Epigraphy, Theory, and the Hebrew Bible

Jeremy M. Hutton
Editorial Introduction

Mahri Leonard-Fleckman
The bit X Formula in Assyrian Documentation and Aramaean Social Structure

Matthew J. Suriano
Remembering Absalom’s Death in 2 Samuel 18–19. History, Memory, and Inscription

Jeremy M. Hutton and C. L. Crouch
Deuteronomy as a Translation of Assyrian Treaties. An “Optimal Translation” Approach

Alice Mandell
Reading and Writing Remembrance in Canaan. Early Alphabetic Inscriptions as Multimodal Objects
Matthew J. Suriano

Remembering Absalom’s Death in 2 Samuel 18–19

History, Memory, and Inscription*

The brief notice of Absalom’s pillar in 2 Sam 18:18 provides an important yet unusual case of how memory is constructed in ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible. Commemoration of the dead typically works from the perspective of the (living) descendant and is directed towards the (deceased) ancestor. Yet in this example Absalom commemorates himself, effectively circumventing cultural ideals of patrilineal succession, rupturing the symbolic power of memory, and severing the rebellious prince from his father’s lineage. Absalom’s pillar can be compared with the rhetorical self-commemoration of two parallel sources: a Phoenician inscription erected by ‘Abd-ʾosīr (KAI 35) and the recently discovered Old Aramaic stele of Katumuwa from Samʿal (modern Zincirli). In these examples, the mechanics of remembering are inverted. This inversion is a key motif throughout 2 Samuel 18–19, which portrays the end of Absalom’s revolt, the reversal of his fate, and his father David’s survival. From Absalom’s ignoble burial and self-commemoration in 2 Sam 18:17–18, to David’s tragic mourning for his dead son in 2 Sam 19:1–5, the biblical narrative emphasizes interrelated themes of dynastic rupture and continuity in order to bring closure to Absalom’s story and highlight the survival of David’s royal house.

Keywords: Absalom, David, Samuel (biblical book), Northwest Semitic epigraphy, memory

1. Introduction

The unusual account of Absalom’s pillar in 2 Sam 18:18 has raised comparisons with Near Eastern sources that describe cultural imperatives to remember the dead. The most well known example is the list of filial duties described in the Ugaritic story of Aqhat.¹ What emerges from this com-

---

¹ This Ugaritic reference is often used to contrast Absalom’s actions. See C. Conroy, Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13–20 (AnBib 81; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 65 n. 88; T. J. Lewis, Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit (HSM 39; Atlanta: Scholars Press 1989), 119; and O. Loretz, “Sohnspflicht im
parison is the recognition of a father-son ideal in the cultural practices of memory. But of course, as a rebellious prince, Absalom is hardly presented in Samuel as an ideal son. In fact, the story of Absalom is an inversion of this ideal, and his self-aggrandizing actions in v. 18 are nothing if not consistent with his erstwhile efforts to claim kingship on his own terms. While these efforts and actions intentionally contrast with the ideal that is evoked in Ugaritic literature, they find comparison with a small group of Phoenician and Aramaic inscriptions. Herein lies the key to understanding the role of Absalom’s pillar in the Book of Samuel. When the story is examined against the Levantine background of remembering the dead, it becomes possible to recognize the cultural inversions that occur throughout the extended narrative of Absalom’s death in 2 Samuel 18–19. The reference to the מַצֶּבֶת (‘pillar’) that the rebellious son sets up for himself becomes an integral component in a series of misfortunes and reversals that form the narrative of Absalom’s fate in 2 Sam 18:17–18 and 19:1. The historiographical purpose of this narrative was to stress the survival of David, and hence his future dynasty, following the failure of Absalom’s coup. But the recognition of this historiography in 2 Samuel 18–19 requires a careful reading of Absalom’s burial, remembrance, and mourning in order to understand how cultural conventions of memory could provide an ideological framework for historical narratives in biblical literature.

17 And they took Absalom and they threw him into a great pit in the forest and erected upon it a great pile of stones. And all of Israel fled to their tents. 18 Now Absalom had taken and erected for himself in his lifetime a pillar, which is in the Vale of the King, because, he said: “I have no son to remember2 my name.” He called3 the pillar according to his name, and it is called the Monument4 of Absalom until this day.

---


2 Brevard Childs (Memory and Tradition in Israel [SBT 37; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1962], 13) argued that the verbal clause in this verse should be rendered “to pronounce
And the king [David] was disturbed, and he went up to the upper chamber of the gate and wept. He spoke thus while walking about: “My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! O that I myself would have died in your stead, Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:17–18; 19:1)

The question of history and memory in the account of Absalom’s death assumes on a certain level that the narrative in Samuel is historical. But this assumption is based on literary form rather than the verifiable facts of the text. In 2 Samuel 18–19, and throughout the Deuteronomistic History, the descriptive third-person account is constructed using preterit verbal forms (typically the waw-consecutive) in order to render a narrative of past events, regardless of veracity. Absalom’s monument does not exist today, nor is it my name,” rather than the literal “cause my name to be remembered.” In the ancient Levant, ritualized “remembering” was a vocal act that was publicly performed; therefore, Childs’ rendering ameliorates the mnemonic sense of the action. Hence, it is translated here as simply “remember the name.” The verbal form of √זכרה is a hiphil infinitive in v.18, and one must keep in mind that it marks a ritual action through causation, linking the remembering subject to an object of memory (the name). As Childs observes (ibid., 33), the nuances of √זכרה span both thought and action. For the classic study of √זכרה, see W. Schottroff, Gedenken im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament: Die Wurzel zākar im semitischen Sprachkreis (WMANT 15; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967).

The verbal nature of remembering is clear in this situation through the two appearances of √קרא (‘call’). In the first instance (as a qal), the verb connects the object (the pillar) with Absalom’s name; in the second instance (as a niphal), the verb evokes the memory. The two forms of √קרא in a single passage is unusual; see Conroy, Absalom, Absalom!, 66; B. Childs, “A Study of the Formula, ‘Until This Day’,” JBL 82 (1963): 282; and J. C. Geoghegan, The Time, Place, and Purpose of the Deuteronomistic History: The Evidence of “Until This Day” (BJS 347; Providence: Brown University, 2006), 49 n. 23.

It is important to note in this text that semantic equivalence is made between מַצֶּבֶת and יד. On the translation of the latter term as “monument” or “stele,” see M. Delcor, “Two Special Meanings of the Word יד in Biblical Hebrew,” JSS 56 (1967): 231–234. See also Loretz, “Sohnespflicht im Totenkult Kanaans und Israels,” 241–246; and D. Kühn, Töntgedenken bei den Nabataëern und im Alten Testament: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Studie (AOAT 311: Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), 334–336. According to Z. Zevit (“Phoenician nbš/npš and Its Hebrew Semantic Equivalents,” Maarav 5–6 [1990]: 342), the Phoenician nuance of nbš (as a memorial object, or “gravestone”) is semantically paralleled in the Hebrew terms יד and מַצֶּבֶת.

This is a working definition of historical narrative, provided here to establish a foundation for discussing the history-memory dialectic. As such, it compares with M. Brettler’s definition (The Creation of History in Ancient Israel [London & New York: Routledge, 1995], 12): “a narrative that represents a past.” Brettler’s definition follows his critique of John Van Seters’ appropriation of J. Huizinga’s much misunderstood definition: “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.” This quote of Huizinga comes from J. Van Seters, In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1–2.
referenced in extra-biblical sources earlier than the first century C.E. (Josephus, *Ant.* 7.10.3, and the Copper Scroll [3Q15 10:12]), so one could (and probably should) question its existence in the past. But this question is more of a distraction when one realizes that the formation of Samuel’s narrative – especially its arrangement of events and depiction of characters – is itself an aspect of historical thought. Indeed, one could call this historiography, as the book’s narrative represents the deliberate selection and arrangement of information and ideas.

The question that should be asked is why the account of Absalom’s pillar was ever included in Samuel’s narrative. The question becomes much more acute when the account is examined against the wider cultural background of remembering the dead. In Samuel’s narrative, through its careful literary placement, Absalom’s pillar becomes both cause and effect of his status. He is no longer king (albeit only ever a short-lived one at that); he has

---

6 The unusual nature and literary placement of 2 Sam 18:18 is sometimes taken as an indication of an existing monument, which was explained or etiollogized (and hence connected with Absalom); see Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), 65–66. Additionally, the use of “until this day” is sometimes taken as an implication of a monument that was evident in the biblical writer’s time; see Geoghegan, *Time, Place, and Purpose* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 120–126. It should be noted, however, that the phrase serves as a coda by establishing a framework of narrative time that reaches its completion (Absalom is dead and remembered), while returning the reader to the (past) time of the story; see A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 107–110.


8 The idea of literary arrangement as historiography is not new, though it is at times ignored or even resisted. Similar points were argued already in P. Machinist, “Literature as Politics: The Tukulti-Ninurta Epic and the Bible,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 478–479; and M. Liverani, “Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts,” *Or* 42 (1973): 178–179.

become instead a tragic figure whose death precludes the patrilineal ideal upon which dynasties are founded. Absalom, in the narrative of 2 Samuel 18–19, was killed and his body discarded in a pit; he died without progeny to remember him, and he ultimately left behind only his father to mourn him. Each aspect of Absalom’s fate subverts the cultural ideals of remembering the dead. Furthermore, all three are literally tied to the text of 2 Sam 18:18 through different means, either through the repetition of נצב in vv. 18–19 or in the cultural allusions triggered by רָגַז in 2Sam 19:1. Moreover, the details of 2 Sam 18:18 compare with Northwest Semitic inscriptions that involve individual acts of self-commemoration formed around an object cognate with Absalom’s pillar. In these inscriptions, however, the act of establishing one’s name (during one’s lifetime) is both socially transgressive and individually empowering. The narrative of Absalom’s fate draws upon the former, social transgression, while at once diffusing the empowering aspects of his actions by situating his pillar memorial between the accounts of his ignoble interment and the unusual mourning surrounding his death.

The reasons for the literary placement of 2 Sam 18:18, where it reads like a gloss, relates to the cultural significance of memory. This significance can be best understood by looking at cognate inscriptions that memorialize the dead. While this analysis will begin with a general overview of Phoenician pillar memorials (מְמַס), a careful inspection of two inscriptions that closely parallel Absalom’s pillar (the Phoenician pillar of ʿAbd-ʾosīr and the Aramaic stele of Katumuwa) will show in particular that the underlying issue in 2 Samuel 18–19 is one of familial and dynastic continuity. Remembering the dead was about affirming ties with the past and one’s ancestors through the formation of a patrilineal descent system bridging generations. But in inscriptions such as the Katumuwa Stele from Samʿal, this patrilineal ideal was circumvented. The literary reworking of Absalom’s reversal of fortune emphasizes patrilineal discontinuity, which is highlighted in Absalom’s own words “I have no son to remember my name” (2 Sam 18:18). Indeed, this factors into the mourning of Absalom’s death by David (2 Sam 19:1–5), which advances the theme of reversal (father mourning son). The narrative account of 2 Sam 18:17–19 and 19:1–5 effectively ruptured the symbolic power of memory, which could affirm the continuity of lineage through the preservation of one’s name. The point was not literally to reenact the establishment of Absalom’s pillar, and hence enable his name’s continued ritual remembrance. Instead, the purpose was to remember Absalom’s actions through a narrative that was detached from the cultural practices of the biblical writer’s contemporary world, removing it instead to a time
that was less threatening to the House of David. Put succinctly, Absalom’s name is not ritually remembered; instead the biblical narrative relegates his pillar to history. \(^\text{10}\)

2. Theory: Memory and History

The recognition that memory is a social construct is the critical starting point in approaching the veneration of the dead. \(^\text{11}\) This recognition in turn

---

\(^{10}\) Due to its rarity, מַצֶּבֶת (‘pillar’) is often equated with the more common term מַצֵּבָה (‘standing stone’), owing to their shared root and similar function. For mainly heuristic purposes, this study treats both as discrete terms. Yet there is a descriptive distinction between מַצֶּבֶת and מַצֵּבָה, if not a morphological difference. The first memorializes a person’s name while the second marks divine presence (or commemorates a sacred event). This is not to overlook possible occurrences of conflation, such as in Gen 35:20, where the bound form of מַצֵּבָה (as it is termed elsewhere in the verse) is orthographically identical to מַצֶּבֶת. The context is familiar to 2 Sam 18:18, as it describes a monument preserving the name of the dead. It is also important to note that the bound form is embedded within the monument’s title: מַצֶּבֶת קְבֻרַת־רָחֵל. Although a full analysis of Gen 35:20 is beyond the scope of the present study, it would seem that the text represents the semantic overlap of two closely related terms. In other Northwest Semitic languages, the primary term for a memorializing object in Phoenician is msbt; whereas, Aramaic is much more flexible in describing stelae and standing stones. See further in Footnote 41 (below). C. F. Graesser (“Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine,” BA 35 [1972]: 40) had related standing stones to the “Aramean” tradition of memorializing objects (citing examples from Zincirli). But he also carefully notes that Absalom’s pillar was about establishing memory, rather than establishing practices of ancestor worship. The cultural phenomena of standing stones is diffuse throughout the ancient Near East, and the objects can hold a variety of purposes. The majority served cultic functions, though their contexts are limited if not entirely lacking. Yet the material discussed in this article, beginning with Absalom’s pillar, suggest a clear setting of ritual commemoration. The pillars facilitate the continued remembrance of a name inscribed upon it, thus distinguishing them from typical standing stones. A Mesopotamian parallel can be found in the famous row of steles at Aššur; see W. Andrae, Die Stelenreihen in Assur, Vol. 3 of Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft in Assur, A: Baudenkmäler aus assyrischer Zeit (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913). For synthetic studies, in addition to Graesser, see E. D. Stockton, “Stones at Worship,” AJBA 1 (1970): 58–81; idem, “Phoenician Cult Stones,” AJBA 2 (1974–1975): 1–27; and J. V. Canby, “The Stelenreihen at Assur, Tell Halaf, and maṣṣēbōt,” Iraq 38 (1976): 113–128.

\(^{11}\) In this article, ancestor veneration is roughly equivalent to cult of the dead as found in other studies, such as Lewis, Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit. Due to the problematic association of cult of the dead with ancestor worship, however, I prefer the term ancestor veneration. See also R. Schmitt, “And Jacob Set up a Pillar at Her Grave . . . : Material Memorials and Landmarks in the Old Testament,” in The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort (ed. J. van Ruiten et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 394. A full discussion of ancestor worship is beyond the scope of this article. The purposes here, instead, are to engage the social location of ancestor veneration, which is discussed in more detail elsewhere.
Matthew J. Suriano offers important insight into the depiction of such actions in the narrative of Samuel. This basic recognition goes back to the work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory. Rather than locating memory in the psychology of the individual, Halbwachs connected the substantive forms of memory and the social frameworks within which it was formed. In Halbwachs’s work, “remembering,” to quote Gerdien Jonker, “was a dynamic process which had to be carried out repeatedly by society in order to satisfy the demands of a changing present.” This is the inherent contradiction of memory. Remembering, and what Halbwachs called cultural memory, collapsed temporal distance in reenacting the past, creating a façade that was static and timeless. It is a façade precisely because remembering is dynamic; cultural memory is shaped and formed through societal forces.

---

veneration in ways similar to studies such as J. D. Schloen, The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient near East (SAHL 2; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 345–346.


15 Halbwachs’s innovative social-scientific approach to memory allowed him to identify the ways by which cultural memory was substantivized. See notably his study of Christian pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land; Halbwachs, La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte: Étude de mémoire collective (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1941), translated into English and republished in On Collective Memory, 193–235. For a description of Halbwachs’s work on the history of tradition in the Holy Land, see Hutton, History as an Art of Memory, 84–87; and Smith, Memoirs of God, 128. The construction of sacred sites offers a clear example of how traditional forms of remembering diverges from modern forms of historical thought. J. Assmann (“Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” New German Critique 65 [1995]: 125–133), however, has defined cultural memory in a way that challenged the separation between living and dead memory (and hence historical thought and remembering). In Assmann’s terms, communicative memory represented the ongoing process of remembering in a society,
An example of the inherently contradictory aspects of remembering, and one that is relevant for studying the Absalom cycle, is in the practice of dynastic succession. In its ideal form, where a son succeeded his father, the practice of dynastic succession was about maintaining an image of political stability. The institution of kingship, localized within a royal house, provided a static image as the conceptual backdrop for the practice. Yet the practice itself was dynamic in that it facilitated and effected change: a new king was installed in place of the old one. Still, it was often incumbent upon the new king to pay homage to the static aspects of the institution by remembering his predecessors – this remembrance was performed when the king engaged in the ritual invocation of dead kings. The idea was to invoke the past, and hence collapse time, by associating the living king with storied figures from the past.

This confluence of multiple factors (present and past, static and dynamic, continuity and change) is apparent in second millennium B.C.E. cuneiform sources. An especially compelling example occurs in an alphabetic-cuneiform ritual text from Ugarit (KTU 1.161), where a list of royal ancestors and dead kings are evoked by name. In this text, a single line is drawn in time from the distant past through the recently departed, connecting with the while cultural memory is the matrix within which cultural practices, societal boundaries, and “memory” converge. In the latter case, a critical function is the formation of group identity; see ibid., 130.

16 Similar to Assmann’s concept of cultural memory, the concern in dynastic succession was one of identity. That is, identification was deployed through an institution, kingship, that was presented as timeless. Following R. Brubaker and F. Cooper’s important caution (“Beyond ‘Identity,’” Theory and Society 29 [2000]: 1–47), it is important to avoid dealing with identity as an objective category. Rather than studying identity, in both its strong (essentialized) and weak (constructed) forms – using Brubaker and Cooper’s terms – it is the examination of identification as a social process that allows scholars to observe agency and intention. The same concerns can be applied to memory, where the analysis of remembering as a social process affords a better perspective on who was remembering, what they were remembering, and why. For instance, royal legitimacy could be claimed in Mesopotamia by remembering past kings through different means. The seminal study by P. Michalowski (“History as Charter: Some Observations on the Sumerian King List,” JAOS 103 [1983]: 237–248) has shown that the Sumerian King List traced kingship as a divinely appointed institution in order to counter Amorite genealogical claims seen, for example, in the Genealogy of the Hammurabi dynasty; see also Jonker, Topography of Remembrance, 140–152. Remembering dead kings, in the form of ancestor veneration, created an image of kingship that was genealogical, and could be inherited through patrilineal descent. This type of lineage continued in the later Assyrian King Lists.

17 For editions, see Lewis, Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit, 7–10; and D. Pardee, Les Textes Rituels (Ras Shamra-Ougarit 12; Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 2000), 2:816–825.
new king who stands in their place. The new king’s place in this lineage is declared through the repetition of the preposition tht.\textsuperscript{18}

The texts that bear witness to remembering the dead were not concerned with the historical documentation of the past. Indeed, the act of remembering could seemingly conflict with history, as seen for example in a royal kispu ritual text from Mari in which an Amorite king (Šamši-Addu I) of the second millennium evoked the names of important third-millennium kings from Agade, Sargon and Naram-Sin.\textsuperscript{19} He was able to make this implicit claim to continuity despite the fact that there was no historical link between Šamši-Addu and the lineage of these Old Akkadian kings. That this practice continued into the first millennium, when Assyrian kings would claim distant Amorite ancestors as part of their own genealogy (including Šamši-Addu himself), attests to the political potency of memory in the ancient Near East.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, the Assyrian King Lists that record the names of these ancestors were often inscribed on tablets that, by their amulet shape, apparently functioned in rituals of remembering the dead.\textsuperscript{21}

But as already noted, the purposes behind 2 Sam 18:18 were not to facilitate memory, nor provide any sense of continuity associated with Absalom’s name. The story of David’s son was not about dynastic succession, but instead its failure. In this sense the story’s emphasis is on discontinuity, and the idea is conveyed by the way the narrative of Samuel removes Absalom to the past. Herein lies the fundamental distinction between history and memory. Unlike remembering, which forms continuity through the enactment of the past, and unlike living memory, history writing is detached from the past and founded upon dead memory.\textsuperscript{22} Of course, in the study of the ancient


\textsuperscript{19} M. Birot, “Fragment de rituel de Mari relatif au kispum,” in \textit{Death in Mesopotamia} (ed. Bendt Alster; Fragment; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 139–150.


\textsuperscript{22} The term “dead memory” here refers to the memory of the past that is not actively preserved in living traditions. The separation of the historian from active forms of remembering plays an important part in Y. H. Yerushalmi’s \textit{Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). This point in Halbwachs’s work, however, has been challenged and nuanced over the past few years; see L. A. Coser’s “Introduction” to Halbwachs’s \textit{On Collective Memory}, 24–28; and Hutton, \textit{History as an Art of Memory}, 73–77.
Levant, it is necessary to qualify the use of the history-memory dialectic. For instance, historical thought was often enmeshed within cultural practices of memory (as in the case of the Assyrian King Lists). As such, in the ancient Near East, historical narratives were not necessarily restricted to dead memory, nor were they bound to modern conventions in the representation of the past. Fortunately, it is possible to sidestep these difficulties in the case of Absalom’s death account. The discussion that follows is not dependent upon some putative historical event. Instead, the focus is upon the narrative employment of 2 Samuel 18–19, distinguishing that literary construction from on-the-ground, real-time practices of cultural memory. This underscores the historiography of Absalom’s death, as the account draws upon cultural practices of remembering (venerating the dead) in forming its narrative.

In order to understand the cultural conventions of memory, and its role in the literary framing of narratives such as 2 Samuel 18–19, it is important to examine the perspectives that were formed through ritual practices. Specifically, in this study, it is necessary to investigate those practices associated with remembering the dead. The principal perspective in this particular type of ritual practice can be described as transgenerational. The terminology is appropriate, as the word generation features prominently in discussions of history and memory. On one level, this term describes the conceptual divide that separates memory from history, since “memory” for one generation risks becoming the “history” of the following one. But on another level, the idea of generation provides a deeper nuance to this dialectic: the continuity of “memory” that is reproduced in successful activations of transgenerational “remembering” takes place within what Pierre Nora calls an “environment of memory” (milieu de mémoire). Conversely, where no such “environment of memory” exists, or when this continuity is ruptured through social events or population movements, “remembering” can only be preserved through “sites of memory” (lieux de mémoire). This type of remembrance is transformed into historical thought. In short, the conditions for historical thought are created when the continuity of living memory

---


becomes ruptured, creating generations that are detached from the past. The dichotomy of environments and sites is based on Halbwachs’s notion of living and dead memory, but Nora articulates this dichotomy in a way that acknowledges the entanglement of historical thought with cultural memory.

The applicability of these theories must be adapted to our sources, and here it is important to return to our working definition of historical narrative. Although this definition has its limitations, it provides a framework for understanding the interrelationship between temporality and narrative, and hence, the role this interrelationship plays in distinguishing generations as a constructive category. These definitions can offer much insight into the cultural background of Absalom’s pillar precisely because remembering the dead was a transgenerational act. For Paul Ricoeur, the notion of a generation is related to the historical structuring of time that is informed by human experience. In fact, the idea of a generation becomes a condition for historical time because it organizes the human experience into categories of past, present, and future. When narrative is situated in the historians’ present (their generation), it becomes possible to recognize a concern for both the past (anteriority) and the future (posterity). Furthermore, the natural, biological pattern of life and death guides historical thought, as each generation is replaced by the next. History is driven by a sense of mortality, but this awareness is less of an existential concern (as in Martin Heidegger’s ontology of being), and more of an obligation to the past (and hence, to the dead). Ricoeur refers to actions undertaken on the basis of this motivation as acts of sepulcher.

Ricoeur’s terminology here is especially insightful when applied to our sources. A stark example of an act of sepulcher can be recognized in the ʾAḥirom inscription from tenth century B.C.E. Byblos – a text that was written on a sarcophagus. Although the inscription is short and formulaic, its third-person preterit verbs create a descriptive narrative of dedication. More precisely, the text reveals the obligation of the living to the dead, syntactically ordered into recognizable generations in its opening lines (KAI § 1:1).

1. ʾrn . zpʿl . [ʾt]bʿl . bn ʾḥrm . mlkgbl . lʾḥrm . ʾbh …

1. Sarcophagus made by ʾItobaʾl the son of ʾAḥirom, king of Byblos, for ʾAḥirom his father …

26 Ricoeur, Memory, History, and Forgetting, 407–408.
27 Ricoeur (Memory, History, and Forgetting, 365) introduced this term in his discussion of Martin Heidegger’s being unto death, where the primary concern was an existential realization of one’s mortality.
The opening lines of this inscription describe how ʾIttobaʿl, the king of Byblos, dedicated a sarcophagus to his father, ʾAḥirom. These lines of the sarcophagus inscription, however, are based on the formulaic opening of votive texts where the dedicated object is deictically marked. It is in this syntactical structure that it becomes possible to recognize the ways by which memory was socially constructed through ritual and writing in the ancient Levant.

The object in KAI § 1 is the dedicated repository of ʾAḥirom’s mortal remains, and the inscription itself provided the means for remembering the name of the dead. The subject of the inscription, however, is not the dead but the living: ʾAḥirom’s son, ʾIttobaʿl. The syntax here, and in similar inscriptions (see below), reveals a basic paradox in the remembrance of the dead; the overt function of the text is to dedicate the dead, but its covert rhetorical focus points to the living. The creation of the object, a sarcophagus in the case of KAI § 1, becomes part of the transgenerational discourse between the living and the dead. It is an act of sepulcher that reflects the historical perspective of the king responsible for the inscription. In addition to its material character, this discourse is textual as well, since the name of the dead is recorded for posterity (effectively, remembered), inscribed in stone. Nonetheless, the performative aspect of the sarcophagus’s manufacture and inscription contained a paradox: the ancillary purpose was to recognize the generation responsible for the dedication. The sarcophagus inside the royal tomb, and the text that it bears, can be compared to Nora’s lieux de mémoire; that is, the dead memory of the former king is preserved and historically recorded by the new king. But even though its cultural framework was one of continuity through patrilineal descent, the inscription marks a certain disruption: the dedication of the inscription signals the succession.

28 The syntactical pattern of object–relative pronoun–verb–subject can be observed in Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic inscription, however, the syntax changes in later Phoenician and Punic (as noted by E. Greenstein, “Phoenician Inscription in Ugaritic Script?” JANES 8 [1976]: 53, with sources).

29 “Discourse” here refers to the manner by which the living spoke of the dead, affecting both their memory and their status in death. The term’s usage here is informed by the work of M. Foucault (The Archaeology of Knowledge [World of Man; New York: Pantheon Books, 1972], 215–237). In Foucauldian terms, the power relations in the patrimonial societies of the Levant are revealed through their language and cultural practices. Thus, the discourse of the dead would involve mourning, lamenting, and rituals of veneration (naming and feeding the dead). Although these examples are largely oral, the traces of these discursive formations can be found in written sources such as genealogies and king lists, where the dead are organized and ranked in categories by the living. Ancestors, and the ability to claim the ancestral rights, formed a critical component in kinship-based societies where inheritance, succession, and control of resources were assigned through lineal descent.
of a new generation. Rather than comprising part of a *milieu de mémoire*, in which the dead king’s memory remains constantly evoked and ever-present, the sarcophagus and its inscription – and along with them, the dead king’s memory – are relegated to the historical record.

3. Phoenician Pillar Memorials

The formulaic syntax in the opening lines of ’Aḥirom’s sarcophagus is found also in Phoenician (and Punic) pillars that memorialized the dead.30 Like *KAI* § 1, the object of dedication fronts the inscription, occurring in the text’s first word. Remarkably, the term for these objects, *mṣbt* (“pillar memorial”),31 and their functional description present a close analogy to

---

30 In the Phoenician material from Kition (dating from the fifth through third centuries B.C.E.), the opening lines follow the same pattern as the dedicatory formula seen in *KAI* § 1. For these texts, see V. Karageorghis and M. G. Amadasi Guzzo, *Inscriptions phéniciennes*, Vol. 3 of Fouilles de Kition (Nicosia: Department of Antiquities, 1977). A later set of pillar memorials from Umm el-Awamid, Lebanon, dating to the 2nd century B.C.E., differ uniformly in their opening syntax; see C. R. Krahmalkov, *A Phoenician-Punic Grammar* (HdO 1; ANEME 54; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 77. These inscriptions begin with the demonstrative particle attached to the object, which is bound to the personal noun (PN), denoting ownership: *zmṣbt* (PN). For the Umm el-Awamid inscriptions, see M. Dunand and R. Duru, *Oumm El-ʿAmed: Une ville de l’époque hellénistique aux échelles de Tyr* (République libanaise, Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale, Direction générale des Antiquités, Études et documents d’Archéologie 4: Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1962), 181–190.

31 The term “pillar memorial” is used in order to distinguish these inscriptions from memorial stelae. The label is fully expressed in the form *mṣbt skr*, found at Umm al-Awamid and on the inscription of ’Abd-tanīt (*KAI* § 53), a marble bilingual inscription (Greek–Phoenician) discovered at Athens. See Schottroff, *Gedenken im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*, 51; and Philip Schmitz, *The Phoenician Diaspora: Epigraphic and Historical Studies* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 89. Punic texts describing such objects are dispersed throughout North Africa, continuing into the latest phase of the language and culture. The Punic orthography (*mnṣbt*) represents the dissimilation of the geminated consonant as reflected in Latino-Punic *MYNSYFTH* (where $[s]$ = the affricate phoneme /ʃ/); K. Jongeling and R. M. Kerr, eds., *Late Punic Epigraphy: An Introduction to the Study of Neo-Punic and Latino-Punic Inscriptions* (FAT II; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 70. Conversely, Krahmalkov (*Phoenician-Punic Grammar*, 26) explains the /n/ as a dialect feature preserving the root consonant. In Phoenician-Punic, the word has a broad semantic range that can include “stele; pillar” or a more substantial structure. The consistent feature, however, remains its dedicatory purpose, bearing the name of the dead. See H. Benichou-Safar, *Les tombes puniques de Carthage: Topographie, structures, inscriptions et rites funéraires* (Études d’Antiquités africaines; Paris: CNRS, 1982), 201–205; idem, “Nouvelle inscription punique découverte au Liban,” *Sem* 41–42 (1991–1992): 108; and Schmitz, *Phoenician Diaspora*, 88–89. In this study, the term will be translated “pillar” for sake of consistency.
Absalom’s pillar (כְּסֶבֶת). Like Absalom’s pillar, the Phoenician mṣbt was not intended, principally, to mark a burial site; its primary function was to preserve the name of the dead. Like ʾAḥirom’s sarcophagus, the mṣbt inscriptions typically were written using descriptive, third-person verbal forms. Furthermore, the person for whom the object is dedicated (that is, the memorialized dead) is usually marked by the l- preposition. Note the following example from Kition, dating to the Persian Period:

The Pillar of Milgasanas (CIS I, 60)
1. mṣbt z ʾṣ yṭn 1. This is the pillar they set [up],
2. ʾšmnṣḥ w 2. ʾĒsmūn-ṣīlāh and
3. mryḥy lʾbn 3. Mār-ʾyiḥai, for their father.

The account of Absalom’s pillar raises important issues regarding the form and typology of post-mortem memorials, in particular those that do not involve the remains of the dead (i.e., non-funerary); see H. Niehr, “Two Stelae Mentioning Mortuary Offerings from Ugarit (KTU 6.13 and 6.14),” in (Re-)Constructing Funerary Rituals in the Ancient Near East (ed. P. Pfälzner et al.; Qatna Studien Supplementa 1; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 152–155. As a preliminary remark, it should be noted that the inscriptions are memorial in function, and as such, focused on the dead. Therefore they can overlap with mortuary architecture and appear in funerary contexts, although this is not required (as in the case of Absalom). See M. J. Suriano, A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 98–127.

For other examples, see CIS I, 58 and KAI § 34 (both from Kition), as well as KAI § 53 (from Athens). The dative translation of the preposition here as “for …” compares with the use of the preposition in similar ritual texts, see M. J. Suriano, “Breaking Bread with the Dead: Katumuwa’s Stele, Hosea 9:1–6, and the Early History of the Soul,” JAOS 134 (2014): 390–393. Schmitz (Phoenician Diaspora, 87–88) also notes the basic function of the preposition in the form mṣbt l-, citing several Phoenician and Punic examples. The syntactical environment of the various pillar memorials may indicate subtle changes in the nuance of the preposition attached to the name. For instance, the verb ‘set up’ (ṭnʾ) could suggest that the accompanying proper noun is the direct object: e.g., “to Milgasanas.” Likewise, the lack of a governing verb may indicate that the prepositional phrase expresses ownership, which would render the clause: “of [PN].” The early-Hellenistic Umm al-Awamid texts record the name of the memorialized dead in construct with the subject noun, the pillar, which is bound to the personal noun. This is how the inscriptions mark the dedicatory act (that is, the erection of a memorial), instead of using the l- preposition. Among the texts published by Dunand and Duru (Oumm El-ʾAmed, 190), no. 10 provides a useful paradigm, while no. 9 (below) offers a constructive exception, where the preposition does occur on a second name of dedication:

zmṣbt bʾlšmr 2[wl-]ʾmn ʾṣ tʾtnʾ lʾb nlm bnm ʾzbʾ lʾlm
This is the pillar of BʾLSMR [and that of] ʾMN, his wife, that was set up for them [by] their son ʾZBL for eternity.

Krahmalkov (Phoenician-Punic Grammar, 244) is correct in describing the restored preposition attached to the second name as an indirect genitive. The second appearance of the preposition, where it is attached to the 3.pl. pronoun (lm = ‘for them’), however, signifies the dedicatory purpose of the verb (tnʾ) in a manner familiar to CIS 1, 60. In light of this purpose (and for the sake of consistency), each specific use of the prepositional phrase that marks commemoration will be translated “for [PN].”

32 The account of Absalom’s pillar raises important issues regarding the form and typology of post-mortem memorials, in particular those that do not involve the remains of the dead (i.e., non-funerary); see H. Niehr, “Two Stelae Mentioning Mortuary Offerings from Ugarit (KTU 6.13 and 6.14),” in (Re-)Constructing Funerary Rituals in the Ancient Near East (ed. P. Pfälzner et al.; Qatna Studien Supplementa 1; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 152–155. As a preliminary remark, it should be noted that the inscriptions are memorial in function, and as such, focused on the dead. Therefore they can overlap with mortuary architecture and appear in funerary contexts, although this is not required (as in the case of Absalom). See M. J. Suriano, A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 98–127.

33 For other examples, see CIS I, 58 and KAI § 34 (both from Kition), as well as KAI § 53 (from Athens). The dative translation of the preposition here as “for …” compares with the use of the preposition in similar ritual texts, see M. J. Suriano, “Breaking Bread with the Dead: Katumuwa’s Stele, Hosea 9:1–6, and the Early History of the Soul,” JAOS 134 (2014): 390–393. Schmitz (Phoenician Diaspora, 87–88) also notes the basic function of the preposition in the form mṣbt l-, citing several Phoenician and Punic examples. The syntactical environment of the various pillar memorials may indicate subtle changes in the nuance of the preposition attached to the name. For instance, the verb ‘set up’ (ṭnʾ) could suggest that the accompanying proper noun is the direct object: e.g., “to Milgasanas.” Likewise, the lack of a governing verb may indicate that the prepositional phrase expresses ownership, which would render the clause: “of [PN].” The early-Hellenistic Umm al-Awamid texts record the name of the memorialized dead in construct with the subject noun, the pillar, which is bound to the personal noun. This is how the inscriptions mark the dedicatory act (that is, the erection of a memorial), instead of using the l- preposition. Among the texts published by Dunand and Duru (Oumm El-ʾAmed, 190), no. 10 provides a useful paradigm, while no. 9 (below) offers a constructive exception, where the preposition does occur on a second name of dedication:

zmṣbt bʾlšmr 2[wl-]ʾmn ʾṣ tʾtnʾ lʾb nlm bnm ʾzbʾ lʾlm
This is the pillar of BʾLSMR [and that of] ʾMN, his wife, that was set up for them [by] their son ʾZBL for eternity.

Krahmalkov (Phoenician-Punic Grammar, 244) is correct in describing the restored preposition attached to the second name as an indirect genitive. The second appearance of the preposition, where it is attached to the 3.pl. pronoun (lm = ‘for them’), however, signifies the dedicatory purpose of the verb (tnʾ) in a manner familiar to CIS 1, 60. In light of this purpose (and for the sake of consistency), each specific use of the prepositional phrase that marks commemoration will be translated “for [PN].”

e-offprint of the author with publisher’s permission.
The text expresses the patrilineal ideal, sons following their father, and thus the rhetorical focus is upon ʾEšmūn-ṣillāḥ and Mār-yīḥai who set up the pillar for their father Milgasanas. What this syntax reveals is the manner by which memory was socially constructed. Not only is the act of remembering recorded for posterity, but it also takes durable form through the deictically marked object, and through the attribution of the act to ʾEšmūn-ṣillāḥ and Mār-yīḥai. At this point, it is important to compare and contrast Absalom’s pillar and reflect for the moment not only on the cultural ideal that is denied to Absalom (who died without a son to follow him), but also the social implications in his act of self-commemoration. What is absent in 2 Sam 18:18 is an obligation to the dead, beyond Absalom’s own concern for the postmortem remembrance of his name. In this sense, the account of Absalom’s pillar contrasts with CIS I, 60 and similar inscriptions; however, it comports with texts that bear witness to self-commemoration.

3.1. ‘Abd-ʾosīr’s Inscription (CIS I, 46 = KAI § 35)

The closest parallel to 2 Sam 18:18 is a Phoenician mṣbt inscription from Cyprus.34 The inscription was first discovered and published in the eighteenth century,35 and as a result we lack the proper contextualizing information.36

34 In addition to those sources cited below, see also the autograph and block-script transliteration in M. Lidzbarski’s treatments of the text (Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik, vols. I–II [Weimar: Felber, 1898], 420 no. 4, pl. VI, 3; and idem, Kanaanäische Inschriften [Giessen: Töpelmann, 1907], 28 [no. 23]). See also Karageorghis and Guzzo, Inscriptions phéniciennes, B1; and J. C. L. Gibson, TSSI 3:134–135, no. 35.

35 R. Pococke discovered the inscription in 1738 while traveling through Cyprus, and in 1750 it was shipped to England, where it is now located in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. See the commentary in KAI as well as in Gibson, TSSP. The inscription was part of the small corpus of inscriptions that served as the data bank in J.-J. Barthélémy’s initial decipherment of the Phoenician language during that same century (“Réflexions sur quelques monuments phéniciens et les alphabets qui en résultent [12 Avril 1758],” Mémoires de l’Académie des inscriptions belles lettres 30 [1764]: 405–427, pls. i–iv). An edition of the text was later offered in Gesenius’s important early grammar (Scripturae Linguaeque Phoenicae [Leipzig: Vogel, 1837], 129–133) under the Latin title: Citiensis secunda seu oxoniensis. See R. G. Lehmann, “Wilhelm Gesenius and the Rise of Phoenician Philology,” in Biblische Exegese und hebräische Lexikographie (ed. S. Schorch and E.-J. Waschke; BZAW 427; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 223 and 253.

36 Generally dated to the Persian Period, the inscription is not on a stele but instead a rectangular shaped marble-slab (35 × 10 cm). CIS I, pl. VIII, no. 46. Aside from the word dividers, the paleographical features are late. These features, along with the artifact’s material (marble), suggest a late Persian/early Hellenistic date. The inscription
Beyond the lexical similarities of מַצֶּבֶת and פִּילִיךְ, along with their overtly mnemonic functions, two further points are found in both the Phoenician inscription and 2 Sam 18:18. In both the biblical verse and the Phoenician inscription there is no heir. Furthermore, both involve a common temporal setting for the object’s creation; that is, the establishment of each pillar occurs during the lifetime of the memorialized individual. These two points are interrelated. Although the omission of any noted succession could be circumstantial, the absence of heirs shifts the dedication’s spotlight onto the name of the person who created it. In other words, the subject who performs the act of memory is the same person for whom the object is dedicated. In KAI § 35 this subject is ʿAbd-ʾosīr, along with his wife ʾAmat-ʿashtart.37 Indeed, the text’s literary structure is not built upon the formulaic syntax of dedicatory inscriptions, as seen in other pillar memorials such as such as CIS I, 60 (cited above) where the dedicated object fronts the text. In KAI § 35, the inscription opens with the statement “I am ʿAbd-ʾosīr,” and the words that follow are spoken in the first-person under the authority of this name. Thus, the text establishes the name of the person who is both the subject (the creator of the memorial stele) and implicitly the object of dedication.

The wife of ʿAbd-ʾosīr, ʾAmat-ʿashtart, is also marked by the preposition l- as the indirect object of the text, and together both individuals identify themselves through a lineage that is two generations deep. That is, both ʿAbd-ʾosīr and ʾAmat-ʿashtart represent the third generation of their lineage. This generational depth is noteworthy, considering the cultural importance in Near Eastern cultures of the third and fourth generation.38 But the

---

37 There are examples of מַצֶּבֶת being set up for a father and mother by their son, see KAI § 34 and Umm al-Awamid no. 9 (quoted above in n. 33).
purpose of genealogy in this inscription is unclear. Did ‘Abd-ʾosir intend on asserting his ancestral rights through his lineage? If so, why did he also list his wife’s genealogy? Both almost seem to be competing lines. If inheritance was determined through lineal descent, ‘Abd-ʾosir’s inscription is then confusing. It is possible that this inscription was meant to combine two different lineages (and potential inheritances)? Another potential explanation is that the inscription, which also commemorates the name ʾAmat-ʾashtart, was meant to privilege the line of a specific wife. A more speculative suggestion is that the marriage was exogamous, thus warranting special mention through the creation of this inscription. All of these possibilities, however, represent exceptions to the norm found among the patrimonial societies of the Levant. Because this inscription does not follow the cultural norm, where a son would honor his parent(s), its reading is as ambiguous as it is exceptional. ‘Abd-ʾosir’s genealogy only serves to buttress, and hence empower, his individual identity. As such, the inscription seems to renegotiate patrimony and cultural concepts of lineal descent through the subversion of patrilineal continuity. The means by which ‘Abd-ʾosir identifies himself, and his spouse, places the inscription’s focus squarely on their names rather than their collective/kinship affiliations.

3.2. The Katumuwa Inscription from Zincirli

The Aramaic inscription on Katumuwa’s stele, found at Zincirli, provides an additional example of self-commemoration. Like the pillars of ‘Abd-
ʾosīr and Absalom, the memorialized individual (Katumuwa) set up the object for himself, during his lifetime. Furthermore, the inscribed object is a nṣb, ‘stele,’ which shares the same root with Absalom’s מַצֶּבֶת and ʿAbd-ʾosīr’s mṣbt. In addition, the opening line of this inscription is identical in form to ʿAbd-ʾosīr’s text, beginning not with the dedicated object but with self-identification:

1. ʾnk . ktmw . ’bd ’ . pmnw . ’zy’ . qnt . l’y’ . nṣb . b
2. ḫyy . wšmt . wth . bṣyd . ‘lmy ...

I am Katumuwa, servant of Panamuwa, who acquired for myself (this) stele in my lifetime. I placed it in my eternal chamber ...

Through this manner of opening, Katumuwa establishes the inscription’s focus (his name and selfhood), and asserts his role in creating the stele.

The inscription’s voice, like that of ʿAbd-ʾosīr’s, is in first-person discourse rather than third-person narrative. In fact, literarily, the Katumuwa stele combines different genres. The bulk of the inscription is a list of the


Although it shares the same root, Aramaic nṣb has a broader semantic range than its Phoenician cognate mṣbt (and presumably the rare Hebrew form in 2 Sam 18:18). The Aramaic word covers any aspect of statue/stele, including memorial and cultic purposes. In fact, Aramaic has a rich vocabulary for stelae that memorialize the dead. The Neirab inscriptions (KAI § 225–226) use the term ʿlm (‘image,’ referring to the iconographic representation of the dead), and other inscriptions refer to the stele as a wgr. See A. Lemaire, “Nouvelle stèle funéraire araméenne de Cilicie orientale (Menekse),” Sem 55 (2013): 75–77. Interestingly, wgr appears in Gen 31:47 as an Aramaic gloss. The mound of stones that is set up is called a “stele of witness” (יְגַר שָֹהֲדָתָא) in Aramaic by Laban, and a “pile/mound of witness” (גַּלְעֵד) by Jacob in Hebrew. In this passage, the Aramaic term is used to translate a word (גָּל; see Gen 31:46) that is often used in Hebrew to describe a pile of stones covering the dead. In fact, this is the term used for Absalom’s burial in 2 Sam 18:17. The story in Gen 31:44–52, however, does not deal with funerary practices. Yet it is curious that this passage contrasts גָּל (and, hence יְגַר) and מַצֶּבֶת (Gen 31:45, 51–52).

Sanders (“Naming the Dead,” 31–32) refers to this genre as “funerary memorial inscription.” The phrase is apt, because such inscriptions combine both elements from both dedicatory and memorial genres. The sarcophagus inscription of Eshmunazar (KAI § 14) is another example, incorporating elements of the memorial genre in a funerary text; see S. B. Parker, “The Composition and Sources of Some Northwest Semitic Royal Inscriptions,” SEL 16 (1999): 57–59.

For general treatments of the Katumuwa inscription, see H. Niehr, “Religion in den Königreichen der Aramäer Syriens,” in Religionen in der Umwelt des Alten Testaments II: Phönizier, Punier, Aramäer (ed. C. Bonnet and H. Niehr; KStTh 4.2; Stuttgart: e-offprint of the author with publisher’s permission.
ritual actions required for remembering Katumuwa’s name. Importantly, the framework of memory is specified in the inscription’s text, and is recognizable in its archaeological context. Both name and image are etched in stone, and this identity (referred to as Katumuwa’s nbš) is localized in the nṣb. Moreover, the nṣb is explicitly placed within a chamber called the syd . ‘lm, which most likely refers to the structure within which the artifact was discovered. The point of the inscription is the preservation of Katumuwa’s name, perpetuated through acts of remembering that take the form of feasting, centered ritually upon the stele.


The rituals are enacted through the feeding of Katumuwa’s soul along with several associated gods (described in two parts, lines 3–5 and 6–13).


Suriano, “Breaking Bread with the Dead,” 393–396. The inscription’s directions, and the details it provides, indicate that Katumuwa’s “soul/self” (nbš) was ritually reified through feeding. In other words, the acts of memory (feeding and naming the dead) embodied Katumuwa’s self, which was hypostatized in the ritually centered stele.


The inscription contains a two-part description, with the first five lines describing the stele’s dedication and accompanying sacrifices to the gods. The remaining text prescribes for future generations the ritual feeding of Katumuwa’s “soul/self.” See Pardee, “Katumuwa Inscription,” 47. The presence of the gods should not mean that the rituals involved did not represent a form of ancestor veneration. The purpose was to insure that Katumuwa dines with deities. Hadad may have played a role in overseeing the feast, calling forth Katumuwa to dine, as H. Niehr (“The Katumuwa Stele in the Context of Royal Mortuary Cult at Sam’al,” in In Remembrance of Me: Feasting with the Dead in the Ancient Middle East [ed. V. R. Herrmann and J. D. Schloen; Oriental Institute Museum Publications 37; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014], 58–59) has suggested based on both Katumuwa and the Hadad Stele. In essence, the sacrificial cult to the gods and rituals of feeding the dead overlapped at Sam’al. See Herrmann, “Katumuwa Stele in Archaeological Context,” 55; and eadem,
There are two further points regarding Katumuwa’s identification, beginning with the fact that he lacks any filiation and including the lack of any reference to a specific heir (which loosely parallels ‘Abd-ʾosir’s inscription and 2 Sam 18:18). Instead of listing a patronym, Katumuwa identifies himself by his official title: “servant of pnmw” (probably Panamuwa II, king of Samʿal, ca. 743–733 B.C.E.). Furthermore, Katumuwa mentions progeny in only vague terms (lines 6–7), referring generally to his own potential sons alongside the sons of anyone else who might come into possession of his stele and its associated endowment (for example, the vineyard in line 9). Thus, the inscription’s singular interest is in Katumuwa, similar to the Phoenician inscription of ‘Abd-ʾosir and ʾAmat-ʾashtart. Indeed, Katumuwa’s empowered status as an individual is reinforced by his solitary appearance in the stele’s iconography.

3.3. Synthesis: Remembering the Names of the Dead

The similarities that Katumuwa’s and ‘Abd-ʾosir’s inscriptions share with 2 Sam 18:18 invite further comparison with other examples of monuments and memory, notably the Hadad Stele from Samʿal (KAI § 214) and the eunuch’s monument in Isaiah 56. These texts are marked by an individualized focus that lacks any tangible reference to a successor, revealing a level of discourse that is specific to the dedicated person. This focus is important to note because it highlights issues of continuity and rupture that are at play within the story of Absalom’s death.

The individualized focus, of course, relates to the statement in 2 Sam 18:18 that Absalom had no sons. But it also evokes another well-known parallel to the monument that Absalom builds: the image of the eunuch in


50 Struble and Herrmann, “Eternal Feast at Samʿal,” 30 n. 24; following D. Bonatz, Das Syro-Hethitische Grabdenkmal (Mainz am R.: von Zabern, 2000), 103–104. Bonatz had suggested that the smaller attendant figures that typically surround the larger image of the enthroned dead, lacking in Katumuwa’s stele, represent the heirs. See D. Bonatz, “Katumuwa’s Banquet Scene,” in In Remembrance of Me: Feasting with the Dead in the Ancient Middle East (ed. V.R. Herrmann and J.D. Schloen; Oriental Institute Museum Publications 37; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago, 2014), 43.
Third Isaiah (Isa 56:3–5). As is often noted, the objects of memory for Absalom and the eunuch are the same (יהוה). The divine promise to the eunuch is meant to show that Yahweh assumes such duties, on the eunuch’s behalf, by setting up “a monument and name that is better than sons and daughters” (Isa 56:5αβ). The ideal of continuity here is stressed further in v. 5b, “an eternal name … that will not be cut off.” But there is an additional similarity that is never mentioned. Both texts involve a direct quote from the commemorated individual. The words of Absalom and the statement associated with the eunuch (words that he will no longer have to speak) are similar in their essence: “I have no son / I am a dry tree.” While the latter quote (from Isa 56:3) is poetic, the intent of both seems to effect an act on behalf of the speaker that would normally be performed by a son or daughter. The statements in these verses may represent a public declaration necessitated by the unusual actions of an individual.

The declarations of Absalom and Isaiah’s eunuch bear important similarities to the inscriptions of Katumuwa and ‘Abd-ʾosir. Both inscriptions involve first-person voice, marking a fundamental shift in the grammatical person that breaks with the third-person descriptive pattern (the dedicatory formula) seen in other funerary and memorializing inscriptions. Ideally, the continuity of memory is preserved in a narrative that draws from the past. But this does not happen in the discourse of self-memorialization. In speaking on their own behalf, Katumuwa and ‘Abd-ʾosir disrupt the cultural ideal of continuity. They do not draw from the past, nor do they preserve

---


52 To be sure, Isa 56:3 begins with a quote from the resident alien as well.

53 Compare this with the egregious example of Absalom’s public (rooftop) rape of David’s concubines in Jerusalem (2 Sam 16:22). Conversely, the public nature of commemorative rituals might explain the clause “among the living” (bḥym) that is occasionally found in Phoenician mšbt inscriptions, such as CIS I, 58 and 59, and KAI § 53. See also the final clause in KAI § 34:5, ‘nm lʾmšḥb nḥtnm lʾlm (“[set up]… in public view at their resting-place for eternity”); following Krahmalkov (Phoenician-Punic Grammar, 257) where ‘nm < ‘n š (literally “within the people’s view”).

54 Not only does the first-person discourse here (in Katumuwa and ‘Abd-ʾosir) break with the older syntactical pattern in dedicatory inscriptions, it contrasts also with the adapted syntax of later (Hellenistic period) mšbt texts from Umm al-Awamid which are also written in a third-person descriptive style.
any lines of continuity. Again, the power of these two inscriptions is evident in their opening syntax, particularly when compared with other memorializing inscriptions. Rather than fronting the object in the inscription’s initial words, which effectively marks the object dedicated to the memory of one’s name (“This is the pillar of …”), these inscriptions begin with self-ascription: “I am Katumuwa / ‘Abd-ʾosir ….,” Certainly, this is the rhetoric of kings, Mesha of Moab being a notable example (KAI § 181:1 and § 306:1; see also Panamuwa I in the Hadad Stele, discussed below). This rhetoric, however, is less common in non-royal inscriptions, and Katumuwa’s stele is the earliest known example in Northwest Semitic to include such a manner of speech. But it is comparable to the Hadad Stele, an inscription that is largely concerned with rituals of memory even though it belongs to the memorial genre of royal inscriptions.

The Hadad Stele is an interesting parallel because its apparent purposes are not to remember the dead, though its practical intentions clearly are. Although it is in the form of a memorial inscription, this text is an inscribed statue that was dedicated to Hadad by the king of Sam’al (Panamuwa I). Ostensibly a dedication to a god, the text contains the standard retrospective materials of a memorial inscription, narrating Panamuwa’s rise to power (through the support of Hadad) and describing his benevolence as king. Like Katumuwa’s stele, Panamuwa dedicates his act of piety in similar terms, although the stele (nṣb) is devoted to Hadad. In fact, in this aspect, the Hadad Stele can be compared to the eunuch’s monument in Third Isaiah,

---


56 Sanders, “Naming the Dead,” 25–26. The Neirab stelae (KAI § 225 and § 226), both dated to the 7th century B.C.E., also include the first-person address of the dead. They are presumably funerary texts, however, and they involve a vocabulary that is distinct from the inscriptions analyzed in the present study (which are not funerary). For example, both stelae refer to themselves as the “image” (ṣlm) of the dead.

57 The Hadad Stele is a royal inscription of Panamuwa I (KAI § 214), King of Sam’al and early 8th-century forerunner of Katumuwa’s royal patron (Panamuwa II). The stele was discovered outside of Zincirli at Gerçin. Childs (*Memory and Tradition in Israel, 13 n. 3*), T. J. Lewis (“The Ancestral Estate [תֵּชำֶלֶת אֱלֹהִים] in 2 Samuel 14:16,” *JBL* 110 [1991]: 65), and van der Toorn (*Family Religion in Babylonia*, 208) have briefly noted the similarities between the Hadad Stele and 2 Sam 18:18. For editions of the text, see J. C. L. Gibson, *TSSI* 2: 60–76, no. 13; and J. Tropper, *Die Inschriften von Zincirli* (ALASP 6: Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1993), 54–97.
because both represent objects that enabled memory through cultic rituals that were otherwise directed towards a deity. But this is what makes the Hadad Stele unique; its primary role was to establish the continual memory of Panamuwa’s name. Although other memorial inscriptions merely warn future generations not to efface their words, the Hadad Stele sternly instructs Panamuwa’s heirs that they must invoke his name and feed his soul. The names of the heirs are not mentioned, but the instructions Panamuwa left behind are clear. Remarkably, the things required by Panamuwa of his heirs reveal the performative elements of remembering the dead (KAI § 214:17):

\[
p' . y'mr . [t']kl . nbš . pmnw . 'mk . wtš[ty . n]bš . pmnw . 'mk . 'd . yzkr . nbš . pmnw . 'm [...]\]

Thus he will say: “[May] the soul of Panamuwa [e]at with you (Hadad) and may the [s]oul of Panamuwa dri[nk] with you (Hadad).” Continually he will remember the soul of Panamuwa with [Hadad].

The actions specified here illustrate the manner of cultural practices that are alluded to in 2 Sam 18:18aβ. Remembering the dead often meant evoking their names in ritual acts of feeding, and here it is routinized around the sustenance of Panamuwa’s soul. This point is emphasized in the curses of lines 22–24, specifically the one at the end of line 23: “disturbed [b-rgz], may he not eat.” The curse applies to the heir (again, if he fails to remember Panamuwa’s name), and it alludes to the future feeding of the heir’s post-mortem soul (nbš). In other words, the curse involves the disturbance of activities that Panamuwa required for himself. The use of rgz here, though somewhat ambiguous, finds an inviting parallel in 2 Sam 19:1, where √רגז expresses David’s condition when he mourns the death of Absalom (see below). In the Hadad Stele, the term refers to the disruption of memory’s perdurability, expressly claimed by Panamuwa (“continually remember” [‘d yzkr] in KAI § 214:17b) and idealized in Third Isaiah (“an eternal name … that will not be cut off” [אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכָּרֵת … שֵׁם עוֹלָם]; Isa 56:5).

58 Tropper, Inschriften von Zincirli, 55–56. The stated words of the first part are repeated in negative form in the second (KAI § 214:21–22), and are followed by a host of curses that will be brought upon the heir if he fails to fulfill his filial obligations (lines 22b–24). In line 17 it is made clear that the act of veneration must include Panamuwa as well as Hadad, as the curses are tied to the failure to remember Panamuwa’s name (line 21).


60 Although the epigraphy in this particular line is difficult, the reading brgz is strongly supported. See Tropper, Inschriften von Zincirli, 84. Tropper follows KAI 2 in translating the term as “anger” (Zorn). Conversely, the translation “disturbed” offered here refers to the disrupted status of feeding the dead.
These sources, both inscriptional and biblical, provide examples of identification through commemoration, and they show that such practices were often powerful statements asserting individual identity. But self-commemoration was also unconventional when viewed against the backdrop of the father-son ideal, and when compared with the types of continuity that were associated with this ideal. It ruptured the patrilineal continuity that was expressed through practices of memory.61 This is the point behind the literary presentation of Absalom’s death in 2 Sam 18–19. The reference to his pillar memorial was not meant to empower Absalom, or encourage any ritual remembering of his name. Instead, the story was intended to show that Absalom’s fate fell short of the cultural ideals of death and the dead.

4. Commentary: Remembering Absalom’s Pillar

Beyond the general memory of Absalom and his deeds in the biblical narrative of Samuel, 2 Sam 18:18 creates a specific memory through the device of Absalom’s pillar. Yet the memorialization of Absalom, described in this verse, becomes manipulated through a series of reversals that surround the verse, involving both his burial (2 Sam 18:17) and the mourning of his death (2 Sam 19:1–5). Again, the centerpiece is Absalom’s pillar, which should not come as a surprise given the empowering implications of self-commemoration seen in the inscriptive parallels.

The account of the pillar in 2 Sam 18:18 is often seen as either a gloss,62 or a redactional note.63 The syntax of v. 18 is disjunctive and breaks with the typical narrative pattern by fronting the subject (Absalom) before the verb.

61 See also, Vayntrub, “Like Father, Like Son: Theorizing Transmission in Biblical Literature.”


63 See, e.g., L. Rost, The Succession to the Throne of David (trans. M. D. Rutter and D. M. Gunn, with an introduction by E. Ball; HTIBS 1; Sheffield: Almond, 1982 [orig. 1926, in German]), 87. In this classic study of Samuel, Rost argued for the literary unity of 2 Samuel 9–20, but he implicitly leaves 18:18 outside of the unified narrative core. Rost, for example, is cited in Schmitt, “Material Memorials and Landmarks,” 393. Schmitt points to the phrase “until this day” as part of the verse’s redactional character, which is often seen as a Deuteronomistic component; see Geoghegan, Time, Place, and Purpose, 122–127.
In addition, the verse’s descriptive account is retrospective and therefore out of sequence with the rest of the narrative. On the other hand, the inclusion of v. 18 in the narrative follows a logical pattern. Absalom’s death in the forest of Ephraim, which ends with the disposal of his body in a pit covered by a large pile of stones (2 Sam 18:8–17), occurs prior to his creation of a pillar memorial. Yet the brief story of Absalom’s pillar brings a sense of closure to his life, and the recurrence of לָקַח from v. 17 as a suffix-preterit form in v. 18 establishes that Absalom’s actions have been completed in the past (pluperfect) and are not ongoing. Absalom’s own words express this finality, stating that he is without progeny (despite 2 Sam 14:27). The institution of kingship that Absalom sought to build in his own name comes to an end. The act of remembering someone’s name typically occurs after that person’s death. Thus, the placement of this passage following the conclusion of Absalom’s life is consistent with the cultural context of remembering the name of the dead.

Given this literary inversion of cultural expectations, it is important to note that the full range of postmortem customs (burial, mourning, and remembering) occurs in the literary representation of Absalom’s fate. Indeed, each event is carefully woven together in 2 Samuel 18–19, beginning with the disposal of the defeated ruler’s body in 18:17 (which concludes his death account [vv. 14–15]). This verse is then linked to v. 18 through the root נצב, revealing that its focus is the object of memory that Absalom himself had created: his pillar (מַצֶּבֶת): the verbal root is used in v. 17 to describe the construction of the “great pile of stones” that covered his burial pit. The interment of Absalom recalls images drawn from three narratives in the book of Joshua, including the fates of Achan and his family (7:25–26).
Remembering Absalom’s Death in 2 Samuel 18–19

well as that of the King of Ai (8:29). Similarly, large stones were used to seal a cave in Makkedah, where the bodies of the five Amorite kings were placed following their execution (10:27). The first two examples involve a גַּל־אֲבָנִים גָּדוֹל (“great pile of stones”), which is the same term used in 2 Sam 18:17. In all of these cases the stones mark the ignominious disposal of the dead. Yet the description of the stone heap in 2 Sam 18:17 differs from the other passages because it is “erected” (נָצַב hiphil) rather than “raised” (קָם hiphil). The use of the verbal form נָצַב hiphil to describe the marker of Absalom’s burial pit in v. 17 creates a link with v. 18, where Absalom is said to have “erected” (נָצַב) a pillar (מַצֶּבֶת). This link creates a line of commentary in which Absalom’s failed ambitions are reflected in both his monument and the pit of his interment. Absalom is neither remembered nor buried properly, and both facts consummate the end of his unsuccessful attempt to supplant his father’s house.

The transposition of burial and remembrance in 2 Sam 18:17–18 is followed by an occurrence of role reversal in the mourning of Absalom’s death (19:1–5). Despite the considerable importance of creating one’s own monument, as attested in the epigraphic parallels to מַצֶּבֶת, Absalom’s declaration that he has no son leads to a scenario where the obligation to mourn the dead falls upon the father (David). Following Absalom’s death in the Forest of Ephraim (2 Sam 18:17), runners bring David news of Absalom’s defeat. Upon receiving the news David promptly laments and mourns his son, rather than celebrating his army’s victory. But the message conveyed through David’s actions is the reversal of the father-son ideal. The death of the erstwhile king in 2 Sam 18:17–18 does not result in dynastic succession.

---


69 Noted by McCarter (II Samuel, 402).

70 Interestingly, Sanders (Invention of Hebrew, 190–191 n. 71) has compared the use of נָצַב in the descriptions of Absalom and Yassibu, Kirta’s son in the Ugaritic epic.


David’s actions and Absalom’s death express discontinuity on multiple levels, Absalom does not succeed his father David, nor does dynastic succession occur in Absalom’s place.

David’s famous words effectively remember the name of the dead, and the lament’s repetition in 2 Sam 19:5 forms an inclusio around the brief description of reversed roles. The sense of disruption through the reversal of roles is signaled in the initial verb of 19:1α, “And the king was disturbed” (וַיִּרְגַּז).73 The verbal root (√רגז) is cognate with the term in the Hadad Stele that threatens the disruption of remembrance rituals (rgz in KAI § 214:23). In fact, the root occurs in other sources that deal with disturbing the dead.74 For example, in 1 Sam 28:15 the hiphil form of the root is used to describe the negative disposition of the divinized dead when the spirit of Samuel asks: “Why have you disturbed me?” In Isa 14:9, the verb (qal) describes the state of Sheol with the arrival of the dead king of Babylon (the root appears also in Isa 14:3 and 16).75 Furthermore, a Phoenician yiphil form of the root is found in the inscription of Tabnit (KAI § 13:6), appearing in a line that forbids the opening of the king’s sarcophagus and the disturbance (rgz) of his bones.76 But in 2 Sam 19:1, it is not Absalom’s bones that are disturbed; what is disrupted is the memory of his name.

The motifs of rupture and reversed roles are also apparent at the end of David’s initial lament (2 Sam 19:1βγ) when he addresses his dead son, wishing “that I myself would have died in your stead (ךָתַחְתֶּי).” The preposition תחתי alludes to the curse of Shimei at the beginning of Absalom’s revolt (2 Sam 16:8).77 However, it also recalls the formulaic use of the preposition in the epilogues of the book of Kings, where it regularly intro-

73 Berlin (Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, 75) notes the significance of this clause, and observes that the repetition of David’s lament in vv. 1 and 5 creates a framework for the narrative’s shifting scenes.
74 Conroy (Absalom, Absalom!, 75 n. 130) comments that the verbal root is rare in narrative texts, and as such it stands out in 19:1, though he does not mention its association with the dead.
77 Note the specific vocabulary of Shemei’s curse in 2 Sam 16:8, “Yahweh has returned upon you all of the blood of the House of Saul, in whose stead [ךָתַחְתֶּי] you have reigned; and Yahweh has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom …” See Fokkelman, Narrative Art and Poetry, 264–265; and Suriano, Politics of Dead Kings, 68–69. See also the comments in Hutton, Transjordanian Palimpsest, 190 n. 53.
duces the dead king’s successor son (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 15:8b: König des Sohnes seinem Vater). In the first example, the preposition’s force expresses one dynasty superseding another, while in the later example it represents internal succession. Both apply in this story of an ill-fated prince rebelling against his father. The reversal of traditional roles is given further description as the narrator tells us that David’s actions transformed “victory to mourning that day” (2 Sam 19:2). The theme is furthered by Joab’s accusation that David, by his behavior, was “loving those who hate him and hating those who love him” (19:7).

The extended narrative of Absalom’s fate, which moves from 18:9–17 into 19:1–5, creates a framework within which Absalom’s memory is subverted and his status is dismissed. The episodic nature of this account is evident in the Wiederaufnahme that frames Absalom’s burial in 18:17b and David’s resumption of his kingly duties in 19:9by. Importantly, the Wiederaufnahme involves the people of Israel, the contested powerbase who had initially backed Absalom, but now fled from his defeat, “each man to his tent” (כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל נָסוּ אִישׁ לְאֺהָלָיו [18:17b, with qere] // כל ישראל נוש את אתליו [2 Sam 19:9by]). Following this episode, the stakes are made clear in 19:10–11, when the Israelites publicly declare that Absalom, whom they had “anointed” as ruler, is now dead. The verbal forms in v. 11, which describe Absalom’s status as a ruler who was once anointed but is now deceased, are in the suffix-tense (משחינו [3.m.pl] and מת [3.m.sg; see also 18:20]) rather than the waw-consecutive. The finality reflected in these pluperfect forms relays the opportune moment for David’s return to Jerusalem. David’s resumption of kingship over all Israel is signaled by the social inversion de-

---

78 Note the use of the preposition tht in Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Phoenician sources discussed in Suriano, Politics of Dead Kings, 131–151; and idem, “Dynasty Building at Ugarit,” 12–15. A fascinating reversal of the epilogues in Kings, and a parallel to David’s lament is seen in the use of tht in the curses of Eshmunazor’s sarcophagus (KAI § 14:8–9). See also the use of this preposition in the critique of dynastic succession found in Eccl 4:15; M. J. Suriano, “Kingship and Carpe Diem, Between Gilgamesh and Qoheleth,” VT 67 (2017): 302, n. 6.

79 Joab’s words in 19:6–7 indicate that as a public figure, David’s personal grief has interfered with the army’s ability to celebrate; see D. Bodi, Demise of the Warlord: A New Look at the David Story (HBM; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 95. See also the examination of the ritual improprieties involved in David’s actions, honor versus shame, in S. M. Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” JBL 115 (1996): 208–211. Olyan points out the covenantal aspects, regarding David’s relations with his army and vassals. This represents the political dimension of David’s actions and their ramifications. The reversal of roles (David as mourner) draws to the forefront the tenuous nature of dynasty, and the fact that disloyalty could have fatal results.
scribed in 19:1 (portended by Absalom’s own actions in 18:18); the succession of kingship following Absalom’s death was the restoration of David to his throne.

Matthew J. Suriano
University of Maryland
4149 Susquehanna Hall
College Park, MD 20742
United States
msuriano@umd.edu
Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel is a peer-reviewed, quarterly journal focusing primarily on the biblical texts in their ancient historical contexts, but also on the history of Israel in its own right. Each issue has a topical focus. The primary language is English, but articles may also be published in German and French. A specific goal of the journal is to foster discussion among different academic cultures within a larger international context pertaining to the study of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel in the first millennium B.C.E.


Associate Editors (2012–2018)
Erhard Blum, Tübingen; John Day, Oxford; Louis Jonker, Stellenbosch; John Kessler, Toronto; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Princeton; Martti Nissinen, Helsinki; Thomas Römer, Paris/Lausanne; Christoph Uehlinger, Zürich; David Vanderhooft, Boston; Nili Wazana, Jerusalem