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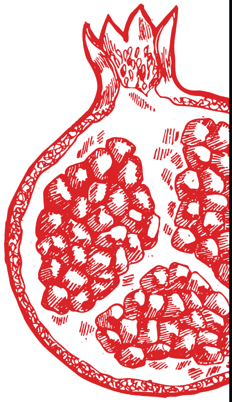
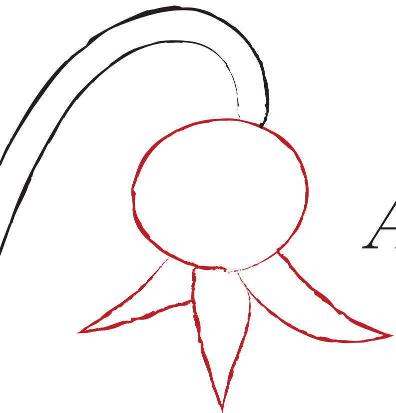
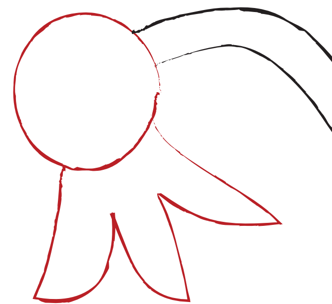


# AABNER

## ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH



*Thematic Issue:*
*Engaging Ritual in the Biblical Texts– A Comparative Approach*



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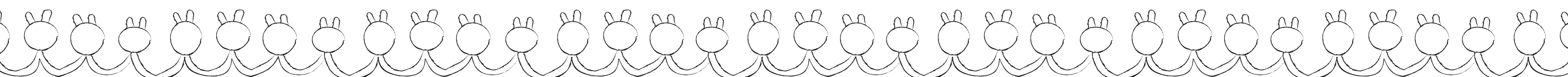

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# INTRODUCTION: RITUAL IN BIBLICAL TEXT AND BIBLICAL LANDS

*Kristine Henriksen Garroway and*
*Christine Elizabeth Palmer*

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 3 (Autumn, 2021): 1–9

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Key Words: Ritual, Biblical World, ancient Near East, Ancient Israel, Hebrew Bible, Afterlife, Archaeology

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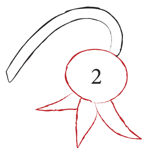
# Abstract

The papers in this special issue speak to the numerous ways in which thinking about the Hebrew Bible within its ancient Near Eastern cultural and intellectual environment can provide new insights and further the understanding of ritual in the biblical world. Papers herein look outward to Israel's neighbors both near and far in their examination of ritual and cult in this life and the next. The authors cull from a variety of approaches, from philological (comparative literatures), iconographic (visual exegesis), and archaeological (material culture), to explore biblical texts as cultural products and "textual artifacts" of ancient Israel.




Les articles de ce numéro spécial déploient les nombreuses façons dont l'étude de la Bible hébraïque au sein de l'environnement intellectuel et culturel du Proche-Orient Ancien permet de proposer de nouvelles connaissances et de mieux comprendre les rituels dans le monde biblique. Les contributions réunies ici s'ouvrent aux voisins proches et plus éloignés d'Israël et examinent rituels et cultes dans cette vie et la suivante. Les auteurs et autrices utilisent une variété d'approches, philologique (littératures comparées), iconographique (exégèse visuelle) et archéologique (culture matérielle), pour explorer les textes bibliques comme des produits culturels et des « artefacts textuels » de l'Israël ancien.



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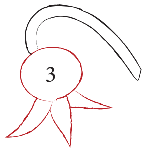
# INTRODUCTION: RITUAL IN BIBLICAL TEXT AND BIBLICAL LANDS

***Kristine Henriksen Garroway and Christine Elizabeth Palmer***




## Introduction

The articles in this special issue speak to the numerous ways in which thinking about the biblical text[1] within its ancient Near Eastern cultural and intellectual environment can provide new insights and further the understanding of the biblical world. The articles herein look outward to Israel's neighbors both near and far in their examination of ritual in this life and the next.

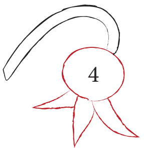
What is ritual? Seeing as this is a special issue dedicated to ritual in the biblical text, it seems apt to define the term. This task, however, is not simple.[2] Ritual is a word that is difficult to define, one that is

[1] Biblical text here refers to the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

[2] Bell 1992; Grimes 2013.

often determined via context. A working definition may be as follows: "a complex performance of symbolic acts, characterized by its formality, order, and sequence, which tends to take place in specific situations, and has as one of its central goals the regulation of the social order" (Gorman 1990, 19). Ritual is not merely a conceptual and theoretical system of beliefs, but a means of enacting belief where societies can actualize worlds of meaning through performance. Ritual is embodied and experienced, as it constructs meaning that both shapes and is shaped by the participant (Palmer 2022).

As seen in this definition, and as used by the articles in this volume, the term ritual is related to what we might call religious ritual. In discussing the theory of religious ritual, the cultural anthropologist Pascal Boyer stated that "one of the main points of the argument [regarding religious ritual] is that there is no unified set of phenomena that could be the object of such a theory" (1984, 185). While the term religion can also be problematized,[3] it is used here to refer to the attempts undertaken by an individual or group to interact with gods, ancestors, or other non-visible entities (Stowers 2012, 8–9). Religious rituals, then, are set apart from mundane rituals that are devoid of any such intent.




Religious rituals of varying kinds were undertaken on a daily basis within the ancient world, whether in the home, out in public, or in between the two realms. Prayers, offerings, sacrifices, intermediary devices both holy and mundane, and the individuals who perform the rituals are all a part of this current issue. The actions recorded in text and material culture that may seem far off and distant to the modern reader had meaning for the ancient reader. Contextualizing the rituals, therefore, matters. To read texts or interpret artifacts outside of their context results in faulty understandings. As Ronald Grimes warns us: "Be cautious in what you assume about the obviousness and purview of the term 'ritual,' and read ritual writings in terms of their historical contexts and the genre of writings in which they appear" (2013, 192).

How, then, do the authors herein go about contextualizing their articles? They cull from a variety of approaches, including philological (comparative literatures), iconographic (visual exegesis), and archeo-

[3] Smith 1982; Braun and McCutcheon 2007; Stowers 2008.

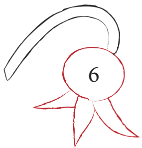
logical (material culture), to explore biblical texts as cultural products and textual artifacts of ancient Israel. In doing so, they all read comparatively. The articles are evenly divided in their approach—some take as their starting point rituals preserved in the form of textual artifacts (Erickson, McDowell, Hays), whereas others read the material remains that concretize practices referred to obliquely in the biblical text (Smoak, Suriano, Ilan and Greer). In commenting on not just the method of reading comparatively, but the necessity of doing so, Christopher Hays describes the interaction of the biblical texts with their ancient Near Eastern context "exceedingly respiratory" (2014, 4). He notes that although the texts "have spoken to many periods and peoples, they spoke first within specific historical contexts; and in crafting their messages, they worked with the cultural materials that their surroundings provided" (2011, 2). The outcome of a comparative approach is rich.[4] Read on their own, each of the articles illuminates the biblical world. When read together, however, they work in harmony with one another. What follows here are some initial observations on common threads that appear throughout this special issue.

The first common thread is the phenomenon of polysemy and puns as related to ritual. Nancy Erickson's article investigates the role-play priests engage in when dressing for ritual. Using the *wpt r* ("Opening of the Mouth") ceremony in Egypt and the Levitical priests as examples, she demonstrates how the donning of ritual clothing transforms an ordinary person (the priest) into an extraordinary individual (the deity). Levitical priests wear an elaborate costume. Egyptian *sm* priests don similarly transformative garb, putting on the skin of a leopard (*ba*), which also invokes the *ba* ("spirit"/ "soul") of the leopard, in turn imbuing the *sm* priest with the animal's strength. As Erickson states, "it is while wearing the *ba* that the *sm* demonstrates *ba*." Puns, or double entendres, abound within the ritual literature she engages. Catherine McDowell's examination of the Mesopotamian *mīs pî pīt pî* ("Opening of the Mouth") ritual and Genesis 1–2 also finds language laden with multiple meanings. She demonstrates how the creation of humans in Genesis as *beṣelem Elohim* reacts against the known cultural context

[4] Stowers 2012; Garroway 2018.

wherein bodies for gods created from clay, wood, or metal needed to be "activated." Humans in the Eden story are not idols but the living image of God that are "activated" by his living breath.

Both McDowell and Erickson discuss the role of dress in becoming like God. Erickson suggests that priests role-play as gods when dressed appropriately, while McDowell describes the first humans in the garden as ones who tend the garden and worship the deity (i.e., priests) as nude. If, as Erickson suggests, priests dress as deities to role-play as deities and enter into the holy space, why then are the first humans naked? Reading these articles together provides a picture wherein Adam and Eve had no role to play, no barriers to cross, to enter the space of Yahweh, so therefore they did not need material clothing. It is only when barriers arise, when humans trespass, that Yahweh provides them with clothing.

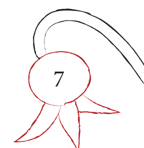



Moving from the description of ancient priests to the individual participant in the ritual, Ilan and Greer offer a picture of pilgrimage to Tel Dan. The sensory affordances a worshipper encounters when entering a cult site in order to engage in a ritual are carefully laid out in their article. From the intentional construction of the architecture, to ancient "city planning," to the sights and sounds that would have surrounded the pilgrim, the article invites the modern reader to think about and breathe in the experience of pilgrimage. In this way, the reader moves back and forth between the present time and ancient context, drawing upon the familiar (synagogue, church, or other religious service) to inform their understanding of the text. The movement back and forth between two worlds both in the textual description of pilgrimage and the archeological reconstruction offers another type of polysemy.

Hays's examination of mortuary art and Psalmic literature again centers on the idea that ritual has multiple meanings. Hays describes the texts as binocular, with one eye looking to this life and the other to life after death. Returning to the notion of polysemy, Hays focuses on how Psalm 15 plays with the royal ideology of the living king and the king's relationship to the deity in the afterlife. The notion of an afterlife and to whom it was afforded is a question raised by Matthew Suriano as well. Where Hays finds hints of a possible afterlife for royalty, Suriano leaves the question unanswered. His study approaches the question of the afterlife by asking whether the biblical understandings

of corpse impurity might have any practical applications or relationship to the archeological practice of feeding the dead. Open ceramic items, cups, bowls, plates, jugs, jars, and the like are commonly found in Iron Age burials. Yet, there is a paucity of evidence to suggest that food or beverage was actually placed in the dishes and cups, suggesting that food exposed to the corpse would be contaminated. Two covered food vessels found in Judahite burials at Beit Shemesh perhaps serve as the exception that proves the rule. Who was fed, what victuals were provided, and what purpose empty ceramic grave goods served: all these questions remain enigmatic.

Jeremy Smoak's article returns us to the sensory nature of ritual, presenting the amulets discovered in Ketef Hinnom as crafted objects made to be touched and used. Inscribed with lines from the Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6, the amulets are polysemic. The multivalent nature of the objects' materiality point both to the humans who manipulate (read, wear, touch, shine) the amulet and the divine who is represented by the words and material used in the amulet. The properties of silver required it to be refined so that one could extract the purest form of metal. Likewise, the biblical text describe Yahweh's power to refine individuals and purify their hearts. Smoak hints at multivalence of purpose for the ritual objects in both this life and beyond, inviting us to consider the audience of ritual. From the miniscule amulets to the expansive landscape of Tel Dan, performance of ritual is at its heart communicative in nature, seeking to build a bridge between the human and divine realms.




An important link between the articles by Hays, Suriano, and Smoak is that they all interpret items associated with elite burials. In the case of Hays's article, the royal ideology is explicit. Similarly, in the Ketef Hinnom burials, we find some of the most elite burials in Jerusalem, which are generally attributed to the upper echelons of Iron Age society. With Suriano's study, this link is less obvious; however, families that could afford bench tombs or hewn cave tombs in the manner of family burials were well-off. Most of the Iron Age population consisted of commoners, and their burials were simple graves now lost to time. They are what David Ilan (2017) calls "the invisible dead." The fact that these three articles interact with aspects of the biblical text is instructive, for

they align with the concerns of the biblical authors, who as scribes were themselves part of the upper tier of society.[5]

These are just a few of the connections that can be seen running through the different articles. We hope that these preliminary thoughts will whet the reader's appetite to read on and draw their own connections and conclusions regarding ritual in the biblical world.

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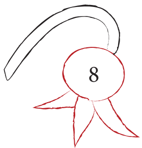


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[5] Davies and Römer 2013; Milstein 2016.

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# DRESSING UP: ROLE-PLAYING IN THE EGYPTIAN *WPT R* RITUAL AND A CONTEXTUALIZED VIEW OF THE BIBLICAL PRIESTHOOD

*Nancy Erickson*

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 3 (Autumn, 2021): 11–27

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Key Words: Dress, identity, costume, *wpt r* ritual, *sm-priest,* biblical priesthood, Egyptian priesthood

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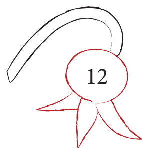
# Abstract

Dress and the act of dressing-up find expression in earliest antiquity in both simple and complex forms. In ritual contexts dress is best labeled as costume, which informs roles played within the ritual. The study here is interested in ritual texts of the ancient Near East and examines the costume of the *sm* priest in the Egyptian *wpt r* ritual and the rituals related to the costume of the biblical priesthood, namely those in Exod 28–29, 40, Lev 6, 8, 16, and Ezek 42 and 44. Both Egyptian and biblical rituals demonstrate necessary costuming for the efficacy of ritual participation. The costume symbolically and temporarily transformed the wearer for the purpose of playing a role. The wearers, then, embodied an identity other than their own, believing themselves capable of playing the roles necessary for the ritual. For the *sm* priest in the Egyptian *wpt r* ritual, the *ba* transformed the *sm* to *ba*, such that the *sm* then embodied a physical strength beyond his own and the divine roles of the gods Horus and Thoth. For the biblical priests, their costumes, which were crafted of the same materials as the house for the presence of the Israelite deity Yahweh and labeled "holy to Yahweh," קדש ליהוה, were the conduit by which they were transformed and embodied the divine.



Dans l'antiquité la plus ancienne, les vêtements et le fait de s'habiller peuvent être l'objet d'expressions simples ou complexes. Dans des contextes rituels, les vêtements peuvent être catalogués comme un costume, qui explique les rôles joués dans le rituel. Cette étude s'intéresse aux textes rituels du Proche-Orient Ancien et examine les habits du prêtre sm dans le rituel égyptien *wpt r* et les rituels liés aux habits du sacerdoce biblique, à savoir ceux en Ex 28–29, Lév 6 ; 8 ; 16 et Éz 42 et 44. Tant les rituels égyptiens que bibliques manifestent la nécessité du vêtement pour assurer l'efficacité de la participation rituelle. Le costume transforme celui qui le porte symboliquement et temporairement, et lui permet de jouer un rôle. Les porteurs incarnent alors une identité différente de la leur, et se considèrent capables de jouer les rôles nécessaires au rituel. Pour le prêtre *sm* dans le rituel égyptien *wpt r*, le *ba* transforme le *sm* en *ba*, de sorte que le *sm* incarne alors une force physique supérieure à la sienne et les rôles divins des dieux Horus et Thot. Pour les prêtres bibliques, les vêtement, fabriqués dans les mêmes matériaux que la maison qui contient la présence de la déité israélite Yahvé et estampillés « saint pour Yahvé » קדש ליהוה, représentaient le moyen par lequel ils étaient transformés et incarnaient le divin.



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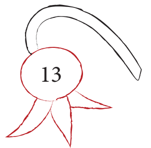
*Nancy Erickson*

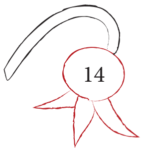



## Introduction

Dressing-up is an activity of supplementing the exterior body. The act includes not only the dress itself, "an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body" (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992, 3), but also the practices and meanings surrounding it. It is a mode of communication that establishes identity, in some scenarios preempting discourse. Its function may be multifaceted and complex, communicating particularities to an audience, whether intended or not, and informing the wearer himself/herself. In this manner, dress may both connect and separate the wearer from others.[1]

[1] Peirson-Smith 2013; Quick 2021, 16.

This article is interested in a specific type of dress and dressing-up, namely costume and costuming. Following Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher, costume is a type of dress that is "out-of-everyday" social roles or activities (1992, 3). It identifies dress that is specific to a situation beyond the usual, one that is reserved for activities such as rituals. Costumes in these scenarios temporarily and symbolically transform and obscure the identity of the wearer, enabling the wearer "to represent their ordinary self in a new guise through role-play" (Peirson-Smith 2013, 79). Gregory Stone notes: "Playing the role of the other requires that the player dress out of the role or roles that are acknowledged to be his own. Costume therefore is 'a kind of magical instrument'" (1995, 31). With the costume on, an individual embodies a different identity, and with the costume off, the ordinary self is resumed. The role the individual plays while wearing the costume is informed by the costume itself. The costume, then, is the conduit by which the individual embodies a different identity for the purpose of role-playing.



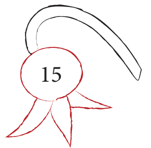

The focus of this article is on the costuming of the *sm* priest in the Egyptian *wpt r* ("opening of the mouth") ritual and the Aaronide priesthood in the Hebrew Bible. The *sm* priest participates in an essential change of costume from the *qni* to the *ba* during the *wpt r* ritual. Wearing the *ba* communicates a particular complex role that the priest plays during the *wpt r* ritual. While the costume functions as an outward symbol to identify the *sm*'s role, the *ba* also functions to temporarily transform the ordinary self of the *sm* priest as an embodied other. A similar transformation of identity may be seen in the descriptions of the costuming of the Aaronide priesthood in the biblical texts. There, the specialized dress is necessary for the rituals of servicing the Israelite deity Yahweh. With their costumes, the priests are symbolically transformed and embody the divine.

The transformation of identity via costuming in the scenarios of the Egyptian *wpt r* ritual and the biblical texts pertaining to the priestly dress inform a rich understanding of dress as costume in the rituals of the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. Laura Quick notes that "the intersection of material culture [dress] and embodiment are essential to understanding the social and cultural world [that] shaped the Hebrew

Bible" (2021, 2). To this end, the Egyptian *wpt r* ritual will be addressed below in order to contextualize the *ba* costume of the *sm* priest and understand the costume's transformative function for the ritual and for the priest himself. Next, the biblical texts that describe the costuming of the Aaronide priesthood will be addressed. Attention will focus on the specifications of the costume, the role that the priests play while wearing the costume, and the symbolic and transformative function of the costume as it relates to the priests' embodiment.

## The Egyptian *wpt r* Ritual

The Egyptian *wpt r* ritual is attested as early as the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2600 BCE) and makes an appearance as late as the Roman period (first century CE).[2] It is associated with a large body of ritual texts known variously as *wpt r irt* ("opening of the mouth and eyes") and *irt wpt rn twt n* ("performing the opening of the mouth in the workshop of the statue of PN"),[3] the latter likely being the full name of the ritual, as it ends with a personal name. The ritual also has activities in common with the daily cult rituals, namely the awakening, washing, feeding, dressing, and anointing of a god in the form of a statue. Daily cult rituals were employed in the temple and performed after the *wpt r* ritual.[4] Their function was to preserve and maintain an already installed deity. Some repetition of elements of the *wpt r* ritual may also be found in the Pyramid Texts. The replicated elements include portions of the purifi-





[2] The earliest textual reference to the Egyptian ritual occurs in the tomb of Metjen, an official during the Fourth Dynasty. Late references include the tomb of Petamonope (Saitic), Papyrus Cairo 36803 (Late Ptolemaic – Early Roman), and the Papyrus of the "Hathor" Sais (Roman). On these later texts, see Bjerke 1965; Schulman 1984; Lorton 1999. The origins of the *wpt r* ritual are addressed in Roth 1992.

[3] Budge 1909; Otto 1960; Goyon 1972.

[4] For an explanation on the relationship between the *wpt r* ritual and daily cult rituals, see Hundley 2013, 169, 199. David Lorton (1999, 150) develops a strong relationship and overlap between the *wpt r* ritual and the daily cult rituals.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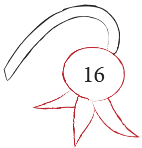
cations and adornments of the statue and the use of various implements to open the statue's faculties.[5]

In the Old Kingdom, the ritual seems to have focused on the mouth specifically, *wpt r*, as shown by its title in that period. During the Middle Kingdom, the ritual wanes but does not drop out completely with some meager allusions in the Coffin Texts.[6] It is in New Kingdom Egypt that the concept of opening the eye was added, *wpt r irt*, and it is during this time that the ritual is ubiquitous in its attestations on royal and private tomb walls, temple walls, in papyri, on coffins, bark, ostraca, and stelae. Of particular importance is the *wpt r* inscription found on the tomb of Rekhmire during the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1400 BCE).[7] The tomb attests some seventy-five episodes of the "opening of the mouth" ritual, including lustrations, censings, libations, and other religious acts. The Rekhmire scenes are particularly informative for understanding the complete ritual as well as one can and for placing the *wpt r* ritual within the larger framework of statuary rituals.




Writing primarily on Theban tombs, Eberhard Otto in his *Das Ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual* sought to create a synthesis of the attested *wpt r* rituals in order to understand the various scenes and acts that comprise its depiction.[8] His notable compilation of texts and illustrations is based on more than eighty extant tombs and remains the academic standard for discussion and study of the *wpt r* ritual (1960 2:173–83). For the purposes of this article, Otto's work provides an essential framework with which to understand the costuming of the *sm* priest. The various stages of the *wpt r* ritual are as follows.

The *wpt r* ritual took place in a workshop until the very moment when the statue was relocated to its shrine. Following initial purifications of the statue, the *sm* priest, after being awakened, was brought before the statue. The *sm* presented the foreleg and heart of a slaughtered bull to the statue and then touched the statue's mouth with various implements.

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5 Baly 1930; Lorton 1999, 131, 149–52, 168.

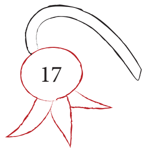
6 Buck 1935–2006; Bjerke 1965, 201–16.

7 Davies 1935; Davies 1943; Otto 1960.

8 Davies and Gardiner 1915–1933; Otto 1960.

The statue itself was then clothed with various garments,[9] anointed, given scepters, fumigations, and presented with an elaborate offering. Following the ritual removal of footprints,[10] the statue was then moved from the workshop and installed in its shrine. The intended result of the *wpt r* was to quicken or enliven the statue as a god. Its upkeep would have required daily cult rituals.

While not the sole participant in the ritual, the primary actor was the *sm* priest.[11] During the ritual, the priest puts on and takes off the *qni* garment[12] and in its stead dons the skin of a leopard, *ba*.[13] The change in costume is dependent on the various scenes of the ritual and the role being played by the *sm* priest. The first costume, the *qni*, is worn after the *sm* priest awakes. The sleeping *sm* otherwise wears a full-bodied and striped costume. The *qni* itself resembles a bib. It is small. Its material is uncertain, though the stripes are not unlike those on the *sm*'s sleeping apparel. The more peculiar costume that the *sm* priest wears




[9] The statue was otherwise nude. On this related topic, see Oppenheim 1949; Matsushima 1993. For a discussion as this topic pertains to the Hebrew Bible, see Ammann 2019; LeMon and Purcell 2019.

[10] Tomb illustrations depict the priest leaving the workshop walking backward and sweeping away the traces of his footprints as he went with the *hdn* plant. The related Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ("opening of the mouth") ritual texts describe a similar disassociation of the fashioner with the completed statue. See Blackman 1924; Baly 1930. Blackman and Baly both conclude that the Mesopotamians borrowed the ritual from Egypt. Lorton (1999, 147 n. 37) disagrees. See also Nelson 1949.

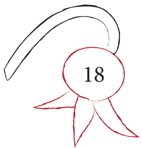
[11] *ÄW* 2, 2195–96; *WÄS* 4.119; *CDME*, 225. The *sm* priest was under the direction of the *ẖry-ḥbt*, or "ritualist," throughout the ritual. See "*ẖry-ᶜ*," *ÄW* 2, 1997; "ẖry-ḥbt," *CDME*, 204; Gardiner 1947, 39.

[12] *ÄW* 2, 2524; *CDME*, 279; Sethe 2018, 211.

[13] The *ba* is worn in various Egyptian contexts (Otto 1960, 2:72–73; Lorton 1999, 159–62). For rendering "leopard," see Castel's (2002) convincing work on identification. *Contra* "panther" in *ÄW* 2, 775–79; Wb. 1:410–16; *CDME*, 77. Incidentally, a metathesis of the radicals, *ba* to *ab*, denotes "to brand" but may also take the form *aby* meaning "panther." The literary play informs Otto's rendering of "panther" (Otto 1960, 2:72; "*3b*," *WÄS* 1.6; "*3by*," *WÄS* 1.7).

is the *ba*, a skin of a leopard.[14] Leopard skins were imported from Nubia or Punt (Houlihan 1996, 93, 199). The skins were given as gifts to the temple, primarily for priestly use, and seen as a sign of power. In the New Kingdom, leopard skins are included in processions where Nubians present gifts (Castel 2002, 22). Interestingly, Egyptians made imitations of the skin, such as the fake skin adorned with gold stars and silver paws found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Other leopard images and symbols are found as coverings on seats of folding chairs used by kings and on carvings on sarcophagi lids (Castel 2002, 21, 23). During the Late Period (ca. 500 BCE), the god Bes is frequently depicted wearing a leopard skin (Castel 2002, 24). The skin was a coveted Egyptian symbol that was associated with the temple, priests, and power.

The correlation between the terms "leopard" and "power" is underscored by a pun originating with the term *ba* itself. While *ba* refers to the leopard-skin costume of priest, the term frequently translates to "power" in other contexts.[15] The intended double meaning is confirmed by illustrations that depict the *sm*'s exceptional prowess by having him carry a slaughtered bull over his shoulders while he approaches the statue. Michael Hundley notes: "Punning plays an especially significant role as a meaningful way of making connections between words and the objects they refer to and in some ways embody" (2013, 8).[16] In this sense, it is while wearing the *ba* that the *sm* demonstrates *ba*. The activity of wearing an animal skin to transmit power is widely documented in many cultures, mainly in Africa, from ancient to present times (Castel 2002, 21 n. 12): "Through sympathetic magic … the use of big felines spotted skins may transmit to its owner a series of the inherent qualities



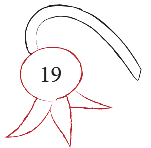

[14] At no point throughout the ritual is the *sm* not wearing one of the special articles of clothing. The clothing change is described in scenes 11, 19–21, and 40 (Otto 1960, 2:60, 71–72, 100).

[15] Punning is at work throughout the ritual. In the immediate scenes, there is a pun between *irt* ("eye") and *iri* ("to make, do"), as well as *ẖpš* ("foreleg") and *ẖpš* ("physical strength"). The literary device "was regarded as a highly serious and controlled use of language" (Assmann 2001, 87). Other examples of punning in the ritual may be found in Lorton 1999, 158–59, 161, 163 n. 61, 164, 170–73. His work relies on the scholarship of Helck 1967 and Goyon 1972.

[16] See also Helck 1967, 33–36.

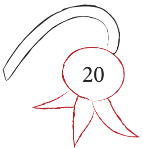
of the animal: strength" (Castel 2002, 20). Likewise, the *sm* priest embodies the power of the costume he wears. As such, he is symbolically and temporarily transformed in order to play his role in the *wpt r* ritual.

The priest's role, however, extends beyond physical strength. While wearing the *ba* costume, the *sm* is identified with the god Horus, deity of kingship and sky and son of Osiris (van Voss 1999, 426–27). From the utterances he makes, the *sm* priest's eye is identified with the eye of Horus, so that the priest's eye becomes Horus' eye. The priest also assumes the role of the god Thoth, cosmic deity of magic and wisdom (Vos 1999, 861–64), and the utterances "I am Horus" and "I am Thoth" are both explicated by the divine determinative preceding the priest's title. While role-playing as Thoth, the priest states: "I have provided myself with your magical powers. I know the knowledge that is in you. I have taken possession of your strength, and of your cunning in handicraft, and of the utterances of your mouth" (Otto 1960, 2:149–50). Here, the priest's embodiment via the *ba* costume extends beyond mere physical power to the divine. The costumed *sm* priest is transformed to play his roles as the gods Horus and Thoth in the *wpt r* ritual. There is a brief transfer of the *ba* costume to the so-called "loving son," but the *sm* priest otherwise wears the *ba* throughout the rest of the ritual.




Following Stone's suggestion mentioned above, the *ba* costume indeed is "a kind of magical instrument." With the costume, the *sm* priest embodies a physical strength that is not his own and assumes the roles of the gods Horus and Thoth. The *sm*'s ordinary self is transformed into new identities for the purpose of role-play. Consider that specialized dress—dress that inherently means something (e.g., *ba* = "power") and when worn even has the capacity to make the individual look like someone or something else—allows the individual to feel like whatever or whomever it is they are wearing. Stated differently, a good costume makes the wearer feel as though they are not wearing a costume at all but are in fact what or whom the costume represents. The wearer embodies the costume. Their ordinary self is set aside, and a new costumed identity is assumed for the sake of a new role. In an older study on animal skins in Egyptian contexts, Alexandre Moret concludes that the skins were donned specifically for the purpose of investing the wearer with

the powers of the animal.[17] For the *sm* priest, the *ba* costume was the conduit through which the priest identified himself as being capable of carrying out the ritual. In costume with the *ba*, the priest conceived that he indeed was *ba*. For the *sm*, this conviction included the strength of a leopard and the gumption to role-play as the deities Horus and Thoth, stating "I am Horus," "I am Thoth." Notably, not just anyone could enter the sacred space of a deity, whether participating in the quickening of its statue or tending to it via the daily cult rituals. This is confirmed by the ritual removal of the footprints, as though there was never a participant at all. The costuming of the *sm* priest, subsequently, is essential for the efficacy of the ritual.



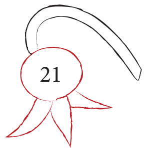

## Biblical Texts

The rituals associated with the costuming of the biblical priests are found in Exod 28–29; 40; Lev 6; 8; 16; Num 8; and Ezek 42; 44. The descriptions are embedded in the narratives of the biblical cults. The institution of the Aaronide priesthood and its associated clothing is described in Exod 28–29 amid instructions for building the Tabernacle (chapters 24–31), the abode of Yahweh's presence. The descriptions include not only the blueprints for a divine dwelling but also elaborate descriptions of the designated participants intended to service the deity along with their specialized garb. In Exod 28, instructions are given for the fabrication of the priestly costume for Aaron and his sons, and then in chapter 29, the ritual associated with how to go about wearing the costume and what the priests are to do while wearing it is described. The actual making of the costume is described in chapter 39. Additional, brief directions for priestly dress are found in Lev 6 and 16. And the execution of the directions can be found, at least in part, in Lev 8. There, Moses leads and directs the ritual of costuming Aaron and his sons as priests. Special priestly dress is also mentioned briefly in Ezek

[17] Moret has compiled several references to animal skins as clothing in various Egyptian religious contexts. See Moret 1903, 43–47, 74–76, 222–25.

42 and 44.[18] The Zadokite priests of Ezekiel are given explicit directions regarding when to put on the special costume and when to take it off.

The biblical texts are strikingly elaborate when it comes to the descriptions of the priestly costume and the rituals involved: extant literature from the ancient Near East pales in comparison to the lengthy descriptions in the Hebrew Bible. The creation of the costume is remarkable. Exceptional individuals are tasked for manufacturing the priestly dress. Said artisans are those "wise of heart," חכמי־לב, whom Yahweh "filled with the spirit of wisdom," רוח חכמה (Exod 28:3). The supremely skilled craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab also take responsibility for the worked garments (31:10). The extraordinary abilities of the Tabernacle craftsmen are highlighted by the compilation of skills with which they are endowed, namely "wisdom," חכמה, "understanding," תבונה, and "knowledge," דעת (Erickson 2011). Not only do the biblical accounts provide thorough explanations of the priestly costume but also of the preparatory rituals pertaining to it. Both the Aaronide priests and their costumes are "consecrated" (ומלאת יד־אהרן ויד־בניו, Exod 29:9) prior to servicing Yahweh.[19] And with their costumes on, the priests are "sprinkled with blood from the altar" (מן הדם אשר על המזבח) and with "anointing oil" (ומשמן המשחה, Exod 29:21).[20] By virtue of this sprinkling, the




[18] I am here leaving out the descriptions of garb in Num 8, since the Levitical priests there do not service the deity but the Aaronide priesthood. Regarding the former's subservient role to the latter, see Erickson forthcoming.

[19] The expression "fill the hand of Aaron and the hand of his sons" indicates the consecration and ordination of the priests. The phrase occurs throughout the biblical narratives with a similar meaning: Exod 28:41; 29:29; 33; 35; 32:29; Lev 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num 3:3; Judg 17:5; 12; 1 Kgs 13:33; 2 Chr 13:9; 29:31. For discussion on the expression, see "*mālē*'," *TDOT* 8:297–308. The phrase is also known in Mari texts, *mullû qātam/qatē*, denoting a divine commissioning or transfer of authority from a god to a human. See "*malû*," *CAD* M, part 1, 187.

[20] Blood gestures and rituals are attested throughout the ancient Near East. Meaning and interpretation vary wildly and depend on immediate context and efficacy. For some helpful background, see Feder 2001; Abusch 2003; Gilder 2004, 78–81, 96–104. The use of blood and oil together, as noted above, is more unusual. See, however, Daniel Fleming's (1998) comparison with texts from Emar describing elements in the *zukru* festival.

Aaronide priests and their costumes are deemed "holy," קדש. The deity's "glory," כבוד, finalizes the "consecration" (קדש) of the clad priests (Exod 29:43), and by virtue of it the ritual participants and their costumes are prepared "to service" Yahweh (לכהן־לי, 29:44).

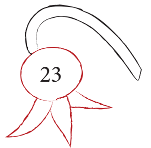
The costume itself includes the "breast piece," חשן, "ephod," אפוד, "robe," מעיל, "woven tunic," וכתנת תשבץ, "turban," מצנפת, and "sash," אבנט, (Exod 28:4) and also the "plate," ציץ, and "undergarment," מכנסי־בד (Exod 28:36; 42) (Houtman 1993–2000). The materials prescribed for the manufacturing of the costume, namely "gold," זהב, "blue," תכלת, "purple," ארגמן, "scarlet material," תולעת השני, and "fine linen," שש, are those also used for the coverings of Yahweh's dwelling.[21] This is a key correlation that equates the priestly costume with the divine:[22] the covering of the place where Yahweh's presence dwells is made of the same material as the apparel that covers the priests. In this manner, the costumed priests are equated with the "costume" of Yahweh's presence and are thus symbolically and temporarily transformed to embody the divine. With the costume, the priests' ordinary self is guised and a new role that embodies the divine is assumed.

The priestly costume is also labeled for interpretation. The engraving on the "plate of pure gold," ציץ זהב טהור, deems the priests as holy to Yahweh: "Engrave on it [the plate of pure gold] a seal, holy to Yahweh," ופתחת עליו פתוחי חום קדש ליהוה (Exod 28:36). The costume is otherwise described as "holy clothes," בגדי־קדש, from the beginning of the

[21] The materials are listed throughout the Tabernacle building instructions in Exodus. Notably, the fabrication of the deity's dwelling and the priestly costumes are not independent narratives. Rather, the entire artistic process is shared (Haran 1985; Rooke 2009, 11–37; MacDonald 2015, 441–42).

[22] William Propp states: "By clothing Aaron in the same fabric that tents over the divine Presence, by dressing him in a golden Ephod with possible idolatrous overtones, the Priestly Writer created an implicit equation between priest and God" (2006, 525–26). See also Propp's discussion on divine dress (2006, 456–74, 522–32). He equates the sumptuous garments adorned with divine images in the ancient Near East with the ritualized priestly garb in Exodus. He then speculates that the priest, "the holiest of all humans," may have been perceived by some as a quasi-god (2006, 525). Jung Hoon Kim (2004) too describes the priestly dress as "symbolically divinized."

descriptions in chapter 28. The relationship between the costume, as holy, and Yahweh cannot be understated. Yahweh *is* holy: "I, Yahweh your god, am holy," קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם (Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8). The deity embodies holiness, and by virtue of their costumes the priests too embody holiness. The transformed identity of the priests, then, is doubly marked as divine. The material of the costume is equated with the material of the very presence of Yahweh, and its label of "holy to Yahweh," directly identifies the priests with the identity of Yahweh. The costume transforms the priests as the god Yahweh for their roles in the rituals related to serving Yahweh. As mentioned above, not just anyone could approach the deity. Quick notes: "Regular man cannot attend to the divine abode, but dressed correctly, [the priest] is not a regular man" (2021, 113). Here, the right costume is essential for the efficacy of the ritual.



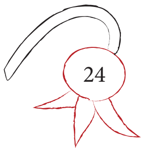

The specialness of the costume is further confirmed by indications of when the priests are to wear it, namely while in sacred space "before/in the presence of Yahweh," לפני יהוה, and while serving the deity. Once the priests leave Yahweh's presence, they are to take off their "holy clothes," בגדי־קדש, and put on "other garments," בגדים אחרים (Ezek 42:14; 44:19). They are to leave their holy costume in holy space until such time that said costume is again required. The action underscores the temporary aspect of the role being played. While wearing the costume, the priests embody the divine and role-play accordingly. Their ordinary self resumes once the costume is removed.

The priestly costume invoked an equation with the divine and as such reframed the wearers' self-identity as divine. It provided the conduit by which the priests identified themselves as being capable of their role. The costume, then, allowed the priests to role-play themselves into the very thing they wore.

## Summary

Costume and costuming inform the roles played by ritual participants. The ordinary self is guised upon wearing a costume, and the wearers are symbolically and temporarily transformed to embody a new identity.

Both the *sm* priest in the Egyptian *wpt r* ritual and the Aaronide priests in the Hebrew Bible are transformed while wearing costumes that are particular to their respective contexts. Both embody new roles with the costume. With the *ba* costume, the *sm* priest embodied the physical strength of a leopard and the gods Horus and Thoth. The biblical priests, similarly, embodied the deity Yahweh. Their costume is doubly marked by the material of the costume and the label on the costume, קדש ליהוה ("holy to Yahweh"). The *sm* and biblical priests were transformed from their ordinary selves to divine embodiments while wearing the costume. The costumes, then, were essential for the efficacy of the rituals they participated in, and they were the means by which the *sm* and biblical priests identified themselves as divine. They embodied the very essence of their costume for the purpose of role-play.

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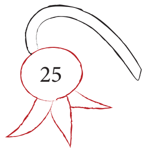


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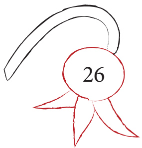


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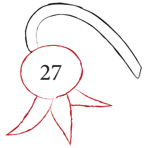



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# HUMAN IDENTITY AND PURPOSE REDEFINED: GEN 1:26–28 AND 2:5–25 IN CONTEXT

*Catherine McDowell*

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Key Words: Genesis 1, Genesis 2, Creation Narratives, Image of God, *mīs pî pīt pî* , Mesopotamia, Hebrew Bible, Cult Statues, Ritual

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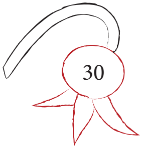
## Abstract

Ancient creation stories define humanity in relation to the gods. In the *Atraḫasīs* Epic, for example, humans were created as a labor force to relieve the lower caste of deities from their toil. In Gen 1–2 humanity was also created to serve God, but the commands to rule and subdue the earth, and to care and cultivate the garden of Eden, are framed by the preceding statement in Gen 1:26–27 that humanity was created in God's image and likeness, that is, as his children. To appreciate Genesis's claim, we must consider it in light of its ancient Near Eastern environment. For Gen 1–2 this includes a set of ritual texts from Mesopotamia, the "Washing and Opening of the Mouth," which describe the process by which divine images, or statues of the gods, were created. Genesis 2 seems to draw from these rituals, or at least the ideas they represent, in order to elaborate on the meaning of בצלם אלהים in Gen 1:26–28. If our aim is to understand how Genesis 1–2 redefines human identity and purpose, we must consider the prevailing views on human creation and the birth of the gods (in their statues) with which it interacted.

Les récits anciens de la création définissent l'humanité comme en lien avec les dieux. Par exemple, dans l'épopée de l'*Atraḫasīs*, les humains sont créés pour être une force de travail qui soulage les déités inférieures dans leur labeur. En Gn 1–2, l'humanité est également créée pour servir Dieu, mais les commandements de régner et de dominer sur la terre, et de prendre soin du jardin d'Éden, sont encadrés par l'affirmation précédente en Gn 1, 26–27 selon laquelle l'humanité a été créée à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu, c'est-à-dire comme ses enfants. Pour comprendre l'affirmation de Genèse, il faut la remettre dans le contexte du Proche-Orient Ancien. Pour Gn 1–2, cela signifie un ensemble de textes rituels de la Mésopotamie, « Ouverture et purification de la bouche » (Mîs-pî), qui décrit le processus par lequel les images divines ou les statues de dieu sont créées. Genèse 2 semble s'inspirer de ces rituels, ou au moins des idées qu'ils représentent, pour construire le sens de en Gn 1, 26–28. Si nous voulons comprendre comment Genèse 1–2 redéfinit l'identité humaine et son but, nous devons prendre en compte les perspectives dominantes sur la création humaine et la naissance des dieux (dans leurs statues) avec lesquelles ce texte interagit.



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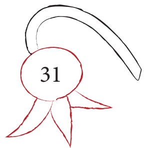
# HUMAN IDENTITY AND PURPOSE REDEFINED: GEN 1:26–28 AND 2:5–25 IN CONTEXT

***Catherine McDowell***




## Introduction

Creation stories from ancient Mesopotamia consistently portray humanity as a workforce created to assume the burdensome task of building cities and temples, a miserable job that had been delegated to the lower gods, who eventually grew weary and unwilling.[1] The situation is described at length in the *Atraḫasīs* Epic, a seventeenth-century BCE Akkadian poem famous for its flood story because of its parallels to

[1] In the *Eridu Genesis*, the goddess Nintur urges that humans be used to construct cities and cult sites for the gods' refreshment: "May they (humans) come and build cities and cult places, that I may cool myself in their shade; may they lay the bricks for the cult cities in pure spots, and may they find places for divination in pure spots!" (*COS* 1.158: 513–15). The Babylonian creation account *Enūma Eliš* mentions the forced labor explicitly: "From his blood he (Ea) created mankind, on whom he imposed the service (misery, hardship) of the gods (*dullu ilāni-ma*), and set the gods free" (*Enūma Eliš*, Tablet VI lines 33–34; Talon 2005, 63).

the biblical flood account in Gen 6–9.[2] Our interest, however, is in its retelling of human creation. The greater Anunna gods had subjected the lesser Igigi gods to forced labor, including the particularly onerous task of digging canals. After enduring decades of drudgery, the Igigi rebelled. They burned their tools, set fire to their workplaces, and then marched on the gates of Enlil, the king of the gods, who was responsible for their enslavement. The insurrection ultimately failed, but the Igigi did succeed in replacing themselves as the lowest caste. Humanity was created as the new working class "to bear the yoke" and "to carry the toil of the gods" (Lambert and Millard 1999, 57, 59–60).[3]

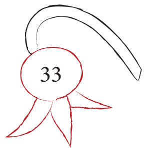
Work plays a significant role in the biblical account of human creation, as well. However, rather than being enslaved, humans served Yahweh Elohim as his royal representatives. God created them in his image, commissioned them to rule over the earth and its creatures, and charged them with cultivating and protecting his sacred garden. Human value, however, was not purely functional. By describing humanity as created בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, Gen 1 defines the divine–human relationship in a startling new way: humans are his *kin*! Human beings are the royal children of God, the creator of the cosmos.[4] They are not designed for enslavement, as in *Atraḫasīs*, nor is their value defined by their function. As his collective "son" or "child," humanity's task is to represent God the Father faithfully as they rule at his behest, cultivating the earth's gifts and resources for their benefit and serving as mediators of his presence and agents of his blessing in the world.

[2] Although initially the *Atraḫasīs* Epic was renowned because of its parallels to Genesis, it is a magnificent piece of literature on its own and does not derive its value simply from comparisons to biblical or other creation accounts.

[3] After humanity is created, the birth goddess Mami declares to the Igigi: "I have removed your heavy work, I have imposed your toil on man. You raised a cry for mankind, I have loosed the yoke, I have established freedom" (Lambert and Millard 1999, 59–60).

[4] Not only has Gen 1 democratized the idea to all of humanity that a royal statue or cult image was a representation of the divine, but by using the terms צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת, Genesis depicts the divine–human relationship in *sonship* terms. Humans are God's royal representatives, but this is because they are first God's "children." For ancient Israel, both ideas would have been novel (McDowell 2015, 131–42).

In what follows, we will consider the royal and priestly portrait of humanity presented in Genesis 1–2. After a brief study on image and likeness in Gen 1:26–28, we will discuss Adam's royal and priestly functions as described in Genesis 2. We will then turn to a set of ritual texts from Mesopotamia, the *mīs pî pīt pî* ("Washing and Opening of the Mouth") texts, which describe the ritual process by which divine images, or statues of the gods, were created. Genesis 2 seems to draw from these rituals, or at least the ideas they represent, in order to elaborate on the meaning of בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים in Gen 1:26–28. If we aim to understand how Genesis redefines humanity's identity and purpose, we must consider the biblical creation accounts in light of their original contexts. The "conversation partners" for Genesis 1–2 included not only human creation stories from neighboring lands but also ritual texts that prescribed the making (birth) of a god.[5]



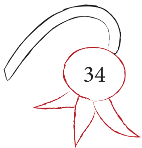

## A Brief Word on Method

Biblical scholars widely agree that the Hebrew Bible cannot be understood apart from the cultural matrix in which it was written. The languages, history, archeology, literature, and traditions of the ancient Near East reveal the cognitive world that ancient Israel inhabited and the broader cultural ideas with which the biblical authors engaged. Comparative work is thus integral to biblical studies. However, we must be careful not to presume historical connections that may instead be typological.[6] Nor should we treat texts synchronically without taking chronological differences into account. Although scholars dispute the

[5] This article draws comparisons and contrasts between Genesis 1 and 2 and select primary sources from ancient Mesopotamia. For a similar discussion between Genesis 1 and 2 and ancient Egyptian texts, see McDowell 2015, 13–14, 85–116, 148–52, 157–77.

[6] For a discussion of the difference between historical and typological relationships, see McDowell 2015, 5–10 and n. 13 and n. 22. We also must be careful neither to presume nor manufacture a historical or typological connection where there is none!

dates of composition for Genesis 1 and 2 (McDowell 2015, 178–202), it is appropriate to consider the biblical creation accounts in light of the *mīs pî pīt pî* texts. Not only do the latter describe the creation of an image, as does Genesis 1 and 2,[7] but these texts lie within the same "historic stream"[8]—that is, the "Washing and Opening of the Mouth" rituals are geographically, chronologically, and culturally proximate to ancient Israel. Further, other biblical writers, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the authors of Psalms 115 and 135, show an awareness of these texts, or at least with the ideas they represent, and engage them in order to make their own poignant statements about divine images (McDowell 2015, 7–10, 152–57). Thus, is it not surprising that the author(s) of Genesis 1 and 2 might also engage these same ideas. For these reasons, we may legitimately compare the *mīs pî pīt pî* texts to biblical views about human creation (McDowell 2015, 5–10). צֶלֶם and דְמוּת in Genesis 1:26–28





וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֔ים נַֽעֲשֶׂ֥ה אָדָ֛ם בְּצַלְמֵ֖נוּ כִּדְמוּתֵ֑נוּ וְיִרְדּוּ֩ בִדְגַ֨ת הַיָּ֜ם וּבְע֣וֹף הַשָּׁמַ֗יִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה֙<br>
וּבְכָל־הָאָ֔רֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶ֖מֶשׂ הָֽרֹמֵ֥שׂ עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ׃<br>
וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים ׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם׃<br>
וַיְבָ֣רֶךְ אֹתָם֮ אֱלֹהִים֒ וַיֹּ֨אמֶר לָהֶ֜ם אֱלֹהִ֗ים פְּר֥וּ וּרְב֛וּ וּמִלְא֥וּ אֶת־הָאָ֖רֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁ֑הָ וּרְד֞וּ<br>
בִּדְגַ֤ת הַיָּם֙ וּבְע֣וֹף הַשָּׁמַ֔יִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּ֖ה הָֽרֹמֶ֥שֶׂת עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ׃

God said, "Let us create humanity[9] in our image, according to our likeness. Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and over the beasts, and over all the earth, and over everything that creeps on the earth." 1:27So God created humanity[10] in his image. In the image

[7] On Genesis 2:5–3:24 and image-making, see McDowell 2015, 138–42.

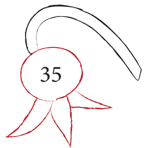
[8] On the concept of "historic stream," see Herskovitz 1958–1959, 1:129–48, esp. 1:141; Talmon 1991, esp. 386 and n. 13.

[9] The Hebrew noun is אָדָם. In this context, it refers to humanity as a whole, as indicated by the plural verb וְיִרְדּוּ ("let them rule") and the reference to male and female in the following verse.

[10] This is likely an anaphoric use of the definite article, its antecedent being אָדָם in verse 26. Thus, the cohortative "Let us make אָדָם" is fulfilled in verse 27 by "So God created הָאָדָם (the humanity)." In English, however, "humanity" is an uncountable or mass noun, of which there is only one by definition. Adding a definite article would be superfluous. For clarity's sake, both in terms of modern English usage and the author's original intent, the best English equivalent of הָאָדָם

> of God he created it. Male and female he created them.[1:28] Then God blessed them and said to them: “Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the skies and over all living creatures that creep on the earth.”[11]

That we should read צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת in Gen 1:26–27 in light of Babylonian and Egyptian titulary designating the king as the image of the god is argued convincingly in the scholarly literature going back at least to 1915 (Hehn 1915). The consensus, with which I agree, is that Gen 1 ascribes to humanity a royal status by defining the divine–human relationship in terms previously reserved for kings and their gods (Westermann 1994, 151–54). The discovery of a Neo-Assyrian statue from the ninth century BCE at Tell Fakhariyeh in the Upper Khabur region of Syria confirms that צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת in Gen 1:26–27 have royal and representative overtones.[12] The accompanying bilingual inscription on the statue’s skirt identifies it as the “image” (Aramaic *ṣlm*’, Akkadian *ṣalmu*) and “likeness” (Aramaic *dmwt*’, Akkadian *ṣalmu*) of its referent, Hadad-yithi’, the governor of Guzana.




However, these terms are not exclusively royal. Aside from Genesis 1, the only other biblical text where צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת appear together is in Gen 5:3: “When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his likeness (בִּדְמוּתוֹ), according to his image (כְּצַלְמוֹ) and named him Seth.” As Adam was created in the image and likeness of God, Seth was made in the image and likeness of his father. The implication is that just as צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת identify Seth as Adam’s son, the same terms in Gen 1:26–27 identify humanity as God’s “son” (or child).

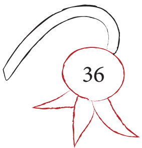
in this context is mankind, humanity, or humankind, not “the man” or “man.” Additional examples of the anaphoric use of the definite article include Gen. 18:7–8, “And he took a calf ... and he took ... the calf” (וַיִּקַּח בֶּן־בָּקָר .... וַיִּקַּח ....וּבֶן־הַבָּקָר); Ruth 1:1–2, “And a man went out ... and the name of the man was Elimelech” (וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ .... וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ); and Gen 1:3–4, “God said: ‘Let there be light.’ ... and God saw the light” (וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר.... וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר). See Waltke and O’Connor 2018, 242.

[11] All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

[12] Abou-Assaf, Bordreuil, and Millard 1982; Millard and Bordreuil 1982; Greenfield and Shaffer 1983.

Similar terms in the opening lines of the Babylonian creation account, *Enūma Eliš*, describe the god Anshar and his descendants. Anu is the *muššulu*[13] ("likeness") of his father, Anshar, just as Nudimmud is the *tamšīlu*[14] ("image," "likeness") of his father, Anu. Although these terms are not cognates of Hebrew צֶ֫לֶם, they demonstrate that within the broad cultural and cognitive environment of Genesis 1, the semantic range of image and likeness language included sonship.

The Akkadian cognate to Hebrew צֶ֫לֶם does appear in a hymn to the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE), where it designates the king's relationship to his patron deity in terms of sonship: "He (the king) alone is the eternal image (*ṣalmu*) of Enlil … whom Enlil raised … like a natural father, after his first-born son" (Machinist 2006, 162–63). The hymn further describes the king's birth as "successfully engendered through/cast (*ši-pi-ik-šu*) into the channel of the womb of the gods" (Machinist 2006, 160–61). The imagery is striking. Influenced by the royal theology of the Sumero-Babylonian south,[15] the author combined birthing and metallurgical imagery to present Tukulti-Ninurta I as both the son of Enlil and as his "statue," that is, his physical representative on earth. Read in this light, and the larger context of Gen 1, צֶ֫לֶם and דְמוּת function similarly to define humanity as both sons (children) and royal "living images" of Elohim.




## Royal and Priestly Functions of One Created בְּצֶ֫לֶם אֱלֹהִים

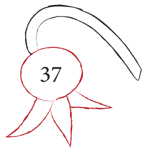
A second account of humanity's creation in the following chapter of Genesis presents a similar theological vision but from a different per-

[13] See "*muššulu*," *CAD* M, part 2, 281 and *Enūma Eliš* Tablet I line 15 in Talon 2005, 33.

[14] See "*tamšīlu*," *CAD* T, part 2, 147–49.

[15] These innovations were influenced by the royal theology of the Sumero-Babylonian south, where the idea of divine parentage and the king as the *ṣalmu* of the god is attested in Sumerian hymns, royal inscriptions, rituals, personal names, and legal texts (Machinist 1978, 180–208).

spective. The account of human creation according to the Eden story (Gen 2:5–3:24) differs significantly from Gen 1:1–2:3, yet surely the final redactor placed the two texts side by side intentionally. A study of the eleven *toledoth* in Genesis demonstrates that these genealogical notices, including Gen 2:4, function as a telescopic hinge (McDowell 2015, 26–35)—that is, they join two sections of material together, but they are also conduits through which the story's focus narrows from the general to the particular (McDowell 2015, 26–35). In the case of Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:5–3:24, the first account established humanity's identity as children of God and their function as God's appointed rulers over creation. The particular foci of the Eden story after Gen 2:4 include the royal and priestly functions that stem from being created in the *imago dei*.




## Adam as Royal Gardener

In Gen 2:15, God places Adam in the garden "to cultivate it and to care for it" (לְעָבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ). Given that the previous chapter established Adam's royal status and that the *toledoth* of Gen 2:4 function to narrow the story's focus, we should understand his role as cultivator and keeper of the garden in Eden as a function of his kingship. This is consistent not only with the royal duties of Israel's later kings[16] but also with descriptions in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions of the kings as providers of agricultural abundance (Winter 2007) and, in some cases, as "farmers" or "cultivators" (*ikarru*/LU$_2$.ENGAR).[17]

### *Adam as Archetypal Priest*

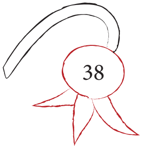
Genesis scholars have also noted that the pairing of עבד and שׁמר ("to work and to keep") in Gen 2:15 occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible but only in reference to the priests' responsibilities to guard and min-

[16] 1 Kgs 4:33; Eccl 2:4b–6.

[17] Winter 2003, esp. 261 n. 3. Royal reliefs depicting Assyrian kings with the composite "trees of abundance" are likely a visual representation of this royal epithet.

ister at the Tabernacle (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). This suggests that Adam's duties involved more than farming. Like the Levites, he was to perform all the duties associated with serving Yahweh Elohim in the sacred Garden of Eden. In the words of Gordon Wenham, Adam was, thus, "an archetypal priest."[18] This dual role of king and priest is attested in Sumerian royal hymns and inscriptions from the twenty-first century BCE that describe the king as the high priest in service of the gods.[19] Later Assyrian kings served as chief temple administrators (*šangû*)[20] responsible for presiding over religious rituals, supplying the temples with all their necessities and overseeing temple maintenance.[21]

By describing humans as created בְּצֶ֫לֶם אֱלֹהִים, Gen 1:1–2:3 defines human identity in terms of kinship with God and expresses their function as his royal representatives, created to "subdue" (כבש) the earth and to "rule" (רדה) over its creatures. Gen 2:5–25 elaborates further on these two ideas. Humanity is to embody its identity as "son" (child) of God by "serving" him (עבד and שמר) in his temple. This involves cultivating the earth's resources as a blessing to its human and animal inhabitants and spreading the presence and power of God as his royal representatives.[22]




18 Wenham 1987, 67; Wenham 1994, 401.

19 McDowell 2015, 141 n. 130; Klein 2003, 1:552–53.

20 See "*šangû*," *CAD* Š, part 1, 377.

21 A late Neo-Assyrian inscription describes Sin-šar-iškun, the last king of Assyria (late seventh century BCE), as the one "whom the (gods) commanded to exercise provision for all the shrines, *šangûtu* for all the sanctuaries (and) shepherdship for" (Machinist 2006, 156).

22 Many commentators refer to Adam's "priestly" role, but this is anachronistic. The duties later reserved for the Israelite priesthood were originally a human task—to serve God in his sacred space, to mediate the blessing and presence of God, and to cultivate his temple and the world.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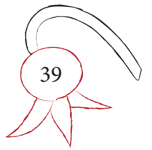
## Royal Representative: The *mīs pî pīt pî* and Genesis 2:5–3:24

In addition to the Mesopotamian royal texts already mentioned, the author of Gen 2:5–3:24 shows an awareness of divine statue manufacture and consecration. The best witnesses to these rituals comprise a set of texts from the ninth to the fifth centuries BCE that describe them as the Washing and Opening of the Mouth" (*mīs pî pīt pî*).[23] They have survived in two forms—the Nineveh version and the Babylon version. Both versions describe how a team of artisans and priests created, consecrated, and animated a cult statue, making it fit for cultic use. Similarities between the "Washing and Opening of the Mouth" texts and Gen 2:5–3:24 suggest that the biblical author drew an implicit comparison between humanity and cult statues in order to emphasize that humans, not idols, are "living images" of God. We will consider three features of the Eden story that reflect the *mīs pî pīt pî*: the garden setting, the installation of Adam, and Gen 2:25 and the poetic reflection of Ps 8:6 on human creation.




### *The Garden Setting (Genesis 2:8–14)*

In the *mīs pî pīt pî*, the opening of the statue's eyes, nose, mouth, and ears and the full activation of its limbs took place in a well-watered, fruit-filled temple garden (McDowell 2015, 143–44, 145). We know from two Assyrian texts and one Babylonian text that the garden of the *Apsû*, in Ea's riverside temple complex in Babylon, the *E-kar-zaginna*, hosted the *mīs pî pīt pî* on at least three occasions—once during the reign of Nabu-apla-iddina (888–855 BCE),[24] a second time during the reign of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE),[25] and on a third occasion during

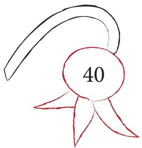
[23] For a list of primary sources for the *mīs pî pīt pî*, see McDowell 2015, 46–48.

[24] Woods 2004, esp. 85–86. Additionally, a late Babylonian gate list identifies the "Gate of the Garden of the Apsû" as "the gate at which the mouths of the gods are opened" (Borger 1956, 89 line 27 and 95 line 27).

[25] "I made them (the exiled gods) enter anew into Babylon, the city of their veneration, and they entered through the orchards, groves, canals and gardens of E-kar-za-ginna, the Pure Place, with the craft of the Sage, mouth-washing and

the reign of Ashurbanipal (669–631 BCE) (Streck 1916, 2:269 line 19). Clearly, the sacred garden setting, with its proximity to the gods, its access to cleansing and life-giving water, and its display of agricultural abundance and fertility, was an appropriate environment for the image's "birth." That the ritual was performed in Ea's garden in particular is fitting, given that he was associated with purification, birth, creation, and craftsmanship. In fact, the *mīs pî pīt pî* texts identify him as the father of the image and the divine craftsman *par excellence*, who possesses the particular wisdom and skill necessary for fashioning a divine image (Walker and Dick 2001, 25).

Like Ea's garden of the *Apsû*, beautiful fruit-bearing trees filled the Garden of Eden. Four rivers coursed through it, and Yahweh Elohim himself, who had planted the garden, dwelt within. However, the Garden of Eden was not simply a beautiful orchard. Based on the striking parallels between Eden, the Tabernacle, and the Solomonic Temple, scholars have concluded that Eden was an archetypal sanctuary (Wenham 1994). Given that the temple garden hosted the ritual for invoking the god into its statue, the creation of humanity within a sacred garden was surely intended to compare humans to royal and divine images.




## *The Installation of Adam (Genesis 2:15)*

At the conclusion of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ceremony, the priests installed the newly animated image in its temple. Incantations invoking the deity to take up residence and establish himself in his "abode of rest" accompanied this climactic event.[26] In Gen 2:8, God "placed" (שׂים) Adam in the garden, but in Gen 2:15 the author used a different verb, the second hiphil of נוח. Although the hiphil B of נוח can mean "to place, set or lay,"[27] given the sacred garden context it is worth noting that this particular stem also refers to the installation of cult statues in 2 Kgs 17:29,[28] Isa

mouth-opening ceremonies, bathing and cleansing, into the presence of the Stars of Heaven, Ea, Šamaš, Asalluḫi, Bēlet-īli, Kusu, Ningirimma, Ninkurrra, Ninagal, Kusibanda, Ninildu and Ninzadim" (George 1992, 302).

[26] Walker and Dick 2001, 160–61, 184 line 11ab and 170, 185 lines 60ab–62ab.

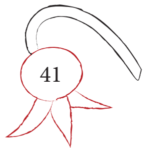
[27] HAL, 679.

[28] וַיִּהְיוּ עֹשִׂים גּוֹי גּוֹי אֱלֹהָיו וַיַּנִּיחוּ בְּבֵית הַבָּמוֹת ("But every nation made its own gods and put/installed them in the shrines of the high places").

46:7,[29] and Zech 5:5–11.[30] By using נוח instead of שׂים, or its synonyms נתן ("to set, place, lay") or שׁית ("to set, stand, place"), perhaps the author is comparing Adam's placement in the garden to the installation of cult images in their temples, underscoring in yet another way humanity's function as God's royal representatives.

## *Genesis 2:25 and the Poetic Reflection of Psalm 8:6 on Human Creation*

Before installing the cult image, the priests would dress and adorn it with sumptuous garments, royal insignia suited to its identity, and a beautiful jewel-studded crown. From the Babylonian version, the "Majestic Crown" incantation describes the royal tiara as "endowed with awesome splendor," "glistening," "gleaming red," "bright," "whose radiance (*melammu*) touches the heavens" and as shining over the land like the rays of Shamash.[31] While it was the primary emblem of divinity, the crown's luminescence was not exclusive to the gods. They could award it to human kings in the form of a crown as a sign of divine appointment and legitimacy. They could also revoke it. The epilogue to the Laws of Hammurabi warns that if the king breaks the divine law, the royal *melammu* will be repossessed.[32]




The Eden story says nothing of Adam and Eve donning royal garments. In fact, Gen 2:25 states that they were naked! For the clothing of humanity at creation, we must look to Ps 8:6: "You have made him/it a little lower than the heavenly beings and with glory and honor you have

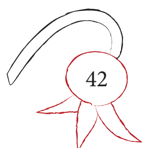
[29] יִשָּׂאֻהוּ עַל־כָּתֵף יִסְבְּלֻהוּ וְיַנִּיחֻהוּ תַחְתָּיו ("They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set/install it in its place").

[30] Verse 11b וְהוּכַן וְהֻנִּיחָה שָּׁם עַל־מְכֻנָתָהּ· ("And when this is prepared, they will set the basket down there on its base"). Note that this form is a hophal, the passive of the hiphil. Cf. 2 Chr 4:8, where the hiphil of נוח is used for the placement or installation of ten gold tables in the Solomonic Temple.

[31] The text and translation is published in Walker and Dick 2001, 193–95 and 203–04 lines 1ab–14ab.

[32] The epilogue in the Law Code of Hammurabi states that if the king alters or breaks the divine law, the god, Anu, will revoke "the *melammu* of kingship" (*melam šarrūti*). See Roth 1995, Col. 49 lines 45–52; *Enūma Eliš* 1:67–68, in which Ea steals Apsû's crown and its *melammu*, and thus steals Apsû's kingship.

crowned him/it" (וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר תְּעַטְּרֵהוּ).[33] The choice of עטר ("to crown") suggests that the glory sits upon humanity's head, precisely where the *melammu* was located on Mesopotamian deities and kings. Although Gen 2:25–3:24 does not mention a crown, it does report that Adam and Eve were suddenly aware of their nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit. Is it possible, as Ps 8:6 claims, that at creation God crowned Adam and Eve with divine glory, the radiance of which served as a covering for their bodies? This is how many early Jewish (McDowell 2015, 165–67) and later rabbinic (McDowell 2015, 167) interpreters understood it. The Samaritan tractate *Memar Marqah* (*The Teaching of Marqah*) (second to fourth century CE) even specifies that Adam and Eve wore "two crowns of great light."[34] If the Jewish interpretation accurately reflects the psalmist's view, Adam and Eve's sudden nakedness would have been a consequence of their rebellion. Just as the gods revoked the *melammu* from kings who transgressed the divine law, disobedience would have cost Adam and Eve their crowns of glory.




## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate the importance of reading the Hebrew Bible, specifically its creation accounts in Gen 1–2, in light of its ancient Near Eastern environment. Because Gen 1–2 interacted with deeply entrenched views about the gods and humanity's relationship to them, we cannot understand the profundity of the biblical response apart from a familiarity with Israel's environment.

The picture that Gen 1–2 paints concerning human identity and purpose is a dignified one. Humans are members of God's family; specifically, they are his royal children, whom he has appointed to rule over creation, to subdue it, and to represent him in the world. They

[33] וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר תְּעַטְּרֵהוּ ("and with glory and honor you crowned him") in Ps 8:6 (8:5 in English). Cf. Ps 8:6 in the LXX: δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφάνωσας αὐτόν, where the verb στεφανόω means "to encircle someone's head with ornamental foliage, wreathe, crown" (*BDAG*, 944).

[34] McDowell 2015, 167–68; MacDonald 1963, 1:135–36, 221.

are “kings and queens” commissioned to be fruitful and to multiply by creating “images” of their own. Their purpose lies in serving God in his macro-temple, protecting the land, and cultivating its resources to provide for themselves and the blessing of others. In light of other human creation stories from Mesopotamia, and by comparing and contrasting humanity to statues of the gods, Genesis 1–2 redefines humanity in the noblest of terms, democratizing the idea once reserved for kings alone that all human beings are royal children of God.

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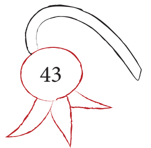

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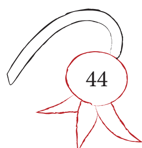


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# PRAYERS FOR THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT: THE POLYSEMY OF MORTUARY PSALMS IN THEIR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

*Christopher B. Hays*

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 3 (Autumn, 2021): 45–80

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Key Words: Psalms, Israel, Judah, mortuary practices, Davidic kings, afterlife, Psalm 15, polysemy, Hebrew Bible

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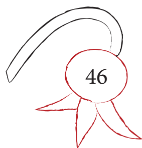
# Abstract

This article shows that ancient Near Eastern mortuary texts and art from Judah, Hatti, Ugarit and Egypt commonly were interpreted in relation to both this life and the afterlife; the blessings they sought were polysemic, often by design. Furthermore, ancient scribes' affection for wordplay, the gray areas of ancient writing systems, and the inherent reticence of ritual texts to explain themselves add further layers of ambiguity. The same is true of biblical psalms that refer to burial and afterlife. As a case study, a funerary interpretation of Ps 15 is offered: The king or his professional intermediary asks who may be buried in the Temple (15:1). The response is given in ethical terms, focusing especially on speaking the truth (15:2–4). The psalm then closes with a word of assurance (15:5): The one who does what is right will not only be worthy of interment next to the Temple (Ezek 43:7–8), but will remain there undisturbed.



Cette contribution démontre que les textes et arts mortuaires du Proche-Orient ancien, en provenance de Juda, Hatti, d'Ougarit et d'Égypte, étaient communément interprétés en lien avec l'ici et l'au-delà ; les bénédictions qu'ils cherchaient à obtenir étaient polysémiques, souvent à dessein. De plus, le goût des scribes anciens pour les jeux de mots, les zones d'ombre des systèmes d'écriture anciens, et la réticence caractéristique des textes rituels à proposer un sens transparent renforcent les ambiguïtés. Ceci est aussi vrai pour les psaumes bibliques qui font référence aux inhumations et à la vie après la mort. Une interprétation funéraire du Ps 15 est proposée ici comme étude de cas : le roi, ou son intermédiaire professionnel, s'interroge pour savoir qui peut être enterré dans le Temple (15,1). La réponse est faite en termes éthiques, et se concentre particulièrement sur le fait de dire la vérité (15, 2-4). Le psaume conclut par une assurance (15, 5) : la personne qui fait ce qui est juste ne sera pas seulement jugée digne d'inhumation à proximité du Temple (Éz 43, 7-8), elle y demeurera aussi en paix.

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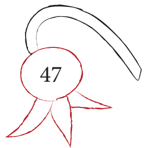


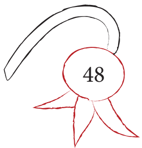


To scholars of ancient Near Eastern religions, allusions to mortuary beliefs and practices jump out from the psalms. Yet if one consults the commentaries, one finds almost nothing on the topic, and the majority of these allusions to the afterlife are explained away. Interpreters who do this tend, either implicitly or explicitly, to ask: if there were anything left in the Psalter that was really about hopes for the afterlife, why would the text not say so more unambiguously? That is the question this article sets out to answer.

This article is dedicated to Patrick D. Miller. I am grateful to Kristine Garroway and Christine Palmer of the Biblical Texts in Cultural Context section of the ASOR for their invitation to present this research. I also thank Amy Pahlen for her editorial assistance. I am a Research Associate of the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

As it turns out, many other ancient Near Eastern prayers and wishes for the afterlife were "binocular"—one eye on this life, the other on the next—just as certain psalms were. This article explores the reasons for polysemy in such texts and then takes Ps 15 as a case study. The reasons for this include the complex ideologies of those who sponsored ancient mortuary art, the literary playfulness of ancient poets and scribes, and the characteristic ambiguity of ritual texts.

This article is part of a larger project analyzing the formation of Ps 15–24, arguing that some of these functioned as mortuary prayers of the Davidic kings. It focuses on Ps 15, demonstrating that its author expected to be judged by the Lord on ethical grounds (15:1–5b; cf. 17:1–5), and hoped to be found worthy to be buried in close proximity to the Jerusalem Temple (15:1; cf. Ezek 43:7–8) and dwell there securely in eternity (15:5c).



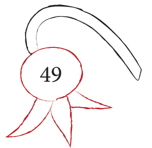

This practice of burial in a temple precinct—"their threshold by [the god's] threshold and their doorposts beside [the god's] doorposts," as Ezek 43:8 says of the Davidic royal tombs—mirrored Egyptian royal burials in the same period.[1] It is not so surprising, then, that there were also certain similarities between the beliefs reflected by the burials. Although burials of Levantine and Mesopotamian rulers in the same period are much less well attested and understood, the proximity and sanctity of the royal dead for the sake of the royal mortuary cult was typically valued in both areas (Hays 2011, 35–46, 100–17).

Psalms 15–18, 20–23 were subsequently edited and reframed in ways that partially obscured their originally complex religious ideas in many cases. Notably, an entrance liturgy, Ps 24, was added to cap what is now a widely recognized subcollection, and it simultaneously reoriented its

[1] In Egypt, it was precisely in the Third Intermediate Period, overlapping the Israelite and Judahite monarchic periods, that pharaohs began to choose burial within the walls of temple precincts. The best-known examples are the largely intact tombs from the Twenty-First through to the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (eleventh to the seventh century BCE) by the Amun Temple in Tanis, but the practice continued with, for example, the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (seventh to the sixth century) at Sais and the Thirtieth Dynasty (fourth century) at Mendes. All of these tombs were built just outside the entrances to the temples. See Lull 2002, esp. 57. A full discussion of this comparison must await a different venue, however.

interpretation. The present article lays out part of the methodological grounding for understanding the ambiguous, or polysemic, nature of these psalms in their history of interpretation. Polysemy was a feature of both ancient literary art and ancient visual art pertaining to death and the afterlife, and literarily attuned readers and art historians have repeatedly noticed their potential ambiguities. By contrast, some interpreters have been overly concerned with establishing doctrines ("What did this or that culture believe?") and too little interested in appreciating how the artists who created texts and images played with meaning.

Psalm 15 expresses only a part of the subcollection's expressed aspirations for the afterlife, and the argument would be strengthened by being seen as a whole, but the scope must be limited for now. Mitchell Dahood's (1965–1970) commentary, which infamously overstated the prevalence of afterlife references in the Psalms without enough support, showed the importance of more thorough argumentation.[2]




## Terminology

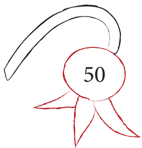
I use "funerary" to refer to rites attending burial and "mortuary" to refer to ongoing rites for the dead—although this distinction is not rigorously maintained in common usage.

A number of different terms are used for wordplay that creates a surplus of meaning so that a text is susceptible to being read in multiple ways. In his seminal book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson casts a wide net in analyzing such wordplay, which includes "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (1953, 1). In his preface to the book's second edition, he defends this "extended" use of the term "ambiguity" against critics who argued that a good reader would know how to "react correctly" (1953, x–xi). Wherever there is "room for puzzling," he said, there is ambiguity. There has certainly been much puzzling about the meaning of Ps 15–24. "Ambiguity," then, is a viable description of what

[2] The history of scholarship on the afterlife in the Psalter is covered in the larger project, but not here.

these texts demonstrate, although the connotations of "lack of specificity or exactness" (per the *Oxford English Dictionary*) mean that it has a slight negative valence that is out of place here.[3]

Accordingly, the term "polysemy" is used primarily in this article; it marks the availability of multiple meanings without assuming authorial intention in creating them. In the course of the discussion, I hope to show that there is inevitably a sort of "transchronic" authorial intentionality at work in the history of the psalms' formation and reception. It's not that there was a single authorial genius who encoded multiple meanings in the texts, but one has to posit a sort of permissive will on the part of the scribes who allowed them to persist. (One is reminded of Mikhail Bakhtin's comment that double-voiced prose is language that has been "weathered in [the] process of becoming.")[4]




Before turning to the reasons that complex, curated literary works such as the biblical psalms demonstrate ambiguity, it should be noted that even funerary and mortuary texts and inscriptions without such a long history of transmission also prove susceptible to multiple interpretations. Indeed, they often seem to have been intended to be so.

## Polysemy in the Judahite Mortuary Inscriptions

The Judahite tomb inscriptions are the funerary/mortuary texts that are closest—historically and culturally—to the biblical psalms, and they show striking similarities to them. Like the psalms in question, they do not *seem* to be about death and afterlife at all. Matthew Suriano notices this vis-à-vis the Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions: "What is unusual about these inscriptions is that they do not contain any references to the dead inside the tomb" (2018, 120).[5]

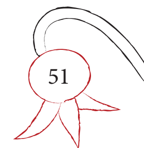
[3] Terms such as "double entendre" and "paronomasia" are also less than ideal, and cannot be discussed in detail here.

[4] Bakhtin 1998, 326. Bakhtin was speaking of the polyphony of "dialogic" writing, esp. in the novel.

[5] Yet Suriano "ultimately supports a funerary reading."

Some do refer to the deceased, of course, like the Silwan Royal Steward inscription, which tries to convince the reader not to disturb the dead who were buried there.[6] However, there are multiple inscriptions in tomb contexts that sound like excerpts from psalms. For example, Khirbet el-Qôm 3 reads: “Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh / and from his enemies, by his Asherah, save him” (ברך עריהו ליהוה ומצריה לעשׂרתה הושע).[7] Khirbet Beit Lei 6 prays: “Attend, Yah, O gracious God! Acquit, YH, O Yahweh!”(פקד יה אל חנן נקה יה יהוה).[8] And Khirbet Beit Lei 7 implores: “Save, O Yahweh!” (הושע [י]הוה). These are all prayers that one might well expect someone living to say if there were no afterlife, but they are inscribed on tomb walls.

Earlier generations of scholars were so surprised to find such prayers in tombs that they doubted whether they were really funerary inscriptions at all—perhaps they were instead carved by fugitives hiding out in the caves at a later time.[9] But those doubts were largely based on preexisting ideas about Judahite religion: the inscriptions could not be about the afterlife because Judahites did not believe in an afterlife.




The Ketef Hinnom silver amulets, found in an Iron Age tomb outside Jerusalem and dated to the end of the seventh century BCE, are a particularly interesting example of polysemy, in that they were presumably worn both in life and in death. Both seek God’s blessing, with language echoing the Aaronic blessing of Num 6:24–27. The bottoms of both amulets are damaged, making it difficult to be certain how similar the correspondence with the biblical text is, but the second is slightly more

[6] Ussishkin 1986, 173–84, 221–26; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, 507–10. The inscription is analogous to later Sidonian coffin inscriptions (*KAI* 1.9, 1.13, 1.14; cf. *COS* 2.56–47).

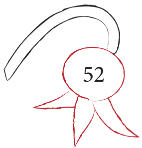
[7] Last quarter of the eighth century. See Lemaire 1977; Naveh 1979; Miller 1981, 311–32; Hadley 1987; Renz and Röllig, 1995–2003, 202–11; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, 408–14.

[8] Both Khirbet Beit Lei (KBLei) inscriptions date to the first half of the seventh century BCE. The reading of KBLei 6 has been somewhat contested, but a consensus is emerging around this interpretation. For commentary, see Renz and Röllig 1995–2003, 247–48; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, 130–31. For the earlier view, see Cross 1970.

[9] For example, Hass 1963; Naveh 1963.

intact. It reads: "May Yahweh bless you and keep you; may YH[W]H make his face shine [upon] you, and give you p[ea]ce" (יברכך יהוה ישמרך יאר יה[ו]ה פניו [אל]יך וישׂם לך שׁ[ל]ם).[10] Each of the amulets also bears a prayer preceding the blessing and expressing the expectation that Yahweh will rebuke evil; this is especially clear in the second amulet, where he is said to "expel evil" (lines. 4–5: הגער ב[ר]ע; compare, e.g., Ps 9:6; 21:11; 23:4; 34:20; 68:31; 119:21).[11] Indeed a broken section of the first amulet asserts protection "from *every* snare and from (the) evil" (מכל פח ומהרע). This desire for comprehensive protection is consistent with the hope for divine assistance in every phase of life, even into the afterlife.

The first amulet also includes an affirmation that the Lord shows "[g]raciousness toward those who love [him] and those who keep [his commandments]," echoing the language of Exod 20:6 and Deut 7:9. Much like the exhortations to (and assertions of) righteousness and purity in psalms, loving the Lord and keeping commandments are seen as qualifications that are needed in order to receive divine blessings. In a related vein, Yahweh is called a "helper" (עזר) in the second amulet, just as Ps 20:2 and 22:11 also allude to. If there were nothing beyond the grave but a shadowy existence in Sheol, why would the dead have been allowed to wear these precious items in burial? Wouldn't they have been seen as useful only to the living?




The Judahite funerary or mortuary texts alone do not provide enough material on which to found a theory about the afterlife. But they do raise a set of questions: Why do the dead need to worry about their enemies? Why do they need Yahweh to "acquit" them, or to "save" them? Why do they need blessing and help?

[10] Barkay et al. 2004; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, 263–75; Renz and Röllig 1995–2003, 447–56; Aḥituv 2008, 49–55; Smoak 2015, 12–42.

[11] Barkay et al. 2004, 61, 68; Aḥituv 2008, 51, 54; Smoak 2015, 19, 31.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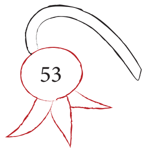
## Polysemy in the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East

The polysemy of Judahite funerary inscriptions and amulets is not idiosyncratic. Rather, it is consistent with numerous examples of similarly ambiguous texts and artistic representations from all over the ancient Near East.

### *Polysemy in Egyptian and Neo-Hittite Mortuary Art*

For example, art historians have recognized the potential of mortuary art to express ideas about and hopes for this life and the next. In earlier scholarship within Classical and Egyptian archeology, there was debate about the meaning of mortuary images of the deceased person feasting (*Totenmahl*): were they idealized portrayals of the person enjoying bounty during his or her life, or is the image meant to depict the person well cared for and feasting in the afterlife? The image type is very common in Neo-Hittite stelae, in elite coastal Levantine coffins, and much earlier still in Egyptian tomb paintings and stelae. *Totenmahl* images attained greater recognition recently among Semitists with the discovery of the Katumuwa Stele from Zincirli, Turkey, with its description of a soul "in this stela."[12]




As it happens, it is not necessary to choose between this-worldly and next-worldly interpretations; recent analysis of Egyptian and Neo-Hittite *Totenmahl* images has erased the dividing lines. Nicola Harrington says quite flatly that "in general there are no iconographic distinctions made between the living and the dead" (2016, 140). Gay Robins expands on this observation:

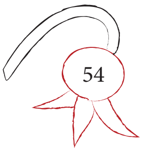
> To ask whether the image shows the subject alive in this world or after rebirth in the next is beside the point. The portrayal shows the deceased as a member of the elite group, to which he or she belonged while alive. Through this image, the memory of the deceased was maintained among the living, allowing the commemorated owner to remain as part of the living community. At the same time, the image projected the identity and status of the deceased into the next world, from which the dead still had the ability to intervene in the lives of the living: the more powerful

[12] Pardee 2009; Sanders 2013; Herrmann and Schloen 2014.

> they had been in this world, the more potent they would be in the next. Thus the identity and status of the deceased when alive and after entry into the afterlife could not be separated. (Robins 2016, 114–15)

Thus, Catherine Draycott observes that "the power of the 'banquet' images … may lie not exactly, or only, in the tension produced by polarity, but in ambiguity" (2016, 14). The sponsors and artists, it seems, would have been pleased to have the images interpreted as portraying both this life and the next: they wanted to be well-provisioned in both.

Furthermore, this ambiguity or duality was not confined only to artistic representation; rather, it was a real aspect of the Egyptian mortuary cult: "'Mortuary' feasts may have been held in or near the tomb during the owner's lifetime"—they were "established during the lifetime of those possessing tombs and statues, and … were fully functional by the time of their owners' demise" (Harrington 2016, 132). As Harrington writes: "The grave is, by its nature, a liminal space, occupying an ambiguous and unstable position between the worlds of the quick and the dead, because it is located simultaneously in the realm of the living and the underworld" (2016, 160). Dominik Bonatz confirms that the same held for the later Syro-Hittite stelae, closer to ancient Judah; he describes "the scene as a mortuary repast where the here and the hereafter are merged in a single visual space" (2016, 177).




All this is consistent with Mike Parker Pearson's observation that the presentation of a body in burial likewise reflects images of and hopes for this life and the next. He calls Tutankhamun's tomb "a series of dualities which represented a complex series of references to the worlds of the living and dead" (1999, 59).[13]

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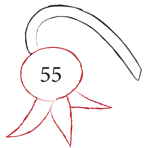
[13] Pearson introduced this idea of duality more fully in connection with the 5,000-year-old burial of "Ötzi the Iceman" found in a Tyrolian mountain pass: "We could argue that the Iceman's own view of himself—what he wanted to wear, his tattoos, his equipment—is one version of reality, and the funerary treatment is another version of the same reality rather than an unreal, distorted, idealized and ritualized representation. Both representations—how he dressed in life and how his corpse, had it been retrieved, would have been dressed and equipped in death—are grounded in their own realities; it is just that the contexts are different" (Parker Pearson 1999, 4).

## *Polysemy in the Ugaritic Cult of the Dead*

The here and the hereafter were also merged in various textual spaces. Ugarit had a relatively well understood royal mortuary cult, in which the dead were summoned to help and protect the living dynasty and were probably thought to feast with the major gods. Some texts allude to these rites unambiguously, such as the Royal Funerary Text (KTU³ 1.161; e.g., lines 31–34), which, after calling on the ancestors and commanding sacrifices, asks blessings for the king, queen, and capital city (Spronk 1986, 191):

> *… šlm . ʿmr[pi] w . šlm . bnʹh .*[14]
> *šlm . ṯryl šlm . bth .*
> *šlm . ugrt šlm . ṯǵrh*
>
> Peace to ʿAmmurapiʾ, and peace to his sons!
> Peace to Ṯarriyelli! Peace to her house!
> Peace to Ugarit! Peace to her gatekeepers!




Others, such as the Rāpiʾūma Texts (KTU³ 1.20–22), are a bit more obscure—but still revealing. The first tablet begins with an invitation to the *rpum* to take part in a sacrifice or feast:

| | |
|---|---|
| *rp]um*[15] *. tdbḥn* | The Rāpiʾūma shall feast |
| *š]bʿd . ilnym* | the spirits [sev]enfold |
| ] *kmtmtm* | [ ] like the ancient dead.[16] |

The same figures are also invited to drink in line 7. In short, the divinized dead are summoned to a banquet—elsewhere called by the Ugaritic term *marziḥu*—even if the nature of this banquet remains murky. The West Semitic tradition of feasting for the dead seems clearly to have been practiced in Israel as well on the basis of Jer 16:5–7, in which the people are forbidden to mourn the dead in a "house of the *marzēaḥ*,"

[14] Or *bth*, "his house." The word is written *bah*.

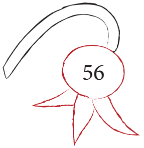
[15] The term *rpum* may be restored here with some confidence on the basis of its occurrences in parallelism with *ilnym* in other passages (e.g., 1.21:3–4).

[16] More woodenly, "the dead of the dead." Cf. Theodore Lewis's translation (Parker 1997, 197).

in which they break bread and drink wine. Perhaps one should say that they “feasted *with* the dead,” but the Hebrew Bible is even less forthcoming about this practice than the Ugaritic texts. This data has already been much discussed elsewhere.[17]

Perhaps the best example of mortuary-cult polysemy at Ugarit is the so-called “Duties of an Ideal Son” in the Aqhat Epic (KTU³ 1.17 I:25–34, cf. II:1–8, 16–23). In it, Baʿlu asks ʾIlu to grant the human king (Danʾilu) a son to perform various duties for him:

*w ykn . bnh . b bt .*
  *šrš . b qrb hklh .*
*nṣb . skn . ilibh .*
  *b qdš ztr. ʿmh .*
*l arṣ . mšṣu . qṭrh*
  *l ʿpr. d̠mr. at̠rh .*
*ṭbq . lḥt niṣh .*
  *grš . d. ʿšy . lnh*
*aḫd. ydh . b škrn .*
  *m ʿmsh [k ]šb ʿ . yn .*
*spu. ksmh. bt. b ʿl*
  *[w ]mnth. bt. il.*
*ṭḫ . ggh. bym [t̠i]ṭ .*
  *rḥṣ . npṣh . b ym . rt̠*

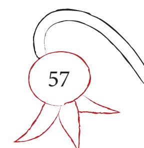



. . . so that his son might be in the house,
  A descendant within his palace;
One to set up the stela of his divine ancestor,
  in the sanctuary the votive symbol of his clan;
To bring up from the earth his smoke,
  From the dust the protector of his place;
To shut up the jaws of his detractors,
  to drive out anyone who would do him in;
To take his hand when he is drunk;
  to bear him up [when] he is full of wine;
To eat his spelt-offering in the temple of Baal,
  his portion in the temple of El;
To resurface his roof on a [mud]dy day,
  to wash his outfit on a muddy day.

[17] For literature and discussion, see Hays 2011, 115–22, 163–65.

As with the *Totenmahl* imagery, it was once much debated what this text was "really about." Scholars like W. F. Albright, Marvin Pope, Robert Wilson, and Klaas Spronk all argued that it essentially pertained to duties that were part of the mortuary cult.[18] Others, like Theodore J. Lewis, argued for a moderate position, that at least some of the duties were mortuary (1989, 53–71). It is increasingly accepted that this entire text *can* be read as a list of forms of cultic care (setting up ritual paraphernalia; summoning the spirit; ensuring the endurance of his good name; eating and drinking to inebriation with him) and duties for the practical maintenance of the tomb (maintaining its roof and keeping it clean). Egyptian mortuary texts identify analogous duties for a living son of a deceased father.[19]

To members of elite Ugaritic society, I see little doubt that this text would have been understood as having mortuary implications; yet it is also true that these resonate and overlap with things one might ask from a living son: to protect the family name, to support a drunken father, etc. No doubt it would have been very appealing to an ancient king such as Danʾilu to emphasize to his heirs that *they owed him service in this life and the next*. Thus, it appears that this is yet another example of a binocular text—like the Judahite mortuary inscriptions. It is another case in which "the here and the hereafter are merged." It remains to be shown, but psalms too could express hopes both for divine blessing and protection in this life and in the next.




## Polysemy in the Psalms

In this discussion of the reasons why mortuary psalms like Ps 15 are ambiguous, it has been shown thus far that hopes for this life and the

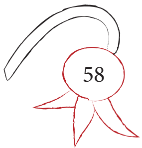
[18] Albright 1944, 35; Wilson 1977, 121 n. 182; Spronk 1986, 161; Pope 1994.

[19] For example, the Coffin Text in which a son says to a deceased father: "I … am here as an advocate in the tribunal of men, / setting up your boundary stone, holding together your despondent ones, / and serving as your image on earth, / while your gateway is secured by means of that which I do" (Buck 1935–1961, 1:175–76, cited in Assmann 2005, 47).

next overlapped significantly in ancient ideologies. This led to inherently polysemic texts that would have been seen as useful for both this life and the afterlife. The foregoing consideration of Ugaritic poetry has already edged into literary territory, and turning to the biblical psalms invites deeper consideration of the specific literary techniques of psalmic poetry and the scribal worldviews that elicited them.

### *Poetic Wordplay*

Wordplay was characteristic of ancient literary texts in general.[20] Two factors might lead us to suspect that it was even more prevalent in ancient Near Eastern literature than it is now: First, literary production was the privilege of a small scribal class, which may have fostered the sort of wordplay that insular groups are prone to develop. It is not surprising that they reveled in their ability to encode multiple meanings. And second, the writing systems of the languages themselves—not least unpointed Hebrew—were inherently susceptible to multiple interpretations in a way that not all modern languages are (Vanstiphout 1996). All writing systems involve an author who encodes and a reader who decodes, and there is room for slippage in the interim. Anyone who has worked extensively with ancient Near Eastern languages knows that, while competency narrows the range of likely interpretations, indeterminacy remains, *and* that ancient literati capitalized on that.




Wordplay is fairly pervasive in biblical literature,[21] and it has been argued that there is a greater concentration of it in certain genres.[22] Prophetic texts are particularly of interest, but not surprisingly psalmic poetry has also been among the genres most often discussed in this regard. Paul Raabe (1991) produced a particularly significant entry in

[20] There is no call for producing a massive footnote attempting to document comprehensively the scholarship on ancient wordplay. For the sake of convenience, a wide of array of cultures and secondary literature is surveyed in Noegel 2000.

[21] For overviews, see Sasson 1976; Greenstein 1992; Rendsburg 2000.

[22] This was the contention of Immanuel M. Casanowicz (1893, 121) in one of the earliest modern studies. Insofar as the prophetic books derive from records of oral performance, it is to be expected that the prophets used innovative wordplays to keep the audience engaged. A particularly cogent analysis of this is Roberts 1992; see also Payne 1967, 207–229 for a review of older literature.

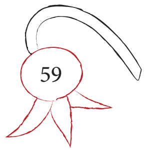
the conversation, analyzing dozens of examples of "deliberate ambiguity" in the Psalter created through lexicon, phonology, and grammar.

A significant number of the examples that Raabe uses to illustrate his argument are from Ps 16 and Ps 23, which are part of the relevant subcollection identified above. He also draws multiple examples from Ps 49, which has been part of the conversation about afterlife in the Psalter. For example, he points out Ps 49:12, which says the following about humankind:

קרבם בתימו לעולם
משכנתם לדר ודר
קראו בשמותם עלי אדמות

The first two lines are relatively straightforward:

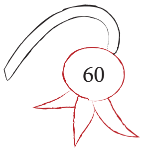
Their graves[23] are their homes forever,
Their dwelling places from generation to generation.




As Raabe notes, the last line combines two Hebrew idioms. First, one thinks of the idiom "to call on the name" (קרא בשם), which is commonly used in a theological sense of calling on a deity (e.g., Gen 4:26; Ps 105:1), so that the foolish speakers are accused of hubris by calling on their own names. By the end of the verse, one thinks instead of the idiom "to have one's name called over X" (נקרא שׁם על), which is commonly used to express ownership (e.g., Deut 28:10; Jer 14:9; Isa 63:19); in this light, the humans are mocked for their belief that their worldly power and possessions will save them. "Which is it?" Raabe asks, rhetorically. "It seems to be a deliberate conflation of both idioms" (1991, 222). On the basis of dozens of examples throughout the Psalms, Raabe concluded that

[23] קברם, "their grave," is sometimes emended to קברים, "grave." As the Masoretic Text (MT) of 2 Kgs 23:6 reflects, a collective singular interpretation of קבר is not especially hard to understand. (Josiah "beat [the image of Asherah] to dust and threw the dust of it upon the grave(s) of the common people [על־קבר בני העם].")

> sometimes the ambiguity is deliberate and not simply the result of the reader's misunderstanding or lack of information, or poor textual transmission. Recognizing the use of deliberate ambiguity often can explain the difficulties of the Masoretic Text and can eliminate the need for emendation. It appears that such ambiguity and multivalence served a positive purpose rather than a negative purpose such as evasion or deceitfulness. No doubt these types of ambiguity functioned to amuse and sustain the interest of the hearers. They are evidence of the psalmists' mastery of the language. They represent the psalmists' sense of humor and their delight in the creative use of language. But, even more important, such multivalence functions to engage the hearers/readers, to cause them to interact with the psalm, and to lead them to recognize the truth of the various possible interpretations. The psalmists achieved this by expressing a "surplus of meaning" in a terse style. (Raabe 1991, 226–27)




His culminating point is the crucial one to the present analysis: Wordplay is not simply a form of scribal self-entertainment (even if it was probably that as well). Instead, it allows the author to encode multiple meanings in a text. And even where the original author may not have meant both or all the possible meanings of a text, later scribes, copyists, and readers, simply by recognizing and "tolerating" them, allowed them to persist in a textual tradition.

Raabe's basic insight has been followed and confirmed by a number of other recent studies.[24] Sometimes, these focus on brief examples of ambiguity, but the principle functions quite broadly. As Harry Nasuti (2004) has ably demonstrated in the case of Ps 130, the ambiguity of the psalms can extend even to their genres, and manifest itself over centuries of their reception histories in the form of competing interpretations.

## *Ritual Language*

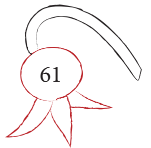
There are still other reasons for polysemy in the subcollection Ps 15–24. If, as many scholars have agreed, a number of the psalms in this collection are cultic in origin, then it is necessary to take into account the characteristic ambiguities of cultic or ritual texts.

[24] Pressler 2003; Kselman 2005; Seow 2013; Schreiner 2018; Hildebrandt 2020.

The reticence of ritual texts to explain themselves is widely observed. It is a truism among scholars that these texts, even when they describe rituals, "do not shed light on how the ancients thought the rituals actually brought about what they were supposed to accomplish" (Aaron 2001, 195).[25] Wade Wheelock cogently challenges our presuppositions about what we ought to expect ancient ritual texts to tell us. He writes:

> Ritual language is frequently couched in metaphorical phrases and relies on an understanding of the symbolic connotations of objects in the ritual context to which it makes reference. Ritual language, then, does not generally function to give the most lucid possible exposition to an untutored audience, but, quite the reverse, often assumes detailed prior knowledge of the matter presented. (Wheelock 1982, 56)

He suggests, then, that part of the ambiguity of rituals is that we lack detailed knowledge of their tools, contexts, etc.



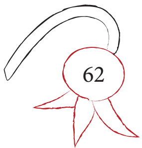

Yet there is arguably a deeper and more essential level of ritual ambiguity. Even in the present day, *participants* in a ritual may not understand it, or they may understand it differently from each other.[26] Indeed, even the officiants to whom others look to "guarantee the value of what is said or done" (Bloch 2004, 69) do not need to understand it, but "can in turn defer knowledge of the meaning of the components of the ritual to a remote authoritative figure who stands further back in space or (more often) time than themselves, and who is presumed to have held explicit knowledge of the meaning of the ritual" (Hobson 2012, 144).

None of this is to say that rituals do not have real meanings and real origins in their cultures, but when the authorial/authorizing figure is remote and inaccessible, as in the case with "Moses" and the Torah and with "David" and psalms, then inevitably ambiguity and polysemy characterize ritual, create mystery, and invite competing interpretations. In this vein, Jonathan Z. Smith suggests that it is not merely a function

[25] See also Milgrom 1976, 2; Harrington 1996; Bibb 2005; Watts 2007. This observation applies across cultures; for a recent set of examples drawn primarily from Indic cultures, see Berger and Kroesen 2016. For discussion of biblical ritual and further literature, see Hays 2014, 147–60.

[26] Hoeffner 1981, 482–99; Flanagan 1985; Engelke 2006; Coleman 2009.

of ritual language to maintain ambiguity, but a function of ritual itself: "Ritual precises [*sic*] ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them" (1987, 110). Ambiguity in ritual thus has potentially fruitful uses; as Mary Douglas has emphasized, it may be considered a subset of *poetic* ambiguity: "Ambiguous symbols can be used in ritual for the same ends as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence" (1996, 41). And elsewhere: "The ambiguity of these grey areas [in a scientific model] stimulates the mind to find new extensions of theory" (1999, 22). These new extensions are prompted by changed circumstances. John North said of Roman rituals that it is characteristic of them to "adjust themselves—through omitting, adding, misunderstanding, and reinterpreting—to new conditions of life" (1988, 984).[27] The same holds true for Judahite rituals and their texts.




The point need not be belabored: ritual texts do not explain themselves, so if one does not already know what a ritual is about, a text may well not reveal it. Furthermore, rituals may in their essence be optimized to protect (or obscure?) divine mysteries and to spark the human imagination to diverse interpretations. These interpretations, and the texts themselves, change over time. The authors and editors of the "cultic psalms" in Ps 15–24 were like other religious professionals in sometimes allowing for and sometimes struggling with the polysemy of their own literature.

### *Metaphor and Comparison*

When scholars argue against the presence of religious ideas in the Bible that are consistent with those of surrounding cultures, one of their recourses is to argue that the *images* in question are present in the Hebrew Bible, but are *metaphorical* or *demythologized*. In one of the most ambitious and theoretically advanced studies of ambiguity in the Bible in recent years, David Aaron (2001) scrutinizes and largely refutes this idea.

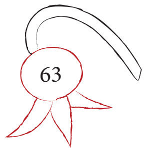
Aaron's argument is specifically about the ancient Israelites' belief in other gods, but the case is highly analogous to the question of the af-

[27] See discussion in Watts 2007, 8.

terlife and cults of the dead.[28] He begins from the observation that "the cultures of the ancient Near East (including the Israelites) … employ common idioms and motifs. However, most scholars distinguish the use of idioms in Israel from their usage in other cultures. As such, the expression 'X is Y' may be read literally in a Ugaritic text, but will frequently be interpreted metaphorically when it appears in a Hebrew text" (2001, 23). Through a detailed meta-analysis of a wide range of biblical scholars' work, he demonstrates that "though often appealing to metaphor in the process, some scholars choose to read biblical idioms clearly drawn from or parallel to those of other ancient Near Eastern cultures as having been demythologized" (2001, 32).

In a somewhat humorous aside, Aaron points out:

> Were a scholar to move through the biblical text changing letters or word order in each and every instance of philological ambiguity with no basis in variant readings, his or her writings would be rejected out of hand. In contrast, when a scholar moves through the text interpreting phrases as figurative speech on the basis of a theological or literary imperative not blatantly disclosed by the text, we only rarely seek a comprehensive justification for the approach offered. (Aaron 2001, 43–44)




As it happens, that more or less describes the dismissal of religious elements in the Psalter that do not match later "orthodoxy"; in fact, Ps 17:15 is one of Aaron's parade examples (citing his translation):

> Then I, justified, will behold your face;
> Awake, I am filled with the vision of you.

Why, he asks, is this taken as a metaphor or spiritualized in the psalm when scholars would view it as a routine vision of the divine statue in a Mesopotamian or Ugaritic text (Aaron 2001, 26)? The same sort of question should be asked of psalmic statements such as "I lie down with

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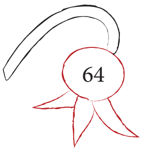
[28] Aaron begins from the observations of Matitiahu Tsevat's "God and the Gods in Assembly" (1969–1970); and although Aaron does not make the connection to cults of the dead specifically, Tsevat does. "The Bible prohibits necromancy, soothsaying, and the like. It does so not because they are ineffective but precisely because they are efficacious" (1969–1970, 124).

Yahweh always before me … he is at my right hand" (Ps 16:8) or "As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight" (16:3). The present study is not focused on divine images as Aaron's is, but rather on the question of who was actually in the Temple and for how long. (Answers: [1] certainly at least kings; [2] eternally, or so they hoped.)

The history of comparative study of the Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context is one that has frequently been told and need not be rehearsed,[29] but Aaron rightly observes that the assumptions of the generation of, for example, Yehezkel Kaufmann and G. E. Wright still persist quietly, partly submerged in nominally historical-critical scholarship. Those assumptions about the distinctiveness of Israelite religion derive

> from the conviction that Scripture is a priori a document of monotheists who believed in a deity quite differently from the surrounding peoples. The contemporary pagans come out of this as simpletons who believed everything literally, that stones and storms were gods, that magic works, and that kings hear directly from their patron deities—as if Israelites did not believe such things. But the evidence does not support these assumptions. (Aaron 2001, 57)




In the same way, if one finds the same evidence in the Bible of beliefs about the afterlife that are analogous to those of surrounding cultures, it will not do to assume that authors from other cultures meant them seriously and that biblical authors did not.[30]

If indeed the kings of Judah expected to be buried in the Temple, then the aspiration to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" would indeed have been believable. As for an afterlife of feasting with the gods, Wheelock points out that ritual speech asserts, declares, and situates. It describes realities that do not actually or yet exist (Wheelock 1982, 60).

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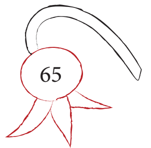
[29] For a convenient summary and additional literature, see Hays 2014, 15–38.

[30] The biblical polemic against the powers of the dead is transparently a reaction to the fact that Israelites and Judahites *did* believe in such things, and so does not constitute contrary evidence. In the Psalter in particular, it is a rhetorical device intended to motivate God to save the supplicant in order to assure himself adoration (e.g., Ps 6:6; 30:10).

## A Case Study: Psalm 15

In the past few decades, as interest has increased in subcollections within the Psalter,[31] Ps 15–24 has been widely recognized and studied as a prominent example of one.[32] Individual psalms within the collection circulated independently before being compiled into their current form.[33] I argue that an original collection of mortuary cult prayers was subsequently redacted and augmented in a way that obfuscated their afterlife meanings. Psalm 15 does not provide the clearest example of afterlife beliefs among the psalms in the collection—Ps 16; 17; 21; and 23 include far more overt references to mortuary beliefs—but the analysis here suggests that it was an original part of the collection, and not merely part of the redactional framing. It would be speculative and unnecessary to argue that the psalm has actually been bowdlerized by editors; rather, its ambiguity can be explained by its being recontextualized.




The Psalter is commonly perceived to have a "wisdom frame" (Ps 1; 73; 90; 107; 145) and a "royal covenantal frame" (Ps 2; 72; 89; 144). As this perception reflects, bookending was a common redactional technique in biblical (and ancient Near Eastern) literature (Milstein 2016). It might also suggest that Ps 15 was newly composed for its location; however, as seems to have been the case with Ps 2 and parts of Isa 1–2, the redactor of Ps 15–24 may have used existing material instead of composing something new. That is to say, simply by taking existing texts and placing then at the beginning of a collection, the scribes who formed Psalms and Isaiah created "overtures" that reframed the collections and thereby affected their interpretation. (The late redactors of Isaiah also added new material interspersed; this is less clear in the case of Ps 2 and Ps 15.)

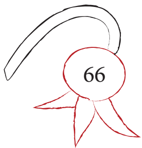
Analysis of Ps 15 sheds light on these issues:

[31] Especially since Gerald Wilson's *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (1985).

[32] It would appear that this recognition is particularly attributable to the literary analysis of Pierre Auffret (Auffret 1982, 409–38). It has been reinforced by Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, 12–15; Miller 1993. See also Jacobson 2014.

[33] For example, Koch 2005, 15.

O Yahweh, who may stay in your tent?
    Who may tabernacle on your holy mountain?
The one who walks blamelessly,
    and who does what is right;
and speaks the truth from his heart;
    whose tongue does not wander.
He has done no evil to his neighbor,
    and no reproach has he lifted up against one close to him.
Despised in his eyes is the one who refuses (the Lord);[34]
    but those who fear the Lord he honors.
His money he does not lend with interest,
    nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
If he has sworn to a neighbor,[35] then he will not change.[36]
The one who does these things will not be shaken forever.




In the first place, the genre of Ps 15 has been misidentified. A telling comment about its history of interpretation comes from Hans-Joachim Kraus: “The setting of Psalm 15 can be reconstructed on the basis of its combination with Psalm 24” (1993, 227). This is indeed what most interpreters do, and I suggest that it is exactly what the redactor who added Ps 24 intended. Psalm 24 is indeed an entrance liturgy; it includes a number of verbs of ascending and entering. On the basis of the ethical language and references to the Temple contained in both psalms, Ps 15 is almost universally taken to be an entrance liturgy as well.

There are serious problems with the theory that Ps 15 was originally an entrance liturgy, however. In the first place, there are no verbs of motion, no references to doors or entry, etc. Furthermore, analogous ethical language is found in numerous genres of biblical literature; it is in no way specifically characteristic of entrance liturgies. Erhard

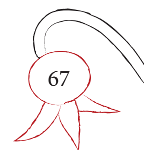
[34] Reading מֹאֵס for MT נמאס; cf. LXX πονηρευόμενος. Presumably the object (“the Lord”) is supplied by the second colon.

[35] cf. LXX τῷ πλησίον αὐτοῦ.

[36] This is probably to be read as a niphal imperfect: יִמֹּר. מור (I), “to change” may not be a different verb from מור (II), “to shake.” The latter is attested only in Ps 46:3, also in proximity to מוט, “to shake, totter”; thus, the author here may be punning on the dual interpretations of מור.

Gerstenberger's list of texts where similar language appears is one of the more complete, including Isa 33:14; Mic 6:6–7; Exod 23:1–9; Leviticus 19; Deut 23:20; Ezek 18:6–8; and Prov 22:22–28: prophecies, law collections, and wisdom literature. Nor are the rhetorical questions found in the Isaiah and Micah passages actually indicative of entrance into the Temple. Therefore, although Gerstenberger grants that Ps 15:1's question "certainly had a cultic context," he goes on to conclude that "Psalm 15 cannot by any means, as it stands now, represent a genuine entrance dialogue between pilgrim and priests of any Israelite temple" (1988, 87–88).[37]

Furthermore, the entrance texts sometimes cited from temples in other ancient Near Eastern cultures are not literarily very analogous to Ps 15. Gerstenberger mentions an inscription from the (Ptolemaic) Egyptian temple at Edfu that reads: "Everyone who may enter through this door: that he avoid entering with impurity." And Eckart Otto quotes from a Middle Assyrian hymn to Ninurta as an analogy: "He who has intercourse with (another) man's wife, his guilt is grievous" (Otto 2007, 26–37).[38] Neither reflects anything more than a common concern for rectitude and purity.




Nevertheless, the answer to many of Ps 15's difficulties did lie in the interpretive tradition all along, albeit without ever crystallizing: As J. A. Soggin noted, another school of interpretation disputed the entrance-liturgy theory and viewed Ps 15 as a "psalm of refuge" (Soggin 1975, 14–48). [39] In fact, it is in a sense both: It is a liturgy identifying what is required for a king to enjoy eternal refuge in the temple.

The wording of the opening question is important, and it is generally analyzed poorly. The opening bicolon is a pair of questions: "O Yahweh, who may stay in your tent?/ Who may tabernacle on your holy mountain?" (יהוה מי יגור באהלך מי ישכן בהר קדשך). Commentators often attempt to connect these questions with the Festival of Booths, as if "who may tabernacle?" was aimed at those staying in booths within the Temple

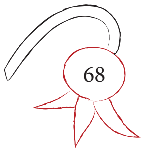
[37] The somewhat disturbed nature of the Hebrew text in Ps 15:4 could reflect a truncated preservation of a longer list of ethical assertions, but that is speculative.

[38] See also Lambert 1960, 118–20.

[39] For the "refuge" approach, see, for example, Delekat 1967, 166–70.

precinct (cf. Neh 8:16). However, neither "tabernacle" (שׁכן) nor "tent" (אהל) is commonly associated with "booth" (סכה).[40]

Instead, these questions originally referred to the tombs of the kings who were buried in or near the Temple (Ezek 43). To be buried there would have been the greatest privilege a Davidic ruler could be accorded in the afterlife. The ensuing questions about the ethics of the (originally royal) supplicant are intended to ensure his worthiness to lie in the Temple, and (as we will see) to feast with Yahweh in the afterlife.[41] If this view has been argued previously, I do not know of it, so it requires demonstration: The *miškān*, within the biblical narrative, refers first to the Tabernacle (e.g., Lev 15:31), but often signifies the Temple in Psalms (26:8; 43:3; 46:5; 49:12; 74:7; 78:60; 84:2l; 132:5, 7).[42] The *miškān* thus connotes the dwelling of a divine being.




By transference, *miškān* is also applied pejoratively by Isaiah to Shebna and his illicit personal tomb in Isa 22:16 in an accusation of hubris:

> Who are your relatives here,
> that you have cut out a tomb (קבר) here for yourself,
> cutting a tomb (קברו) on the height,
> and carving a *miškān* (משׁכן) for yourself in the rock?

The prophet's critique is that Shebna is trying to deify himself through his individual (rather than family) tomb (Hays 2010). "Tomb" and "Tabernacle" also occur in parallel in Ps 49:12:

> Their graves (קברם) are their homes forever,
> their *miškānôt* (משׁכנתם) to all generations.

The idea of the tomb as a house for the dead is also conveyed in different terms in Isa 14:18: "The kings of the nations lie in glory, each in

[40] Yitzhak Avishur also notes that the festival interpretation is incorrect, though he then reads the psalm metaphorically (1977, 125).

[41] On the royal and Temple associations of the psalm, see Koole 1963; Willis 1974.

[42] It goes beyond the scope of the present study to determine whether this usage was simply a figure of speech, or whether it was actually transferred from a tent shrine to the Temple as older psalms continued be used.

his 'house' (ביתו)." It is commonly observed that Judahite bench tombs approximated the layout of a house, so the "grammar" of the image was clearly available to the prophets to adapt pejoratively.[43]

In Ps 15:1, the theological significance of the *miškān* (as opposed to being a mere booth for a festival) is emphasized by the parallel question: "Who may stay (יגור) in *your* holy tent?" The tent is the Lord's,[44] and refers to the sanctuary, as in Ps 27:5–6 and 61:5 (cf. 1 Kgs 1:39; 2:28; Exod 28:43; 29:23; etc.) The verb גור is often taken to refer to a short sojourn,[45] but it need not: In Ps 61:5, the psalmist says: "Let me stay in your tent *forever*" (אגורה באהלך עולמים). The centuries of Israel's Egyptian slavery are described with the verb גור in Deut 26:5; Isa 52:4; Ps 105:23; etc. The verb גור is used in a special metaphorical sense in cases like Ps 15:1 and Ps 61:5—in the scope of divine eternity, the king's stay in burial is not long.

It bears returning at this point to Isaiah 33:14–16; as noted above, it is commonly mentioned in connection with Ps 15 in reference to its rhetorical questions and ethical content. In fact, it is revealing in its entirety:

> The sinners in Zion are afraid;
> trembling has seized the godless:
> "Who among us can abide (יגור) the devouring fire?
> Who among us can abide (יגור) everlasting flames (מוקדי עולם)?"
> The one who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
> who despises the gain of oppression,
> who waves away a bribe instead of accepting it,
> who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed
> and shuts his eyes from looking on evil—

[43] Mazar 1976; Faust and Bunimovitz 2008; Osborne 2011; Suriano 2018, 93–95.

[44] A few Hebrew mss pluralize אהל, but the witness of the major versions is clearly in favor of the singular.

[45] This was the assertion of Sigmund Mowinckel, who overambitiously sought to incorporate practically all of the Psalter's cultic material into his theory of a Fall Enthronement Festival. He explained away statements like these as the yearnings of those who could only visit the Temple briefly, expressing their desire to stay longer (2014, 825–26).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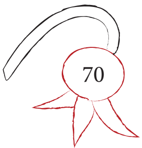
> He will tabernacle on the heights (הוא מרומים ישכן);
> his refuge will be the fortresses of rocks (סלעים);
> his food will be supplied, his water assured.

The language of this promise again echoes the condemnation of Shebna and his tomb in Isa 22:16: "What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here, that you have cut out a tomb (קבר) here for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height (חצבי מרום קברו), and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock (חקקי בסלע משכן לו)?" The language of "staying/sojourning" (גור) is again connected with one's burial and eternal fate. Even the ethical language of Isa 33:14–15 is similar to Ps 15's in its reference to how one walks and speaks and what one looks upon, and in its rejection of bribery and unjust gain.





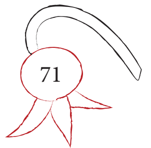
It is striking that the afterlife connotations of Isa 33 are not more generally remarked upon. It offers alternative afterlife fates: "everlasting fire" or safe refuge in a rock-cut tomb, in which "his food will be supplied, his water assured." Is there a more straightforward reference to mortuary feeding and libations in the Bible?

The understanding that Ps 15 is a prayer for a king who wishes to be buried in proximity to the Temple also makes better sense of the ensuing ethical instructions. While it is true that concerns for moral purity are attested in temple entrance texts, they are even more prominent in particularly extensive compendia in prayer texts in which the supplicant fears the wrath of the deity (e.g., the Mesopotamian *diĝir-šà-dab$_5$-ba*) and when a person faces judgment in the afterlife, as in the well-known "negative confession" of Book of the Dead Spell 125. The latter connection has particularly been noted, yet older interpreters resisted making the connection, presumably because of the field's previously underdeveloped sense of Judahite afterlife beliefs (e.g., Galling 1929, 130). As these different comparanda suggest, there is no warrant to suggest direct influence from those texts to the psalm; rather, what they suggest is that there was a fairly pervasive concern with personal holiness when a human encountered a deity.[46]

[46] This was so in life and in death. Take, for example, Isaiah's throne-room vision: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people

The same pattern as Ps 15's is found in Ps 17 and 73: The one who does what is right, especially with regard to speaking (17:1, 3; cf. 73:8) will find refuge with the Lord (17:7; 73:28) and dwell in his presence (17:15; 73:20, 26), unlike enemy wrongdoers, who will perish (17:13–14; 73:18–20, 27).[47] Thus Ps 15, 17, 73 and Isa 33:14–16 all manifest a shared set of ideas: only the king "who does what is right (צדק)" (15:2) may be buried in the Temple and thus dwell forever in the presence of Yahweh. As for the ethical guidelines, there is no single text that they are drawn from; rather, as the catalogue of similar passages above shows, they are common in Hebrew traditions.

The final line of Ps 15 is as crucial as the opening couplet for understanding the cultic funerary context: "The one who does these things will not be shaken forever (לא ימוט לעולם)." In Psalms, the verb מוט is used just enough of individuals in an extended, figurative sense (10:6; 13:5; 30:7; 112:6) that its more basic sense is overlooked: it most often refers to the shaking of earth and rock (Ps 46:3, 6; 60:4; 99:1; 82:5; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; 125:1; Isa 54:10; 1 Chr 16:30). A text like Ps 62:3, 7 makes clear the metaphorical connection: "[God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken (לא־אמוט)." The same verb is also used of the permanent installation of cultic objects in temples—that is, the idols in Second Isaiah, and specifically the makers' hopes that they "will not topple" (40:20) or "cannot be removed" (41:7).




All this sets the stage for the significance of מוט in Ps 15:5, as well as in 16:8; 21:8; and perhaps more subtly in other instances: to "not be shaken forever" can mean to lie at rest in burial in the bedrock of the Temple Mount, just as the Canaanite rulers of Jerusalem were in previous centuries.[48] This same specific use of מוט is in evidence in Prov 10:30:

of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!" (6:5). Like the psalmist in Ps 15:2–4, Isaiah focuses on the uprightness of his speech.

[47] Psalm 17 is, of course, a greatly disputed text that cannot be analyzed in depth in this context.

[48] It is generally taken for granted that the Davidic royal tombs were rock-cut like other elite tombs of the period, even if their location is much disputed. For a summary of attempts to locate the Davidic royal tombs, see Rahmani 1981; Tarler and Cahill 1992, 2:64–65; Zorn 2006.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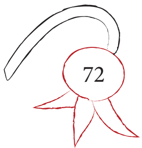
"The righteous will never be removed (צדיק לעולם בל־ימוט), / but the wicked will not stay in the land (ורשׁעים לא ישׁכנו־ארץ)." (This was probably a threat against both one's burial and one's patrimonial territory, in light of the use of graves as boundary markers.[49]) Since Jerusalem was on a seismic fault, and vaulted tombs carved into the rock would have been at risk in earthquakes, the promise that the deceased would not be shaken is particularly relevant and vivid.

The most indisputable use of מוט in the Psalter in an afterlife context is in Ps 112:6: "For he (the one who acts ethically, cf. verses 1–5) will never be moved; the righteous one will be remembered forever" (כי לעולם לא־ימוט לזכר עולם יהיה צדיק). Forms of זכר are very commonly used in Biblical Hebrew for invoking divinities, both the Lord (Isa 48:1; Ps 45:17; 71:16) and other gods (e.g., Exod 23:13; Hos 2:19; Zech 13:2). This use extends relatively frequently to invoking the dead in the mortuary cult (Jer 11:19; Ezek 3:20; 33:13; Job 24:20; and the memorial offering [מזכיר] in Isa 66:3),[50] just as the Akkadian cognate *zakāru* is well attested in *kispu* rituals.[51] Thus, as generally in ancient Near Eastern mortuary cults, Ps 112:6 associated the integrity of the burial with the preservation of the name, memory, and cult.[52]




There is yet a further possibility for the meaning of מוט in light of the discussion of wordplay above: it would have been nearly homophonous

[49] Note Prov 22:27–28: "If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your 'bed' (= "bench tomb"; משׁכבך) be taken from under you? Do not remove the ancient landmark that your ancestors set up." For additional data and literature, see Stavrakopoulou 2010, esp. 11.

[50] Cf. also Nah 1:14, in which HALOT suggests emending יזרע to יזכר, as well as Isa 14:20, which uses קרא. Afterlife considerations also probably lie behind Nehemiah's concern for his memory in Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31, etc.

[51] See, "*zakāru*" *CAD* Z, 18.

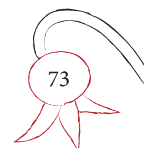
[52] Kurt Galling, trying to interpret Ps 15 as an entrance liturgy, was perplexed: "Beachtlich ist der Schlußsatz: Wer so handelt, wird nimmermehr wanken! Man würde entsprechend der Frage erwarten: Wer so handelt, darf zum Heiligtum eintreten. Die vorliegende Formel zeigt bereits den Loslosungsprozeß vorn Kultus, dergestalt, daß die Frage den Unterton mitschwingen läßt: wer darf der Segnungen der Gottesgemeinschaft gewiß sein. Auch in Jes 33 16 ist der Schluß abgehogen" (1929, 128–29).

with מות, “to die.” Thus, one can hear in Ps 15’s final line: “The one who does these things will never die (לא ימות לעולם)”! Avoiding what Egyptians called “the second death” was the central goal of mortuary cults throughout the ancient Near East.

Thus when J. T. Willis commented that the authors of Ps 15 “were ‘dead serious’ about the quality of religion that they held before their respective audiences,” he unintentionally created a pun that was dead-on (1974, 163).[53]

## Conclusions

A straightforward funerary reading of Ps 15 has emerged: The king or his professional intermediary asks who may be buried in the Temple (15:1). The response is given in ethical terms, focusing especially on speaking the truth (15:2–4). The psalm then closes with a word of assurance: the one who does what is right will not only be worthy of interment next to the Temple (Ezek 43:7–8), but will remain there undisturbed (15:5). Greater hopes still are expressed in later psalms, but burial is a very understandable starting point for a collection of mortuary prayers. It appears that Ps 15 was originally composed specifically for the king—to pray for and reflect on his worthiness to be buried in proximity to the Lord, and subsequently to rise and feast with him. It is likely that even in its original form, the psalm was meant to express hopes and blessings for this life and the next.



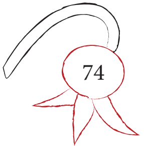

This article has also explored the common phenomenon of polysemy in texts and iconography portraying mortuary care, and has explored cultural and literary reasons for its prevalence.

Recent exegetes continue to demonstrate that the psalm can be read without attention to its mortuary significance, and they are abetted by the activities of ancient scribes and translators who were similarly uncomfortable with the idea of a royal afterlife. Those who are inclined

[53] The quotation marks, present in the original, appear to have been used simply for emphasis, unfortunately. He says nothing else about death or the afterlife in the entire essay.

to dismiss the mortuary interpretation should especially consider how difficult it inherently is for us now to *hear* aspirations concerning royal interment in the Temple—aspirations which were abandoned while the Psalter was still in formation. This doctrine, though dominant when many psalms were written, has lacked vocal advocates for more than 2,500 years.

It would be unwise to deny that the psalm always contained a message for and about a living king. What Patrick Miller wrote of the different understandings of Ps 15's poetic form applies equally to the issue of whether the psalm is about this life or the next: "The differences … do not necessarily reflect a correct reading and incorrect reading(s) but different ways of reading or speaking the psalm that are there in the text" (1979, 418–19).[54]




One of our original questions was whether Ps 15 was composed to introduce a collection of psalms. If we mean an original mortuary collection, then probably so. Insofar as the redaction of Ps 15–24 has tended to minimize the mortuary significance of the incorporated psalms, Ps 15 is not to be attributed to a later editorial layer. Its incorporation into a collection with strong interests in ethics (Ps 17), protection from enemies (esp. Ps 18, 20–21, 23), *tôrāh* (Ps 19), and ritual entrance (Ps 24) proved more than enough to distract many interpreters over the centuries from the features described here.

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[54] Miller was focused on alternatives in its poetic lineation and their subtle effects on meaning.

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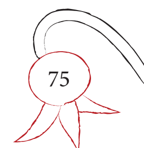


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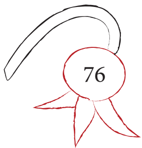


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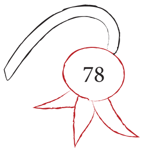


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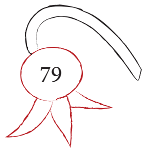


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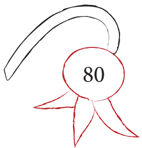


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# "YOU HAVE REFINED US LIKE SILVER IS REFINED" (PS 66:10): YAHWEH'S METALLURGICAL POWERS IN ANCIENT JUDAH

*Jeremy D. Smoak*

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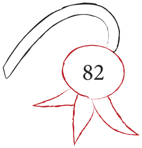
# Abstract

Since the discovery of the Ketef Hinnom amulets most studies have focused upon the semantic content of their inscriptions and their relationship to the biblical texts. As a result, few studies have asked how their manufacture from silver and their design as tiny scrolls communicated meaning. The present study attempts to fill this lacuna by exploring their materiality as purified silver that was rolled into tiny scrolls. While past studies emphasize that silver was a signifier of economic and social status, I argue that the affordances of silver were also central to their *ritual* logic. I show how a material religions approach to the amulets offers new insights into the sensory affordances of silver and how this metal's properties mediated notions of divine presence and ritual purity. Several biblical texts describe Yahweh as a divine metallurgist who attempts to purify Judah through the removal or extraction of base alloys or impurities. Beyond clarifying the affordances of Ketef Hinnom's silver, I argue that the silver materiality of the objects guided or influenced their semantic content. Verbal allusions to covenant loyalty and the shining face of Yahweh complemented silver's chemical purity and shine.

Depuis la découverte des amulettes de Ketef Hinnom, la plupart des études se sont concentrées sur leur contenu sémantique et leur relation aux textes bibliques. En conséquence, rares sont les études qui se sont demandé comment leur fabrication en argent et leur conception comme rouleaux minuscules créaient du sens. Cette étude cherche à combler cette lacune, en explorant la matérialité des amulettes, en argent purifié, enroulés en minuscules rouleaux. Alors que les études précédentes soulignent que l'argent était un indicateur de statut économique et social, je propose de dire que les propriétés de l'argent étaient aussi centrales pour leur logique rituelle. Je montre comment l'étude des amulettes à travers une approche intéressée par la matérialité des religions permet de mieux comprendre les propriétés sensorielles de l'argent et comment les caractéristiques de ce métal transmettaient les notions de présence divine et de pureté rituelle. Plusieurs textes bibliques décrivent Yahvé comme un métallurgiste divin qui cherche à purifier Juda à travers la suppression ou l'extraction d'alliages de mauvaise qualité ou d'impuretés. En clarifiant les propriétés de l'argent de Ketef Hinnom, j'affirme que la matérialité de l'argent des objets guidait ou influençait leur contenu sémantique. Les allusions verbales à la loyauté à l'alliance et le visage resplendissant de Yahvé complètent la pureté et l'éclat chimiques de l'argent.



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# "YOU HAVE REFINED US LIKE SILVER IS REFINED" (PS 66:10): YAHWEH'S METALLURGICAL POWERS IN ANCIENT JUDAH

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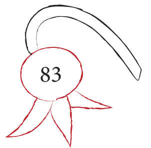



## Introduction

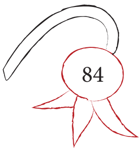
The Ketef Hinnom amulets are two of the most famous inscriptions from the Iron Age southern Levant. These inscribed objects were discovered in the repository of an elite burial complex at the site of Ketef Hinnom, Jerusalem (Barkay 1992, 148–51). Due to their fragile state, and their incredibly small size, they were only unrolled and translated several years after their discovery.[1] The content of these inscriptions made a deep impact on scholarship due to parallels between their language and the priestly blessing found in Num 6:24–26.[2] Studies focused

[1] Rasovsky, Bigelajzen, and Shenhav 1992. See also Barkay et al. 2003.

[2] Barkay 1992, 2009; Haran 1989; Yardeni 1991. A major focus of the early study of the amulets was also the question of the date of the inscriptions. For discussion

upon form critical and comparative questions as scholars aligned the objects with priestly writings and the history of scribalism in ancient Judah.[3] The 2004 revised edition of the inscriptions concluded: "The inscriptions found on these plaques preserve the earliest known citations of biblical texts. The new readings outlined in this article show that these plaques not only contain biblical quotations, but they also provide us with the earliest examples of confessional statements concerning Yahweh" (Barkay et al. 2004, 68). This quote captures an important aspect of the early study of these objects, namely, the concern to read their texts and understand them as inscriptional forms of the biblical text.

The "material turn" in the study of religion, however, reminds us that the materiality of such amulets was an equally important part of their message of blessing and protection.[4] Indeed, we should emphasize the illegibility of these texts—they were inscribed on the interiors of tiny metal scrolls that were rolled up several times and discovered in a family tomb.[5] The present study, therefore, complements past works on these tiny scrolls by offering an analysis of their ritual function as "hidden" texts that were not made to be seen, but to communicate through their materiality and design. While past studies have explored the ways in which the use of silver signified the economic and social status of the tomb owners at Ketef Hinnom, I argue here that the precious metal was also central to the *ritual* logic of the amulets, both in life and in "death," that is, once they were absorbed into the tomb repository as a part of the things placed in the tomb to care for the dead. Having been designed from highly refined silver, the materiality of these amulets and




of their paleography, see especially Renz 1995, 447–56; Yardeni 1991; Lemaire 1997; Vanderhooft 1999; Cross 2003, 128; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004; Aḥituv 2008, 49–55; 2012. For further discussion of the date of the objects, see Berlejung 2008a, 2008b.

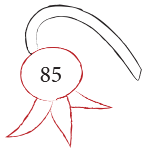
[3] Waaler 2002; Schniedewind 2004, 2013; Na'aman 2011; Smoak 2012, 2015. Studies have also focused upon the significance the inscriptions had for our understanding of Israelite religion. See Keel and Uehlinger 1989, 363–64; Lewis 2000, 2011, 2012; Hendel 2004; Schmidt 2013, 2016, 123–41; Smoak 2019.

[4] Meyer et al. 2010; Hazard 2013; Bräunlein 2016.

[5] Schmidt 2013, 2016; Suriano 2018; Smoak 2019; Valkama 2021.

their inscribed words worked together as a communicative complex of meaning: one material and one linguistic. In order to demonstrate this, I step back from the study of these amulets as priestly objects and address the broader tradition about the purifying power of silver that underlies their design. To do this, I draw specific attention to the chemical properties of silver and the metal's capacity to be refined to produce a shine that located its ritual meaning within the realm of sensory experience.

As I show below, an important aspect of silver's value in the ancient Near East relates to the technology of cupellation, which was used to remove impurities from the precious metal. Because silver could be refined several times in order to rid unwanted alloys, it came to serve as a metaphor and ritual analogue for human purification. The biblical texts represent a significant part of this tradition by alluding in several places to Yahweh's power to refine and purify human hearts. In what follows, I argue that this meaning may have formed a critical part of the ritual logic of the design of Ketef Hinnom's amulets; indeed, this might be why these amulets were crafted specifically as silver objects. Toward this end, I argue that the silver used to make the amulets not only "presenced" divine blessing, but it also played an active role in guiding the semantic context of the inscriptions. Silver conveyed notions of covenant fidelity and ritual purity, while the metals shiny qualities gave visual expression to divine favor and protection. The inscriptions complemented this message by invoking covenantal language, statements that Yahweh's blessings are stronger than evil, and requesting that Yahweh make his face shine upon the wearer.




## The Materiality of Ritual Objects

My more recent work on these two objects draws from recent scholarship on amulets that considers the ritual power of their material composition and design elements. In the 2011 article, "Text, Image and Medium," Chris Faraone (2011) explored the role that the medium of Greco-Roman gemstones played in their magical function. He stressed that the ancient sources often emphasize the medium or color as much as the inscriptions on such stones. Faraone noted the example of the use

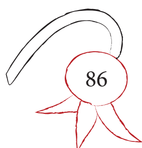



Figure 1. Photo of Ketef Hinnom 1 at 1:1 scale (courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Bruce and Ken Zuckerman, University of Southern California, West Semitic Research Project)

## Translation of the Ketef Hinnom Amulet 1

*KHinn* 1

[For PN]-iah ... 3). the grea[t … who keeps] 4). the covenant and 5).[g] raciousness toward those who love [him] and 6). those who keep [his commandments … 7).... 8). the eternal [ …. ] 9). [the?] blessing more than any 10). [sna]re and more than evil. 11). For redemption is in him. 12). For Yahweh 13). is our restorer [and] 14). rock. May Yahweh bles[s] 15). you and 16). [may he] guard you. 17). [May] Yahweh make 18). [his face] shine.

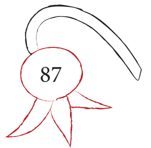


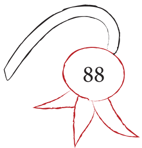

Figure 2. Photo of Ketef Hinnom 2 at 1:1 scale (courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Bruce and Ken Zuckerman, University of Southern California, West Semitic Research Project)

## Translation of the Ketef Hinnom Amulet 2

*KHinn* 2

> [For PN, (the son/daughter of) PN-ia]h. May h[e]/ [2). ]sh[e] be blessed by Yahweh, [3). ]the warrior and [4) ]the one who expels [5).-6). ][e]vil. May Yahweh bless you, [7). ]guard you. [8). ]May Yahweh make [9). ]his face shine [10). ]upon you and [11). ]give you [12). ]p[ea]ce.

of a yellow jasper gemstone inscribed with an image of an eight-legged scorpion (2011, 55). Faraone explored the relationship between the yellow color and the type of stone used to make these amulets and their ritual function; he argued that the use of this specific yellow-colored stone for amulets with the "yellow Palestinian scorpion" is not arbitrary, but evolved through the principle of "like-banning-like" (2011, 55). The yellow Palestinian scorpion was a more lethal type of scorpion in the eastern Mediterranean both because it was more easily camouflaged by the soil and because its venom was especially lethal (2011, 55). Faraone argued that it was the medium of the stone—particularly its yellowish color—was chosen because it shared this visual mode; that is, the stone's color guided the magician's decision to use this material to create an amulet that would ward off this yellowish-brown scorpion and protect against its lethal bite (2011, 55).

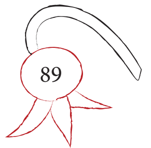



Faraone's article has been followed by a number of recent studies that also stress the importance of looking at the medium of amulets and other magical objects as an intrinsic, and not ancillary, facet of their ritual logic.[6] For instance, a recent study by Celia Sánchez Natalías (2018) examines the role that the properties and color of lead played in the desired function of Latin curse tablets. Natalías shows that "the textual metaphor attested in these curse tablets depends on the physicality of lead and/or a specific ritual deposition to make sense" (2018, 13). These works form helpful reminders that scholars have tended to ignore the role that an object's physical properties played in guiding its application in ritual. The importance of this line of argument rests not only in the way that it redirects the focus of study toward the materiality of amulets, but—as David Frankfurter recently emphasized—the medium (chemical, color, shape, etc.) may have in many cases influenced or guided decisions about the content that was inscribed on such objects (2019, 662). Any design elements, including iconography and text, were seen to complement the ritual power inherent in a material. Indeed, we might also consider that the color, materiality, and shape of the amulets—which were accessible to both literate and non-literate

[6] Bremmer 2015; Graf 2015; López-Ruiz 2015; Dieleman 2018; Gordon 2018; Kotansky 2019. See also Tsouparopoulou 2016.

audiences and which were more highly visible—were more expressive to an audience than their words.

The arguments made in these studies suggest that the affordances of the silver used to make the Ketef Hinnom amulets played an important role in their ritual power. Whereas studies have tended to prioritize concerns over understanding the semantic content of the objects, we might ask how their silver materiality functioned as the primary agent in their ritual power. Silver was much more than a signifier of the high social status of the members of this family. The use of the specific metal added a range of metaphoric meaning to these amulets related to the refinement process. Approaching Ketef Hinnom's amulets from this perspective offers a corrective to the tendency to prioritize the inscriptions and to note their medium in passing. Indeed, we might ask, if these amulets were made of a different metal or another material, such as gold or clay, for example, would they have had the same ritual power?



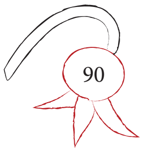

## Silver's Economy in the Iron Age Southern Levant

In order to understand how these amulets operated as metal *ritual* things, we might first step back and address the wealth of meaning that was expressed, not by their words, but from their medium: silver. We can start by observing that the ritual value of Ketef Hinnom's silver was most manifest at the intersection of its economic significance and its personal value as adornment for the body. The goal of these objects was to merge the economic value of precious metal with the religious associations that came with their design and display functions as jewelry. We might begin with a broad focus upon silver's regional value in the Neo-Assyrian period. The excavations at Tel Miqne-Ekron are especially helpful here in elucidating the picture of silver during this period. Among the many finds from the site were six separate caches of silver, which had been purposefully hidden in large buildings in the central zone of the city (Golani and Sass 1998).[7] This zone of the city was also

[7] One of the hoards from Ekron contains an impressive collection of silver jewelry, which was buried beneath a wall in Stratum 1C-B, and which dated to

the location of the massive temple complex and city palace. Three of the hoards were discovered in a building that formed part of the temple.

The impressive hoard of silver from Tel Miqne–Ekron and other sites in the southern Levant reflect the increasing importance of silver, not merely as the medium for craft or jewelry production, but also as the international currency of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The fact that several of such hoards have been discovered in the southern Levant points to the region's significance as part of the east–west trade network between the Mediterranean and the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[8] Seymour Gitin and Amir Golani also emphasize the importance of the silver at Ekron in relation to tribute payments to the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[9] Evidence from the Assyrian heartland as well as inscriptions from the southern Levant point to the use of silver as "tribute" (*maddattu*) to Assyria as well as a currency for the purchase of raw resources (i.e., grain) (Stager 1996, 66).




Silver and gold jewelry in particular was prized as personal adornment used to decorate the dead in the tomb (Golani 2013, 11). Silver jewelry, like the Ketef Hinnom amulets, is most commonly found in burial contexts in the Iron Age southern Levant.[10] This is not surprising given the wide use of silver and gold jewelry in burial contexts in adjacent regions. Beyond the impressive collection of silver from Ketef Hinnom, silver jewelry pieces have been discovered at a number of burial contexts dating to the Iron Age. Silver pendants exhibiting

the Iron II (Golani 2013, 12). Other hoards of silver come from an early Iron Age context at Beth-Shean and an unstratified context at Eshtemoʿa. The hoard discovered at Eshtemoʿa dates somewhere between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE, while the hoard from Beth-Shean dates to the Iron I. A hoard of silver was also uncovered below a floor level at En-Gedi, dating to the late Iron Age, likely between 630 and 582 BCE. The hoard had been placed in a cooking pot and buried beneath of the floor of a building. Other hoards of silver dating to the Iron Age are those discovered at Shechem and Gezer, although a more precise date for both is not possible (for discussion, see Golani 2013).

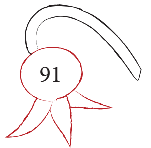
[8] Gitin 1995; Gitin and Golani 2001.

[9] Gitin and Golani 2001, 36–37; Gitin and Golani 2004, 204. See also Postgate 1979, 21–22; Fales and Postgate 1995, 218; Golani 2013, 79.

[10] Bloch-Smith 1992, 81; Golani 2013, 11.

Phoenician influence have been discovered in Iron Age funerary contexts at Akhziv (Tomb 1), Tel Michal (Tomb 2001), ʿAtlit (Tomb 24), and Tel Shor (sixth–fourth centuries) (Golani 2013, 11). The discovery of silver in funerary contexts reflects the role that it played as a valuable personal possession, one that conferred prestige and honor to the dead. It is also possible that in certain cases the jewelry found in funerary contexts was not used through the life of an individual but may have been made specifically for burial.

Several of the silver jewelry items discovered in the excavations of Tel Miqne-Ekron, unlike those at Ketef Hinnom, feature religious decorative designs and iconography (Golani and Sass 1998, 73–74). Among the pieces of jewelry is a thin silver medallion that features a cultic scene incised on the surface. The scene reflects well-known Assyrian iconography of a worshipper with raised arms standing before a cult stand and an image of Ishtar with a lion (Golani and Sass 1998, 71). Above the images of the worshipper and the goddess are the seven Pleiades, a crescent, and a winged sun. The same hoard in which the medallion appears included two Horus eyes made of very thin sheets of silver. The use of silver for the Horus eyes is somewhat unique in the archeological record of the southern Levant. The majority of examples of Horus eyes were made of faience and not silver. These pieces of jewelry reflect Ekron's position at the crossroads of Assyrian, Phoenician, and Egyptian cultures (Golani and Sass 1998, 74). The religious imagery used in the silver jewelry attests to the production of local religious materials that draw from Assyrian, Phoenician, and Egyptian and traditions.




The caches of silver described here situate Ketef Hinnom's silver within its regional context as precious objects and social signifiers of high status and wealth. The elite nature of this tomb is also demonstrated by the other metal objects that were interred in the burial complex. The repository of chapter 25 in which the two amulets were discovered contained numerous examples of silver, gold, and bronze jewelry and many other objects made of other valuable materials (Limmer 2007, 232). Gabriel Barkay notes that over ninety of the items removed from the repository were made of silver (1992, 145). An Udjat-eye amulet discovered in the same tomb featured the use of silver sheeting for the pupil of the eye (1986, 26). The high volume of silver items together

with the other precious metal objects found in the tomb points to the family's wealth and its access to the wider regional and international market for silver (Limmer 2007, 232). Indeed, we might see the incorporation of the silver amulets into the assemblage of valuable objects in the tomb repository as an effort to create and store a kind of collective memory of the family's status and wealth.

## Refining Silver's Ritual Value in the Ancient Near East

Having established the economic and cultural significance of silver in late Iron Age Judah, we can refine our analysis by contextualizing the use of silver for ritual objects within a broader discussion of the chemical properties and the related metaphoric powers ascribed to the metal. Recent studies by Kim Benzel and several others have drawn attention to the variety of ways that Mesopotamian texts convey notions of precious metal's perceived efficacy, divinity, or inherent ritual value.[11] One does not have to go far in the textual evidence of Mesopotamia to locate allusions to silver's and to gold's ritual significance. Building on the work of Irene Winter and Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Benzel emphasizes that the word for silver in Sumerian KU$_3$.BABBAR (*kaspum*) and Akkadian *ellu* also possesses the meaning "(to be) pure, bright, shiny."[12] She details the ways in which Mesopotamian texts held the metal to hold intrinsic or inherent divine properties, sacredness, and radiance (2015, 102). Benzel argues that it is because silver and gold possess an ability to maintain their lustrous appearance that they came to hold a special place in religious discourse about divinity and in the aesthetics of temples in Mesopotamia (2015, 98).

In Mesopotamian texts, silver and gold are often presented as a pair. They are presented as complementary precious metals and signifiers of divine power. This is seen in the metaphorical load ascribed to these

[11] Lewis 2005; Pongratz-Leisten 2009; Ornan 2012; Winter 2012; Benzel 2015. See also Oppenheim 1949.

[12] Benzel 2015, 100. On *ellu*, cf. Wilson 1994, 68–82.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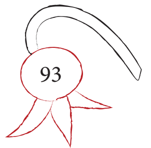
metals and their use to describe gods and things relating to divine power. The shining of these metals denoted the availability of the divine presence to manifest in the human realm. Whereas terms that denoted "pure brightness" were associated with divinity, "brightness-dominated"—as Shiyanthi Thavapalan has argued—colors took their names from precious metals and other stones and evoked notions of divine *manifestation* (2018, 13). By divine *manifestation*, I mean the affect that the metal had upon persons in the realm of visual and tactile experience. The distinction here is decidedly material: the "brightness-dominated" properties of silver and gold signaled an inherent divinity and ritual purity that could be employed in the cult.

In this understanding, Winter's definition of the modes of aesthetics in Mesopotamian art is most helpful.[13] In several articles on the aesthetics of radiance in Mesopotamian traditions, she divides aesthetics into three interrelated modes, which she characterizes as the "visible property by which the quality was manifest, the inherent characteristic, or power, for which the visible was the manifest sign, and the emotional response appropriate to each" (1994, 125). In other words, Winter's exploration of the use of terms for radiance or brilliance in Mesopotamian draws attention to the way that the aesthetics of art in this region emphasize three communicative modes: an inherent power of a material, the physical characteristics of the material that signal inherent power, and the effect that the physical characteristics have upon a person, or, to put it another way, the material's sensory affects (1994, 125).



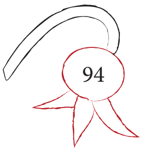

While those of us who specialize in the ancient Near East are familiar with the pairing of silver and gold that we might be tempted to ascribe them a similar meaning, it is important to keep in mind that the affordances of silver and gold are quite distinct.[14] It is significant that Ketef Hinnom's amulets are made in silver, and not in gold. Recent studies rightly emphasize the distinction between gold and silver in terms of each metal's levels of purity (Benzel 2015, 104). Whereas gold occurs more frequently in a pure state, silver often requires a much more thor-

[13] Winter 1994, 2002, 2007, 2012.

[14] See Clark 1986, 59–60; van der Spek et al. 2018.

ough refining process to remove unwanted impurities.[15] Silver, compared to gold, is relatively more malleable to work, and this quality of the metal may have contributed further to its significance as a metaphor for human behavior. Its malleability meant that it would be tested and refined several times in order as part of the metallurgical process of separating the precious metal from base alloys. The use of silver seems to be significant, especially given the amount of data—both archeological and textual—that we possess from the ancient Near East concerning silver's economic *and* ritual value: silver was prized for its scarcity but also for its chemical properties.

Mesopotamian texts record a number of glimpses into the role that the refining process played in evaluating the true economic value of the metal. This meant that a much more extensive technical vocabulary developed around the manufacturing capacities of silver. An especially important corpus for understanding the technical vocabulary associated with silver's refining capacities comes from the Old Assyrian texts from Assur (Veenhof 1972, 2014). These texts date to the early second millennium and describe the overland trade between Assur and the Taurus region of Anatolia. This region was rich in deposits of galena, an argentiferous lead mineral from which silver could be extracted through cupellation. When it was imported into Assur, it was used as the primary means by which traders purchased raw materials for their livelihood.



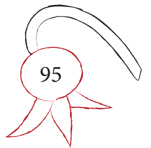

The fact that silver formed the primary means of exchange in the network also meant that methods for assessing its value received considerable attention. Much of our understanding of the technical terminology for cupellation, for example, derives from this literary corpus. This is because the actual value of the silver was determined by a process that involved "firing" (*ṣarāpum*), "melting" (*ṣu'ādum*; *sâdu*), and "washing" (*masā'um*) the metal in order to rid it of impurities (Veenhof 2014). These terms refer to the process of heating the metal in the cupel to a certain temperature so that the unwanted alloys would rise to the surface. The impurities could then be oxidized by using bellows to blow air across the molten metal. Since the silver would remain unoxidized, this

[15] Dercksen 2005, 21–24; Golani 2013, 18–19.

process resulted in the separation of the metal impurities (or slag) from the precious metal. The refiner knows when all of the impurities have been removed when he examines the molten ore and sees it become a shining liquid mirror. Hans E. Wulff's description of the process is especially helpful here:

> Crucibles are used that are lined with a mixture of wood ash, sand and ground potsherds. Lead is melted into the precious metal, and the dross that forms on the surface and contains all the base metal impurities is continually removed by scraping it over the edge of the crucible until the molten precious metal shows a *brightly shining surface*. (qtd. in Levene and Rothenberg 2004, 197; my italics)

As a result, the most valuable form of silver was known as *kaspum ṣarrupum* or "refined (or fired) silver" (Veenhof 2014). The role that silver and other precious metals played in exchange between temples and merchants meant that the textual sources often associate it with notions of blessing or benediction of the gods (Veenhof 1972, 75).



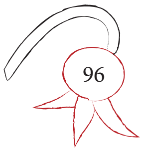

This also meant that the economic texts from this corpus preserved a variety of glimpses into the technical terminology associated with the process of removing impurities from silver (Veenhof 1972, 46–47). Silver that was regarded as dirty or impure was referred to as *massuhum*, and was considered less valuable (Veenhof 2014, 404). Several texts mention that the silver-slag removed in the process would be retained and used for some other purposes. Several of the texts emphasize the loss of weight—hence, value—that was determined through the process of separating the silver from other metal impurities in the refining process (Veenhof 2014, 405).

The Old Assyrian texts described here provide insight into the import of silver as a metaphor in ancient Near Eastern texts. Silver's ability to be cupellated in order to remove base alloys meant that the metal could serve as an analogue for human purity.[16] Several Mesopotamian texts use silver's purity as a metaphor for human purity and the refining of the metal as a parallel for the removal of evil, wickedness, or immoral

[16] For further discussion of the purifying powers of gold and silver, see Maul 1994, 95.

behavior from humans. The Old Babylonian composition "Hymn to Nungal" employs the analogy to describe Nungal's cleansing of an evil man to a state of cultic purity.[17] The relevant part of the text reads: "When it pacifies the heart of his god, when it is has polished him like silver of good quality, when it has made him shine forth through the dust; when it has cleansed him of dirt, like silver of best quality; he will be returned to the good hands of his god" (Reid 2016, 99). While this text refers more to the act of polishing and cleaning silver than to cupellation, it connects the quality of silver and its aesthetics to ideas about human behavior and the ability of prison to refine human character (Reid 2015, 596).

It is not difficult to see how this process came to serve as a metaphor for human behavior, or, perhaps better, the power of a god to examine human moral and ritual purity. The metallurgical craft was abstracted into the realm of divine inspection and testing of humans. Refining silver to determine whether it had any undetected impurities became an analogue for extracting wickedness from human character, purity, etc. One facet of this tradition—as Yitzhaq Feder has shown—was the association of the metal impurities removed in the process of refining precious metals with human immorality, criminality, and "unclean persons banished from the community (*musukku*)" (2016, 115).[18] He identified a terminological overlap in the root *msk/ḫ* that could pertain to both metallic impurities and contemptible people. Especially relevant here is the observation that this later term *musukku* also has the meanings "to be ugly," "to spoil, make disgusting," and "to become bad, wicked" (2016, 115). The use of these two terms in Akkadian texts shows not only that Mesopotamian cultures connected the purity that silver achieved through the refining process to ideas about human purity and



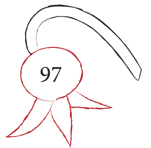

[17] Frymer 1977; Civil 1993; Kleber and Frahm 2006.

[18] Feder 2016, 115. See also De Zorzi 2019, 227–52. Feder shows that whereas the lexica tend to treat the terms *(m)usukku* and *mussuḫu* as two separate semantic categories, both terms appear in contexts where they convey notions of "inferior quality of silver" (2016, 115). He cites the use of the term *massuḫu/maššuḫu* to refer to "poor-quality silver and copper," whereas *musukku* "refers to the *impurities* resulting from the silver's refinement" (2016, 115).

cleanness but also that such texts associated the dross removed from precious metals to human wickedness and criminality.

## Silver's Ritual Power in Ancient Judah

With this backdrop in mind, we can refine our understanding of how Ketef Hinnom's silver communicated ritual meaning. When we return to the question raised at the beginning of this article, we might ask: would the amulets have had the same power had they been made out of another material, such as gold or bronze? While several recent studies have fleshed out silver's economic value in Iron Age Judah, far less attention has been devoted to its significance in ritual.[19] This is an important point to stress because studies tend to emphasize the ways in which the biblical texts allude to silver's economic value while neglecting to mention the many references to its manufacture.[20] When we move from Mesopotamia to Judah, however, we can see that the literary discourse over silver's refining capacities also left a noticeable legacy in the biblical texts.[21] Collectively, as I describe below, these texts attest to a robust mythology concerning silver's applications in religious discourse in ancient Judah (Amzallag 2013, 2015). This mythology points to the strong likelihood that the use of highly refined silver imparted a meaning to the Ketef Hinnom amulets that was specific to the material, chemical, and metaphorical nature of this metal. That is, these amulets would not have the same power or meaning had they been inscribed in another substance.




To offer a corrective and better contextualize the ritual logic of these amulets, we might start by examining the small handful of texts that

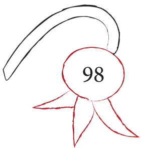
[19] Golani and Sass 1998; Gitin and Golani 2001; Limmer 2007; Golani 2013; Ilan 2014.

[20] For previous discussion of the metal form of the amulets and comparison with other silver objects in the southern Levant, see Berlejung 2008a, 2008b; Aḥituv 2012.

[21] See Jer 6:27–30; Ezek 22:17–22; Ps 12:7; 24:4; 26:2; 66:10; Prov 10:20; 25:4; 30:5; Mal 3:3.

employ metaphorical language about silver's refining capacities. Silver is especially central in metaphors for Yahweh's testing of Israel. One of the most detailed descriptions of this appears in Jer 6:27–30.[22] The passage stands at the very end of several oracles of judgment regarding the Babylonian destruction of Judah. It is relevant here because it contains a brief yet detailed description of a failed attempt to refine silver. I therefore cite the passage in full:[23]

> An assayer I have made you among my people,
> so that you may know and assay their ways.
> They are all princely rebels,
> bearers of slander,
> bronze and iron, all of them,
> destroyers they are;
> the bellows are scorched by the fire,
> the lead is consumed
> in vain the refiner has refined,
> but the evil are not separated out
> "rejected silver" they are called,
> for Yahweh has rejected them.




In this passage, Yahweh uses the language of cupellation to tell Jeremiah to test and purify the people of Judah. The passage opens with a declaration by Yahweh to Jeremiah that he has made the prophet an assayer of his people, "so that [the prophet] may know and test their way."[24] Verse 28 identifies the people as stubbornly rebellious, acting corruptly and sets the stage for the imagery in the following two verses. The following verse alludes to the use of lead mixture and a heating mechanism to remove unwanted alloys from the silver: "bronze and iron, all of them" (Holladay 1986, 230). After this declaration by Yahweh, verse 29 alludes

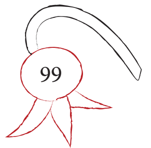
[22] Percy 1870, 177; Driver 1955; Gettens and Waring 1957; Soggin 1959; Guillaume 1962; Loretz 1972; Holladay 1986; Amzallag 2013, 2015.

[23] It is beyond the scope of the present study to review all of the text-critical difficulties that this passage poses. For discussion, see Robinson 1914–1915; Driver 1955; Soggin 1959; Holladay 1986, 228–29.

[24] For discussion, see Holladay 1986, 229.

to the use of bellows to blow air into the fire. William Holladay translated the first line of the verse as "the bellows are scorched by the fire" (1986, 228). The advantage of this translation lies in the way that it initiates the description of cupellation (Levene and Rothenberg 2004).

The final clause of verse 29 requires further comment in the light of the Mesopotamian texts described in this study. The clause reads: ורעים לא נתקו, which Holladay renders as "but the evil are not separated out" (1986, 228). The use of the term רעים is striking in a metallurgical context, however. Based upon allusions to cupellation in other biblical texts, one might have expected the term "dross" (סיגים). Proverbs 25:4 provides a good example of this: "The dross (סיגים) having been separated from the silver, a vessel (כלי) emerged for the refiner (צרף)."[25] Viewed against the background of the metaphorical uses of cupellation outlined in the present study, however, we might suggest that רעים has a polysemous function in this oracle: it refers to both the unwanted metal impurities removed during cupellation as well as the wickedness or evil that Yahweh has attempted to remove from Judah. As Holladay summarizes: "Just as in the metaphor the impure metals have not been extracted, so in the analysis of the people of Israel those who rebel against Yahweh are not extracted from the mass" (1986, 233). The comparison here is with the term *musukku* in Old Assyrian, which refers to the dirty or impure alloys extracted during refining. As noted above, several Mesopotamian texts connect the base alloys that are separated from precious metals to notions of human wickedness and impurity (Feder 2014, 115).

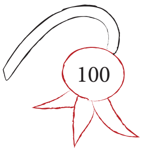



The imagery of cupellation in Jeremiah's oracle clarifies the metaphorical value of refined silver in several biblical texts. A number of such texts employ verbs that reflect the different stages of refining silver to describe Yahweh's testing of his people (i.e., צרף, זקק, בחן). Especially noteworthy are several texts that connect ritual purity to the chemical purity that the process of refining produces. So, the psalmist in Ps 66 may enter the Temple and offer sacrifices because they have been tested and refined like silver: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have refined us like refined silver" (Hossfeld et al. 2005, 146). Malachi 3:3

[25] Robinson 1949, 188–90; Fox 2009, 779. See also Ezek 22:17–22.

describes Yahweh as refining fire who will sit and refine the sons of Levi like one who purifies silver: “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver” (Petersen 1995, 211). According to Zechariah 13:9, those who have been tested and refined like silver and gold are those who will be left alive and who will say: “Yahweh is my God” (see discussion in Petersen 1995, 131–32).

Proverbs locates the metallurgical metaphor of cupellation at the anatomical level. Yahweh “refines” (צרף) the heart of his people and then “assays” or “tests” (בחן) the organ for purity. According to Proverbs 17:3, “a crucible is for silver, and a furnace is for gold, and Yahweh tests hearts.”[26] Commenting on the use of the metaphor in this passage, Michael Fox summarizes: “God ‘tests’ the heart as a furnace assays and purifies metallic ore by heating it until the pure silver or gold melts … and can be collected. Since God is the tester, the analogy connotes more than examination of thoughts … [it] implies a hard trial, which will prove the sufferer’s loyalty and purify him in the process” (2009, 625). According to Psalm 24, only those who have a “pure heart” (לב ברה)—that is, a heart that has been refined and as a result shines—may enter the sanctuary of Yahweh (see Feder 2014, 108). This is because—as Thomas Staubli and Silvia Schroer emphasize—“a human being conducts his or her most secret reflections and plans in the heart” (2017, 45–46). The power of this metaphor is that “while people are deceived … God sees behind the facades and knows what is happening inside them” (2017, 46).




We might see the allusions to silver in these texts as reflections of the role that refined silver played in cultic settings in ancient Israel and the Near East. In other words, the metaphor’s value rests not only in silver’s manufacturing capacities but also in its ritual or cultic associations: silver and gold decorated cult statues and were found in temple contexts.[27] In ancient Egypt, silver was associated with the bones of the gods and with notions of cultic purity.[28] The purity of the metal was

[26] Morrison 2017, 156. See also Fox 2009, 625.

[27] Oppenheim 1949; Lewis 2005; Ornan 2012; Winter 2012; Smoak 2019.

[28] Aufrère 1991, 409–23; Schorsch 2001.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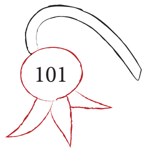
signaled to the viewer by its luminous appearance, its brightness, and its radiance. As Winter observed concerning the aesthetics of precious metals in Mesopotamia: "To the extent that shine is a signal of purity and sacredness, the shining vessel is declared manifestly appropriate for use in the cult; and to the extent that shine is both physically manifest and positively charged, it is a property that engages a positive visual response in the viewer" (1994, 125).

## Sensing Silver's Ritual Power

When we return to the question raised at the beginning of this article, we might ask: would the amulets have had the same power had they been made out of another material, such as gold or bronze? The biblical texts presented here suggest that ancient Judah had a rather robust mythology surrounding the ritual power of silver. While the biblical texts often pair silver and gold, the passages examined above demonstrate that silver held an especially significant place because of its refining capacities. When we move from the metaphorical usages of silver in the biblical literature back to Ketef Hinnom, however, we might draw more specific attention to silver's role in personal religion. By this, I mean to emphasize the precious metal's sensory affects or the ways in which its materiality engaged the senses. This means to ask not only about its visual qualities but also the affect that the metal had upon the skin of the body. In this way, we might use the terminology of "sensory artefact"—to borrow Kiersten Neumann's expression—to explore further the agency and capacity that the amulets had to engage the human senses (2018, 182).[29] Silver's ritual power was generated by the coordination of sight and touch and the precious metal's cultural associations. Whatever we might say about silver's cultic associations, Ketef Hinnom's amulets placed those associations at the heart and fingertips of their owners.




[29] For further discussion of the notion of "sensory artifact" or "sense-scape," see Thomason 2016.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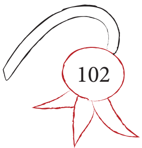
Although amulets were used in a variety of ways, they were often placed upon the chest in order to locate their significance in relation to the heart. As Donald Skemer observes: "People generally positioned protective objects over the heart because it was considered the gateway to the soul and the seat of the memory. Shielding the heart with powerful words and images was believed to offer the bearer comprehensive protection against demonic invasion and evil spirits" (2006, 128). In this way, the act of placing silver upon the body and in close proximity to the heart not only functioned to protect the wearers but it also gave expression to their religious devotion. One is reminded of the instructions in Proverbs to write commandments and teaching upon the tablet of one's heart (Prov 3:1–3; 7:1–2). Similarly, Deuteronomy instructs the placing of Yahweh's commands upon the heart.[30] In this way, the meaning of Ketef Hinnom's silver was not located only in its chemical properties but also in its design as jewelry that may have been placed at the heart of their owners. This ritual act might be viewed to convey the idea that purity of this silver gave outward expression to the purity of the heart of their owners.

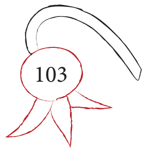



At Ketef Hinnom, however, we do not have a metaphorical application of these ideas, but rather a decidedly material one: Yahweh's words are not *like* silver; they *are* silver. Highly purified silver "manifested" or "presenced" the blessings and protection of Yahweh for those who wore them upon their bodies. The feel of the silver's purity produced a sensation. It is noteworthy in this regard that a handful of biblical texts describe the words of Yahweh as "refined"—that is, tested, and hence, determined to be free from impurities (Ps 12:7; 28:30; Prov 30:5). The words of Ps 12:7 are especially relevant here: "The utterances of Yahweh are pure words; silver refined in a furnace in the ground; purified seven times" (Smoak 2010). So also, Ps 18:30 states: "The word of Yahweh is refined (צרופה); he is a shield to all who take refuge in him" (Kraus 1993, 263). Here in these psalms, we have a linguistic expression of what the materiality of Ketef Hinnom's silver conveyed chemically. The silver sheets onto which the words were scratched are not to be seen as a backdrop for divine words, but instead as a crucial ingredient of

[30] Deut 6:6; 11:18. See Stavrakopoulou 2013, 548.

the ritual power of the words. These were not words to be read, but rather words to be *felt*. The sensation that was produced by the feel of silver's chemical purity put Yahweh's words within their owners' bodies. Precious metal, according to Ps 19:7–9, "rejoices the heart" and "makes the eyes light up".

The ritual power of Ketef Hinnom's silver scripts, however, would not have been confined to the materiality of their sheets of silver foil. The ritual power of these objects would have also been connected to the writing implement that produced the inscriptions. We cannot be certain of the type of implement that was used, but such inscriptions would have required a hard implement, most likely made out of some type of metal. In her article "Materials of Writing and Materiality of Knowledge," Laurie Pearce (2010) draws attention to the role that special implements must have contributed to the value and power of inscriptions made in metal or other precious materials. She notes that Mesopotamian texts refer to styli made of refined silver, gold, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, arguing that, "as no stylus can impress cuneiform signs into stone or metal tablets, the mention of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian styli must signify the inherent value of writing implements and thereby affirm the materiality and prestige of writing" (2010, 176). She emphasizes the association that Mesopotamian texts draw between such writing implements made of precious stones and metals and what such texts call *šiṭir šamê*, or "celestial writing." As Pearce explains, "*šiṭir šamê* was a lucid, highly ordered, patterned means of communication and mediation between the divine and human realms" (2010, 177). In other words, writing with such rare implements of precious metal signified a type of divine writing.

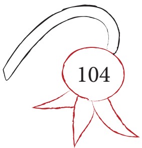



These observations only heighten the points already made here about the ritual application of silver upon the body. Writing with such implements implies a certain permanence, internalization, and durability of words. Inscribing materials with hard writing implements signifies the ability of words to penetrate and become lodged in the human heart.[31] The biblical texts characterize divine writing, or perhaps "supremely skillful writing," as a type of writing that leaves a durable imprint upon

31 Jer 17:1. See Holladay 1986, 486.

hard materials such as stone and metal.[32] Perhaps more relevant here is the fact that we find the majority of references to special writing such as a pen of iron or a point of a diamond or another implement in contexts of prophetic oracles (Jer 17) or divine commands for a prophet to engrave a prophetic vision (Isa 8:1). Such references to rare writing implements also imply a concern over their divine origins as well as their capacity to produce an effect and endure.

Silver has long been recognized as a metal that not only shines but also tarnishes and darkens by contact with the air and the surface of the skin (Vassilious and Gouda 2013). For this reason, many later traditions associate the practice of polishing or restoring the shine of silver as an act that signified repetitive religious devotion (Kessler 2010, 56). Gregory the Great argued in his commentary on the desert Tabernacle that the brightness of silver was preserved by being used (Kessler 2010, 55). This comment taps into traditions that connect the act of touching and polishing silver with votive rituals involving the acts of touching, cleaning, and polishing (Kessler 2010, 60).

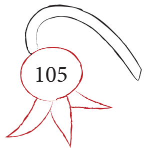



When we turn to the subject of silver jewelry or amulets, the importance of this observation becomes readily apparent. The propensity of silver to lose it shine and tarnish apart from the attention of its owner made it a particularly effective devotionary item. By rubbing the silver, the wearers of the amulets made their surfaces shine (again). This sensory act brought together touch and sight as it produced a shine that manifested the divine presence for the wearer. As Raquel Romberg and Claire Fanger suggest, "shine … becomes embedded with ethical-aesthetic-mystic significance and, in some situations, undergoes an ontological shift that transforms its sensorial materiality (representation) into divine aura (presentation), and directs the power or attention of an actual spiritual presence" (2017, 157). In this way, we might see the act of rubbing the objects and returning their shine to communicate not only notions of continued religious devotion to Yahweh but also an act that directed the god's presence to the wearer. Feeling the smoothness of the metal may have also conjured notions of the purity of the metal and associations between such purity and Yahweh's promises to

[32] Exod 31:18; 32:16. See Thomas 1968, 120–21; Propp 2006, 495.

the wearer. The feel of the metal's smoothness activated the affect that the metal's purity had upon the body of the wearer.

Silver's ability to be polished and receive a new shine might also explain its wide significance in the tomb and in contexts marked by darkness. Indeed, studies have pointed to the important role that the luminosity of shiny metals may have played in relation to the night and darkness, and in relation to the ideas about the moon's protection.[33] Carol Meyers has noted the use of shiny metal objects as devices to reflect light at night by mothers to ward off malevolent forces from their newborn children (2013, 154). In the context of the house, then, silver's shine might have been associated with concerns over protection in the darkness at night. In their secondary context in the tomb, however, the amulets would have lost their shine. Left alone without human polishing or cleaning, silver tarnishes into a dull gray. This transformation of the metal apart from human contact mimicked the darkness of the tomb and the absence of human contact in the space of the repository.



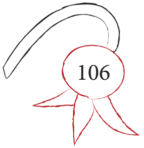

## Conclusion

Establishing the ritual power of silver's materiality also refines our understanding of its semantic content. Returning to the point made at the beginning of this study, we might ask here how the silver materiality of the objects guided or influenced the specific content of the inscriptions. I conclude here by suggesting that silver's ritual power might be seen to be reflected in three aspects of the language of the inscriptions. First, the inscriptions on Amulet 1 invoke covenant language to express the idea that Yahweh will protect the one who has exhibited covenant loyalty or devotion. The language in lines 4–7 on Amulet 1 invoke Yahweh's blessing and protection for "those who love him and those who keep his commandments" (Barkay et al. 2004, 61–62). Given the prominence that silver plays as a metaphor for the covenant and covenant loyalty in the biblical texts, it becomes difficult not to see this aspect of the inscriptions as purposefully playing upon their silver materiality. In other

[33] Ilan 2014, 146; Keel and Uehlinger 1989.

words, the references to those who love and keep his commandments formed the verbal complements to the chemical purity of the amulets and the act of placing them upon the owners' hearts.

Beyond allusions to covenant loyalty, the inscriptions on both amulets also include blessings that invoke the shining face of Yahweh. Most past studies have focused upon the blessing's relationship to the biblical text of Num 6:22–27 and the way that other biblical texts connect the shining face of Yahweh to the Temple. Given the variety of ways in which ancient Near Eastern texts connect silver to the aesthetics of radiance, luminosity, and brightness, we might think first in the context of the amulets that the language of the shining face played upon the metallic purity and visual qualities of silver. That is, the act of inscribing the blessing into the silver gave verbal expression to what the materiality of the precious metal manifested, namely, divine favor and blessing. The chemical purity of the metal produced and made available the shine of Yahweh's face on the body of the amulets' wearers.




Finally, the fact that both amulets contain references to Yahweh's power over רע is significant in the light of the arguments made here about the correlation between evil, wickedness, impurity, and the base alloys that are removed during the process of cupellation. Jeremiah 6:27–30 demonstrates that ancient Judah had its own mythology about silver's refining capacities and that a part of that mythology connected the removal of metal impurities to notions of extracting evil from human behavior. The way that this text connects רע to metal impurities that are separated from silver during the refining process offers an intriguing possibility for how to rethink the meaning of this term on both amulets. Amulet 1 states that Yahweh's blessing is more powerful than *Evil*, and Amulet 2 refers to Yahweh as the one who expels *Evil*.[34] Within the context of highly purified silver, such statements perhaps played upon the process through which the metal was produced. The purity of these silver objects had been achieved by expelling or extracting metal impurities from the precious metal. When we return to the images of Yahweh as a metalworker described above, we might see such statement

[34] For discussion, see Barkay et al. 2004, 65; Lewis 2012.

on the amulets as playing upon and directing Yahweh's metallurgical powers to those who wore silver upon their bodies.

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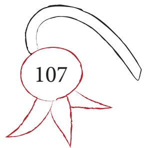


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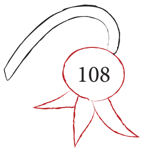


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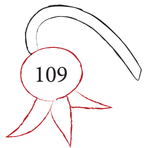



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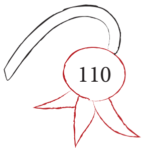


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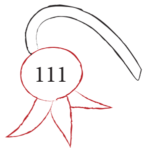

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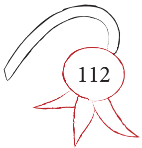


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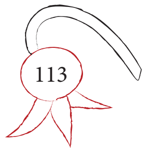


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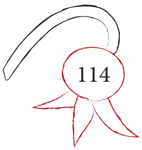


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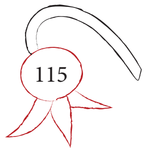

# WHAT DID FEEDING THE DEAD MEAN? TWO CASE STUDIES FROM IRON AGE TOMBS AT BETH-SHEMESH

*Matthew Suriano*

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Key Words: Beth-Shemesh, Israelite, Judahite, mortuary practices, feeding the dead, corpse impurity, Numbers 19, Deuteronomy 26, Hebrew Bible, tomb

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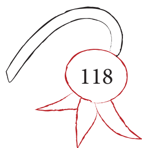
## Abstract

Feeding the dead was an accepted cultural practice in the world of the biblical writers. The biblical writers tacitly acknowledged the practice, though feeding the dead is never explicitly prescribed in the Hebrew Bible. Conversely, mortuary remains from Judah indicate that it was common during the Iron Age II–III, continuing into the Second Temple Period. Yet the evidence is incomplete. There are few inscriptional or iconographic sources that shed light on the association of food and the dead. This paper reframes feeding the dead and reexamines it through the study of ritual. The practice involved placing food inside a space—the tomb—ritualized through binary oppositions such as living/dead and pure/impure. Two Iron Age tombs from Beth-Shemesh will serve as case examples for how we might explore feeding the dead using the binary oppositions that are evoked in biblical concepts of ritual impurity, particularly those concerned with the treatment of the corpse. These archaeological case studies will, in turn, suggest new ways of looking at what feeding the dead meant in the Hebrew Bible.

Nourrir les morts était une pratique culturelle acceptée dans le monde des auteurs bibliques. Les auteurs bibliques admettent tacitement la pratique, même si nourrir les morts n'est jamais explicitement prescrit dans la Bible hébraïque. Inversement, les vestiges mortuaires de Juda indiquent que la pratique était courante durant les âges de fer II-III, et qu'elle a continué dans la période du Second Temple. Cependant, les attestations sont incomplètes. On trouve des sources épigraphiques et iconographiques qui éclairent l'association entre la nourriture et les morts. Cette contribution replace le fait de nourrir les morts dans un nouveau cadre et réexamine le phénomène à travers l'étude des rituels. La pratique consistait à placer de la nourriture à l'intérieur d'un espace—la tombe—qui était ritualisé à travers des oppositions binaires telles que vivant/mort et pur/impur. Deux tombes de l'âge de fer à Beth Shemesh serviront d'exemples pour montrer comment nous pouvons explorer le fait de nourrir les morts en utilisant les oppositions binaires évoquées dans les concepts bibliques d'impureté rituelle, en particulier ceux impliqués dans le traitement du cadavre. Ces études de cas archéologiques suggèrent elles aussi de nouvelles façons de comprendre ce que nourrir les morts signifiait dans la Bible hébraïque.

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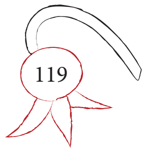


## Introduction

One of the more enigmatic practices mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is feeding the dead.[1] Food for the dead is mentioned in only a few passages, but it is comparable with the archeologically attested practice of placing vessels for food inside Iron Age tombs in Judah.[2] Though the

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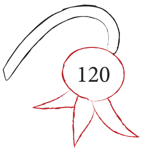
[1] This research for this article was originally presented at the ASOR in November 2020. I would like to extend my thanks to Kristine Garroway and Christine Palmer for their invitation and for this opportunity to expand upon my work on the dead. The paper benefited greatly from the session's panel discussion and from Kristine Garroway's comments on this manuscript. I would like to thank Carol Meyers and Janling Fu for their helpful advice. The usual caveat applies: I am responsible for any errors within.

[2] The mortuary remains from the southern Levant indicate that the practice was common throughout the Kingdom of Judah during the Iron Age II–III period

two can be compared constructively, questions remain regarding the cultural meaning of both. What did it signify? The biblical concept of corpse impurity can shed light on the matter. Two case studies from Iron Age tombs excavated at Beth-Shemesh will show how biblical discussions of impurity can be compared with archeologically attested practices that formed Judahite mortuary culture. The case studies will lead to the suggestion that the symbolic value of food brought to the tomb lies in feasting.

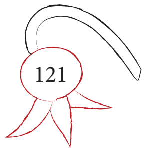
The association of food with the dead was common throughout the Near East, though the ritual practice varied, and differed across regions and through time. The practice of giving food to the dead occurred in two general forms, either at the burial site or away from it.[3] This general distinction is important, as it implies different aspects of ritual practice. At the burial site, the practice was probably an irregular occurrence preformed either during the funerary ritual or at some point




(tenth–sixth centuries BCE). Yet the evidence is incomplete (Tappy 1995, 1–2; Pitard 2002, 147–51) as there are very few inscriptional or iconographic sources that might shed light on the practice. The evidence, nonetheless, indicates that the dead were attended to inside the tomb in ancient Judah; see most recently, Sonia 2020, 25–64; and Suriano 2018a, 154–72; forthcoming.

[3] The term "practice" throughout this article is used to describe both the physical act of bringing vessels to a tomb, revealed in the material remains of Judahite mortuary culture, as well as the ritualization of mortuary culture. The common occurrence of material remains in Judahite tombs, which constitutes Judah's mortuary culture, reveals the pervasiveness of ritualization. Yet ritualization, as revealed through ritual practice, is more than simply a set of acts that are differentiated from quotidian activities. This is certainly important, the graveside consumption of food (whether real or symbolic) was exceptional and obviously different from a common meal. But ritual practice, drawing from Bell, refers to activities that are contextual, strategic, and "are able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world" (1992, 81). The dynamics of ritual practice (or ritualization), as defined here, can inform case studies such as these where it becomes possible to see how various activities reconfigure or even resist certain norms, whether it is the unusual presence of an inscribed vessel inside a tomb or the unique act of covering food placed on a burial bench. To quote Bell: "Since practice is situational and strategic, people engage in ritualization as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances" (1992, 83).

post-burial. Conversely, ritual repasts for the dead were often observed with some regularity. An example is the *kispu* ritual, known from Akkadian sources, which was not directly linked to burial and was often practiced according to dates on the lunar calendar (Bottero 2004, 119). Similarly, at Sam'al, where there is a fairly robust inscriptional record of feeding the dead (Herrmann and Schloen 2014), the practice was unassociated with burial and likely followed a regular schedule (Lemaire and Sass 2013, 122–23). Yet, the association of food and death was complex. Jeremiah's (16:7) reference to the "cup of consolation" most likely refers to mourning practices that occurred alongside funerary rituals. The consumption of food and drink in this example would be irregular, occurring at the time of death, but not necessarily at the tomb. In most of the biblical texts that mention food given to the dead, the subject is made in reference to corpse impurity.[4] This suggests that the texts allude to cultural practices that occurred in close proximity to the dead. As such, they would be similar to, if not identical with, the symbolic act of feeding the dead by placing food vessels inside a Judahite tomb.



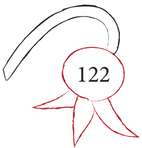

Food and vessels made impure due to death appear in biblical texts that define ritual parameters: Num 19:14–15, Deut 26:14, and Hag 2:12–14. Impure food also appears as an analogy for divine separation in Hos 9:4. In these texts, impurity is a ritual category and as such can serve as a useful concept in the study of Judahite mortuary culture. The purity system evident in the biblical literature served to separate certain activities from the sacrificial cult of Yahweh.[5] The biblical discourse concerning food made impure due to contact with death suggests that such activities included feeding the dead (Suriano 2018a, 141–42). This separation is evident also in Judahite mortuary culture, seen in both

[4] Aside from the passages discussed in this article, there are a few other ambiguous references found in poetic texts such as Ps 16:3–4 and Job 21:5. See Suriano 2018a, 170–72, 223–32.

[5] According to Jonathan Klawans, "ritual purity is the prerequisite of those who come to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices, of those who regularly officiate at sacrifices (priests), and of any animals that are to be offered as sacrifices." For Klawans, the separation reveals and idea of divine imitation, which removes anything unassociated with the God of Israel such as death and sex (2006, 56).

the location of burial sites as well as in the grave goods that burial sites contained. But what did this separation signify, and how does it inform the way we analyze feeding the dead?

The biblical concepts of purity and impurity are understood as boundary markers,[6] but the question is: what is being bounded? Two initial observations can be made. The conceptual category at work here is specifically "ritual purity/impurity," thus the boundaries were enacted to control cultural practices.[7] Furthermore, the nature of impurity, particularly corpse impurity, reified a separation of the living from the dead (Milgrom 1993, 107–11). Jacob Milgrom once said that death was the "common denominator" of impurity (1991, 1001). The distinctions here do not necessarily imply a separation of religious spheres, and they certainly do not infer the existence of ancestor worship in the world of the biblical writers. Although food for the dead is interpreted by some as offerings for deified ancestors, the general theory of ancestor worship is fraught and fails to take into consideration important factors. The practice of providing food for the dead is circumscribed by the biblical writers, but never banned. Furthermore, biblical literature and epigraphic sources indicate that there was no strict separation of Yahweh from the realm of the dead.[8]




In one sense, the pervasiveness ascribed to corpse impurity by biblical writers in passages like Num 19:11–22 makes it an optimal concept

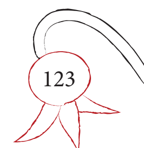
[6] Jacob Milgrom had argued that due to the antithetical nature of holiness and impurity, and because purity could only exist in the absence of impurity, the dichotomous states (sacred versus profane and pure versus impure) were marked by unfixed boundaries separated by a "broken line" (1991, 732). This explanation addresses the metaphorical nature of each state in relation to each other with regard to the process of maintaining holiness and purity within the community. But because the realm of death is unrelated and thus separate from the biblical writers' concept of holiness, the boundaries surrounding the dead are more rigid. These boundaries are reified through separation and removal (Num 19:11–22), as well as the exceptions made in Lev 21:1–6 (H). By extension, the pragmatic nature of corpse impurity creates clear boundaries that can be identified in Judahite material culture.

[7] Klawans 2006, 52–55; Feder 2013, 166–67.

[8] Mandell and Smoak 2016; Sonia 2020.

for the comparison of literary references and archeological remains. This type of impurity affected everything surrounding it: the tomb, its contents, and by extension food brought for the dead.[9] Yet the exact nature of this impurity not only eludes interpreters, it also effectively hides certain aspects of thought regarding postmortem existence. It is reasonable to infer that the food was intended as sustenance for the dead, and thus related to an idea of postmortem existence localized within the tomb. But what more can we say about this idea? Why were the biblical writers intent on separating food for the dead from food dedicated to Yahweh? What does this imply regarding postmortem ideologies?

The custom of placing food inside the tomb was a form of ritual action, and the concept of corpse impurity as defined in the Hebrew Bible offers a structural baseline for examining the framework for such action. While we might not know much about this particular ritual action, other than its basic components, we can infer meaning based on the restrictions biblical writers placed on such actions. The impurity of the dead served as a boundary marker, separating graveside practices from the sacrificial cult of Yahweh. But purity regulations also acknowledge the reality of graveside practices. People needed to bury their dead, they sought to care for their dead inside the tomb, and this reality necessitated the construction of idealized boundaries in biblical literature. Artifacts found inside two eighth-century BCE tombs from Beth-Shemesh will provide case studies for understanding how impurity can contribute to the study of feeding the dead. In both examples, corpse impurity provides an ideological framework for exploring cultural action identifiable among different types of grave goods: an inscribed bowl and covered vessels of food. In these examples, ideologies of ritual purity expressed in rituals of removal (Num 19:14–22) and vows denying impurity (Deut 26:14) are resisted or conformed to. The results of this analysis will be briefly discussed in light of other examples of feeding the dead found elsewhere in the Iron Age Levant, specifically Zincirli/Sam'al, providing a further contrast for the study of corpse impurity in biblical literature. The case studies and cross-cultural

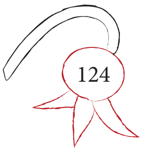



[9] Wright 1987, 115–28; Feder 2013, 161.

comparison will lead to the suggestion that feeding the dead in ancient Judah was a ritual practice formed around a concept of feasting in the afterlife.

## Corpse Impurity

The regulation of purity found in the Hebrew Bible can constructively contribute to the study of mortuary culture, though certain caveats apply. The first involves the use of dichotomies in the study of ritual (see Suriano 2018a, 25–26). Scholars of ritual, such as Victor Turner (1997) and Catherine Bell (1992), often drew from binary oppositions that were apparent within ritual practices. In several ways, the concept of corpse impurity is inherently dichotomous, as it involves not only pure-versus-impure, but also the fundamental distinction of life and death. The use of dialectical relationships such as these, however, should be made with caution. Systems of opposition are not always reductive and can often involve multiple intersecting concepts that defy simple explanation.[10] Yet, in sources that describe ritual behavior, obvious and apparent dichotomies can be used to examine the particularized practices involved in the ritual. In Numbers 19, the detailed description of the defiling dead involves clear distinctions between inside and outside as well as between enclosed and open. These oppositions are important for understanding how concepts of impurity controlled and gave structure to ritual practice at burial sites.

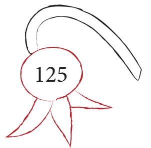



The second caveat involves the use of biblical purity regulations for the analysis of Iron Age mortuary culture. This use should be properly qualified given the questions regarding the date of biblical literature. In the Hebrew Bible, purity laws are primarily located in priestly literature (P), which many biblical scholars date to the postexilic period. To be sure, the issue of dating P is complicated and controversial. Despite this perceived lateness, it is possible that concepts of ritual purity found in (potentially) postexilic biblical literature reflect preexilic customs that date to the time of the Kingdom of Judah (Suriano 2018a, 45). As such,

[10] Smith 1987; Asad 1997, 43–45.

the mortuary practices observed in Iron Age Judah should be seen as part of a cultural continuum that can be observed in later literary formulations found in the Pentateuch.

A good example of how this works is the occurrence of extramural burial practices, which are found throughout the Kingdom of Judah during the Iron II–III. The use of burial grounds outside the settlement suggests a concept of corpse impurity. This is not to say, however, that we should look for the origins of extramural burials in corpse impurity. The burial practice can be observed in the southern Levant in earlier periods, for example the Middle and Late Bronze Ages,[11] and there are other possible reasons for its development. The creation of bounded cemeteries was probably initially related to the control of resources through lineal descent—in other words, inheritance.[12] Other possible factors that would explain the creation of extramural cemeteries include the organization of social space, where the dead would be given a place of existence separate from the living. The reorganization of social space would explain the replication of domestic life inside the tomb, something attested in Iron Age Judah, where the design of the bench tomb is typically understood to be an emulation of the four-room house.[13] Thus, there are several features of extramural burials that would explain their occurrence. But these types of cemeteries occur almost without exception throughout the kingdom, from the tenth century through the Babylonian conquest, which strongly suggests that corpse impurity played a role. The nature of this impurity is such that a single intramural interment would have defiled the area surrounding it within the settlement.[14] This supports the interpretation of corpse impurity as a prevailing factor in Judahite mortuary culture by the mid-Iron Age, re-




[11] Gonen 1992; Hallote 1995, 103–105.

[12] See Saxe 1971; Morris 1991.

[13] Faust and Bunimovitz 2008; Osborne 2011, 47–53; Suriano 2018a, 93–97.

[14] For example, the existing evidence from Judah indicates that the earlier custom of burying infants inside homes (jar burials) does not continue in the region during the Iron II–III (Kristine Garroway, personal communication). Children are attested in communal burials—that is, Judahite bench tombs—though the recorded instances are low. See Garroway 2018, 257–63.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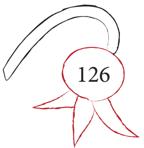
gardless of whether it was a symptom of extramural burial customs or the cause.

The contaminating aspect of corpse impurity (see Wright 1987, 115–28), as both an abstract concept and a ritual category,[15] can also explain the contents of a typical Judahite bench tomb. In Num 19:14–15, we are told that everything inside a tent where death occurs becomes impure. This applies to people as well as things. The impurity is aerial in the sense that everything within the enclosed space of the tomb is affected.[16] The ritual dynamics here involve multiple, intersecting dichotomies: living–dead, open–closed, and inside–outside. The open–closed dichotomy is applied both spatially as well as to objects. Within the enclosed space of the tent, everything inside is made impure, likewise all vessels that are not closed are also impure. The intersecting dichotomies of open–closed and inside–outside are invoked again in the next verse, Num 19:16, where the rules of corpse impurity are specified for open space (Suriano 2018a, 149–50). Unlike the enclosed space of the tent, in the open field corpse impurity is not aerial but instead tactile (Levine 1993, 467). It is transmitted by touch. If a person comes in contact with the dead, regardless of manner of death and regardless of corporeal state (even a bone), then that person becomes impure. Numbers 19:16 provides a short list of impure objects that are defiling by touch, including corpses and bones and ending with the tomb itself. If a person touches a tomb, they become impure. The mention of the tomb in this verse conceptually parallels the tent mentioned in verse 14. This parallel creates a contrast between the enclosed space of the living *inside* the settlement (the tent), a space from which the impurity of death must be removed, and the enclosed space of the dead *outside* the settlement (the tomb), the place where the impurity of death was to be removed. The tomb exists as a place that contains the impurity of death, and as such it remains perpetually impure (Levine 1993, 467–68). As an enclosed place, the tomb only transmits impurity outside to anyone who touches it.

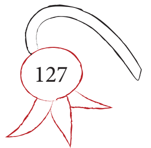



Several inferences can be made when the spatial definition of corpse impurity found in Numbers 19:14–16 is compared with what we know

[15] Klawans 2006, 52–55; Feder 2013, 166–67.

[16] Levine 1993, 467; Feder 2013, 161–62.

about Judahite tombs. These burial sites were almost always subterranean.[17] Regardless of whether the burial unit was formed from a natural cave, as was typical of loculus tombs, or was rock-hewn and artificial as in the case of bench tombs, the typical Judahite tomb was below ground and unobtrusive.[18] The only way of coming in contact with the tomb was through its entrance. As enclosed space, the burial cave contained the impurity of death, concealing it below ground, affecting only those who approached the entrance and entered the tomb.[19] Although the archeological and literary evidence for burial markers is scattered (Stavrakopoulou 2010, 8–18), two funerary inscriptions from the Silwan necropolis in Jerusalem warn against "opening" their respective tombs.[20]



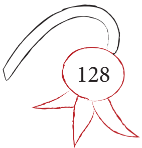

[17] There are a few descriptions in the Hebrew Bible of tombs that were probably above ground, most notably Rachel's tomb (Gen 35:19) and Shebna's tomb (Isa 22:16). The only known archeological examples are four monolithic tombs found in the Silwan necropolis east of the City of David. See Ussishkin 1993.

[18] The term "rock-cut bench tomb" refers to a burial unit that was a cave (artificial or natural) containing burial benches and often an area for the secondary disposal of bones (called a "repository"). This type of burial was found throughout Judah during the Iron Age. Another form of burial found in Iron Age Judah was the so-called "loculus tomb," which was the use of a natural cave with carved niches instead of full-benches. Both burial types were designed to facilitate multiple burials (Suriano 2018a, 56–91). See Bloch-Smith 1992a; Yezerski 2013.

[19] There are a few references in biblical literature to above-ground memorials to the dead, which are typically designated as a "stele" or "monument/memorial" (*maṣṣebet*, *maṣṣēbâ* or *yād*; Gen 35:20; 2 Sam 18:18; Isa 56:5). See Schmitt 2009; Suriano 2018b. But aside from Rachel's tomb, the few examples are not directly tied to a burial site, nor is it clear from Gen 35:20 whether the stele that Jacob erected for his wife marked the entrance to her grave. Archeological evidence for burial markers in Judah are scarce, though they are found in Phoenicia. See Cross 2002; Sader 2005. The relationship between visible markers, burial sites, and purity boundaries in ancient Judah has yet to be fully explored.

[20] The Royal Steward Inscription [*Silw* 1] and *Silw* 4. See Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, 403–6; Ussishkin 1993, 243–45. The sealed tomb, as a large hollow space, nicely parallels sealed food vessels (small hollow objects). I am grateful to Kristine Garroway for the observation and for reminding me of the importance of the tomb warnings posted on the Silwan sepulchers.

The recognition of the tomb as a place that contained impurity can guide us in the analysis of the typical contents found inside Judahite burial sites. The large number of ceramic vessels found inside Judahite tombs allows for several inferences regarding food for the dead. According to the definition in Num 19:15, corpse impurity affected open vessels that shared space with a dead person (Levine 1993, 467). Implicitly, the removal of an open vessel from inside a tomb would create a problem of impurity because the defiled object would affect anything it came in contact with outside of the burial site (see Wright 1987, 115–28). This concern might explain the disposal of ceramic vessels inside tomb repositories. When it became necessary to clear a burial space inside a tomb in order to accommodate new interments, the older items would be transferred to another part of the tomb. Any pottery that accompanied the dead person during the primary interment would be secondarily buried along with the person's disarticulated remains inside a pit, repository, or designated area on the chamber floor (Suriano 2018a, 48–49). This indicates that the tendency was not to salvage or reuse ceramic vessels once they had entered the tomb. As grave goods, the vessels would be discarded inside the tomb after they served their purposes. This attitude toward pottery reflects a status that is permanent and irrevocable.[21]




## Two Beth Shemesh Case Studies

The general observations regarding corpse impurity and mortuary culture allow us to probe further into particular artifacts found among tomb assemblages. The two case examples examined here come from Iron Age bench tombs excavated at Beth-Shemesh by Duncan MacKenzie

[21] This is the most reasonable explanation. Other possibilities are less likely. For instance, the vessels could have been broken as part of a ritual. But this type of ritual action would have been impractical given the large number of vessels discovered inside repositories. The pottery assemblages include both intact and broken vessels, with no discernible order. This suggests that the vessels were broken randomly and by accident through the course of disposal.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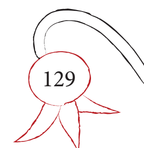
in the early twentieth century: Tombs 2 and 8. Both tombs date to the eighth century BCE.

Inside Beth-Shemesh Tomb 2, the excavators found an unambiguous example of food provided for the dead. Within this rock-cut bench tomb, set on a bench next to burial remains, archeologists discovered two vessels. The first vessel contained lamb (mutton) and the second some form of drink.[22] The discovery of food remains in an Iron Age tomb setting is rare (Johnston 2002, 62–63), despite the abundance of food wares. This indicates that feeding the dead in Iron Age Judah was a largely symbolic act. Cooking pots, plates, jugs, and so forth symbolized food, though food itself was otherwise absent. But in this particular case, the food remains were not the only unusual aspect. The plate of lamb meat was covered with a smaller plate, set upside down and atop the first, effectively covering its contents. The jug set next to this plate, which contained some form of liquid, was fastened shut with a stopper (Mackenzie 1912–1913, Plate 37, Nos. 11–13).[23]



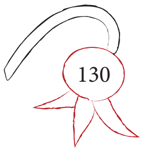

Here, we have the occurrence of two closed vessels. The jug's stopper and the use of the plate as a lid may suggest a concern for preserving food left inside the burial chamber, though it is unclear what the purpose of preservation might have been. One possible explanation for preserving the food, or at least enclosing it, would be to protect it from corpse impurity. In light of Num 19:15, it is possible that the food was symbolically given to the dead inside Tomb 2, but its placement inside closed vessels was done so in order to preserve the food for reuse. If the food was left inside the tomb for the dead, there would be no reason to preserve it. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the attempt to preserve the food was intended so that it could be extracted later either to be eaten by the living or repurposed as ritual offerings in other contexts. The placement of a ceramic vessel covering the food would have kept it from animals inside the tomb, but it would have also protected the

[22] Mackenzie 1912–1913, 67; Bloch-Smith 1992a, 107.

[23] The excavator suggested that the jug contained "milk or olive oil" (Mackenzie 1912–1913, 67). Milk is mentioned in Job 21:24 as a food consumed by the dead in Job's reflection on the postmortem existence (Job 21:23–26). See Suriano 2018a, 170–72.

contents from impurity according to Num 19:5. Therefore, the covered vessels inside Tomb 2 can be interpreted as the vestiges of actions meant to circumvent impurity. This circumvention would have allowed people to repurpose the food for consumption, or to be offered in some other ritual context, possibly through feasting by offering it to various members of the community (Levites along with the widow, orphan, resident alien [see Deut 26:12–14]), or to be used as sacrifices to Yahweh.

To be sure, the act of bringing food to a tomb only to remove it later (to reuse the food) was probably exceptional. In this particular example, the food went unused and was never repurposed, remaining inside Tomb 2 at Beth-Shemesh until it was rediscovered in the early twentieth century. R. A. S. Macalister briefly described another example of a plate of lamb meat covered by a second plate, which was found in an Iron Age tomb at Gezer:



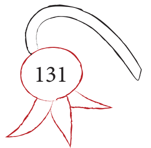

> An earthenware bowl contained some decayed matter in which a few mutton-bones were mingled. A bronze knife lay in the midst, for cutting the meat; and a second bowl was inverted over the deposit, as though to keep it warm until he for whom it was destined should have need of it. (Macalister 1925, 260)

Macalister did not publish his discovery, which is unfortunate because the tomb contents would provide another rare instance of food existing within a tomb setting.[24] The most reasonable explanation for the paucity of food remnants is that food was considered wealth, particularly meat (Suriano forthcoming). But this would also explain a motivation for avoiding ritual impurity by bringing food in covered vessels. The

[24] Bloch-Smith (1992a, 106) notes the similarity here to the vessels discovered at Beth-Shemesh inside Tomb 2. These are rare examples, yet we should not expect covered vessels with food left inside a tomb if the action was intended to allow someone to remove it, presumably a short time later. Therefore, the trace of such action seen in the rare example from Beth-Shemesh Tomb 2, and possibly Gezer, is reflected primarily in texts such as Num 19:15 and Deut 26:14 that recall the practice.

suggestion is speculative, yet it would explain why the traces of victuals are rare inside Judahite tombs,[25] let alone covered vessels.

The act of removing food given to the dead and repurposing it is mentioned specifically in Deut 26:14. This verse is part of the oath required when bringing the tithe, where one must declare: "I have not eaten of it while in mourning, I have not removed any of it while I was impure, and I have not given any of it to the dead." This verse covers a range of activities that would incur the impurity of death: mourning, contact with the corpse, and feeding the dead.[26] These three aspects are encountered also in Hos 9:4, which uses the image of food made impure by death as a metaphor for the denial of sacrifices offered to Yahweh (Suriano 2014, 397–401). In these verses, feeding the dead is contrasted with offerings that are required by divine command. Moreover, the divinely commanded offerings are intended for living members of the community (in Deut 26:14) as well as for the God of Israel (Hos 9:4). Yet the verses do not ban feeding the dead, nor is it rejected outright (Suriano 2014, 399–400).[27] In both biblical passages, the impurity of death is contrastive. Impurity is not a statement of value but a boundary



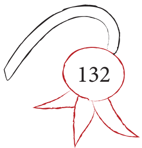

[25] The precise issue here is one of taphonomy, and the paucity of food in Iron Age tombs needs to be problematized further in archeological work. The evaporation of liquid over time, the decay of organic material, and scavengers inside the tomb (rodents and insects in particular) would provide some explanation for this paucity—but not all, as the infrequency of bones provides a good indication that meat was not regularly included among grave goods. Likewise, the lack of stoppers on jars and jugs probably indicates that the vessels were empty when deposited.

[26] According to Baruch Levine (1993, 477–78), the vow was meant to disqualify anyone who participated in a "cult of the dead." But this is misleading. The vow indicates a status, ritual impurity, that disqualifies a person temporarily. The status can also affect things touched by the defiled person, such as food, due to the nature of corpse impurity. The short list covers several aspects of interacting with the dead that might require someone to take on corpse impurity. It is unreasonable to see this list of cultural practices as a denunciation of religious practices. How were people supposed to bury their deceased or even mourn them, let alone care for the dead inside the tomb?

[27] There is a tendency to read Deut 26:14 as a prohibition against feeding the dead; in addition to Levine 1993 (see above), refer also to Blenkinsopp 1995; Van der Toorn 1996, 357–58.

marker that creates a distinction between pure and impure. The concept of ritual purity separates and distinguishes certain actions, most notably actions related to the sacrificial cult of Yahweh.

The oath in Deut 26:14 is comparable also with another artifact from the Beth-Shemesh cemetery, an inscribed bowl discovered in Beth-Shemesh Tomb 8 (see Figures 1 and 2). Inside this tomb the excavator discovered a bowl with a short inscription engraved inside (Figure 2), reading: "Your brother" (MacKenzie (1912–1913, 87). Though the script is Phoenician,[28] everything else about the bowl is Judahite (its type and findspot). Moreover, the inscribed bowl has parallels in other offertory bowls found elsewhere in Judah such as at Arad.[29] The nature of this particular offering vessel is intriguing given its context inside the tomb. Gabriel Barkay (1991, 240–41) has compared the inscription with the term "your poor brother" (*āḥikā hāʾebyôn*) found in Pentateuchal texts that involve giving to those in need (Deut 15:7–8, 11). There are several biblical examples where special offerings such as tithes or the first-fruits were designated for those in need, such as Lev 25:6 and Deut 14:28–29. Among these examples is Deut 26:12–14. According to Barkay, the bowl originally was an offering plate for the poor that was repurposed as a grave good (1991, 241). If this interpretation is correct,[30] it would reflect the inverse of the sort of practice banned in Deut 26:14 (Suriano 2018a, 159–61).




The interpretation of the Beth-Shemesh bowl highlights questions regarding impurity and grave goods. If the Beth-Shemesh bowl was an offering bowl for the poor repurposed for the dead, it would represent the blurring of lines that the biblical writer in Deuteronomy 26 was concerned about. In Num 19:11–22 these lines are carefully delineated through the regulation and ritual removal of corpse impurity. But the boundaries and controls devised by the biblical writers reveal the real-

[28] Delavault and Lemaire 1979, 23–24; Barkay 1991, 240–41; Dixon 2013, 92–93.

[29] Barkay 1991, 240–41; Smoak 2019, 74 n. 15.

[30] The term of kinship here could indicate that the bowl was used for venerating or mourning dead family. Another possible interpretation, though less likely, is that the inscription is a hitherto unattested proper name. See Delavault and Lemaire 1979, 23–24.

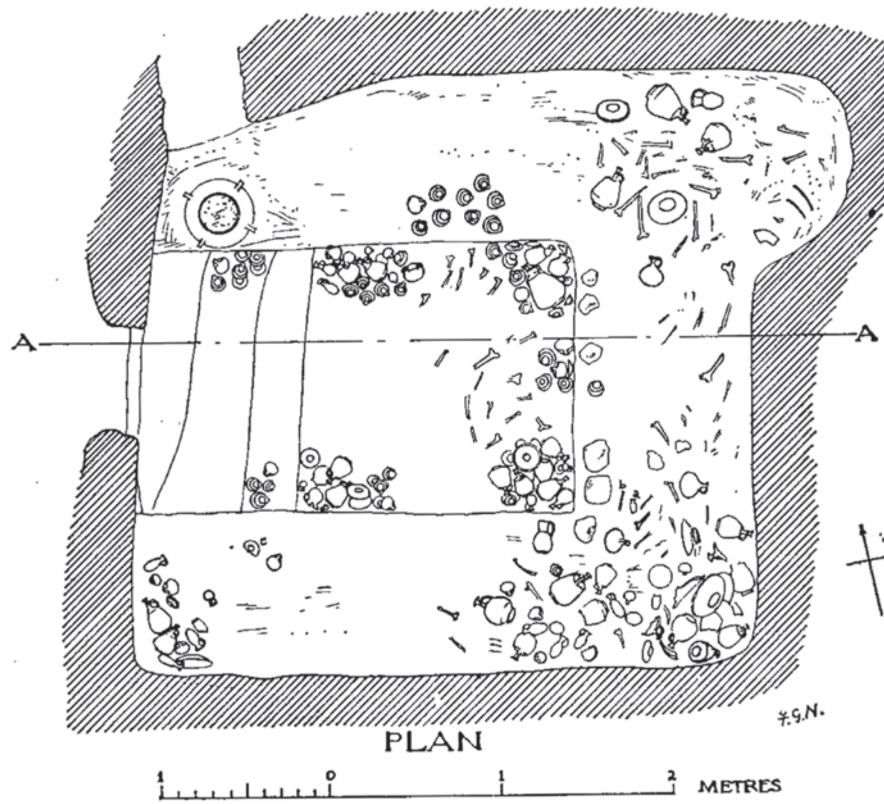
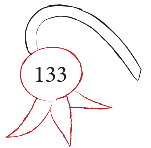



Figure 1: Beth-Shemesh Tomb 8 (MacKenzie 1912–1913)



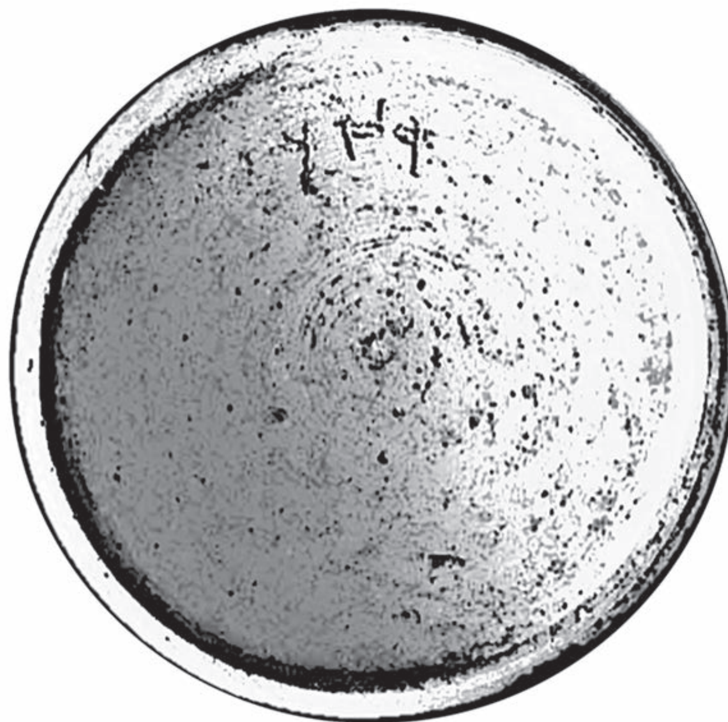
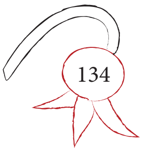



Figure 2: Beth Shemesh Bowl (image courtesy of the author).

ity of cultural practices associated with death. The care and protection of the dead were important components in ancient Judahite culture (see Sonia 2020, 1–25). The biblical writers tacitly acknowledged and even allowed provisions for the dead (Suriano 2018a, 133–35, 154–58). The basic questions raised by this observation can be summarized: why regulate the practice, and what does it mean? The "why" is relatively straightforward. The biblical writers sought to separate the sacrificial cult of Yahweh from the care and feeding of the dead. But what did this separation mean? Some scholars have suggested that food offered to the dead represented an illicit religious practice that involved deified ancestors.[31] The concept of ancestor worship, however, is fraught and lacks solid evidence (Suriano 2018a, 32–34). Again, feeding the dead is never abolished, forbidden, or even denounced in biblical literature.[32]



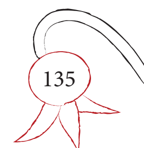

Based on archeology, the cultural practice seems to have been a common component in Judahite society. The number of vessels found inside Judahite tombs suggests that the act of bringing food to the tomb served some commensal function, possibly as part of some graveside meal that involved the living and the dead.[33] Yet even a feast held outside the tomb would still contract corpse impurity, especially when living participants brought food inside the tomb to feed the dead. For this reason, the function of impurity should be examined in order to identify possible meanings assigned to the practice of placing food within a ritually impure environment.

[31] Bloch-Smith 1992a, 122–26; Bloch-Smith 1992b, 220–21; Van der Toorn 1996, 208–16. See Levine 1993.

[32] Note the following quote from Bloch-Smith: "Nowhere in the Bible are Israelites and Judahites forbidden to feed the dead. However, there was an important exception. The dead, though divine, were not to be offered tithed food [Deut. 26:14]" (1992, 126).

[33] Janling Fu and Peter Altmann (2014, 15–16) defined "feast" as the consumption of food in an event that is ritualized and communal. Both aspects would be component features of a graveside funerary meal, and both set this practice apart from quotidian activities. Following Bell (1992, 1997), the ritualizing aspect of a feast sets it apart from a quotidian meal; likewise, the difference between communal consumption and meals shared by small numbers or consumed individually.

The concept of purity as a system of regulating what can and cannot be offered to the deity provides a mechanism for comparative studies. Food offerings brought to Yahweh were meant to feed the deity.[34] Thus, what we see in passages like Deut 26:14, Hos 9:4, and Nah 2:12–13 is a distinction of food, separating food for the dead from what is fed to the God of Israel. The offering bowl from Beth-Shemesh Tomb 8 as well as the covered food in Beth-Shemesh Tomb 2 may represent actions that overlapped with cultural practices involving food for the sacrificial cult of Yahweh. Again, the biblical writers specifically sought to control, regulate, and even deny such actions as seen in Num 19:11–22 and Deut 26:12–14. Herein lies a possible clue to the meaning of food brought to the tomb: feasting in the afterlife. Feasting here is defined as special act of consumption that serves social and religious purposes.[35] The archeological data is limited, yet comparative data from the northern Levant can shed some light on practices of offering food for gods and the dead.




## Comparative Evidence: Zincirli/Sam'al

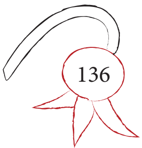
The separation of feeding the dead from sacrifices offered to the deity can be contrasted briefly with the material from Zincirli/Sam'al, an Iron Age culture where we see a conflation of the two.[36] The Aramaic inscriptions from Sam'al are comparable with biblical texts such as Num

[34] Milgrom (1991, 54–59) suggests that the Priestly writers suppressed the idea that food sacrifices were intended for the "care and feeding" of Yahweh at the Tabernacle. The Priestly writers avoided any anthropomorphized imagery associated with the God of Israel, though sacrifices are occasionally referenced as divine food (see Lev 22:25 and other examples cited in Milgrom [1991, 59]). The idea itself—sacrifices as food for the gods—was common in the Near East (Milgrom 1991, 59, citing Oppenheim 1964, 183–98).

[35] The term "feasting" used in this article can be compared with the definition offered by Jonathan Greer (forthcoming), citing Michael Dietler and Catherine Bell: "specialized eating events [that] are set apart … from daily meals and from other feasts or festivals by sets of repeated actions, or rituals, associated with the particular eating event."

[36] Struble and Herrmann 2009; Niehr 2010, 279–84; 2014.

19:11–22 in that both use similar terms to refer to the dead: "soul" or "self" (*nepeš* in Hebrew and *nabš* in Aramaic).[37] They differ, however, in that the practice of feeding the dead at Sam'al was a regular occurrence that was not necessarily conducted at the burial site. In this sense, it contrasts with Judahite mortuary culture, where feeding the dead was most likely an irregular practice associated with death and burial. At Sam'al, the regularity of the practice, and the broader context for its occurrence, most likely related to the fact that feeding the dead was often associated with feeding the gods. Aramaic inscriptions from Sam'al such as the Katumuwa Stele (*COS* 4.23),[38] and probably the Ördekburnu Stele (*COS* 4.24),[39] offer lists of deities who are to be provided with food and drink alongside the dead person dedicated in the stele.[40] The Hadad Statue[41] found at Sam'al, contains clear instructions that the provision of sacrifices to the storm god (Hadad) should also include food, drink, and a special invocation for the soul of Panamuwa I, the king who had dedicated the statue.[42] This is clearly the sort of mixing of sacrifices that the biblical writers were opposed to. But this opposition should not be taken as evidence for the deification of the dead (*contra* Levine 1993, 478–79). Panamuwa I is not portrayed as a deity, nor does his inscription call for him to be worshipped. Instead, the ideal claimed by the dead king is a beneficent afterlife feasting with the gods (Sanders 2012, 19–20). This is the point of the Aramaic inscriptions from Sam'al, a point vividly depicted in iconography often associated with the inscriptions (see Figure 3). The dead continue to survive through rituals of remembrance and feasting.[43]




37 Suriano 2014; Suriano 2018a, 135–54.

38 For translations and studies of this inscription, see Pardee 2009; 2014; Sanders 2012, 35–55; Suriano 2014, 385–405; Hogue 2019; Younger 2020, 7–16.

39 The inscription is worn and difficult to read. In addition to Lemaire and Sass 2013, see Younger 2020, 2–7.

40 Struble and Herrmann 2009; Bonatz 2014; Herrmann 2014; Pardee 2014; Younger 2020.

41 KAI 214/*COS* 2.36; Tropper 1993, 154–58.

42 Niehr 2014, 58–59; Younger 2016, 413–15.

43 Sanders 2013. See Greenfield 1973.

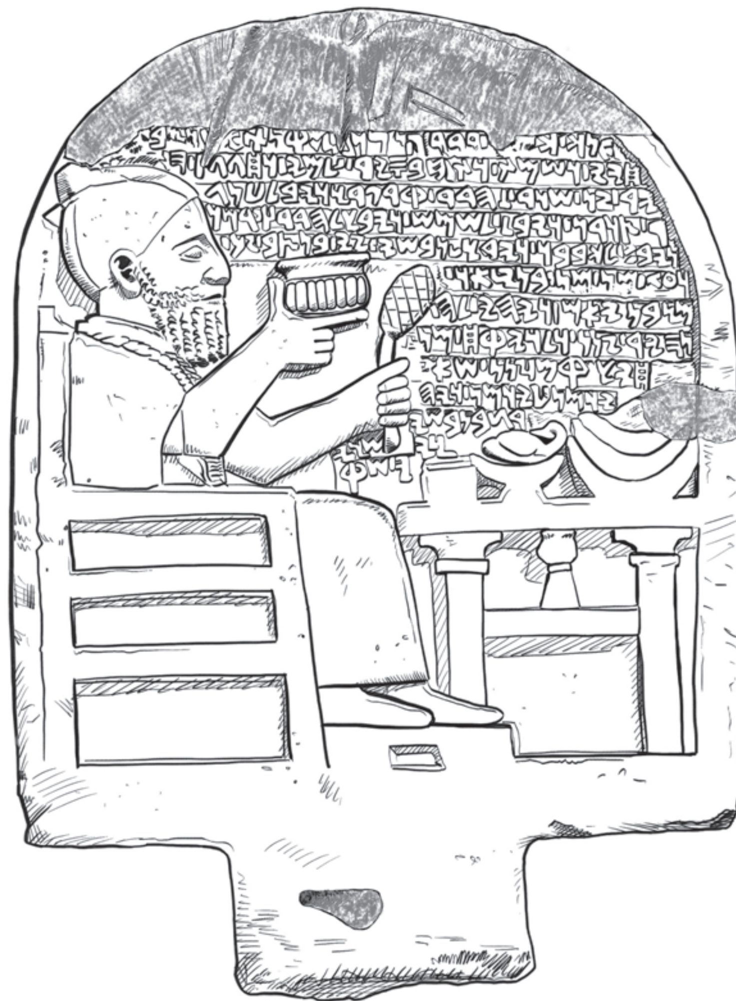
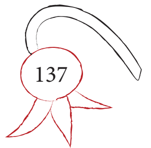


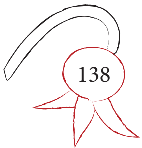
Figure 3: The Katumuwa Stele (Drawing by Dan McClellan, reproduced with permission)




## Conclusion

So what was the meaning of feeding the dead? The concept of impurity offers a clue. The references to food made impure due to death and the comparison of this ideology with the material remains found inside Judahite tombs indicate a special meaning assigned to the food. The two case studies from Beth-Shemesh suggest different ways in which food could be used both as part of the sacrificial cult of Yahweh as well as in mortuary culture. In both instances, the act is identifiable because it appears in stark relief against the backdrop of biblical regulations regarding corpse impurity. Food brought to the grave is affected by the impurity of the dead, thus according to the biblical writers the food

cannot be used as part of the tithe or as offerings to the God of Israel. If the vessels are enclosed, however, the food inside would still be useable in contexts that required purity (i.e., the absence of impurity). These stipulations were intended to keep divine offerings separate from those given to the dead. But why was this? Inscriptions and iconography from Sam'al shed some light on this question. There we see a conflation of offerings made to gods alongside the dead in artifacts such as the Hadad Statue and the Katamuwa Stele. In the ancient Near East, the purpose of sacrificial food was often to feed the gods. At Sam'al, we see the dead feasting in the afterlife alongside the gods. This raises the possibility that the same dynamic existed in Judahite mortuary culture. If so, the restrictions placed on feeding the dead in biblical literature could be seen as a denial of this ideal. This was not a denial of ancestors, however. The care and feeding of the dead is not forbidden in the Hebrew Bible, and reunion with ancestors in the family tomb constituted an afterlife ideal. Nor was it meant to separate the God of Israel from the realm of death. Yet for the biblical writers, the care and feeding of Yahweh was the domain of the Temple and not the tomb. The reasons for this concern, and the wider implications it raises with regard to ancestors and postmortem existence, should be explored further.

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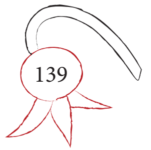


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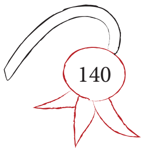


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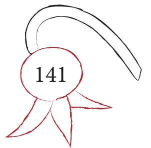


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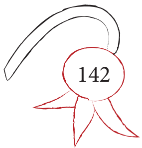


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AABNER
ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

# A PILGRIMAGE TO IRON AGE II TEL DAN

***David Ilan and Jonathan S. Greer***

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 3 (Autumn, 2021): 143–190

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Key Words: Tel Dan, pilgrimage, senses, archaeology, phenomenology, iconography, ritual, Israelite, Yahweh

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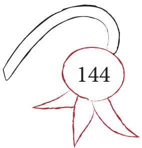
# Abstract

Pilgrimage—a journey to a shrine or other sacred place undertaken to gain divine aid, as an act of thanksgiving or penance, or to demonstrate devotion within a particular religious system—has been the subject of archeological investigation in recent years. The site of Tel Dan (Tell el-Qāḍi), Israel, provides a unique opportunity to explore pilgrimage because its remains have been exposed over a wide expanse and it has produced a great deal of archeological data. Dan is also remembered in the Hebrew Bible as an Israelite pilgrimage destination. In this paper we attempt to recreate the experience of a pilgrim moving through the stations of the pilgrimage itinerary of Holy Dan. We end by providing a synthetic analysis of pilgrimage at the site invoking biblical, archeological, iconographic, and ancient Near Eastern textual data, viewed through a phenomenological lens.



Les pèlerinages – des voyages à destination d'un tombeau ou d'un autre lieu saint, entrepris pour obtenir de l'aide divine, comme acte d'actions de grâce ou de repentance, ou pour montrer sa dévotion à un système religieux particulier— ont récemment été l'objet de recherches archéologiques. Le site de Tel Dan (Tell el-Qadi), en Israël, offre une opportunité unique d'étudier le pèlerinage, car ses vestiges ont été excavés sur une grande surface, et ont donné lieu à un grand nombre de données archéologiques. La Bible hébraïque fait également mémoire de Dan, comme une destination de pèlerinage israélite. Dans cette contribution, nous essayons de recréer l'expérience d'un·e pèlerin·e qui se déplacerait à travers les stations de l'itinéraire du pèlerinage pour le lieu saint de Dan. Nous terminons en offrant une analyse synthétique du pèlerinage sur le site, en utilisant des données bibliques, archéologiques, iconographiques ainsi que des éléments textuels du Proche-Orient Ancien, analysés à travers un prisme phénoménologique.

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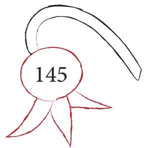



Pilgrimage is a hallmark of many religious systems, past and present, and a topic of particular interest to archeologists because ritual actions often leave material traces. If "pilgrimage" is defined as a journey to a sacred *place*, undertaken as an act of worship, the materiality of that physical space, accessible to archeology, will provide data that will facilitate our understanding of the religious experience. The artifacts and ecofacts encountered at pilgrimage destinations allow us to reconstruct the connections between things and spaces—the nature and sequences of ritual action.[1] These reconstructions, in turn, allow us to speculate about the cognitive and emotive dimensions of the pilgrim's experience.

The topic of pilgrimage has also received much attention from biblical scholars. The emphasis in the literature is primarily on the prescriptive and descriptive accounts in the Pentateuch/Torah of celebrations of biblical festivals. Much of the discussion focuses on the dating of textual strata,[2] though some studies have ventured into phenomenological

[1] For example, Zevit 2001, 81–83; Blake 2005; Hesse, Wapnish, and Greer 2012; Mandell and Smoak 2019.

[2] For example, de Vaux 1961; Wagenaar 2005.

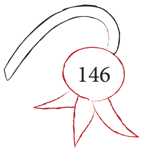



Figure 1. Location of Tel Dan (courtesy of Conn Herriott)

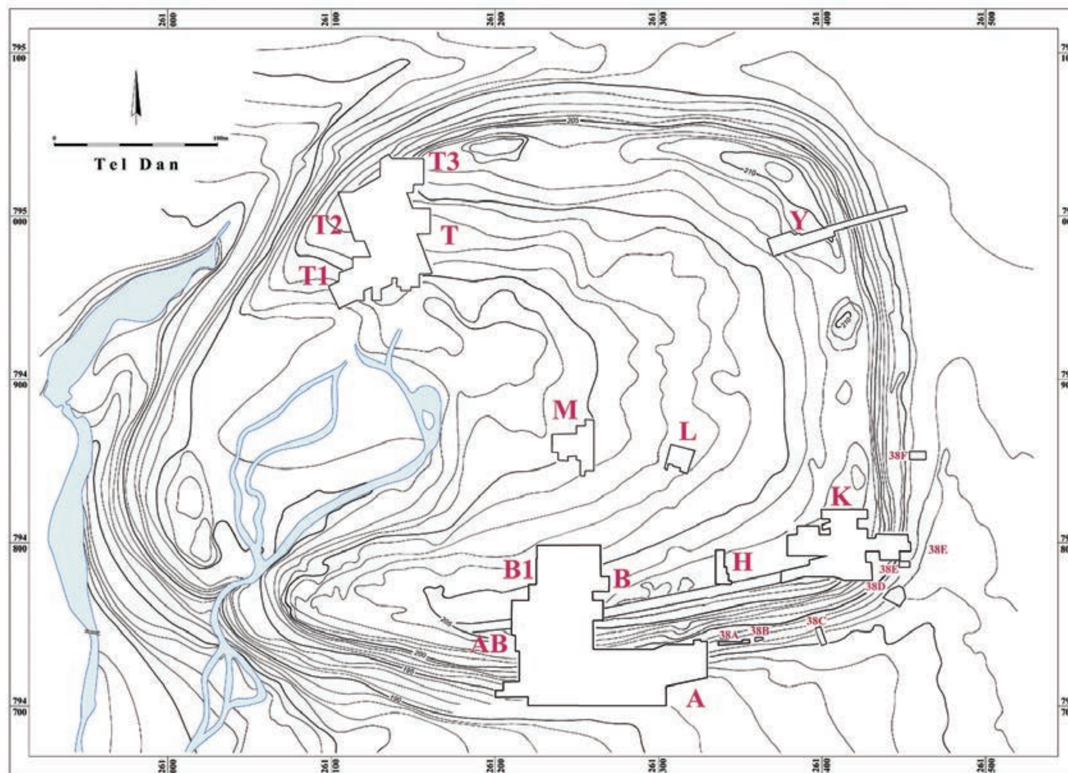
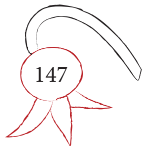



Figure 2. Site plan of Tel Dan with pilgrimage stations labeled (courtesy of Dov Porotsky)




dimensions of religious experience.[3] The majority of textual inquiries, however, are carried out without reference to archeology. While largely a symptom of a long-recognized methodological disconnect,[4] the neglect is also understandable in that there are no undisputed material remains of a temple in Iron Age Jerusalem—the primary destination of pilgrimage mentioned in the Hebrew Bible—during any phase that may correspond to the composition of these texts. Thus, any correlations between text and archeology simply lack a "space" in which they might be explored.

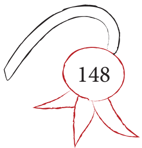
The site of Tel Dan (Tell el-Qāḍi, Figures 1–2) in northern Israel has been long recognized as the city of the same name in the Hebrew Bible (Robinson and Smith 1841). In the biblical text, Dan is identified in several places as an ancient Yahwistic worship center, albeit not in an entirely positive light. In the foundation story in Judges 17–18, the shrine

[3] For example, Haran 1978; Klingbeil 1995.

[4] See Dever 1997; Levy 2010.

is established by marauding Danites, outfitted with a silver image, and serviced by a Levitical priesthood of Yahweh. In 1 Kgs 12:26–33, the shrine is revivified as one of two royal Yahwistic cult centers of northern Israel, housing a golden calf. Most importantly for the purposes of the discussion here, it is explicitly identified as a destination of festal pilgrimage. In Amos 8:14, its religious status, and perhaps pilgrimage association, is assumed.[5]

From an archeological perspective, even without the biblical description and discourse concerning Israelite pilgrimage to Dan, we would identify much of what we find in the Iron Age levels as ceremonial in nature. Many of the site's finds meet generally accepted criteria for identifying cultic sites and assemblages,[6] including altars, votives, stelae, and other cultic paraphernalia (Biran 1994). Yet the potential contribution of Tel Dan to the study of Israelite religion is still largely untapped.[7]




In this article, we seek to explore the experience of pilgrimage to Tel Dan through an integrated analysis of the archeological remains, relevant texts, and iconography. There is some question as to whether Tel Dan was "Israelite" in the earlier part of the Iron Age II period, in the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, and it was certainly ruled by Aram-Damascus in at least part of the ninth and early eighth centuries BCE.[8] That said, there is consensus that Tel Dan was a Yahwistic cult

[5] Another ancient testament to the religious importance of the site occurs in LXX 2 Sam 20:18, thought to be a better reading, recounting memories of oracular inquiries at Abel "and at Dan." See discussion in McCarter 1980, 428–29.

[6] Cf. the archeological correlates for ritual behavior laid out by Colin Renfrew (1985) adapted to the field of Israelite religion by Ziony Zevit (2001, 81–83), and specifically to the Tel Dan assemblage by Andrew Davis (2013, 22–28).

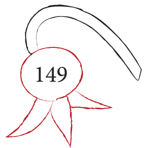
[7] Note the lack of any mention of Tel Dan in Rainer Albertz's (1994) classic study, highlighted by Dever's (1996) review. Even in more recent treatments, the site is minimized (e.g., Faust 2019, 7–8) or overlooked (e.g., Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2016).

[8] Arie 2008; Ilan 2019. See Thareani 2019a; 2019b; Greer 2017b. Note, however, that the crux of Eran Arie's (2008) argument for rejecting an Israelite association with the earliest Iron Age phases—i.e., a proposed gap in the archeological record corresponding to the Iron IIA—has not been substantiated by further excavations, as has been addressed most comprehensively by Yifat Thareani (2019a, 2019b).

center at least in the eighth century BCE, and likely long after,[9] and the following exploration lies within that context. Archeologically, we are focusing on Stratum II, though many of the relevant features are present in Stratum III as well, albeit in a less distinct expression. Thus, Tel Dan will serve as the theater for the unfolding ritual drama we reconstruct—or perhaps more accurately *construct*—with our informed imaginations.

We will walk the reader through the archeologically defined physical spaces of the site (Figures 2–3), pausing at various "stations" along the way to consider the experiential dimension of those spaces.

Figure 3. Aerial photo of Tel Dan, looking north, marking the first stations of the onsite pilgrim itinerary (courtesy of Albatross Aerial Photography)




Thus, many of the reconstructions based on that assumption (e.g., Berlejung 2009; Finkelstein and Schmid 2017; Römer 2017) may need to be revised.

[9] Evidence for later veneration is the Hellenisitic Zoilos inscription dedicated to the "God who is in Dan" (Biran 1981), most likely Yahweh, and an explicit association with divine revelation from Yahweh in 1 Enoch 12–16. Some have also suggested that the region of Tel Dan is depicted as the site of revelation in the Testament of Levi 2–7, though this is not certain; Shechem may be implied (see discussion and references in Ackerman 2013, 157 n. 13).

## Approaching Holy Dan

For travelers anticipating the pilgrimage to Dan, the journey itself would have been sacred.[10] Nestled at the base of Mount Hermon, which towers above the Hula Valley at over 2,700 m above sea level, the site is located next to the largest spring in the Levant (Figures 3–4). Both written sources and archeological remains suggest that the entire region may have been considered holy—from Ugaritic texts[11] to 1 Enoch (and the Bible), from Dan to Banias to the Iturian summit shrine on Mount Hermon, and a number of other shrines as well.[12] A case has been made for an *in antis*, or *migdal* temple dating to the Middle Bronze Age

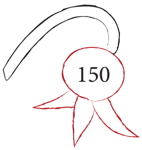


Figure 4. The Dan spring: the most effluent in the Middle East (courtesy of David Ilan)

[10] van Gennep 1960, 184–85; Coleman and Elsner 1995, 6, 205–7; McCorriston 2011, 34–35; Greenia 2018, 10.

[11] Dussaud 1936; Lipinski 1971.

[12] For example, Clermont-Ganneau 1903; Dar 1993; Ma'oz 1993; Wilson 2004; Tzaferis 2008.

(ca. eighteenth century) under the Iron Age temple platform at Tel Dan itself (Ilan 2018). In the Iron II, Persian, Hellenistic, and Late Roman periods the temple complex and other ritual installations—those discussed in this article—were certainly well known.

The ancient city of Laish/Dan lay at an important crossroads, including one branch of the international highway connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia. The road from Tyre (joined by a branch from Sidon) to Damascus passed just north of Dan, connecting maritime and inland centers, as well as another road running north and south through the Hula and Beqa'a Valleys (Figure 5). The only Iron II gate identified thus far is located on the southern edge of the city, and so our itinerary will begin there.

Figure 5. The roads leading to Tel Dan (courtesy of Conn Herriot)

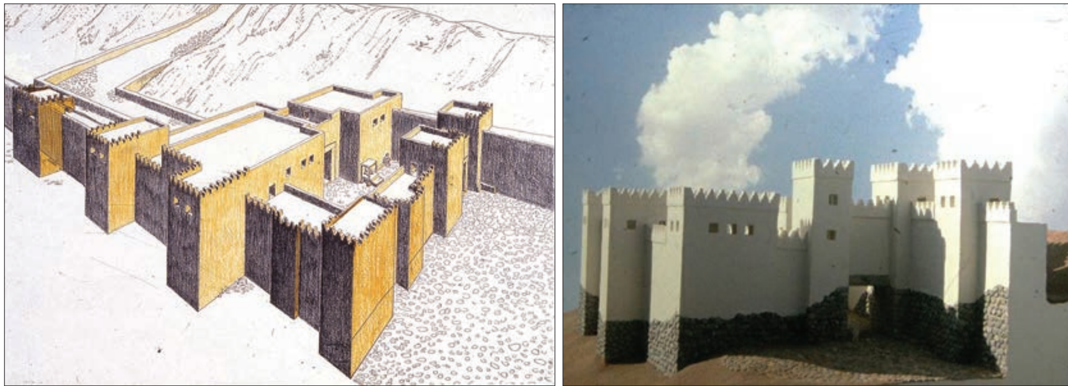
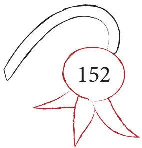


Figure 6. The Dan fortifications (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)




Approaching from the south, the Iron II pilgrim would have spotted Dan's towering fortifications from afar (Figure 6).[13] The lower portion of the buttressed wall was constructed of basalt boulders and the upper portion with mudbricks. The highest current point of preservation is 3.5 m, but the original height would have been at least 8 m, the height required to match the height of the ascending road (Biran 1994, 249–50). The walls were plastered and topped by crenellations (Figure 7). Massive towers flanked the gate. Extensive pavements abutted the walls along the southern circumference of the site, forming streets and a large open plaza in front of the gate itself (Figure 8). These monumental walls and towers would have meant more to the pilgrim than physical protection and a projection of power; they symbolically delimited the dwelling compound of the resident deity—the divine monarch. The various ritual installations along the city's roads and plazas marked stages of transition between the outside world and the deity's inner sanctum, liminal zones through which the pilgrim passed from one state of being to another—from prosaic day-to-day existence and subsistence to the transcendent realm of the deity: spirit, cosmos, and ecstasy.

[13] The walls were built in two main phases; the first is currently dated to the ninth century BCE, attributed to the Omrides by Biran (1994, 246) and to Aram-Damascus by Ilan (2019, 121–22). The second is dated to the eighth century BCE, and was likely commissioned by Jeroboam II (Biran 1994, 249–53).

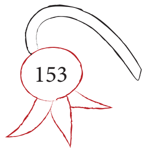



Figure 7. Crenellations found near the upper fortification wall in Area AB. Similar crenellations were found in Area T and may have adorned the altar compound wall in the Persian period (courtesy of David Ilan)

Arriving at the gate plaza, the pilgrim encountered the *ḥuṣṣot* (חוצות), a complex of structures initially understood as market stalls (Biran 1999, 50–52, based on 1 Kgs 20:34). However, alternative interpretations are to be preferred in light of the inconsistency in the size and spacing of the rooms, the lack of redundancy of artifacts or commodities, and the absence of weights. The frequency of bowls and lamps is high, with a smaller component of jars and jugs. This suggests small-scale consumption and nocturnal activity; the structures could be understood as lodging facilities. Perhaps more likely, though, is a ritual function, even sacred feasting. Most importantly, two bronze plaques featuring deity representations (Figure 9) were discovered in adjacent spaces, one of which may represent Yahweh (or Baal-Hadad).[14] Whether the plaques

[14] On a possible identification with Yahweh, see Smith 2007, 387–88; Greer 2013, 22–24 (and note the connection to the Taanach cult stand discussed there). Tallay

Figure 8. Aerial photo (looking west) showing the eighth century BCE gate, the plaza outside the gate and fortification wall, and the external annex (*ḥuṣṣot*), which we interpret as the headquarters of ritual personnel (courtesy of Albatross Aerial Photography)

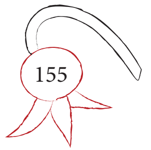
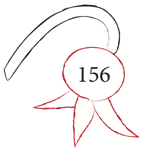



Figure 9. The bronze plaques from the *ḥuṣṣot.* These may have been mounted on poles or staffs held by ritual personnel who lead processions of pilgrims into the holy city (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

functioned as ceremonial standards or fixed icons, the images may have served as "focusing devices" for pilgrims preparing to enter the holy city. Their portability invites speculation that they were mounted on standards and carried by priests leading pilgrims into the city after meeting them at the so-called *ḥuṣṣot*.

## Station 1: The First Imprint of the Deity

The first clearly cultic installation the pilgrim would have encountered would have been a shrine along the southern face of the city wall consisting of five small vertical basalt slabs identified as "standing stones," or *maṣṣebot* (מצבות Figure 10). The stones were set up against the city wall with the pavement built up to them, demonstrating conscientious placement, though no other signs of veneration have been recovered.[15]




Ornan (2006, 302–03), following Biran's original suggestion (Biran 1999, 54), argues that the deity is best understood as a goddess based on the small triangles adorning her clothing and what may be a mirror in her hand typical of female deities. Though noting that male deities were more frequently associated with bovine iconography in the first millennium, she draws a parallel to the Malatya 13 image interpreted as depicting Kubaba on a bull. However, we find the morphological characteristics of the animal on Malatya 13 to fit better with a goat or with the traditional identification of a stag (thus, illustrating an "animal-vehicle swap" between Kubaba and Karhuhas). Further, the figure on the plaque is depicted with wings typical of Baal-type deities of the first millennium (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 248–62; cf. Cornelius 1994), and the garment is ambiguous. If, indeed, the plaque depicts a male deity on the back of a (young?) bull, perhaps 1 Kgs 12 is a reflection of a Danite association of the deity with bovine iconography. If the iconography represents an Aramean deity, however, Baal-Hadad would be the most likely candidate.

[15] A new installation was constructed in the seventh century BCE, closer to the gate, over the debris of the destruction of the late eighth century—the result of the Assyrian campaign of Tiglath-Pileser III or of an earthquake (Biran 2002, 9–11). Here, only three (or possibly four) *maṣṣebot* were uncovered, fronted by a basalt bowl filled with ashes resting on a stone pedestal, along with two juglets and three lamps. Thus, we can say that ritual action continued in the plaza, though how it related to eighth-century ritual and religion is unclear.

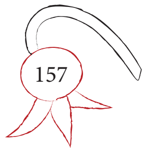



Figure 10. The first group of five *maṣṣebot*. We interpret these as personifying the foot of the deity (El/Yahweh) (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

This installation is, in fact, the first of three groups of five small *maṣṣebot* (Biran 1998), each group dating to the eighth century BCE.[16] As for the significance of the number five, we can, of course, only speculate. They may represent five deities, but little in either the textual record or the archeological record supports this. They may represent people, either individuals or groups, but which ones? A more tactile explanation is that they represent the fingers of the worshipper in a gesture of obeisance, following the imagery on the Late Bronze Age stele found in the Hazor Area C Temple (Yadin 1972, 67–74). In a similar way, the five *maṣṣebot* may represent the hands of the deity, perhaps

[16] One group of *maṣṣebot* (at Station 5) was identified only years after being excavated, suggesting the possibility that others may have gone unnoticed or have even been dismantled.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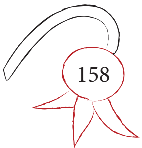
Yahweh himself, in a gesture of blessing.[17] However, the interpretation suggested here is that the five slabs represent the feet of the deity (the slabs are the toes) as his immanence enters the sacred place together with the pilgrim. The inspiration for this proposal is found in the great footsteps carved into the thresholds of the ʿAin Dara Temple in Syria,[18] and may reflect biblical imagery of Yahweh's presence (e.g., Ezek 43:7 where Yahweh identified the Temple as his throne and "the place for the soles of my feet" (את מקום כפות רגלי); see also the irony in Mic 1:2–7 in which footprints would be left in the treading of the shrines).

## *Crossing through the Outer Gate*

The pilgrim would then have continued to the west, perhaps physically following a priest holding a raised standard, symbolically following the unshod deity, toward the first encountered, outermost gate. Passing through flanking pilasters topped with proto-Aeolic capitals (Figure 11), the worshipper would have passed a hexagonal freestanding column installed in the gate passage (Figure 12), probably to preclude the entry of wheeled vehicles.[19] More significantly, the pilgrim would have entered a liminal zone—the symbolic threshold between "outside" and "inside." We suggest that the contrast was not so stark as to suggest a transition from "profane" to "sacred," but rather a movement of graded contrast, moving from less holy to more holy, as one progressed along the pilgrim trail, coming one step closer to the temple itself.[20]




[17] Note, in this respect, the suggestion of Judith Hadley (1987) that the image of the "hand" (Heb. יד) at Khirbet el-Qom may have been intended to connote the notion of a "memorial" or "monument," another meaning of יד. This idea has been expanded by Alice Mandell and Justin Smoak (2019), who see the hand as a way of marking out sacred space.

[18] Abu Assaf 1990; Monson 2006; Novak 2012.

[19] The lower gateway is also significantly narrower than most other Iron Age gates: 3.7 m vs. a standard of 4.2 m (Dorsey 1991, 21), which may further indicate that vehicular traffic was disallowed.

[20] See Haran 1978, 175–88; Jenson 1992. See also Mandell and Smoak 2019, building on Frankfurter 2008; Tweed 2011.

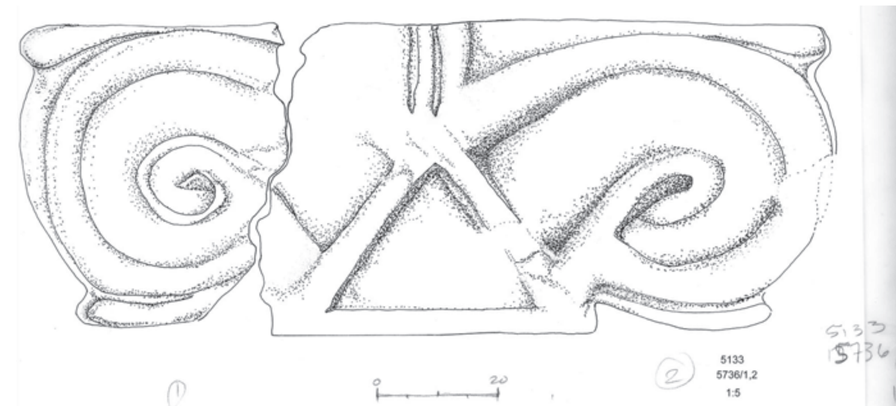
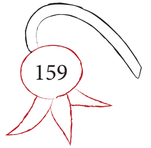



Figure 11. The pilasters (a) of the outer gate and one of the proto-Aeolic capitals (b) found in the outer plaza that probably rested on one of the pilasters (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology).





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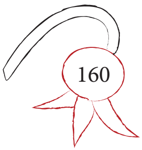



Figure 12. The four-paneled, freestanding column, set just outside the entrance to the outer gate. This would have blocked wheeled vehicles from entering the city (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

## Station 2: The Second Imprint of the Deity

In this liminal zone, just inside the outer gate (Figure 13), the second set of five *maṣṣebot* is found, situated directly on the pilgrim's right as they would have entered the inner plaza, quite literally "one (deity) step" closer to the temple (Figure 14). It is as if the stride of the deity itself symbolically delimits and distinguishes these zones of holiness. Here again, we draw a parallel to the ʿAin Dara prints, with a pair on the threshold of the porch, followed by a left-footed imprint on the threshold before the hall, and a right-footed imprint on the threshold before the inner sanctum, each stride marking out the sacred sectors of graded holiness. Perhaps pilgrims sang songs glorifying their divine king as they passed through each series of gates.[21]

[21] For example, Ps 24:7–10. See Bloch-Smith 1994 regarding the Temple in Jerusalem.

Figure 13. An artist's reconstruction of the inner plaza (courtesy of Balage Balogh/ archaeologyillustrated.com)

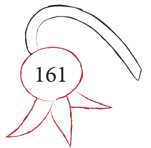


Figure 14. The second group of five *maṣṣebot*. These were fronted by a bench associated with a series of ritual vessels (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

In front of and attached to the five *maṣṣebot* is a low bench, flanked by attached additional benches on either side. Under the debris of the eighth-century destruction were found bowls, lamps, tripod incense cups, and animal bones (Biran 1994, Fig. 205). Of particular interest was the discovery of seven-spouted oil lamps (Figure 15), which were found only here and in the temple compound in Area T (see below). Similar seven-spouted vessels have been found at other Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, and Iron Age sites throughout the southern Levant, usually in ritual contexts (Naeh 2012), possibly antecedents to the biblical menorah (Meyers 1976). The presence of lamps reminds us again that activities associated with the installation may have taken place at night.

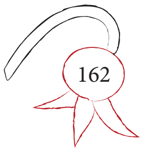
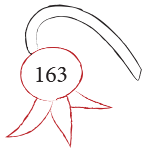


Figure 15. One of the seven-spouted lamps found in the inner gateway plaza and in the *temenos* of Area T (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

## Station 3: The Podium

As the pilgrim entered the inner plaza, facing west, the northern tower of the largest gate would have loomed above them. Appended to the tower is an ashlar podium and an ashlar bench extending to the right.[22] At each of the four corners of the podium were decorated column bases, into which wooden poles or columns would have been mounted. A chalkstone capital found in the plaza, possibly in the form of a grape cluster (Biran 1994, Fig. 202), probably represents one of four that were mounted on the wooden columns. It is likely that a canopy was mounted over the capitals. The pilgrim's attention would have been focused on whatever was placed on this podium. A deep slot on the surface of the podium indicates that something was inserted here. We agree with Wolfgang Zwickel's (1997, 226) suggestion that this would have been a stele—such as the famous Aramaic Tel Dan stele of the ninth century BCE (Biran and Naveh 1993, 1995) or one like the bull-god stele from et-Tell/Bethsaida (Bernett and Keel 1998)—or, perhaps, a cult image or an offering table.[23] The somewhat earlier outer gate shrine at nearby et-Tell/Bethsaida shows striking similarities in its comparable size, approach by steps, proximity to benches, and location on the right side of the gate along with various stelae.




Facing the stele, image, or offering table, the pilgrim may have paid homage to the deity and left votive offerings on the benches. The complex as a whole, with its *maṣṣebot* installation and its associated artifacts, the podium, and the offering bench, would have been a sacred place, a place of liminality—perhaps an illustration of "the shrines of the gate" (במות השערים) mentioned in the reforms of Josiah.[24]

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[22] Figure 16; Biran 1994, Figs. 197–99.

[23] It is not likely to have been a throne, as reconstructed by Biran (1994, Fig. 198). It is too small. The podium may have served both ninth-century and eighth-century BCE pilgrims, possibly worshippers of different gods at different times—perhaps El or Baal-Hadad under Aramean control, and Yahweh under Israelite control.

[24] 2 Kgs 23:8; Biran 1994. See Blomquist 1999.

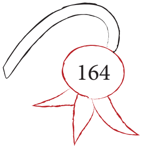



Figure 16. The podium in the first inner plaza, with column bases and appended bench. This podium appears to have had more than one iteration. We suggest that a *maṣṣebah* may have been inserted into the top slot (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

*Crossing through the Inner Gate*

Following our hypothetical pilgrim itinerary, the worshipper would have continued up the processional way after singing praises and leaving initial offerings at the inner plaza. They would have crossed over the three thresholds of the monumental ninth-century gate, passing by a single *maṣṣebah* (מצבה) to their right just before the first threshold (Figure 17). This single *maṣṣebah* likely implied something different than the groups of five. Perhaps it was thought to contain the immanence of the deity who was witnessing, even guarding, the entry into his holy city (cf. Avner 2006, 54), and marking out the next grade of sanctity.

*Climbing the Processional Way*

The pilgrim would have then continued toward the west for some 17 m along the processional way, at which point the route veered sharply

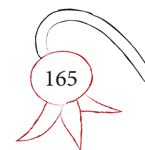



Figure 17. The single *maṣṣebah* at the southeast corner of the northern monumental gate tower, which would have been to the visitors' right as they entered (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

to the right and up a steep incline. With a pitch of 28 degrees, they would have been forced to slow their pace, perhaps chanting alongside others as they physically and spiritually ascended.[25] Though little remains of the third gate complex, a fragment of another proto-Aeolic capital found nearby (Biran 1994, Fig. 209) suggests that such decoration adorned these gates like it did the outer gates.

In the ninth century BCE, visitors would have accessed the upper gate straight ahead. But in the eighth century, pilgrims would have taken a switchback to the east. Such an alteration slowed and eased the pace of the ascent; a materialist approach might suggest that this required pilgrims to pass by vendors hawking their wares. This includes a room located in the second story of the monumental four-chambered gate, which contained a cache of more than three hundred juglets

[25] Cf. the "psalm of ascent" (שיר המעלות) of Ps 120–34, and many more (e.g., Ps 24:3; 42:4).

(Figure 18). This may have been a sacred oil shop, much like the shops that line the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem or the town of Assisi in Italy, for example. Biran (1994, 255) notes that the way the juglets were arrayed suggests that they were on shelves. A Hebrew inscription reading *l'Amotz* (לאמץ), "belonging to Amotz," was also found in this chamber, perhaps identifying the owner of the shop.

Figure 18. A cache of more than 300 juglets found in a chamber above the northern tower of the monumental four-chambered gate. We propose that this was a shop accessed from the road above (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

## Station 4: The Upper Gate Shrine

The pilgrim then would have made another 180 degree turn to the west. Directly in front of them, to the west, was a small, enclosed, rectangular shrine (Figure 19). At the center of the 5 x 2 m space was a shallow rectangular basin of carved tufa. In the left back corner was another podium, similar to the podium found in the inner plaza below, but higher, with two or three steps up. Perhaps another image, a *maṣṣebah*, or offering table stood at the top. Here, again, parallels may be drawn with the podium outside the ninth-century BCE four-chambered gate of et-Tell/Bethsaida, where a basin stood before the moon god stele.[26] The chamber is lined with low stone benches, similar to those of the shrine of the inner plaza below, upon which worshippers may have deposited votive offerings.

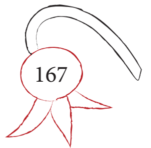


Figure 19. The upper shrine, outside (south of) the west tower of the upper gate (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

[26] It is also worth noting that et-Tell/Bethsaida also has an inner shrine in addition to the outer shine, similar to Dan (Arav 2009).

## Station 5: The Third Imprint of the Deity

Turning now toward the upper city gate, the pilgrim would have beheld the third installation of five *maṣṣebot* (Figure 20). These were installed atop one of the massive retaining walls that supported and protected the eastern tower of the upper gate. Thus, another stride of Yahweh is marked at the crest of the fortifications. Perhaps there is also a defensive aspect to this "imprint."

The pilgrim then would have crossed over the thresholds of the upper gate, again consisting of four chambers of dressed ashlars whose piers were probably decorated with proto-Aeolic capitals (Biran 1994, Fig. 209).

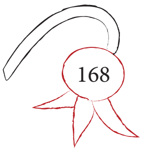
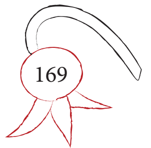


Figure 20. The third group of *maṣṣebot*, just outside (south of) the east tower of the upper gate (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

## Station 6: The Great Plaza

Following our reconstruction of the pilgrimage itinerary within the city walls, one imagines the pilgrim descending to a great plaza of

Figure 21. Part of the great plaza of Area M, at the center of the site (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)





meticulously laid flagstones (Figure 21). More than 130 m$^2$ of this has been exposed, though its limits have not yet been determined. It was certainly much larger—perhaps 1000 m$^2$. Such a space would have been communal in nature, allowing for large gatherings. The extensive faunal remains suggest feasting from locally sourced flocks (Arnold et al. 2021), and we may imagine celebrations that were perhaps accompanied by festal music and dancing in anticipation of the final procession to Yahweh's abode, which was next to the upper spring. The sacrificial animals would have been tethered here, pending their slaughter. Urban and rural people, the rich and the poor, would have mingled in this place and rejoiced before their deity, the trappings of status and rank now removed. The plaza likely served as an extended liminal zone of excited preparation and anticipation.[27]

[27] The material culture from the inner city (Areas B, H, K, L, and M) will be published by Thareani in a forthcoming final report (*Dan VI* or *Dan VII*).

*Approaching the Temple Compound*

The plaza, or a paved way leading from it, allowed a short walk of 100 m or so to the temple compound. The pilgrim throng would have passed the spring bubbling up along the western edge, and would thereby have been reminded of the Edenic connections between the temple compound and its environment.[28] Perhaps they would have drunk the water of the sacred spring and recited blessings and moved forward.

The beautiful temple towered above everything else on the northwest sector of the mound (though the entire superstructure of the temple is lacking archeologically). We know the western and northern limits of the temple compound; the southern portion probably bordered the Ein Leshem (Ain el-Qāḍi) spring. The eastern limits have not been determined. Nevertheless, the existing side chambers and the architectural features recovered throughout the precinct allow us to suggest a plausible reconstruction of the compound (Figure 22). Notably, there are a number of correspondences to the description of the Jerusalem Temple described in 1 Kgs 6–7 (see, e.g., Greer 2013, 108–16).

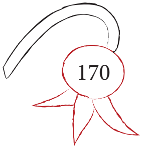


Figure 22. A reconstruction of the Dan temple compound (courtesy of Balage Balogh/ archaeologyillustrated.com)

[28] Ackerman 2013; cf. Stager 1999.

## Station 7: Purification Pools

Before crossing the threshold of Yahweh's abode, the worshipper may have purified themselves in the cold, gushing waters of the Ein Leshem spring (Figure 23). Just inside where the compound gates likely stood, remains of what may have been a stepped pool were found (Biran 1994, 174), perhaps functioning as a purification installation reserved for the priests;[29] a ceramic bathtub discovered 20 m north of this may have served the same purpose (Figure 24). The symbolic act of submersion and return is known in other ancient and contemporary religions (cf. Weinfeld 1983), marking another transformation from one state of holiness to the next.

### *The Temple Courtyard*

The temple courtyard would have been a bustle of activity; the pilgrim's senses would have been barraged. The temple would have appeared

Figure 23. The Ein Leshem spring on top of the *tel*, just south of the Area T *temenos* (courtesy of David Ilan)

[29] cf. Exod 29:4; 30:17–21; Lev 16:4.

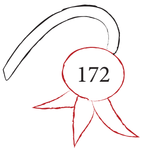



Figure 24. The restored tub found on the pavement north of the spring pool (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

without impediment and the great altar before it. The priests, dressed in exotic garments, perhaps even draped in animal skins,[30] would be seen coming and going from the side chambers. Cooking fires would have been seen spread throughout the precinct along with small altars and ritual vessels (including seven-spouted lamps and painted stands).[31]

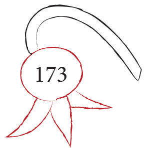
[30] Bones from the paws of both lions and bears have been recovered here; contemporary Neo-Assyrian iconography shows priests dressed in carnivore skins (as, of course, does the iconography of Egypt), though these remains may have been from rugs or wall hangings. See Greer 2013, 94–95.

[31] We are describing the eighth-century BCE assemblage, essentially what Biran identified as Stratum II, discussed in detail in Davis 2013 and Greer 2013. Note, however, that some material currently being analyzed for publication by Levana Zias may be redated to the Persian/Hellenistic period. The earlier strata (IVA and III), too, which include additional smaller structures, ovens, an olive press, water installations, "snake *pithoi*," incense stands, anthropomorphic figurines, are also being processed for publication by Thareani. While the stratigraphic assignments

Those partaking in the festivities would have heard bleating animals and buzzing flies, alongside prayers and songs. They would have smelled the fresh blood of slaughter and the reek of burning flesh and innards, the sweet smell of incense and savory stews. They would have inhaled the whiff of spiced wine and scented oil.

## Station 8: The Great Altar

The focus of the pilgrim's gaze would have been the massive central altar. The stone base of this structure has been found (Figure 25).[32] The latest incarnation of this altar was dated by Avraham Biran to the time of Jeroboam II in the eighth century BCE (1994, 191–209).[33] The remains of staircases ascending the north and west faces of the altar allow for reconstruction of an altar 4.75 m on a side and 3 m high. This may be the largest altar discovered anywhere in the Levant. A single basalt horn of this altar has been recovered (Figure 26), used as repurposed building material in a Hellenistic period wall. It was clearly a horned altar of the type well known in the southern Levant (Gitin 2002). The altar is marked off from the rest of the sanctuary by a low *temenos* wall, delimiting sacred space and restricting movement (Davis 2013, 72–75), which would have been entered into through small openings to the east and the south.




Priestly texts[34] guide our reconstruction of the slaughter of the sacrificial victim as taking place in front of the altar—if it is a bovine—

may change, the essence of the pilgrimage experience will most likely remain intact. Sacred space and ritual action are remarkably conservative.

[32] Figure 25; Biran 1994, Figs. 143–44 (Stratum IVA); Figs. 149–50 (Stratum III); Fig. 163 (Stratum II).

[33] As in the previous note, much of the Stratum II assemblage may date to the Persian or early Hellenistic period, but the architectural and artifactual components are essentially those that existed in the earlier strata. We reference the last phase, what Biran called "Bamah C," as the most visible and evocative.

[34] Some may rightly challenge the correlation of so-called "priestly texts" of the Pentateuch with Iron Age material remains based on the assumption that such texts date to the Persian period. While we do not contest the claim that the current form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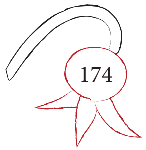
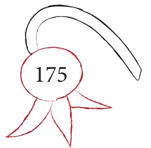



Figure 25. The stone base of the central altar (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

Figure 26. The stone horn, most likely part of the original central altar, found in secondary use (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

between the entrance and the altar (Lev 1:3–9). For sheep and goats, a designated place is marked out to the right side of the altar (Lev 1:11; cf. *m. Mid.* 3:5). Those bringing an offering placed their hands upon the animals, and blessings were likely recited. The throat of the animal was slit, and the blood spilled out, some of it collected in a sacrificial bowl (a *mizraq* [מזרק]; see Greer 2010) and splashed upon a low extended step (the *yesod* [יסוד])[35] protruding from the base of the altar on these two sides.

For the burnt offering, the animal was skinned and quartered (Lev 1:6), and the whole of the animal, save the skin (cf. Lev 7:8), was surrendered to the priest for immolation on the altar (Lev 1:8). The opening and the staircase here correspond precisely with approaching the altar from this direction.[36] After the carcass or portions were burned, the priest would have descended from the altar to deposit the ashes in a designated spot between the altar and the entrance to the court (Lev 1:16; 6:3)—again, this itinerary is marked by the second staircase and the opening in the altar *temenos* wall.



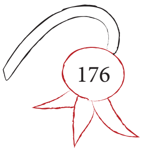

of the received text dates to the fifth century BCE (with some degree of fluidity extending even into the next century or so), evidence derived from comparative linguistic studies, source critical analysis, and archeological sources suggests an earlier core of ritual materials rooted in preexilic times (see, e.g., Haran 1978, 132–48; Milgrom 1991, 3–13; Zevit 1995; Friedman 1997; Hurvitz 2000). Further, the cultic practices and paraphernalia described in these texts exhibit close parallels with those described even earlier in Late Bronze Age texts from Emar, Mari, and Hattussa especially (see, e.g., Fleming 2000; Feder 2011; Knohl 2015), suggesting that the biblical practices may be rooted in earlier realities. Thus, even if the current forms of the biblical texts postdate the archeological discoveries at Tel Dan, the congruence between text and archeology likely reflects a shared reality of an earlier cultic tradition. Cult, again, is remarkably conservative.

[35] See Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 29, 34; 5:9.

[36] There is a disconnect here with the Judahite tradition: the Mishnah (*m. Mid.* 3:1–2) reconstructs a ramp leading up to the altar in Jerusalem from the left side, and the altars at the archeological sites of Arad (Aharoni 1968) and Motza (Kisilevitz 2015), likewise, suggest approaches from this direction, and thus do not correspond with the layout at Tel Dan or the descriptions in the biblical text. Jonathan Greer (2017a) has argued, based on this evidence and more, that priestly ritual texts preserve northern traditions in regards to the approach of the altar and blood manipulation.

While the priest burned the carcass, the worshipper would likely have circumnavigated the altar, perhaps depositing the priestly portion of the sacrifice—the hide, in the case of a burnt offering, or a right-sided meaty limb portion, in the case of a fellowship offering (Greer 2019)—in the western chambers, where evidence of such deposits has been discovered (Greer 2013, 100–106).

A complete priestly "altar kit" (כלי המזבח)[37] was also discovered in the central chamber of these halls surrounding a small altar (Figure 27).[38] The finds have been interpreted as specific ritual items described in such kits: a bronze blood bowl known as a *mizraq* (מזרק), a pair of iron shovels for removing the ashes known as *yaim* (יעים), an incense pan known as a *makhtah* (מחתה), and a sunken pot filled with charred animal remains understood to be a form of a *sir* (סיר). A long metal handle, perhaps the remains of the meat fork known as a *mazleg* (מזלג), was also discovered in this space.




These artifacts, along with an analysis of the animal bone and ceramic remains, suggest that this area was the sphere of the priests, where they would have dined on their sacrificial meaty portions and stockpiled the skins of their priestly due.[39] The function of the small altar may have been as a supplemental burning location for offerings that were still holy but not holy enough to be burned on the main altar, such as leftovers from sacrificial meals (cf. Lev 19:5–8). The presence of oil lamps here too suggests feasting long into the night.

## When the Party Is Over

What did pilgrims do when the sacrificial meal was finished? Are there any archeological correlates of departure, or of the pilgrimage experi-

[37] See, for example, Exod 38:3, 30; Num 4:14.

[38] See Exod 27:1–8; Num 4:13–15; cf. 1 Kgs 7:40, 45; Biran 1994, 192–99; Greer 2010.

[39] Alternatively, Davis (2013, 101–107) suggests that these chambers served the people as a "non-elite" worship space at a time when the main altar was restricted to priests.

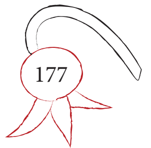
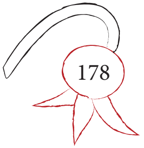


Figure 27. The priestly "altar kit" found in one of the chambers to the west of the central altar (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

ence upon return home? Evidence for departure is, by definition, difficult to come by; after all, departure is mostly defined by removing a presence and taking things with you. Still, evidence of a pilgrimage experience should be detectable, if not easily so.[40]

A departure scenario may be imagined as follows: The sacrificial meal is finished, and pilgrims have said their after-meal prayers, all together, fervently, as a community. It is getting dark. They might have cleansed themselves in the spring, drunk deeply of the cold water, and walked over to the hostels, just inside the upper city gate, to sleep for the night.

Just inside the upper city gate—to the east of the paved road (though perhaps on the west as well)—is a battery of at least three large, long buildings, each containing two rows of pillars and paved aisles (Figure 28). Tripartite pillared buildings of this kind are found at a number of other Iron II sites and have been attributed various functions—storehouses (Figure 29), stables, barracks, and closed markets (summarized in Routledge 1995). At Dan, their preservation is very poor, and they gave up no intact artifact assemblages that might divulge their function. The hallmarks of stables are lacking (troughs and hitching posts, in particular), but storage and commercial functions are both possible. They could also be pens for sacrificial animals (viz. the conclusions in Arnold et al. 2021). Perhaps they served as hostels for pilgrims. If so, sleeping within the deity's sacred city would have encouraged discussion and the exchange of information, bolstering the sense of *communitas* (cf. Turner and Turner 1978: Location 2949).




Lying on straw bedding, covered by blankets they brought with them, the pilgrims may have reminisced over the day's events—the ecstatic singing, dancing, the visions seen in the smoke, the flavors of the meat stew, the strength felt within. They may have talked about their villages and their families, their crops and their leaders, their enemies to the

[40] This is an avenue for further exploration. Were keepsakes taken as reminders of the pilgrimage? An example is the Monza-Bobbio flasks of the Byzantine period—flasks manufactured for pilgrims in Jerusalem that were brought back to communities in Europe (Barag and Wilkinson 1972).

Figure 28. The remains of one of the three large (poorly preserved) tripartite buildings that were uncovered in Area B, just inside the upper gate. Lacking preserved small finds, we speculate that these may have been pilgrim hostels (courtesy of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology)

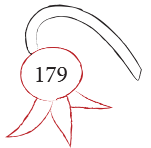
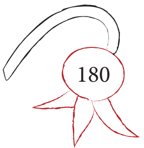


Figure 29. A partially reconstructed tripartite storehouse at Iron II Tel Beersheba (courtesy of David Ilan)

north and south. Then they would have slept. Enhanced by the absorption of sanctity, perhaps they were granted revealing dreams.[41]

The next day, the visiting pilgrim would have descended the processional way, stopping to pray again at each station. They might have stopped at the oil merchant to buy holy olive oil pressed by the priests contained in little spherical juglets (Figure 18). This would have been valuable (it might have been held to have special properties), and a souvenir, back home. They would have exited the gates and headed east to the highway that ran along the shores of the Waters of Merom (Lake Hula), perhaps pausing to look back at Dan's magnificent fortifications. And a final prayer might have poured forth from their lips: "May the yields be good this year!"




## Broader Implications of the Tel Dan Itinerary for the Archeology of Pilgrimage

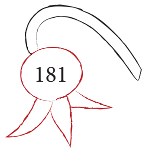
The archeology of pilgrimage is a broad topic with an extensive literature, covering most of the earth's continents. Indeed, the field can be embraced by different perspectives, and no single one of these will cover all the bases (Coleman 2002, 2013). Furthermore, pilgrims embark on pilgrimage with a wide variety of motivations such as those noted by Michael Winkelman and Jill Dubisch: "Making contact with the sacred, fulfilling a vow, seeking healing for physical or spiritual ailments, marking a life passage, doing penance, affirming cultural identity, and simple curiosity are among the diverse motivations for undertaking pilgrimage" (2005, xiii). So too "[p]ilgrimages instigate relationships—they entangle humans, places, deities, spirits, practices, objects, monuments, and more in efficacious ways" (Skousen 2018, 262). Pilgrimage is, further, a transformational quest (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005, xix–xxii).

The above sketch (and it is only a sketch) of the pilgrimage itinerary at Tel Dan illustrates a number of axioms shared by the pilgrimage phenomenon. To begin with, pilgrimage sites are typically places of

[41] cf. Turner and Turner 1978: Location 4401; Petsalis-Diomidis 2017: Location 3279.

power. This power may derive from association with historical events, persons, deities, or natural phenomena. Regarding power derived from historical-religious associations, we recall traditions contained in the Hebrew Bible concerning the establishment of shrines in the early days of ancient Israel (see Judg 17–18 and 1 Kgs 12). In terms of power derived from natural features, we highlight the fact that Tel Dan is located at the main source of the Jordan River—water is obviously a crucial element, as it is in so many pilgrimage destinations (at Varanasi, Cahokia, and Mayan Cenotes, for example). The spring and the site are positioned at the foot of Mount Hermon, a mountain likely identified as the deity's abode (see the introductory section above).

Pilgrimage, by definition, requires movement. To cite one archeological example of its detection, the journey along the Emerald Avenue to the Cahokia mound in Illinois likely involved a series of way stations or stopping points, all locales where special rituals and performances took place (Pauketat 2013). Movement creates relationships—it is the mechanism or quality through which phenomena of all kinds continually align or position themselves in relation to others (Skousen 2018, 265). Simon Coleman and John Elsner remark that "it is the experience of travel and the constant possibility of encountering the new which makes pilgrimage distinct from other forms of ritual" (1995, 206). In this way, pilgrimage is also tourism.



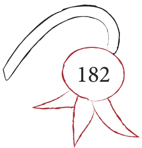

At Dan, we have "detected" movement based on the spatial array of symbol-laden ritual installations and their resonance in the biblical text. We have proposed an onsite itinerary. Admittedly, there is an element of circular argumentation here—the reader will have to be the judge.[42]

The number of focusing devices and spaces for public gathering at Dan and the multiple opportunities for sensory stimulation testify to the totality of the pilgrimage experience (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005, xv).

[42] A forthcoming study will entail a more in-depth description and analysis of the practices we have inferred and their relational qualities. Why, for example, are there so few, or no, *ex-votos* at Dan? It would be interesting to carry out a provenience analysis on a massive scale to see how much was imported to Tel Dan from elsewhere and, perhaps more interestingly, whether certain items (oil juglets?) are cropping up at other sites.

It tends to be sensually and emotionally consuming. Pilgrimage is often experienced as hierophany (Eliade 1959)—a sacred, enchanting experience.[43] As B. Jacob Skousen emphasizes, "the senses are integral to experience; they create affects that, as defined here, are embodied, subjective emotions, feelings, dispositions, and states of consciousness that change the way humans perceive the world and give meaning to their experiences" (2018, 266). This often includes the experience of ecstatic states and altered states of consciousness, which are cleansing (both physically and psychologically) and transformational.

Pilgrimage frequently involves a process of healing of, or the alleviation of, suffering from ailments both personal and societal (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005, x–xi, xxvi–xxxiv). A pilgrimage is a new start and a shared experience, both private and public. Pilgrimage instigates *communitas* (Turner and Turner 1978), which results in the social validation of the self and an accompanying reduction of stress and anxiety (e.g., Winkelman and Dubisch 2005, xxxii–xxxiv). As a shared experience, pilgrimage is a form of popular empowerment (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005, xxii–xxvi), which can create social and political solidarity, but which can also endanger established power structures. The sacred can be contested.[44] This was certainly true of ancient Israel and Judah, especially as one considers the reality of multiple Yahwistic royal cult places. Skousen argues that:




> pilgrimage scholars should focus on the relational qualities of pilgrimage in order to rethink and produce more detailed, sensuous descriptions and analyses of this practice. This can be done by employing "relational approaches," seen here as perspectives that recognize and prioritize the interconnections among persons, places, things, and substances. I further suggest that focusing on movement, the vitality of places and materials, and the senses is useful in thinking about the relational aspects of pilgrimage. (Skousen 2018, 261)

We agree wholeheartedly with this approach, and we have taken a step in this direction in our outline of pilgrimage to Dan. There is, of course,

[43] Gell 1992; Bennett 2001.

[44] Coleman and Elsner 1991; Eade and Sallnow 1991.

much more to be done; one has the feeling that the *archeology* of pilgrimage to Dan will become a kind of pilgrimage in its own right.

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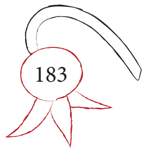

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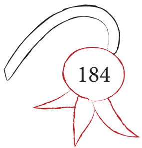


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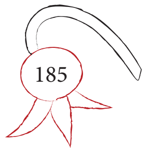


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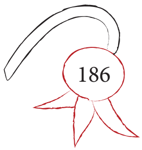


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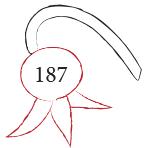


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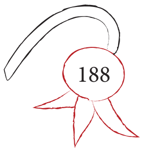


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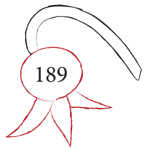


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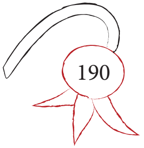



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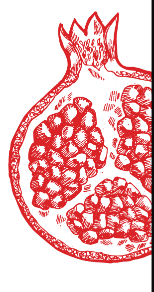

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