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## Studies in the Ancient Israelite Cult of Dead Kin

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# **Studies in the Ancient Israelite Cult of Dead Kin**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies in  
Classical Studies

By

Joshua Jacobs

Spring 2023  
Classical Studies  
Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences  
The University of Arkansas

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the culmination of a long and winding journey, upon which I have been guided and supported by many. I would first like to thank Dr. Lynda Coon and Dr. John Treat, who have demonstrated thoughtful and respectful study of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and who never looked at me sideways for wanting to study these texts. I would also like to thank Kelly Carter for her constant interest in and excitement for my studies throughout my undergraduate career. The University of Arkansas Honors College provided me with both funding and guidance throughout this research project, neither of which I could have done without.

I am also deeply grateful for the faculty members of the University of Arkansas' Classical Studies program. My first undergraduate course, at 9:40 AM Monday, August 26, 2019, was an Introduction to Ancient Greek, taught by Dr. Daniel Levine. Dr. Levine is entirely unique (quite possibly heaven-sent, if I am to trust his own words), and his mentorship and care for students has left an indelible mark on me. I hope to imitate his kindness to others and his passion for his craft. Since that first Ancient Greek course, I have been the grateful student of Dr. Joy Reeber, Dr. Dora Vennarucci, and Dr. Dave Fredrick, all of whom have impressed upon me their own fascination with the ancient world and the people who inhabited it. Without these professors, I would not know the wonders of philology, archaeology, and history.

For Dr. Spencer Allen, I cannot express the extent of my gratitude. He has quite literally changed the course of my life and career, and without him, this thesis would not exist. Over the course of three years, he has dedicated hours upon hours of his time to teach me a plethora of ancient languages. I am grateful for his willingness to discuss ideas about ancient Israel and Judah, the Hebrew Bible, and the ancient Near East, all with a student who once thought the Samaritans spoke Sumerian. From the first seeds of thought about the current project, he has been insightful and active in providing me with resources, leads, and other scholars with whom to connect. He has been uplifting and honest in offering his thoughts and advice as the various pieces of this work came together. He has consistently encouraged me to try new things, whether it be presenting my research at a conference or taking a pottery course (maybe one day). I hope to be a lifelong student of the ancient Near East, and that from the mentorship and example of Dr. Allen. Thank you.

I wish to thank my parents, who have supported me in my studies, even if it is difficult to explain at times. My final thanks go to my wife Dani, who has already shown a great deal of patience and support as I researched, wrote, and rambled on about all sorts of obscure texts and topics. She has kept me sane and grounded, helping me to realize that there is more to life than words on pages. I look forward to the rest of this journey with you.

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## Introduction

### The Ancient Israelite Cult of Dead Kin

#### 1 Modern Scholarship

In 1986, Klaas Spronk published a monograph titled, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*.<sup>1</sup> Although many have criticized Spronk's central thesis, his study began a new era in biblical scholarship on death and the afterlife in ancient Israel.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it sparked renewed interest in the study of the relationship between the living and the dead. Just three years after Spronk's work, Theodore J. Lewis published his own study, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (1989). Lewis affirmed and developed evidence for one of the foundational aspects of Spronk's book: in ancient Israel, the dead depended on the living for the proper performance of certain rituals which would maintain 1) the connection between the living members of a family and their deceased kin, and 2) the livelihood of the deceased in the afterlife. This ritual interaction between the living and the dead has been described variously as a "cult of the dead," an "ancestor cult," and a "cult of dead kin."<sup>3</sup> In this study, I will employ the last of these phrases, "the cult of dead kin," to describe these rituals which the living offered to their deceased, as it is unquestionable that this cult was indeed centered around the family unit.<sup>4</sup> In 1991, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith published a monograph, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, extensively cataloguing the archaeological data for burials in the Levant during the Iron Age (ca. 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spronk also includes a comprehensive overview of scholarship until 1986. See Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 25-84.

<sup>2</sup> On criticism, see, for example Christopher Hays' worry that "beatific afterlife" is a topic dictated by the interests of later Judaism and Christianity, in Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> For different authors who have employed these various descriptions, see Ackerman, "Just Who Is Coming to Dinner?," 298 n. 4.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife," 1-54.

century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE). These three studies, among many others, were able to change the longstanding scholarly opinion that no such cult could have existed in ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> Over the last decade, three more studies, albeit with various aims, continued to affirm the scholars of the late twentieth century: there was indeed a cult of dead kin in ancient Israel and Judah. Specifically, these works are Christopher Hays', *Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah* (2011), Matthew Suriano's, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (2018), and Kerry Sonia's, *Caring for the Dead in Ancient Israel* (2020). Now, there have certainly been those who disagree with the assessment put forth by all of the aforementioned scholars. In a thorough and well-respected study, Brian Schmidt argued that ancestor cults were a late introduction into Israel from Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite these disagreements from so-called "minimalists," the mainstream scholarly opinion has remained in favor of the existence of a native and longstanding cult of dead kin in ancient Israel.<sup>7</sup>

## **2 The Cult of Dead Kin in Ancient Israel: Its Rituals and Participants**

Having briefly discussed modern scholarship on the cult of dead kin in ancient Israel, it is necessary now to discuss what rituals this cult consisted of. It is important to note initially that, for ancient Israel, death involved both the living and the deceased.<sup>8</sup> I am primarily interested in the responsibilities of the living toward their deceased relatives: these responsibilities included, in general, funerary and mortuary rites. Following the definitions put forth by Schmidt: "Funerary rites include burial and mourning customs. The mortuary

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this minimalist backlash, see Lewis, "How Far Can Texts Take Us?," 187ff.

<sup>8</sup> So, Matthew Suriano: "Death in the Hebrew Bible was relational," in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 175.

cult includes the regular care or feeding of the common dead or the ancestors as well as the customary commemoration of the dead.”<sup>9</sup>

The natural progression of these rites begins with burial; the most desirable form of inhumation for the ancient Israelite took place in the family tomb.<sup>10</sup> This tomb was usually located either on a family’s own land, or in a village cemetery.<sup>11</sup> Examples of this sort of burial in the biblical text include the narrative in Gen 23 of Abraham’s purchase of the Cave of Machpelah, and Sarah’s subsequent burial there, along with the other patriarchs and most of their wives.<sup>12</sup> Another example can be found in the book of Kings, wherein a deceased monarch is said to “sleep with his ancestors” (וישכב עם־אבתיו).<sup>13</sup> This phraseology, along with the biblical expression, “He was gathered to his people” (ויאסף אל־עמיו), requires some clarification.<sup>14</sup> The initial inclination for many when encountering these phrases is to associate them explicitly with the act of burial itself. However, it is likely the case that this phrase has more to do with the joining of the deceased with ancestors in the netherworld, distinct from the burial act.<sup>15</sup>

While there may be reservations with drawing conclusions about the general populace of ancient Israel based on biblical passages alone, studies like Bloch-Smith’s

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<sup>9</sup> Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead*, 5. Although Schmidt’s conclusions generally contradict the mainstream of biblical scholarship, these definitions are most helpful in delineating terms that can be so easily confused.

<sup>10</sup> Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects,” 603; Spronk, “Good death and bad death,” 991.

<sup>11</sup> Brichito, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 5; Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 115; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 238; Suriano, *A History of Death*, 200-204. This location of the burial plot is of utmost importance, for it allows easy access to the deceased for the practice of mortuary rituals.

<sup>12</sup> The story, and implications, of Rachel’s burial outside of this family tomb is treated in Matthew Suriano, *A History of Death*, 208-211. My own discussion of this narrative can be found in Chapter Two of the present study.

<sup>13</sup> For example, 1 Kgs 2:10; 11:43; 14:20, 31.

<sup>14</sup> ArteMov: “It [this phrase] is found in the accounts of the deaths of patriarchs in the book of Genesis as well as in the speeches of God announcing the deaths of Moses and Aaron in Numbers and Deuteronomy.” See ArteMov, “Belief in Family Reunion,” 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> ArteMov, “Belief in Family Reunion,” 29-32; also, Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 240-241. These authors disagree on the relative importance of the question but seem to arrive at similar conclusions.

catalogue of the archaeological data of Judahite tombs deal substantially with the material culture of the common people, and the data often affirms in broad strokes the picture described by the biblical text.<sup>16</sup> For example, there have been various types of objects discovered by archaeologists at burial sites, including pottery, jewelry, tools, etc., some of which may reflect offerings from the living.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond burial, I will now consider the mortuary practices of ancient Israel, which generally consisted of offerings of food, drink, etc. to the deceased and commemorating their name. There is strong archaeological and biblical evidence that feeding the dead was practiced in ancient Israel.<sup>18</sup> The biblical text that is most often cited as evidence for this ritual is Deut 26:14 wherein a tither swears that he has “not offered any of it to the dead” (ולא־נתתי ממנו למת).<sup>19</sup> This text must not be used to reject the existence ritual offerings to the deceased in ancient Israel; rather, as H.C. Brichto puts it, “Not only does this verse attest to the practice, as late as the time of Deuteronomy, of offerings made to the dead; it attests that normative biblical religion accorded them the sanction of tolerance.”<sup>20</sup> Actual food in ancient Israelite tombs seems somewhat scarce, although according to Bloch-Smith, archaeologists have found large quantities of “ceramic forms...specifically for the

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Suriano also provides a detailed analysis of Judahite tombs, along with inscriptional data. See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 39-127.

<sup>17</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 63-108.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Suriano also analyzes Aramaic inscriptions from Zincirli. See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 163-170.

<sup>19</sup> It has become an almost unanimous interpretation among scholars that this text does indeed constitute evidence of this practice. See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 244; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 102-104; Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 126; Suriano, *A History of Death*, 158-161; Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects,” 609 n. 25; Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 28-29. As pointed out by Lewis, “Prior to the discoveries at Ugarit, scholars debated the ambiguity of the Hebrew *lēmēt*.” Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 103. Other biblical texts that describe this phenomenon are Hos 9:4 and Job 21:25.

<sup>20</sup> Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 29. Lewis disagrees slightly, as he sets this practice under the banner of necromancy, which “had no place in ‘normative Yahwism.’” See Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 104.



preparation, serving, and storing of foodstuffs, wine and other liquids.”<sup>21</sup> There have been interesting scholarly debates regarding the motives of this offering for the dead.<sup>22</sup> Were they perceived as weak and needing sustenance? Or were they vengeful and required appeasement? Did they have power to affect the lives of the living? Regardless of these questions, the existence of the practice is firmly founded textually and archaeologically.<sup>23</sup>

Another mortuary ritual practiced in ancient Israel is what can be called memorialization, or put another way, the invocation of the name of the dead. The integral biblical text cited by scholars in discussion of this ritual is 2 Sam 18:18, wherein a childless Absalom, with no son “to proclaim his name” (הזכיר שמי) sets up a pillar (מצבת) for this purpose. Many scholars have seen this moment as a reflection of a funerary practice performed on behalf of the dead.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the practice, and language, of 2 Sam 18:18 has a direct parallel elsewhere in the Levant with the Hadad inscription (KAI 214.16, 21), in which Panammu tells his sons to “invoke the name of Panammu” (ויזכר אשם פנמו) and “invoke the name of Hadad” (ויזכר אשם הדד). Lewis also sees a connection between Ugaritic texts and this passage, saying, “Scholars have frequently made reference to the description of the ideal son setting up ‘the stela of his divine ancestor’ (*nāšibu sikni ’il’ibihu*).”<sup>25</sup> Jacob Milgrom, following Miranda Bayliss, makes a direct connection between the funerary cult

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<sup>21</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 105-108; this sentiment is echoed in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 154-158.

<sup>22</sup> Bloch-Smith discusses this in Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 122-126; See also, Scurlock, “Ghosts in the Ancient Near East,” 77-79.

<sup>23</sup> Thus, Suriano: “The texts describe or allude to cultural action performed by the living for the dead regardless of whether the main concern was the proscription of customs for sake of purity, as in the pentateuchal texts, or whether the intention was the veneration of the dead in monumental form, as in the Aramaic inscriptions.” Suriano, *A History of Death*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 118-120; Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 113-114.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 119; Ugaritic in CTA 17.1.27.

and this remembrance of the name of the dead.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is unclear exactly what this ritual comprised or where it took place, and scholars have differing opinions regarding the key biblical passage described above.<sup>27</sup> Despite this lack of clarity, there is again an overwhelming consensus that there indeed existed some form of invocation of the name of the dead as part of a mortuary rite, not only in ancient Israel, but across the Levant in general.

There remains one more aspect of death which requires introduction: namely, the realm of the dead. In the Hebrew Bible, the most common designation for the netherworld was “Sheol” (שְׁאוֹל); this term occurs alongside “Death” (מוֹת), “Land” (אֶרֶץ), and “Pit” (בּוֹר).<sup>28</sup> These words, especially Sheol, refer not only to the place where the deceased resided; they also can be used to embody encounters of the living with death.<sup>29</sup> More than the names assigned to the netherworld, it is important to discuss how ancient Israelites thought about human existence in these realms. Sheol was located beneath the surface of the Earth; this can be seen in biblical texts in which one “goes down” (יָרַד) to the land of the dead (e.g.,

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<sup>26</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1774.

<sup>27</sup> Spronk, “Good death and bad death,” 992; Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 26 n. 41.

<sup>28</sup> A list of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible of these terms can be found in Lewis, “Abode of the Dead,” 104. Sheol is mysterious, both etymologically and conceptually. Scholars have been unable to agree upon an etymological origin of this word, and its absence in other mythological texts of the surrounding cultures both adds to this confusion and helps to maintain the elusive nature of the concept. See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 217-223; also, Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 66-69. Another consideration for Sheol is the correlation between this word and the netherworld over and against the grave itself. Scholars gave disagreed on the emphasis that should be placed on either aspect of the word. For the term “death,” it must be noted that this word can refer both to the realm of the dead, as well as to the power of death. It seems related to the Ugaritic deity, Mot, who personified Death. This can be seen in biblical texts like Num 16:32, “And the Land opened its mouth, and it swallowed them, and their houses, and all the people who belonged to Korah, and all their property.” See also, Isa 5:14, “Therefore, Sheol has made large its throat and opened its mouth without limit, and its honors, and its crowd, and its roaring and exultation will go down into it.” See Milgrom, *Numbers*, 138. The Ugaritic, and Akkadian parallels remain strong for the use of the generic term “land” to refer to the realm of the dead. See again Lewis, “Abode of the Dead,” 101.

<sup>29</sup> Suriano says, “Sheol typically describes the psalmist’s threatened status, implying that it can refer to a state of being.” Suriano, *A History of Death*, 221.

Num 16:30, Job 7:9, Isa 57:9).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it appears that the land of the dead was a place of darkness and that, much like in Mesopotamian sources (discussed below), it was a place from which none could return.<sup>31</sup> Another interesting aspect of the perception of the realm of the dead is the consistent association between it and the chaotic waters that were also thought to exist below the earth.<sup>32</sup> As in Mesopotamia, there is mention of the idea that Sheol is gated, potentially for the purpose of ensuring that the dead could never escape.<sup>33</sup> While there is debate regarding whether all deceased ended up in Sheol, it seems likely that, given the widespread practice of burial and mortuary rites, it was indeed an abode for all, albeit unpleasant.

### **3 The Cult of Dead Kin in Mesopotamia**

In Mesopotamia there also existed a cult of dead kin.<sup>34</sup> This cult is pertinent to the present study for various reasons. Most broadly, the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian empires of the first millennium BCE exercised great political, cultural, and religious influence over the comparatively small states of Israel and Judah. Beyond this, however, some aspects of this study require knowledge of and comparison with the Mesopotamian cult of dead kin. I will discuss these specific instances below.

In Mesopotamia, there are many similarities regarding burial practices compared with ancient Israel, the first among them being the mere fact that inhumation of the body

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<sup>30</sup> This, and the following descriptions are from Lewis, "Abode of the Dead," 102-103.

<sup>31</sup> For the darkness of Sheol, see Job 17:13, Lam 3:6, Job 18:18. For the permanence of residence in Sheol, see Job 7:9, "The one who goes down to Sheol does not rise up." In some biblical texts, there is hope expressed in YHWH bringing up the writer from Sheol; this most likely refers to the idea of Sheol as a state of being.

<sup>32</sup> Although this is ambiguous in biblical texts, such as Jon 2, there seems to be exceptional similarity between the idea of water in the netherworld in ancient Israelite and Mesopotamian ideologies.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Jon 2:6.

<sup>34</sup> See Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin," 115-125.

was the dominant method of dealing with corpses.<sup>35</sup> Alexander Heidel states: “To be left unburied or unprovided for was...a grievous misfortune or a terrible punishment.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the familial responsibilities to the dead are similar; namely, it was the living kinsmen’s responsibility to bury the corpse of the dead.<sup>37</sup> Intriguingly, the tombs were often beneath the homes of the family members of the deceased.<sup>38</sup> Although this location differs from the idea of a family burial plot or village cemetery, the fundamental impulse is quite clear; it is of utmost importance that one’s deceased family members remained close to the living and were easily accessible.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, like in ancient Israel, a multiplicity of grave goods have been found in ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>40</sup> The mourning rituals of ancient Israel and Mesopotamia are less pertinent to this study, although they were indeed similar: the tearing of clothes, the application of dust to the body and the head, and lacerating one’s own skin, are a few of their mutual practices.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it is clear that in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia, there are numerous similarities regarding burial practices.

As in the discussion on ancient Israel’s cult of dead kin, I will turn now from burial to mortuary rites. In Mesopotamia, the textual evidence regarding care for the dead is overwhelming. This care was performed by the person known as the *pāqīdu*, often a family member of the deceased.<sup>42</sup> The importance of this caregiver can be seen in a multitude of

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<sup>35</sup> Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 103.

<sup>36</sup> Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> This can also be inferred by the family’s role in caring for the deceased. Put another way, it seems obvious that if the family is required to care for the deceased post-burial, they would also be intimately involved in the burial process.

<sup>38</sup> Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, 164.

<sup>39</sup> There is again a connection here between the patrimony and the ancestors, a connection which has been detailed in the above discussion of the levirate.

<sup>40</sup> Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 104; Katz, “Death they Dispensed,” 64 n. 29.

<sup>41</sup> A discussion of these similarities can be found in Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 244-247.

<sup>42</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death*, 180; also Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 124. Suriano also includes a comparison between this term and Inscription B from Khirbet Beit Lei’s Tomb 1 (*BLeI* 6). The inscription reads: “Attend (to us) Yah, O gracious God! Acquit Yah, O Yahweh” (פִּקֵּד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יְהוָה). For this translation

texts, in which the lack of such a provider produces serious negative consequences for the deceased. For example, Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh, includes this line:

‘Did you see the one whose shade has no one to make funerary offerings?’ ‘I saw him.  
He eats scrapings from the pot and crusts of bread thrown away in the street.’<sup>43</sup>

In Mesopotamia, these offerings also seem to have followed a schedule, with certain offerings prescribed monthly or annually.<sup>44</sup> The role of the *pāqīdu*, and the fulfillment of their duties were of immense importance and will be discussed further in Chapter Three of this study. Despite the Mesopotamian characterization of the netherworld as “the house which none who enters ever leaves” (Gilgamesh, VII, l. 185),<sup>45</sup> there are a number of incantations for the purpose of exorcising the ghosts of those whose care has ceased.<sup>46</sup> One such text reads:

“The ghost which cried out in my house, whether he be (the ghost of my) father (or) mother, or brother (or) sister  
or the son of somebody or other or a roaming ghost with no one to care for him, a funerary offering has been made for him; water has been libated for him. May the evil (portended by) his cry go off after him. May the (e)vil (portended by) his cry of evil not approach me.”<sup>47</sup>

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see Suriano, *A History of Death*, 184 n. 17. Lewis also discusses this connection in Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 120-122.

<sup>43</sup> George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 195. Milgrom, Suriano, and Spronk all include this text in discussions of the feeding of the dead. See Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1773; Suriano, *A History of Death*, 181; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, 151-152; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 104; Katz, “Death they Dispensed,” 65.

<sup>45</sup> George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Spronk is insightful about the characterization of the realm of the dead as a place from which none return as it stands against texts that seem quite clearly to imply that the dead can indeed roam again in the world of the living. He says, “Just as in Israelite thought, the world of the dead not only denoted a place, but also the power of death.” Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 100.

<sup>47</sup> This translation along with an edition of this text, can be found in Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means*, 178-179, No. 1 *Afo* 29/30.2 (fig. 2). All told, she includes eight similar texts in her work. The others are as follows: 183-184, No. 3 *CT* 23.15-22+(K 2175+K 2469+K 2475+K 2480+K 7814)+K 2431+K 14738(+K 2352(+K 11321+AMT 29/1 (K 8777)+AMT 89/3(K 10429+K 11677)+KMI 74(K 10710)+K 10454+AMT 38/6(K 13962); 195-196, No. 9 *CT* 23.15-22+KAR 234; 197-199, No. 10 *CT* 23.15-22+KAR 21; 214-217, No. 18 *CT* 23.15-22+BAM 230, BAM 546, K 2415, Sm 1227; 503-506, No. 217 *LKA* 84; 510-514, No. 219 *KAR* 32, K 9175; 543-545, No. 232 *BBR* 2 no. 52.

The mere fact that ancient Mesopotamians conceptualized ghosts, in part, as those who had no one to care for them, including their feeding, testifies to the importance placed on this rite, specifically named the *kispum*. Most scholars see this ritual as a type of funerary offering in which the living and the dead were able to commune and eat together.<sup>48</sup> This rite was repeated throughout the year, as well as at other events with postmortem significance, like burials.<sup>49</sup> Along with feeding the deceased, this ritual involved the invocation of the names of the dead, a practice which we have seen present in ancient Israel specifically, and the Levant more broadly.<sup>50</sup> This remembrance was also instantiated at times through statues or stelae for the dead.<sup>51</sup> One Assyrian text, with language nearly identical to that of the biblical and Levantine texts above, says, “I have invoked your name with the spirits of the dead (of my family), I have invoked your name with the funerary offerings” (*šumka itti eṭemmē azkur šumka itti kispī azkur*).<sup>52</sup> Here, within the same line, there is a close association between the *kispum*, the feeding of the dead, and the remembrance of the names of the dead.

#### **4 In Search of the Ancient Israelite Cult of Dead Kin**

Thus far, I have described in brief modern scholarship on the ancient Israelite and Mesopotamian cults of dead kin. What follows are three chapters investigating various aspects of this cult in ancient Israel. Chapter 1 is comparative and philological in nature. In it, I interpret the narrative of Judah and Tamar found in Gen 38 as primarily concerned with death. From Judah’s motivations to Tamar’s near immolation, it appears that each of these

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<sup>48</sup> Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 104-110; Suriano, *A History of Death*, 183. However, in line with his generally contradictory view, Schmidt has issues with this characterization. See Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead*, 28-36.

<sup>49</sup> Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> CAD E, 400a trans Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 119.

characters seeks to preserve his/her own postmortem existence. In Chapter 2, I take a more historical and sociological approach to investigate whether parity existed in the way men and women were treated after their death in ancient Israel. Here, I analyze several biblical texts, including Gen 23; 35; and 2 Kgs 9, along with comparative material from Ugarit and the Levant. Finally, in Chapter 3, I have conducted a lexical study of the root  $\pi\eta\eta$ . As stated above, in Mesopotamia, the *pāqīdu* was the caretaker in the cult of dead kin. I posit in this last section of the study that Isa 26:14; 38:10 and Jer 15:15 preserve this custodial meaning in the Hebrew Bible.

While each of these chapters investigates a separate question underlying the cult of dead kin in ancient Israel, their total effect amounts to a strong development in the evidential basis of the cult of dead kin in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, I intend for each of the following chapters to offer further clarity and support for the ways biblical authors used ideologies of death and the afterlife to inform their writing. I believe that these references to the cult are not hidden or cryptic. Rather, it seems that the biblical authors were able to assume knowledge of this cult, so that their writings did not reflect in-depth discussions on this common aspect of life, instead making subtle use of the imagery and ideologies of this cult.

# Chapter One

## An Analysis of Death and the Afterlife in Genesis 38

### 1 Introduction: Death and Genesis 38

Biblical scholarship has long been intrigued by the narrative of Judah and Tamar found in Gen 38, and for good reason. This passage is dense and multi-faceted; while it has often been attributed primarily to the Yahwistic source (J), data for this view is difficult to produce.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the pericope's relationship to the Joseph story has elicited a number of differing viewpoints.<sup>2</sup> Aside from these redaction-critical considerations, the content of the text has also been analyzed thoroughly. For example, the invocation of levirate marriage as well as Tamar's ostensible prostitution have produced both profound and unfortunate responses among scholars.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite the foregoing debates, scholars have tended to overlook a central aspect of Gen 38: namely, the text's overwhelming preoccupation with death. This preoccupation manifests in a number of ways, including explicit references to the deaths of Judah's sons and wife, and the near immolation of Tamar at the end of the chapter. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, E.A. Speiser states: "It is especially interesting that this narrative should stem from J (cf. vss. 7, 10), precisely because J also has a substantial stake in the Joseph story." This mere note to cross-reference is all the evidence provided in the commentary that this pericope is indeed from J. Speiser, *Genesis*, 299. For an overview of this discussion, see Emerton, "Some Problems"; also, Leuchter, "Genesis 38." This last article discusses the difficulties of dating biblical texts through linguistic criteria. Jeffrey Stackert expresses similar concern; he also gives extensive notes to further discussions of the absolute dating of biblical texts. See Stackert, *Rewriting the Torah*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Goldin, "The Youngest Son."

<sup>3</sup> Given Gen 38's role as one of only three potential texts in the Hebrew Bible that refer to the institution of levirate marriage, it has remained integral to scholarly pursuit of this subject. See, for example, Burrows, "Levirate Marriage." A number of scholars have used Tamar's designation as a *qādešā* as evidence of ancient Near Eastern cult prostitution. See, for example, Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule." However, Tigay summarizes the reality of the situation well: "There is probably no subject in the field of ancient Near Eastern religion on which more has been written, with so much confidence, on the basis of so little explicit evidence, than 'cultic prostitution.'" See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 481. It is also pertinent to mention that modern interpretations of Tamar have tended to the positive. See Frymer-Kensky, "Reading the Women," 264-277. However, the rabbis figured her an immoral, yet necessary, tool for the preservation of Judah's line of kings and redeemers. See Freedman and Simon, *Genesis Rabbah*, 794.



the levirate institution's role in providing descendants for the deceased renders it closely connected to ancient Israelite conceptions of death and the afterlife (cf. Deut 25:5–10).<sup>4</sup>

In light of the scholarship that has revealed the existence of an ancient Israelite cult of dead kin, it is untenable and unwise to forego a treatment of such repeated and explicit references to postmortem ideologies. This chapter will attempt to provide such a treatment of Gen 38, with two primary conclusions: 1) Judah's actions in the chapter (his invocation of the levirate and his withholding of Shelah from Tamar) ought to be viewed as responses to the threat on his afterlife brought on by the deaths of his sons, and 2) Tamar's near immolation was meant to constitute an existential threat to her afterlife. Together, these conclusions allow for a more cohesive reading of Gen 38, drawing together the deaths of Judah's sons and wife, the levirate institution, and Tamar's role as fulfiller of the levirate and near-victim of immolation. This analysis will be accompanied and supported by other ancient Near Eastern texts including Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh and a number of Mesopotamian ghost prescription texts.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Judah's Motivations: The Levirate Marriage and Gilgamesh Tablet XII

Turning now to Gen 38, it is necessary first to establish the chthonic overtones within the pericope prior to the immolation episode.<sup>6</sup> As previously stated, these overtones manifest

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<sup>4</sup> Burrows, "Levirate Marriage," 28–31; also, Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife," 11–22.

<sup>5</sup> Any English translation of the former text comes from George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The ghost prescription texts come from Scurlock, *Medico-Magical Means*.

<sup>6</sup> Suriano argues that "the ideal of an afterlife in the Hebrew Bible often lies unrecognized behind otherwise famous passages." This before analyzing Gen 15, a text not unlike our own, that has garnered a large amount of attention without much connection to the afterlife. However, with just the mention of a burial, Suriano is able to expose strong ideologies of the afterlife within Gen 15. This same method can be followed in the text at hand, although death is even more explicit here. It is not difficult to see why modern interpreters are often unable to expose such ideologies; after all, we are not enmeshed in the culture of the biblical authors. Yet, as will be seen, this ideology of death is easily unraveled once certain key connections have been made. See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 7–8.

in two primary ways: explicit and consistent references to deaths within Judah's family and the invocation and exercise of the levirate institution.<sup>7</sup> First, let us look to Gen 38:6–11 alongside Gilgamesh Tablet XII, ll. 254–270. In the former passage, the author tells of how Judah's eldest son marries Tamar, but is killed by YHWH, because he is evil in his eyes. After his death, Judah invokes the levirate, ordering his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar.<sup>8</sup> Onan, however, famously refuses to perform this duty, thereby incurring the wrath of YHWH, who kills him as well.<sup>9</sup> At this point, Judah refuses to marry Tamar to Shelah, "for he said, 'lest he die also, like his brothers'" (v. 11). The juxtaposition of Judah's insistence that Onan fulfill the levirate against his activity in ensuring that Shelah does not do so elicits the question: Why this change of heart?<sup>10</sup>

Here, Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh becomes enlightening.<sup>11</sup> The relevant passage, wherein Gilgamesh questions Enkidu about the netherworld, reads, in part:

'Did you see the man with one son?' 'I saw him.'  
 'How does he fare?' 'For the peg built into his wall bitterly he laments.'  
 'Did you see the man with seven sons?' 'I saw him.'  
 'How does he fare?' 'Among the junior deities he sits on a throne and listens to the proceedings.'  
 'Did you see the man with no heir?' 'I saw him.'  
 'How does he fare?' 'He eats a bread loaf like a kiln-fired brick.'

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<sup>7</sup> The root מוּת occurs four times in the first eleven verses of the chapter.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that in Gen 38, the levirate is invoked by the father-in-law of the widow, whereas in Deut 25:5–10, it appears that the brother of the deceased takes this role upon himself. In Ruth 4, it is the widow (Ruth) who catalyzes the kinsman-redeemer (Boaz) to action.

<sup>9</sup> See Davies, "Inheritance Rights," 257–258; also, Thompson and Thompson, "Some Legal Problems," 93–94. For a more in-depth explanation of the general male angst regarding the levirate, see Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 405–407.

<sup>10</sup> This agency in Judah, corresponding to the passivity of his sons, is a strong indication that Judah and Tamar are the key players in the chapter, despite the overwhelming amount of attention placed on the marriages of Judah's sons in scholarly writing.

<sup>11</sup> As George states: "The last Tablet in the 'Series of Gilgamesh', Tablet XII, is not part of the epic at all, but an Akkadian translation of the latter part of the Sumerian poem of Bilgameš and the Netherworld." See George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 100; also, Katz, "Death they Dispensed," 65 n. 32. However, Nicola Vulpe seems interested in, at the very least, asserting that the Epic is thematically incomplete without Tablet XII. See Vulpe, "Irony and the Unity of the Gilgamesh Epic," 283.

This text details the familiar idea regarding death and the afterlife in Mesopotamia, shared by ancient Israelites, that one's postmortem existence depended on his progeny. The rest of the passage between the mention of the first and the seventh sons only serves to further substantiate this idea.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to recognize the structural similarities between this passage and Gen 38:7–11.<sup>13</sup> Indeed the two texts seemingly offer a parallel vision between the world of the dead, in Tablet XII, and the world of the living, in Genesis. In the biblical text, Judah is faced with the deaths, in quick succession, of his two eldest sons. And, given the necessity of progeny for the quality of one's afterlife in ancient Israel, it is quite easy to imagine that, with each successive death, Judah becomes increasingly anxious regarding his own postmortem prospects. It seems almost as if, with the loss of one son, then two, readers are meant to picture Judah falling down the hierarchy of those consigned to the netherworld. Thus, it appears that the author of Gen 38 assumes that his audience understands the postmortem consequences of Judah's losses and expects readers to recognize their immense gravity and seriousness.

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<sup>12</sup> The fact that living kinsmen of the deceased provided for the needs of the deceased, often through provision of food and drink, in many sections of Mesopotamian society has become almost a truism. For regular feeding of the dead in Mesopotamia, see Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, 151–152. For the general dependence the deceased had on the living, see Scurlock, *Ghosts*, 79; Katz, "Death they Dispensed," 65; Spronk, discussing this very passage, notes: "This text makes it abundantly clear that the dead were thought to be totally dependent on the living for their well-being in the hereafter, especially their descendants." See Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 102. Again, though this idea was initially denied by biblical scholars, it has become widely accepted that these same principles were practiced in ancient Israel. See Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Some scholars have seen strikingly close connections between the language of the epic and passages of the Hebrew Bible. See, for example, Sommer, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," 153. However, this is not the case in the present scenario. Yet despite the lack of strict dependence on the epic by authors of the Hebrew Bible, the thematic parallels have often been seen as evidence of shared conceptions about the world in the ancient Near East (e.g., the flood stories of Gen 6–9 and Tablet XI of the Standard Version). Moreover, archaeological data has revealed the presence of the text of the epic itself in Bronze Age Canaan, offering tantalizing evidence that the story of the epic, if not the actual text itself, was known to some in Canaan. See Horowitz et al., *Cuneiform in Canaan*, 105–108.

Having briefly mentioned the invocation of the levirate, we turn now to a fuller discussion of its role in Gen 38.<sup>14</sup> This institution is a complex one, with many scholars offering various views on its purpose.<sup>15</sup> However, a consistent aspect of the conversation has been the levirate's relationship to afterlife ideologies through its provision of descendants for the deceased brother.<sup>16</sup> Or, as Deut 25:6 says, "The firstborn whom she brings forth will rise over the name of the dead brother." As stated above, the levirate is invoked by Judah at the death of Er, his firstborn. However, after the death of Onan, Judah refuses to marry Shelah to Tamar. Millar Burrows states: "The extinction of the self, his own life, was what a man avoided by having a son."<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is clear that Judah's refusal to marry Shelah to Tamar is a result of his concern for his own afterlife; from Judah's perspective, it is Tamar who has deprived him of two of his children up to this point.<sup>18</sup> Not only has she caused him a substantial decrease in the quality of his own afterlife, as can be

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<sup>14</sup> Although some form of the levirate was practiced elsewhere, as can be seen in the Middle Assyrian and the Hittite Laws, the purpose and form of the institution varied somewhat significantly from what is found in the biblical texts; in the latter, it seems a consistent theme that the preservation of the name of the deceased is intended. For example, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 483.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Davies argues that levirate marriage was intended as a supportive measure to uphold the status of childless widows, and to give them children for their husband's inheritance. See "Inheritance Rights," 17. Weisberg even suggests that "providing for widows rather than securing offspring for the deceased had come to be seen as the primary benefit of levirate marriage." See Weisberg, "The Widow of our Discontent," 428. Burrows contrasts the issues of inheritance and afterlife in his discussion. See Burrows, "Levirate Marriage," 28. Brichto offers a more integrative approach to the question of inheritance as opposed to the afterlife. See Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife," 11–22.

<sup>16</sup> Thus, Burrows: "According to a widespread notion of the ancient world, a man's life after death depended upon the due performance of ancestral rites by his descendants. Perhaps, as has often been supposed, the practice of levirate marriage grew out of ancestor-worship, its original purpose being to provide a son to carry on the cult." See Burrows, "Levirate Marriage," 31–32.

<sup>17</sup> Burrows, "Levirate Marriage," 31.

<sup>18</sup> Modern readers may be tempted to suspect that Judah is motivated by selfless, paternal love. However, the text itself does not lend credence to this interpretation. Robert Alter notes the silence on Judah's part in the biblical text, as opposed to the inconsolable Jacob in the previous chapter and says it "makes us wonder whether there is a real lack of responsiveness in Judah." See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6. Moreover, Heath Dewrell explains that "a common assumption in most modern Western societies is that parents have a strong biologically ingrained attachment to children from the moment of their birth," but that these "modern attitudes toward children are indeed nothing more than modern constructions." See Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice*, 77–82.

demonstrated from Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh, she has threatened his very postmortem existence. As demonstrated, Gen 38:7–11, which introduces the chief conflict of the chapter, is awash with explicit references to death. The presence of the levirate marriage, an institution highly charged with postmortem significance in ancient Israel, further adds to the importance of the theme of death in the pericope.

### **3 The Near Immolation of Tamar**

Having seen that Judah views Tamar as a threat to his own afterlife, we turn now to the subject of immolation. Texts in the Hebrew Bible that refer to immolation are scarce, and when they do appear there is little explanation or consistency for this punishment's application.<sup>19</sup> These texts, besides Gen 38:24, include Lev 10:1–2; 20:14; 21:9; Judg 12:1; 14:15; 15:6; 1 Kgs 16:18; and Dan 3.<sup>20</sup> One of these, namely Lev 21:9, requires further explanation, given the consistent linking of this passage to Gen 38 by biblical scholars.<sup>21</sup> The verse in Leviticus states: “The daughter of a priest that defiles herself for prostitution, she defiles her father; she shall be burned in the fire.” The issue is not whether this verse and Gen 38:24 should be connected at all, but rather on what basis such a connection ought to be made. In my view, these two texts are primarily linked by the intention of those seeking to immolate rather than the situation in which immolation is prescribed. In other words, it is not the case that Tamar's designation as a קדשה in Gen 38:24 points to her

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<sup>19</sup> A discussion of child sacrifice lies outside the scope of the present chapter. See Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice*.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on Dan 3, see Holm, “The Fiery Furnace.” Holm, in listing the biblical evidence for immolation, excludes the passages in Judges and Kings; I am unsure of the reasoning behind this decision.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Sarna, *Genesis*, 269–270; Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1810–1811; also, Levine, *Leviticus*, 143–144. It is notable that each of these authors cites a different justification for immolation. Sarna says “Judah's extreme verdict may reflect contemporary Canaanite practice.” Milgrom asserts that “the older practice for punishing adultery was death by fire.” Finally, Levine broadens this assertion: “It seems, therefore, that it was common to impose death by burning in the case of serious sexual offenses.” Clearly, it is not agreed upon as to what historical practices may have motivated the patriarch.

participation as some sort of cultic functionary, or otherwise related to one, such as the priest's daughter in Lev 21:9; thus, the relationship of the two texts does not indicate that it was common punishment for holy women to be burned as a consequence of sexual impropriety.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the actions of the two women function as such obstacles to the well-being of Judah's family in the former, and the cult in the latter, that it is better to be rid of them entirely rather than suffer the consequences of their actions. This parallel is supported by Nadab and Abihu's death by fire in Lev 10:1–2. Here, the sons of Aaron are immolated by the deity himself for threatening the priesthood through undue offerings. Yet, there is no sense in which the deceased priests can be related to sexual impropriety.

Thus, it is better for the cult and its functionaries that such people are utterly destroyed, rather than becoming a generational problem, as they would be if given the chance to have children or receive proper burial and continued postmortem care. The daughter of the priest who has acted as a prostitute functions as much the same problem for the cult; it is again easier to purify the priesthood by completely destroying her, than to deal with the ramifications of her actions. In the same way, Judah's threat to immolate Tamar allowed him the possibility to rid his family of the scorn and consequences of her actions. Thus, the two texts cannot be linked as evidence of burning within the families of priests and other cultic functionaries; instead, they serve to reinforce the idea present in the Mesopotamian texts below that immolation functions to entirely destroy threats to individual families and the Yahwistic cult.

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<sup>22</sup> Tigay proposes that the term קדש may function as a euphemism for a common prostitute; thus, he says, "Etymology is not a reliable indication of meaning." See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 216.

Having established this, the fact remains that in these verses, the issuance of the injunction to burn someone alive comes after some sort of sexual impropriety.<sup>23</sup> However, this observation alone does little to explain or elucidate the motivations and perceived consequences of immolation in these instances. What is more, sexual impropriety has nothing to do with the verses in Judges or Kings. In Judg 12:1, some Ephraimites threaten Jephthah with immolation because he did not request their aid in battle against the Ammonites. In Judg 14:15 and 15:6 the Philistine immolation of Samson's wife and father-in-law are described. In 1 Kgs 16:18, when Zimri sees that Tirzah has been taken by Omri, he goes into the king's house and burns it over himself.<sup>24</sup> The wide array of circumstances under which immolation is exercised further establishes the likelihood that immolation in these texts served a common purpose, rather than existing as a set punishment for holy prostitutes, as has often been assumed.

Considering the paucity of evidence in the biblical text, it is worthwhile to explore the Mesopotamian attestations to immolation. Tawny L. Holm attempts to summarize these texts, saying, "Death by fire in Mesopotamia seems to be a penalty particularly suitable for crimes against a hierarchical superior (especially against a king or a god), but whether or not it was regularly applied seems impossible to know."<sup>25</sup> Although there are significantly

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<sup>23</sup> So, Levine, *Leviticus*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> Note the use of the word "house" (בית), in Judg 12:1; 14:15; 1 Kgs 16:18. Perhaps this has to do with the presence of the burial plot and the patrimony being tied up together, so that the destruction of the בית constitutes the destruction of the ancestral home. As argued by Stager, an Israelite's "happiness in the afterlife was intimately linked to the preservation of the patrimonial estate by his descendants." Stager, "The Family," 23. On the death of Zimri in 1 Kgs 16:18, Cogan says, "Late classical tradition told of Sin-shar-ishkun, the last Assyrian king (mistakenly named Sardanapalus), who, seeing that Nineveh was about to fall to the barbarians, threw himself into the fire of his burning palace, a portrayal likely derived from the fiery demise of Shamash-shum-ukin in Babylon in 648 BCE; see, at length, Streck 1916, ccxcix n. 1." See Cogan, *1 Kings*, 413.

<sup>25</sup> Holm, "The Fiery Furnace," 88. It must be noted that I was made aware of the following examples of Mesopotamian immolation texts from Holm's article.

more texts that mention immolation in Mesopotamia, this summation suggests that the evidence is equally difficult to interpret.<sup>26</sup> Within the Code of Hammurabi, three laws mention the penalty of immolation.<sup>27</sup> At Mari, there is a text that reads: “Let him (the man who has thought up or knows about the plot) and his house be burnt” (ARM 3 73:15). Here, as in Judges and Kings, there is reference to the burning of the house as well as the criminal. Some Neo-Assyrian inscriptions include reference to the burning of prisoners.<sup>28</sup>

However, Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh and certain Mesopotamian ghost prescription texts offer clues regarding the perceived consequences of immolation. And, given the similarities between ancient Israelite and Mesopotamian ideologies of death and the afterlife, it is reasonable to apply the ideas within these Mesopotamian texts to the perspective of the author of Gen 38 as it relates to the near immolation of Tamar. We shall begin with the ghost prescription texts. JoAnn Scurlock lists a number of these, one of which, longer than the others, will suffice to illustrate the point of all the texts. It reads, in part:

Whether you be a strange ghost, whose name nobody knows, or a roving ghost, or a roaming ghost, or the ghost (of someone) who was abandoned in the steppe, or the ghost (of someone) who died in water, or the ghost (of someone) who died in a river, or the ghost (of someone) who [died] in a well, or the ghost (of someone) who died of hunger, or the ghost (of someone) who [died] of thi[rst], o[r the gh]ost (of someone) who was burned in a fire ... [or a ghost who] has no [one to pour wate]r (for him), [or a ghost who] has nobody [to ca]re for him.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Spronk also cites the rarity of burning in Mesopotamia, although it is unclear whether he is referring to cremation or immolation. See Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 103.

<sup>27</sup> These are laws 25, 110, and 157. It is interesting to note that of these three examples, only law 157 includes overt sexual connotations.

<sup>28</sup> See Holm, “Fiery Furnace,” 90 n. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means*, 33. Text no. 217, *LKA* 84, 503–506. She lists five other texts which I was able to identify that include this provision for someone who was burned. On page 5, she cites *TDP* 78:76; *STT* 91+287:71' // BM 47753 r. 16, apud M. Stol, *Epilepsy* 69; *STT* 91+287:72'; on page 6, *TDP* 78:76; on page 17, *STT* 91+287:72' // BM 47753 r. 17, apud M. Stol, *Epilepsy* 70; on page 18, *TDP* 78:76.



One conclusion that can be drawn from this text is that, along with other ways in which one can die an unnatural death, being burned alive was thought to cause spirits to roam the land of the living as ghosts.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, this fate can also be inflicted on someone who does not have a caretaker or the provisions necessary to live in the afterlife. Thus, it is clear that for Mesopotamians, immolation was a direct threat to one's afterlife. However, a point of contention might be raised here regarding the strength of ancient Israel's conception of ghosts as compared to Mesopotamia. This concern is unwarranted, for although there is again less specific and detailed evidence regarding ghosts in ancient Israel, scholars are confident that there was indeed some form of ritual interaction with the spirits of the dead, based on passages like 1 Sam 28, and others like it.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is possible to conclude that, as in ancient Mesopotamia, immolation in ancient Israel was thought to be a cause for an inadequate and insufferable afterlife.

The next text comes from Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh. This section appears within the same conversation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu discussed above. Here, the text reads: "Did you see the man who was burnt to death? 'I did not see him. His ghost was not there, his smoke went up to the heavens.'" <sup>32</sup> These lines assert an entirely new possibility for the deceased in Mesopotamia: non-existence. Worse than having no children to care for you is the possibility that one would not experience an afterlife at all.<sup>33</sup> It seems

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<sup>30</sup> It is sure that immolation, rather than cremation, is in view here because it appears alongside these other methods of death.

<sup>31</sup> See Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 104–117. The Hebrew words most often used to refer to spirits in the Hebrew Bible are אַבּוֹת and יְדֹעִיִּים, which appear a number of times in legal, historical, and prophetic texts. However, the meaning of the former is somewhat difficult. For a discussion on this etymology in scholarship, see Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, 209–210.

<sup>32</sup> George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Spronk's mention of Assurbanipal's destruction of the tombs of his enemies, and the sons of Nippur who destroyed the bones of their own father. See Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 103.

here that the idea of the text is total dissolution of one's body and spirit. Holm concurs: "One of the goals of burning is the absolute annihilation of a person; not only is their body destroyed, but as smoke they cannot enter and rest in the netherworld."<sup>34</sup> Comparing the ghost prescription texts with this passage, there seems to be a difference in opinion between the two as to what exactly immolation does to a person in the afterlife; while this may be the case, it is also not difficult to imagine that the smoke that rises up in Tablet XII was thought to be one and the same as the ghost of the deceased that roams over the earth and causes harm to the living. However, even if these two texts represent contradictory views as to what happens to someone who is burned alive, the consensus between the two is that it is a terrible fate, equal or worse to that of someone who has no caretaker.

#### **4 Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to elucidate the chthonic aspects of Gen 38. In light of modern research on the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin, it has become apparent that certain biblical texts may consist of references to such ideologies previously hidden to scholars. Such a situation prevails regarding the narrative of Judah and Tamar. As we have seen, this text is laden with a complex network of references and rituals that allude, sometimes quite explicitly, to ancient Israelite conceptions of death and the afterlife. These references include the explicit notices of the deaths of Judah's sons and the invocation of the levirate marriage. As seen by comparison with Gilgamesh Tablet XII, Judah faces serious diminishment of the quality of his afterlife on account of his children's deaths. Moreover, the levirate institution is explicitly tied to the need for the deceased to have caretakers in their postmortem state. Finally, Tamar's near death at the hands of her father-in-law may

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<sup>34</sup> Holm, "The Fiery Furnace," 91.

indeed represent a threat to the former's own existence in the afterlife, as can be seen in some Mesopotamian ghost prescription texts as well as Tablet XII. Together, these aspects of Gen 38 make for a text that is overtly based on the same ideologies as the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin.

## Chapter Two

# Gendered Death in Ancient Israel: The Narratives of Sarah, Rachel, and Jezebel

### 1 Introduction: The Cult of Dead Kin and Ancient Israelite Patriarchy

Despite the large amount of scholarly literature on the subject of death in ancient Israel, there has hardly been any reckoning of the rituals comprising the cult of dead kin with the fact that ancient Israelite society was patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal.<sup>1</sup> Given the intimate link between family, the estate, and the ancestors, these qualities might very well have led to unequal treatment between men and women in death. Through an analysis of the narratives depicting the deaths of Sarah (Gen 23), Rachel and Deborah (Gen 35), and Jezebel (2 Kgs 9), along with archaeological data concerning male and female burials, I will seek to determine whether gender parity existed in ancient Israel as it pertains to death. To be sure, these texts have been recognized and discussed by those interested in ancient Israelite conceptions of death and the afterlife; however, these discussions have almost all purposed to support the existence of the rites of the cult of dead kin summarized in the Introduction, apart from the value of these texts as they pertain to the intersection of gender ideologies and conceptions of death.<sup>2</sup> I will begin with the biblical narratives, then turn to certain extrabiblical data for further investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> These three ideologies are wrapped up together tightly in the social institution of the *בית אב* ("house of the father"), which is essentially the conception of the family unit, whether nuclear or extended, as led by the paterfamilias. It was through the *בית אב* that kinship ties were legitimized, and inheritance was turned over through successive generations. There existed Mesopotamian linguistic and practical cognates in the Sumerian *É-A-BA* and the Akkadian *bīt abim*. See Westbrook, "Property and the Family," 12–14; also, van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 20–26, 194–203. See Stager, "The Family," 22–23 for some related archaeological data.

<sup>2</sup> Although Suriano indeed writes about these women in this context somewhat extensively, his focus is the identity of the women as bones, corpses, or simply as one buried apart from the family tomb; moreover, these

## 2 The Death of Sarah and the Purchase of the Cave of Machpelah<sup>3</sup>

Gen 23 has held the attention of scholars in large part because of the legal transaction of land that it describes between Abraham and the “Hittites” (בני חת).<sup>4</sup> Scholars have posited Hittite,<sup>5</sup> Neo-Babylonian,<sup>6</sup> and Ugaritic<sup>7</sup> parallels to the legal terms of the pericope. However, as Raymond Westbrook states: “It would be rash...to draw any conclusions about the *exact* source of the law of Gen 23.”<sup>8</sup> Aside from the passage’s utility in discussions of ancient property law, the narrative in Gen 23 also serves as an important datum for ancient Israelite conceptions of a decent burial, as the pattern of burial in a family tomb established in this chapter is repeated throughout Genesis.<sup>9</sup> And, in fact, while some scholars have viewed the narrative as coming from the Priestly (P) source (i.e., after the Babylonian exile),<sup>10</sup> there are some who have favored the idea that the tradition of Genesis 23 is at its core much more ancient.<sup>11</sup> While the latter view seems to have grounding in the phrases,

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sections do not discuss the archaeological data regarding male and female burials. See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 189–210.

<sup>3</sup> Sarna indicates that this chapter and the one following it both act as necessary occurrences before Abraham can die. Thus, he says, “Two important issues remain: the concern with mortality and the pre-occupation with posterity. The former finds expression in the acquisition of a hereditary burial site, the latter through the selection of a wife for Isaac so that the succession of the line may be secured. These are the topics of chapters 23 and 24, respectively.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> The translation “Hittites” may be problematic here, thus, E.A. Speiser: “For reasons of both history and geography, it is most unlikely that this group name has any direct connection either with the Hattians of Anatolia or with their ‘Hittite’ successors.” See Speiser, *Genesis*, 172; Sarna, *Genesis*, 395–396; Westbrook, *Property and the Family*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Lehmann, “Abraham’s Purchase,” 15–18.

<sup>6</sup> Tucker, “The Legal Background,” 77–84.

<sup>7</sup> Westbrook, *Property and the Family*, 34, citing Boyer, “L’intervention de l’autorité publique,” 283–293.

<sup>8</sup> Italics original; Westbrook, *Property and the Family*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> This is essentially the extent to which most authors on the subject of death and the afterlife in ancient Israel treat this passage. See, for example, Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 238; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 178; Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 110; Lewis, “How Far Can Texts Take Us,” 172.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Tucker, “The Legal Background,” 84; also, Bray, “Genesis 23,” 69–73. Although C. Levin argues for a Priestly redactor, it seems as if he agrees that there is a more ancient tradition in play. See Levin, “Abraham erwirbt,” in *“Gerechtigkeit und recht”*, 96–113.

<sup>11</sup> See Speiser, *Genesis*, 173, who, other than the introductory verses of the chapter, sees J’s hand at work; also, Westbrook, *Property and the Family*, 35.

“passing to the merchant” (עבר לסחר),<sup>12</sup> and “those going in the gate of the city” (באי שער-), found in vv. 16 and 18 respectively,<sup>13</sup> this passage remains the first description of burial in the Hebrew Bible regardless of its origin. Although the compiler of the book of Genesis may have been bound by received traditions or chronology, it is nonetheless significant that such an extensive treatment of Sarah’s death is the first of its kind in the biblical narrative sequence.<sup>14</sup>

The details of the text itself continue to support the importance of this event to Abraham and to the recipients of this tradition. First, the notice of Sarah’s life span in v. 1 mirrors the similar notice in Gen 25 describing Abraham’s death, a detail that at least demonstrates a level of honor for the matriarch that essentially mirrors that of her husband. In v. 2, “Abraham [goes] to lament for Sarah and to bewail her.” This is no mere act of grief, but a ritual of mourning that constitutes one of the necessary initial reactions of an ancient Israelite to the death of a family member.<sup>15</sup> Given the probability that the traditions of the patriarchs are legendary, it is likely that this act of Abraham is actually a demonstration of the viewpoint of the text’s author: namely, it was entirely appropriate, and perhaps necessary, to perform the same mourning rituals for deceased women and men. The designation of Sarah as “his dead” (מתו) in v. 3 should perhaps best be interpreted as expressing the liminality of the matriarch as an exposed corpse.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “That this is an old technical phrase is proved by the parallel Akk. *maḥīrat illaku* “the rate that is current,” which is common in Old Babylonian and is used officially as early as the Eshnunna Laws.” Speiser, *Genesis*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> For older parallels to this phrase, see Reviv, “Early Elements and Late Terminology,” 190–191.

<sup>14</sup> See a similar statement in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 205.

<sup>15</sup> For mourning rituals in ancient Israel, see Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 244–247.

<sup>16</sup> “Sarah’s postmortem portrayal during the tense dialogue of Gen 23:3–15 is interesting, because she is never identified by name but instead is referred to as an object. Her name, and reference to her status as Abraham’s wife, occurs only at the beginning of the chapter and at the end, once she is buried (vv. 1–2 and 19). Yet her dead body is a topic of discussion throughout the discourse. Following verse 2, the unburied matriarch is

Furthermore, the entire legal transaction is initiated by Abraham for the express purpose of acquiring a tomb for Sarah, “that [he] may bury [his] dead” (וַאֲקַבְרָהּ מֵתִי, v. 4). Burying his wife is so important that he, a mere “alien and a stranger” (גֵּר וְתוֹשֵׁב, v. 4), would approach a much more powerful people to ask for land owned by them.<sup>17</sup> It is thus clear that, at least for the author of Gen 23, it was unthinkable that Sarah would not receive proper care from her living relatives, in this case her spouse. As an aside, the narrative detailing Abraham’s death in Gen 25 does not describe any mourning rituals on behalf of the deceased patriarch, only burial; technically, Sarah is depicted as having received better postmortem care. Despite the foregoing evidence that women were provided with the same care by the living members of the *בֵּית אֲב* as their male counterparts, there is one detail lacking in Gen 23 that detracts from this view: namely, the absence of the notice that she was “gathered to [her] people” which is present in each of the passages detailing the deaths of the patriarchs.<sup>18</sup> That Sarah is the first person to be buried in this cave is not an issue, as the Hebrew phrase does not refer to the burial act, but rather to the transition of the deceased to the afterlife. However, the absence of this phrase may reflect the aforementioned Israelite conceptions of society and kinship as patriarchal and patrilineal;

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neither mentioned by name nor referenced as Abraham’s wife. Instead, she is called a *מת*, which is a qal masculine singular participle. In an extreme state of marginality, Sarah is robbed of all forms of identity, including gender. As such, she is divested of selfhood, existing as an object rather than as a person, awaiting for the completion of the ritual when she can regain her identity inside the controlled environment of the tomb.” Suriano, *A History of Death*, 208.

<sup>17</sup> This would potentially be an offensive question, given the foregoing comments on the importance of the ancestral estate. See, for example, Naboth’s reaction to a similar question in 1 Kgs 21:3.

<sup>18</sup> For the importance of this phrase in ancient Israelite conceptions of death and the afterlife, see ArteMov, “Belief in Family Reunion,” 28–32; also, Sarna, *Genesis*, 174. Note also the equivalent phrase in the Books of 1 and 2 Kgs: “He lay with his fathers.” See, for example, 1 Kgs 2:10, 11:43, 14:20, 31, etc. It should also be noted that this former phraseology is usually attributed to P. See, for example, Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 163–164.

whatever the case may be, it seems that Sarah fared none the worse functionally than her husband.

### 3 The Deaths of Rachel and Deborah

A second matriarch whose death is described in relative detail is Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob. To this day, there are many who make pilgrimages to the supposed tomb of Rachel, and the location of her sepulcher is the subject of no shortage of scholarly literature.<sup>19</sup> However, the location of the tomb, if it ever existed, is of no concern to us here.<sup>20</sup> Rather, because the narrative in Gen 35:16–20 reflects the ideologies of death of at least one group of ancient Israelites (Muilenburg and Speiser agree the author is the Elohist, or E),<sup>21</sup> the way in which Rachel's death is described allows for further investigation into the question of gendered differences in death. Despite her status as matriarch, Rachel's death differs from Sarah's in two primary ways: 1) it is the result of childbirth,<sup>22</sup> and 2) it does not end with burial in the family tomb.<sup>23</sup> As Saul Olyan states: "Texts suggest that burial in the family tomb is so important that male kin or others bound to the deceased by formal ties will expend great effort to transport the corpse to the family tomb, even if the death occurs

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Sarna's excursus in Sarna, *Genesis*, 407–408. Sarna also claims that Rachel's grave was a famous landmark already by the time of Saul in Sarna, *Genesis*, 244; Tsevat, "Studies in the Book of Samuel II," 107–118. The issue at stake here is the fairly different traditions that appear in the biblical text. In *Genesis*, the location is said to be Ephrath (i.e., Bethlehem or near it), while in 1 Sam 10 and Jer 31:15, the tomb is said to be somewhere in the territory of Benjamin. Given the etiological nature of the tale of Benjamin's birth and the subsequent death of Rachel, it would indeed be odd for the fictive forefather to be born in the territory of Judah.

<sup>20</sup> Muilenburg writes, "In no section of the Book of Genesis are the etiological interests of the ancient writers more clearly in evidence than in the nativity reports of the sons of Jacob-Israel." See Muilenburg, "The Birth of Benjamin," 194.

<sup>21</sup> Muilenburg, "The Birth of Benjamin," 195; Speiser, *Genesis*, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Suriano notes this as a major point of departure between the previous matriarch, saying: "This separateness in death may seem like a denial of Rachel's identity. To an extent it is, as the particular circumstances of her death in childbirth distinguished her fate from the others." Suriano, *A History of Death*, 209–209.

<sup>23</sup> These two facets of Rachel's death may be related. See Cox and Ackerman, "Rachel's Tomb," 135–148.



at a distance.”<sup>24</sup> While death in childbirth was by no means rare in the ancient world, the fact that Jacob does not carry his beloved wife’s remains to the family tomb is decidedly odd. Moreover, as Benjamin Cox and Susan Ackerman mention, the distance from Bethlehem or the territory of Benjamin to the Cave of Machpelah is much shorter than that from Egypt, whence Jacob requests his body to be carried.<sup>25</sup> Thus, these authors conclude that it is precisely because of the fact that Rachel dies by childbirth that she cannot be transported, because of her impurity (cf. Lev 12:2, 4, 5).<sup>26</sup> If this interpretation of the text is correct, then it may be the case that ancient Israelite women were indeed denied the most ideal forms of burial and postmortem care if they died in a state of impurity, as would be the case in childbirth. While this point cannot be ignored, the fact remains that Rachel was indeed provided with a burial, complete with a funerary stele (מצבת), perhaps not unlike that of Absalom in 2 Sam 18:18. This honorable burial seems to be the next best option for those who cannot be buried in the family tomb.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Rachel’s death offers conflicting data: the societal regulations of purity in ancient Israel rendered her unable to be transported to the family tomb, yet she is offered an honorable burial nonetheless.<sup>28</sup>

Up to this point, we have dealt only with the deaths and burials of matriarchs, a class of women that may not represent the average woman’s experience. Fortunately, Gen 35:8 notifies readers of the death of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse. It is interesting that Deborah

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<sup>24</sup> Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects,” 603.

<sup>25</sup> Cox and Ackerman, “Rachel’s Tomb,” 137.

<sup>26</sup> Cox and Ackerman, “Rachel’s Tomb,” 140. Suriano admits the compelling nature of this claim in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 209–210. The story of Rachel may include further hints of anxiety surrounding posterity in her demand to Jacob to provide her children, lest she die. See, for example, Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 44.

<sup>27</sup> Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects,” 604–605. Suriano shares a similar viewpoint in his analysis of the “Man of God from Judah” in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 211–213.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel is also not said to be “gathered to [her] people.” See n. 18 above.

receives such a description, given the lack of one regarding her mistress Rebekah.<sup>29</sup> Her death is described as follows: “Deborah, the nurse of Rebekah, died, and she was buried under Beth-El, under the oak. And its name was called Allon-Bacuth” (v. 8). While this death notice has similarities to Rachel’s, the lack of a מצבת may serve as a marker of her lower status as compared to Rachel.<sup>30</sup> Thus, it is this first interment in Gen 35 which allows us to assert that the common woman was also generally treated to a proper burial. In summary, the deaths of Rachel and Deborah further complicate the picture initiated by the pericope in Gen 23 surrounding Sarah’s burial. While it is the case that both the servant and the matriarch receive an honorable burial in Gen 35, the possibility that Rachel’s corpse could not be interred at the family tomb due to her ritual impurity from childbirth stands as evidence against postmortem gender equality in ancient Israel. Of course, this interpretation of the narrative offered by Ackerman and Cox may place far too much emphasis on certain legal codes in the Hebrew Bible; yet, as far as I am aware, theirs is the only interpretation offered by scholars.

#### 4 Naboth’s Vineyard and the Death of Jezebel

The final biblical character to be discussed is Queen Jezebel, whose death appears in 2 Kgs 9. However, before analyzing this text, it is pertinent to discuss briefly the account of

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<sup>29</sup> Sarna posits traditions regarding Deborah that would have been known to the author and readers of the text. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 241.

<sup>30</sup> Cox and Ackerman see it differently:

Indeed, because Rachel, it is implied, is laid simply in the earth, her burial appears more analogous to that described for Deborah—the nurse of Rebekah who is likewise laid simply in the earth beneath an oak near Bethel—than to the burials of Abraham’s other descendants. The Hebrew used to recount the burials of Rachel and Deborah is, in fact, exactly the same...But while the sort of *al fresco* burial these verses depict is appropriate for a character like Deborah, a servant who merely sojourns with Abraham’s family and not a member of the Abrahamic patriline, it seems strikingly out of place for Rachel.

See, Cox and Ackerman, “Rachel’s Tomb,” 140. While they may have a point, burial in a cave does not represent a higher social standing, but rather a separate one. In the Levant, a number of different types of graves have been discovered with quite similar grave goods. See Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 25–108.

Naboth's death in 1 Kgs 21 and 2 Kgs 9. Much has been written regarding the former version of the Jezreelite's death,<sup>31</sup> yet the historical relationship between the two texts is difficult to discern.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of whether Jezebel actually instigated the murder of a man named Naboth and his family, thereby claiming his ancestral estate for the monarch, the biblical authors indeed assert such a tradition. And, in fact, it seems to be this very tradition that necessitates the fatal end that meets Jezebel.<sup>33</sup> Jezebel's actions in 1 Kgs 21 represent an existential threat to Naboth and his family, precisely because of the relationship between the estate and the family in ancient Israel.<sup>34</sup> And, in the version told in 2 Kgs 9, the explicit notice that Naboth's children are killed represents another facet of this threat. In a way, these two narratives represent the antithesis to Gen 23–24, in which Abraham first obtains a burial plot, and then secures progeny through the marriage of his son Isaac. Thus, the prophecy against Ahab and Jezebel that Elijah speaks in 1 Kgs 21:20–24 and its reprisal in 2 Kgs 9:36–37 represent the clear consequences that resulted from denying another family their ancestral inheritance and lineage.<sup>35</sup> This brief excursion into the importance of the

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<sup>31</sup> The legal background for the event has been conjectured at in Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background," 46–57. Naboth is also depicted as representative of a party within a political struggle between Ahab and Elijah in Cohen, "In All Fairness to Ahab," 87–94.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Rofé sees the version in 2 Kgs 9 as preserving a historical core of the event. See Rofé, "The Vineyard of Naboth," 96; however, both Cogan and Na'aman doubt the veracity of either of the two events. See Cogan, *1 Kings*, 485–486; also, Na'aman, "Naboth's Vineyard," 212.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family," 23; Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife," 41; Na'aman, "Naboth's Vineyard," 14.

<sup>34</sup> The idea put forth by many that Jezebel, as a Phoenician princess, would have no awareness of the importance of ancestral land and care for the ancestors in ancient Israel is an odd claim, given the claim by van der Toorn: "The continuity between Syro-Mesopotamian and early Israelite family religion is such that one may speak of the prolongation of a Bronze Age phenomenon into the Iron Age." See van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 375. That Phoenician peoples would be an exception between Babylon, Ugarit, and Israel is without basis, so far as I can tell.

<sup>35</sup> That a Deuteronomistic editor would allow such a message to stand should come as no surprise given texts like Deut 26:14. It seems clear that, even at this later stage in the biblical text, the idea of a cult of dead kin was not totally taboo by the leaders of "normative Yahwism." Thus, Andersen states: "Since the contrast between farmer and shepherd has been greatly exaggerated in OT scholarship, it would be better to say that family and tribal structures maintained themselves for a long time in Israel, even after the economy had become essentially agricultural." See Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background," 48.

incident with Naboth merely serves to demonstrate the possibility that Jezebel's death and subsequent lack of burial were meant by the biblical authors to be tied to her threat to Naboth, not to her presumed idolatry and foreignness.

The actual notice of the death of Jezebel begins in 2 Kgs 9:30 with her self-adornment after receiving news of Jehu's approach.<sup>36</sup> With his arrival, Jehu commands the eunuchs surrounding the queen to throw her down from the window through which she has just taunted the usurper. The eunuchs oblige, and Jezebel is defenestrated and trampled on. Oddly enough, after this incredibly violent act, Jehu orders this command in v. 34: "Care for this cursed woman, and bury her, for she is the daughter of a king." Of great interest is the phrase translated here, "care for," which is from the root *דקף*, the funerary connotations of which have been long documented. In short, this phrase elicits associations with the Mesopotamian *pāqīdu*, usually a family member of the deceased, whose task it was to perform proper postmortem rituals; I will discuss this further in Chapter Three. That a Deuteronomistic editor would preserve a phrase so laden with connotations of the cult of dead kin may attest to its acceptance by some biblical authors.<sup>37</sup> In fact, given the instability of the historical grounds of this episode, it is possible that these words were purposefully inserted into Jehu's mouth in order to present him as one who honored the necessary rituals of the cult. Thus, although Jezebel receives no burial, it is the deity who denies this of her, not Jehu. A final interesting note is the reasoning behind Jehu's command: namely, that Jezebel ought to be buried and cared for because she is the daughter of a king. As seen

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note, following the majority of scholars today, that Jezebel's actions are not meant to imply seduction, but rather her role as royalty. See, for example, Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 111; also, Everhart, "Jezebel," 688–698. These authors also note the common motif of the "woman at the window" with varying views on its applicability here.

<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, it is possible that southern authors place the words of an external cult of dead kin in the mouth of Jehu, whom they later portray as sub-par in his worship of YHWH.

above, social class had an effect on how one was treated after death (e.g., Rachel is provided with a pillar on her grave, while Deborah only receives a simple burial under a tree).<sup>38</sup> Thus, while Jezebel's body is never buried,<sup>39</sup> the biblical text preserves at least a tradition of Jehu's command to provide her with the correct rites. Again, it seems ideal that women and men were both treated with equal standing in postmortem rituals, even if this result did not always materialize.<sup>40</sup> In summary, while Jezebel does not actually receive any funerary care, the narrative surrounding her death adds further support to the complicated picture of how women and men were treated after their deaths in the biblical text: although women were ideally meant to be buried properly, and perhaps receive mortuary rites, these acts could be influenced by social standing among other circumstances (as in the case of Rachel's death in childbirth).

## 5 Extrabiblical Data

Aside from the foregoing biblical texts, there is some data left to be considered. These include: 1) archaeological evidence from tombs in the Levant regarding the frequency of burial of women and men as well as the items with which they were buried, 2) the Royal Steward Inscription from the Silwan necropolis, and 3) the portion of the Aqhat epic known as "The Duties of an Ideal Son." Regarding the funerary data across the Levant, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith's catalogue is extensive, and it is from her work that the following data comes.<sup>41</sup> However, as she states, "Given the large number of Iron Age burials excavated, only a very small number of the individuals interred have been analyzed for sex or age...These

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<sup>38</sup> As Bloch-Smith notes, "Mortuary goods were differentiated on the basis of age, sex, social status and wealth." Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 140.

<sup>39</sup> The consequences of this are explained in Suriano, *A History of Death*, 196–199.

<sup>40</sup> Another, contradicting point, is the fact that Queen Athaliah's death in 2 Kgs 11:17 is not accompanied by the notice that she slept with her ancestors, as is said with a number of male monarchs. See above, n. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 65–71, 140–141.

small numbers render generalizations regarding sex and age distinctions extremely tentative.”<sup>42</sup> With this caveat in mind, we turn now to the ratios of men to women buried across a number of tomb types, locations, and times. When infants, children, adolescents, and adults are all accounted for, the ratio of men to women in pit graves was 1:3; in cist graves 1:3; in cave tombs 1:1; and in bench tombs 3:2.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the evidence, albeit scant, in the archaeological record indicates that women were buried with at least the same frequency as men, if not at a higher rate. Furthermore, Bloch-Smith notes: “Unusual burial practices included separating men from women and children.”<sup>44</sup> This fact indicates a certain level of real equality in burial among women and men. Furthermore, her discussion on burial goods seems to indicate that differentiating factors primarily included age and class, although sex may have also played a role.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it seems as if a general practice of equality in burial among women and men was pursued throughout the Levant.

A second piece of external data comes from the Silwan necropolis in Jerusalem, namely the Royal Steward Inscription.<sup>46</sup> This inscription reads:

This is the [sepulcher of PN-]iah, the royal steward. There is neither silver nor gold [he]re, [but] only [his bones] and his concubine’s bon[es] w[ith] him. Cursed be the one who opens this (sepulcher).<sup>47</sup>

The reason that this inscription is relevant to the present discussion is its mention of the concubine of the royal steward. Although brief, this tomb records a historical reality that, at least for this man, his concubine was important enough both to be buried with him and to be mentioned in his epitaph. However, as Matthew Suriano states: “She is identified by her

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<sup>42</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 71.

<sup>45</sup> Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 68, 72–103.

<sup>46</sup> The translation of the inscription and its general context is from Suriano, *A History of Death*, 103–108.

<sup>47</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death*, 104.

social role and, given the patriarchal society of Jerusalem during the Iron Age this identity is subordinate to that of the royal steward (“his concubine”).<sup>48</sup> As with the biblical texts, this inscription from the Silwan necropolis presents us with two conflicting conclusions: the necessity and provision of burial for women along with their continued relegation to second-class citizens after death.

A final datum to consider comes from Ugarit, the “Duties of an Ideal Son” portion from the Aqhat Epic. This text specifically gives more information on the mortuary roles of a son for his father after the latter’s death. Theodore J. Lewis provides a translation of ll. 26–28a:<sup>49</sup>

Let there be a son in his house,  
A descendant in his palace;  
One who sets up the stela of his divine ancestor,  
In the sanctuary, the marker of his clansman.

Of primary interest here is the masculine context of this pericope; although literary, it sets forth a framework of patrilineality through which a son cares for his father in the afterlife. In fact, so far as I am able to tell, there are no texts from Syria-Palestine that mention sons or daughters performing postmortem rituals for their mother. Therefore, while extrabiblical data seems to suggest that women were buried with the same frequency and in similar ways as men, the cult of dead kin remains decidedly patriarchal.<sup>50</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine a few biblical texts and certain extrabiblical data to determine whether men and women were provided the same funerary and mortuary rites

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<sup>48</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death*, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 54. A discussion of this text can also be found in van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 154–160.

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it is the case that one’s relationship with the father is less certain than with the mother, requiring assertion of one’s placement in the father’s line.

after their deaths. The narratives surrounding Sarah, Rachel, Deborah, and Jezebel have produced a number of conclusions. The first is that it appears to have been deemed proper by several segments of the population of ancient Israel for women to be given a proper burial (e.g., J/P in Gen 23, E in Gen 35, and Dtr in 2 Kgs 9). As an example, the Deuteronomist or an earlier source wished Jehu to order Jezebel a proper burial, even if YHWH had declared otherwise. This could only have been the case if such a command depicted the appropriate action on the usurper's part. However, this treatment seems to have depended on a number of factors, including social standing and other extenuating circumstances. Thus, Deborah is buried, yet in a decidedly modest fashion compared to Sarah and Rachel. And, while Rachel was buried, she may have not been transported to the family tomb because of her death in childbirth. Moreover, the burials of other matriarchs like Rebekah and Leah are given only the briefest mention, unlike the patriarchs, all of whom are given a death notice. The phrase, "gathered to his people," has been seen as reserved for patriarchs and male monarchs, not for matriarchs and queens. The biblical text thus presents a functional societal norm toward treating women and men with equality in death, although on the ideological level the cult of dead kin remained patriarchal.

These same conclusions are borne out by the extrabiblical data. The Levantine tomb data demonstrates that women and men were buried with equal frequency and relatively equal grave goods. The Royal Steward inscription depicts a woman buried with her husband yet subordinated to him by being denied a name. Finally, the "Duties of an Ideal Son" section from the Aqhat epic adds further evidence that women were generally removed from theoretical discussions of the cult of dead kin, both in Ugarit, and in ancient Israel.



## Chapter Three

# The Prophetic *Pāqidu*: The Cult of Dead Kin in Isaiah and Jeremiah

### 1 Introduction: The *pāqidu* and תָּפַח in the Hebrew Bible

As previously discussed, in Mesopotamia, as in ancient Israel, there thrived a cult of dead kin. This cult consisted of a number of rituals, including *kispa kasāpu* (making funerary offerings), *mê naqû* (pouring water), and *šuma zakāru* (calling the name).<sup>1</sup> These rites, recalling the discussion in Chapter Two, were generally performed by the *pāqidu* (LÚ.SAG.ÈN.TAR), often, though not always, a family member of the deceased.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, there is no text, biblical or inscriptional, from the Levant that uses a participle of תָּפַח to refer to a caretaker of the deceased.<sup>3</sup> However, biblical scholars investigating the cult of dead kin in ancient Israel have noted resonances of the Mesopotamian *pāqidu* in two passages: Num 16:29 and 2 Kgs 9:34.<sup>4</sup> In the first example, Moses' showdown with the sons of Korah, תָּפַח is used twice, first in a nominal form and then in a verbal form, both appearing to refer to the care regularly given to the deceased (as

<sup>1</sup> Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin," 116. For the *kispu* ritual, often viewed as the center of the Mesopotamian cult of dead kin, see Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege* and van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 48–54. It should be noted that van der Toorn designates the *šuma(m) zakāru* ritual as occupying the central role in the cult of dead kin.

<sup>2</sup> For the *pāqidu*, see CAD P, 137–138 and AHW M-S, 887. For the role itself, see Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin," 119, 123. The *pāqidu* appears in numerous Mesopotamian texts, including BM 80328, 38 published in Finkelstein, "The Genealogy." A translation of this text can also be found in COS 1.134. See also the appearance of the *pāqidu* in the Standard Version of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XII, 152 in George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 734. A list of ghosts representing the neglected dead, including one without a *pāqidu* can be found in Udug-Hul 4, 145–149, published in Geller, *Healing Magic*. Kerry Sonia also cites a letter from King Hammurabi to Sin-iddinam, offering the *kispu* to the unburied, much like the Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty. See Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 11. Sarah Lange aligns the archaeological evidence with the textual use of the *pāqidu* at Mari in Lange, "The Distribution of Graves," 187.

<sup>3</sup> Healey attempts to make such a case for Ugarit, in Healey, "Ugaritic HTK: A Note."

<sup>4</sup> See Suriano, *A History of Death*, 177–199 and Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 10–12. It may be the case that this root eventually lost its cultic connotation and was then used as a term strictly for physical visitation of the site of the deceased. See the entry for תָּפַח in Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, 1206.

opposed to the decidedly irregular death facing the sons of Korah).<sup>5</sup> In the passage in 2 Kgs, the usurper Jehu orders his men to “take care of” Jezebel after her recent death with an imperative form of  $\text{קָפַד}$ .<sup>6</sup> Despite the general acceptance that  $\text{קָפַד}$  in these passages seems to express the custodial role given to the deceased, there has been almost no further investigation into the use of  $\text{קָפַד}$  for this purpose in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze certain instances of the occurrence of the root  $\text{קָפַד}$ , namely in Isa 26:14; 38:10 and Jer 15:15, to determine whether these verses constitute further evidence that some biblical authors were familiar with and made use of this root’s postmortem connotations. These examples were chosen based on the occurrence of the root  $\text{קָפַד}$  in close proximity to other words or phrases that clearly belong to the semantic category of death and the afterlife.<sup>8</sup> While each of these passages presents certain interpretive difficulties, I tentatively conclude that there is sufficient evidence to view the authors’ uses of  $\text{קָפַד}$  as intentional references to language surrounding the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This passage seems to have been first identified in the context of death in Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 124 to argue against Lewis’ assertion that this ritual was originally a Canaanite practice. Jacob Milgrom cites Bloch-Smith approvingly in his commentary on this verse in Milgrom, *Numbers*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Lewis was the first to see resonances of the Mesopotamian *pāqīdu* in this passage in Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 120–121. This interpretation of the passage has been tentatively approved of by many authors since. See Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 124; Suriano, *A History of Death*, 194; Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis does mention Ps 31:6 and Job 10:12 in a footnote, but without further discussion. I think it is important, however, that in these verses, God is the one who is caring for the spirit of the author. See Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 121.

<sup>8</sup> The grammatical form of  $\text{קָפַד}$  was not deemed important in the selection of these verses, given the array of forms which occur in the passages previously identified by scholars as related to the cult of dead kin.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that  $\text{קָפַד}$  is a notoriously enigmatic root and has garnered much discussion by scholars outside of its use in the passages I will be discussing. For an overview of these debates, with bibliography for other major works, see Creason, “PQD Revisited.”

## 2 The Irony of Death in Isaiah 26:14

The first verse I will discuss here is Isa 26:14, which reads: “The dead will not live, the Rephaim (רפאים) will not rise, because you have cared for (פקדת) and destroyed them. You have exterminated all memory of them.”<sup>10</sup> This verse has received much scholarly attention, both because of its mention of the רפאים and its presence in the so-called Little Isaiah Apocalypse. The latter point is important here only with regard to the dating of this composition. The difficulty of dating this passage is a notorious issue, and scholars have posited origins from the seventh century to the Hellenistic period.<sup>11</sup> Important for our discussion here is whether an author from any of these periods could plausibly make reference to a cult of dead kin. It has been firmly established, as demonstrated in the Introduction, that a cult of dead kin, both royal and non-royal, existed in the Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah.<sup>12</sup> In the Hellenistic period, references to feeding the dead are made in Sir 7:33 and Tob 4:17.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of these texts, we can be confident that the author of Isa 26:14 was familiar with a form of this cult, whether he was writing in the seventh or the fourth century. Regarding the other topic of interest in this verse, namely the רפאים, I believe that the term in this context is used simply as a parallel to the word מתים.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Translation my own.

<sup>11</sup> See Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 306 n.1 for various perspectives on dating. I am generally content with Hays’ argument for a seventh-sixth century date in Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 318, further elaborated in Hays, “The Date and Message.”

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*; Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*; and, Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*.

<sup>13</sup> Albertz and Schmitt: “Thus, in the realm of family religion, care for the dead was—even in Hellenistic times—an orthodox practice in the true sense of the word.” In Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion*, 456.

<sup>14</sup> Following Rouillard, “The treatment of the biblical material concerning the Rephaim should distinguish between the occurrences in the poetic texts, and those in the so-called historical texts...the notion of the Rephaim as denizens of the netherworld is also found in the Books of Job and Psalms.” He goes on to cite Ps 88 and Job 26:5 in support of this view. See Rouillard, “Rephaim,” 695-696.

That is, in this verse, it seems that the term רפאים designates the deceased in general, not a class of divinized ancestors like the *rpum* at Ugarit.<sup>15</sup>

Having addressed these initial concerns, I turn now to the use of פקד in Isa 26:14. This verse, and the pericope more broadly, are concerned with death and the afterlife. Especially pertinent to the present discussion is the appearance of the root זכר. As mentioned earlier, one of the rituals of the Mesopotamian cult of dead kin was *šuma zakāru* (calling the name). Moreover, the Hebrew Bible preserves similar ideas of the importance of invoking the name of the deceased (e.g., 2 Sam 18:18). As Christopher Hays notes, “True death [comes] only in being forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, in this verse, the elimination of all memory of the deceased serves as a direct affront to what an Israelite or Judahite would hope for in their afterlife.<sup>17</sup>

Turning now to פקד, many interpreters have translated פקדת in this instance as some variation of “you punished.”<sup>18</sup> While this is a legitimate translation, it is unspecific and seemingly informed primarily by the other verbs in the verse. Yet, the presence of זכר and other words directly related to death and the afterlife seems to warrant a new, more specific interpretation. I propose that פקד here ought to be translated as “you (YHWH) have cared for (like a *pāqīdu*).” A clear objection to this interpretation is that YHWH in this verse is doing the exact opposite of what a caretaker for the deceased would be expected to do. The

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<sup>15</sup> For texts that mention the *rpum* at Ugarit, see, for example, *KTU* 1.6; 1.20–22; 1.161. For scholarly discussion on the רפאים, see Rouillard, “Rephaim,” with bibliography. It is perhaps important to note that LXX in this verse has ἄτροι, which according to van der Toorn may represent a contrast to the MT’s attempted erasure of the power of the *rephaim*, in van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 225 n. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 41, following Bottéro. Van der Toorn says, “From the perspective of the dead, the main purpose of the cult of the ancestors is to ensure that their names do not perish; their identity is to be preserved.” See van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 52. Both of these statements come in the context of the Mesopotamian cult, but a similar ideology seems to have prevailed in ancient Israel and Judah, see Suriano, *A History of Death*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> See the so-called “death after death” in Stavrakopoulou, *Land of our Fathers*, 68. Stavrakopoulou is following Brian Schmidt’s terminology in her discussion of Isa 26:14, see the citation in n. 47.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 326 and Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 366.

destruction that YHWH inflicts upon the deceased is highly characteristic of the attitudes of the book of Isaiah towards the dead. As Hays asserts, “At least in the book of Isaiah, the dead were YHWH’s competition.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, it is highly uncharacteristic of the care that a family member owed to their deceased relatives. Thus, it appears to me that the author of this passage is using the idea of custodial care evoked by the use of פקד in an ironic sense to emphasize the destruction that the dead will receive at the hands of YHWH. If the use of words and phrases related to death is sufficient in this instance to evoke imagery from the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin, then Kerry Sonia’s interpretation of the Jezebel narrative in 2 Kgs 9 is enlightening. She says:

Though Jehu uses the terminology of the cult of dead kin (*piqdû*) in his command, the end result is that Jezebel receives none of that care. Thus, it seems as though the use of cultic terminology here is ironic in the sense that, rather than receiving care, Jezebel’s fate is the cultic opposite of that care—utter annihilation and lack of commemoration.<sup>20</sup>

This interpretation of the pericope in 2 Kgs 9 is exactly how I believe we should view the use of פקד in the verse at hand. In Isa 26:14, the author utilizes almost the exact same technical terminology regarding the deceased as the narrative from 2 Kgs. There is both the use of פקד followed by destruction of the dead, and the use of other technical language from the cult of dead kin, in this instance, זכר.<sup>21</sup> Another potential objection to this interpretation of Isa 26:14 is that it sees YHWH, a deity, as the caretaker of the deceased, when such a role in the cult of dead kin was clearly played by a human relative. However, Sonia has also

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<sup>19</sup> Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 326. See, however, Blenkinsopp’s distinction between “*their* dead” and “*your* dead” (italics original), in Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 371.

<sup>20</sup> Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 151.

<sup>21</sup> The other word used in 2 Kgs would be the term *qbr*, “to bury.”

soundly demonstrated that, during and after the Babylonian exile, biblical writers were able to turn to YHWH as their divine caregiver.<sup>22</sup>

In short, Isa 26:14 is concerned with death, including words specifically related to the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin, such as זכר. Given these realities of the text, it seems plausible that the use of פקד in this verse is meant to further evoke such imagery. More specifically, by the juxtaposition of YHWH as caregiver and destroyer, the author of Isa 26:14 has created an ironic situation similar to that of Jehu's command to care for the utterly annihilated Jezebel in 2 Kgs 9.

### 3 Death and Separation from YHWH in Isaiah 38:10

The next verse to be discussed here is Isa 38:10, the beginning of the so-called Psalm of Hezekiah.<sup>23</sup> While there are again a number of text-critical issues relevant to this pericope, such as the relationship of this text to that in 2 Kgs 20, the analysis here does not require a judgment on such questions.<sup>24</sup> The verse at hand reads, "I thought: On account of the guilt of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol the rest of my years."<sup>25</sup> Many translators and commentators have chosen this phrase, "I am consigned," to translate the verb פקדתי.<sup>26</sup> Michael Barré supports this interpretation by positing that it is a calque of Akkadian *paqādu*, although he admits that this sense of the root "is not well-attested in

<sup>22</sup> Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 201. Much of Sonia's argument in this chapter is based on Isa 56:3–5.

<sup>23</sup> For a treatment of this pericope, see Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me*. Although I disagree with his treatment of פקד in this instance, the work as a whole is quite thorough.

<sup>24</sup> See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 479–486; Roberts, *Isaiah*, 480–486; Childs, *Isaiah*, 278–284; also, Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 253–257. All of these commentaries offer thoughts on the relationship between the material in this portion of the book of Isaiah and the narrative in 2 Kgs.

<sup>25</sup> Translation from Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 337.

<sup>26</sup> See Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me*, 61 n. 43.

Biblical Hebrew.”<sup>27</sup> In his treatment on פקד in this text, Stuart Creason merely asserts that the meaning of “being assigned to one’s proper place” is clear.<sup>28</sup> Thus, there have been only tentative explanations of what exactly פקד might mean in this verse. One further point of interest is the fact that, in his monograph on death in the Hebrew Bible, Matthew Suriano makes a brief note recognizing the use of פקד in this pericope.<sup>29</sup> Although he makes no further comment, it seems likely, in light of his section on the *pāqīdu* and פקד earlier in the same study, that he sees this occurrence as potentially related to the cult of dead kin.

Given this uncertainty about the meaning of פקד in Isa 38:10 as well as its proximity to language related to death, this verse serves as another potential example of the root being used as reference to the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin. The beginning of the verse, up until אלכה, although rife with its own difficulties,<sup>30</sup> is tangential to the discussion at hand. Regarding the verb אלכה, I am mostly content with the interpretation of this verb as standing apart from the phrase, “the gates of Sheol,” in an absolute sense (i.e., “I will/must depart”).<sup>31</sup> However, the MT’s punctuation does indicate a pause after “the gates of Sheol,” potentially suggesting that the phrase was understood to be, “In the guilt of my days, I will go into the gates of Sheol.”<sup>32</sup> For the sake of this discussion, I will assume that אלכה stands on its own, and that the phrase “in the gates of Sheol” is governed by the verb פקדתי. This image of the

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<sup>27</sup> Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me*, 61. Christopher Hays acknowledges that this is an unusual meaning for פקד, citing Barré without further comment, in Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 337. This calque is based off occurrences of *paqādu* in the G stem, while the instance of פקד in Isa 38:10 is in the BH pual.

<sup>28</sup> Creason, “PQD Revisited,” 40.

<sup>29</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death*, 223.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the debates on the meaning of *bidmî*, in Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Us*, 54–57 and Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 337–340.

<sup>31</sup> Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Us*, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts states, “The prepositional phrase...‘into/in the gates of Sheol,’ stands between, and is governed by, both the preceding and the following verb. See Roberts, *Isaiah*, 484.

gates of Sheol envisions the netherworld as a city.<sup>33</sup> The phrase, as Hays notes, is similar both to the “gates of death” in Ps 107:18 and the “gates of the shadow of death” in Job 38:17.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the prepositional phrase seems to simply be describing the space which Hezekiah will inhabit for “the rest of his years.”<sup>35</sup> It is possible, given the explicit postmortem language of this verse, that פקדתי could best be rendered as, “I am cared for” with the care offered to a deceased monarch. The obvious issue with this interpretation is that receiving care as a dead man would generally be viewed as positive, a sentiment which is out of place in this verse. As a king, Hezekiah could plausibly expect the best postmortem treatment possible.<sup>36</sup> In response, I offer two thoughts. First, the realm of the dead in the Hebrew Bible, as in Mesopotamia, was visualized as a dreary, dark existence.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the quality of one’s postmortem care, the grave was a place where, following Hays, “one finds forgetfulness...and is forgotten.”<sup>38</sup> Also, the imagery of the cult of dead kin evoked by the root פקד in this instance can be read as highlighting Hezekiah’s nearness to death, at YHWH’s command no less! It is small consolation for the monarch under divine judgment that he will receive offerings from his relatives and attendants. The sense is perhaps similar to a dying modern person who thinks of how beautiful his tombstone will look adorned by flowers left

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<sup>33</sup> Following Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Us*, 63. Barré’s discussion on whether שַׁעַר ought to be read as “gates” or “gatekeepers” is confusing, given the *bet* preposition in front of the word. He does not appear to give any account of how the translation “gatekeepers” would function after this preposition. He does ultimately conclude that “gates” is the better option, but it is worth noting that “gatekeepers” would require real contortion of the *bet* preposition.

<sup>34</sup> Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 340.

<sup>35</sup> Barré attempts to emend this phrase, because, as he says, “The fact remains that reference to being in the netherworld for the remainder of one’s lifetime is totally lacking in ancient Near Eastern literature.” See, Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Us*. However, I am content to allow for poetic license in this instance, seeing no need to emend the text due to lack of parallels.

<sup>36</sup> Like the man who has seven sons in Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh, of whom it is said, “Among the junior deities he sits on a throne and listens to the proceedings.” Translation in George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 735.

<sup>37</sup> See Theodore Lewis’ entry, “Abode of the Dead,” in *ABD* D-G, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Hays, *Death in the Iron Age*, 176.



by family members: a small consolation at the end of one's life. Thus, while the idea of custodial care for the near-dead Hezekiah may seem oddly positive in the midst of an overtly pessimistic verse, the use of פקד may instead serve as imagery supporting the king's nearness to death.

Having analyzed Isa 38:10, we have seen that the verb פקדתי in this instance has remained enigmatic for scholars. Moreover, the common translation "I am consigned" has no real support from the Hebrew Bible, and the proposed calque of Akkadian *paqādu* is unconvincing due to the differing stems between the Akkadian examples provided by Barré and the Hebrew of Isa 38:10. I have proposed instead that פקדתי be translated as "I am cared for," making reference to Hezekiah's perceived state as one of the deceased in this psalm. And, while such a translation may seem too optimistic in the context, it is apparent that any existence in the afterlife as perceived by the biblical authors was miserable in comparison to life in communion with YHWH.

#### 4 Divine Care in Jeremiah 15:15

The final verse to be considered here is Jer 15:15. It says, "You, you know, YHWH.<sup>39</sup> Remember me and take account of me and take vengeance for me on my pursuers. Do not in your slowness to anger take me away. Know that on your account I bear reproach."<sup>40</sup> The root פקד is rendered in this instance as "take account of me." This verse also includes the root זכר,

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<sup>39</sup> This assertion that YHWH knows is interesting both text-critically and in relationship to the present discussion on death in this verse. Scholars have debated whether this first part of the verse belongs, especially given the lack of the assertion in some manuscripts. See, for example, Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 457. Also, note the discussion on deified ancestors, in van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 230. He says, "Deified ancestors might intervene in the life of their descendants in more than one way. They 'know' their descendants (YD'...Abida, Genesis 25:4)." Also, note the ידענים in, e.g., 1 Sam 28:3. See, Blenkinsopp, *Deuteronomy and the Politics*, 13-15. I am not suggesting that YHWH is portrayed in this verse as a deified ancestor or a medium/spirit. However, the idea of a divine caregiver may indeed invoke the familial comfort and care that was deeply imbedded in the cult of dead kin.

<sup>40</sup> Translation in Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 759.

discussed above for its relevance to the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin. That Jeremiah is aware of such a cult has been consistently affirmed in the scholarly literature, often in discussions of the *בית מרחץ* mentioned in chapter sixteen.<sup>41</sup>

This section of the pericope is quite clearly a lament.<sup>42</sup> As Karel van der Toorn states regarding v. 17, “Jeremiah’s mission has turned him into an outcast.”<sup>43</sup> Even more than loneliness, however, the prophet faces death. He expresses this feeling with “the witty opposite of the phrase in the Psalms: not, ‘Do not in your anger let me die,’ but rather, ‘Do not in the postponement of your anger let me die.’”<sup>44</sup> Thus, here, as in the verses described above, death is of immediate concern. However, unlike Hezekiah in Isa 38:10, who faces judgment from YHWH, Jeremiah here pleads for YHWH to help him against his persecutors.

It is important to note that the presence of the root *זכר* in close proximity to the root *פקד* is not sufficient to warrant the claim that *פקד* in that instance may refer to the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin. For example, in Hos 8:13 and 9:9, the sense is quite explicitly to remember and punish iniquity.<sup>45</sup> In the present text, as in Isa 26:14, other words or phrases belonging to the semantic category of death have been integral to the identification of the passages at hand. Here, the use of the root *לקח* later in the verse to signify the taking away of Jeremiah’s life provides evidence beyond the root *זכר* for the potential cultic significance of

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<sup>41</sup> The purpose of the *מרחץ* is debated. For Ugarit, see Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 202. For ancient Israel, see Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 137-139; Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 125. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 173, sees the *מרחץ* *בית* as a place for mourners to be comforted. Even so, this is only one step away from the care these mourners would be providing to the deceased.

<sup>42</sup> Lundbom, following Baumgartner, *Jeremiah*, 740.

<sup>43</sup> Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 370.

<sup>44</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 457.

<sup>45</sup> Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 742. This is obvious from the explicit use of the term “iniquity” in each of these examples.

פקד.<sup>46</sup> This undisputable foundation of death is what then provides the basis for reading both זכר and פקד in the context of the cult of dead kin.<sup>47</sup>

Having said all this, I would propose translating the first part of this verse as follows: “You know, YHWH, remember me and care for me (in death).” As in the other verses treated in this chapter, the interpretation of פקד as “care for” in the sense of custodial cultic care for the deceased offers a far more specific meaning of the root, based upon the intrinsic interest in death found in this verse. The fact that other examples exist of פקד and זכר in close proximity demonstrates the importance of the presence of other death-related language in identifying passages in which פקד might refer to the cult of dead kin.

## 5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to offer tentative interpretations of the root פקד in three biblical texts: Isa 26:14; 38:10 and Jer 15:15, instances in which this root has been notoriously difficult to translate with confidence. More specifically, I have attempted to argue that these occurrences of the root may have been intended as references to the custodial role in the cult of dead kin which existed in ancient Israel. This goal is based on the work of scholars who have identified certain biblical texts (i.e., Num 16:29 and 2 Kgs 9:34) which seem to use פקד

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<sup>46</sup> For other examples where לקח has such a meaning, see Ps 6:2; Job 1:21; and Isa 53:8. A short discussion can be found in Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 457.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Creason, in his essay, “PQD Revisited,” 34, describes an instance in which scholars have deduced the meaning of פקד by parallelism with other verbs, in this instance זכר. He says, “The first example to be considered in this category is Psalm 8:5–6, which reads: ‘What is a man that you remember him, a human being that you *pāqad* him? You have made him a little less than divine beings; (with) glory and honor you have crowned him.’ All scholars note that *pāqad* must therefore mean something similar to *zākar*, namely, ‘to take notice of’. This line of reasoning is similar to the one taken in the analysis of Numbers 1:1–3, and it is as faulty here as it was there. Though it is true that God takes notice of humanity, the last half of verse 5 is saying far more than that. What it is saying is that God has placed humanity in its proper place in the divine order. That this understanding of *pāqad* is the correct one is made clear by the fact that verse 6, and the entire rest of Psalm 8, is concerned with describing exactly what that place is.” The salient point here is that the context of the pericope in question is far more important than the meaning of surrounding verbs in determining the meaning of פקד.

in precisely this sense, supported by the importance of the *pāqīdu* in the Mesopotamian cult of dead kin. The evidence for such an interpretation in the verses discussed here includes the overt concern with death in each, as can be seen by certain words and phrases that belong to the semantic category of death and the afterlife (i.e., זכר, רפאים, מתים).

## Conclusions

### Ubiquitous and Mundane Death in the Hebrew Bible

I have endeavored in this study to build upon previous scholarship which has uncovered a cult of dead kin in ancient Israel. Despite the overwhelming consensus on the existence of this cult and the general rituals which comprised it, scholars have tended to rely on the same few texts in the Hebrew Bible to build their arguments. Assuming that these previous scholars are correct in their general conclusions, I have attempted here to develop further discussion on the cult of dead kin in three discrete investigations.

The first, a philological and comparative approach to Gen 38, sought to uncover ideologies of death and the afterlife within an oft-analyzed pericope. Given the passage's explicit concern with death, I have argued that the text's author had knowledge of and employed the same ideologies surrounding the cult of dead kin. In this case, the operative issue is the securing of progeny to care for oneself postmortem. Cleverly, the author of Gen 38 pits Judah and Tamar against one another: although they both desire security after their death, their methods of obtaining said security is juxtaposed. Moreover, the near immolation of Tamar was found to be a potential threat to Tamar's afterlife, as can be seen when the text is read through the lens of certain Mesopotamian documents.

In the second chapter, I conducted a study on postmortem gender parity in ancient Israel. Through the use of certain textual (biblical and extrabiblical) and archaeological data, a complicated picture emerged regarding the role of women in the ancient Israelite cult of dead kin. While theoretical discussions of the cult are decidedly male-dominated, as in the phrase, "he was gathered to his fathers," it may have been the case that women

functionally received the same care as men in the cult. However, apart from social status, which affected everyone, women may have encountered other circumstances which could have prevented their receipt of proper care in some circles (i.e., Rachel's death in childbirth in Gen 35).

Finally, I conducted a lexical study on the root  $\tau\eta\eta$ , which is used in Mesopotamia to denote the custodial role in the region's own cult of dead kin. Building on the work of previous scholars who have seen similar connotations of the root in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Num 16:29 and 2 Kgs 9:34), I have attempted to argue for similar meanings of  $\tau\eta\eta$  in Isa 26:14; 38:10 and Jer 15:15. Again, the overt concern of each of these verses and their contexts with death has proved foundational for my argument.

The sum total effect of each of these studies is the sense that the cult of dead kin in the Hebrew Bible and in ancient Israel may not be as elusive as scholars have previously thought. If this cult indeed exists in the form that scholars have asserted, it is not difficult to see words, phrases, and whole stories in the Hebrew Bible which depend on the language and ideology of precisely this same cult. If a modern author in the United States were to write "*RIP*" in any given context, her readers' minds would snap to the conceptual framework of death. In a similar way, it seems that biblical authors were able to capitalize on familiar and assumed knowledge of the cult of dead kin to enhance the poignancy of their imagery and narrative. Rather than a rare and blurry occurrence here and there, the Hebrew Bible may instead preserve resonances of death as numerous as the deceased themselves.

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