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

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Abstract

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



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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



Terminology

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

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

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

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

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

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



Polysemy in the Judahite Mortuary Inscriptions

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

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

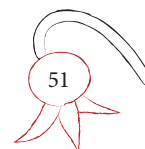
⁴ Bakhtin 1998, 326. Bakhtin was speaking of the polyphony of “dialogic” writing, esp. in the novel.

⁵ Yet Suriano “ultimately supports a funerary reading.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

⁹ For example, Hass 1963; Naveh 1963.

intact. It reads: “May Yahweh bless you and keep you; may YH[W]H make his face shine [upon] you, and give you p[ea]ce” (יִבְרַךְ יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֶךָ) (יִאֲרֶה יְהוָה פְּנֵיךָ וְיִשְׁמַח לְךָ וְיַעֲלֶם לְךָ).¹⁰ Each of the amulets also bears a prayer preceding the blessing and expressing the expectation that Yahweh will rebuke evil; this is especially clear in the second amulet, where he is said to “expel evil” (lines. 4–5: הִגְעֵר בְּ[ר]ע; compare, e.g., Ps 9:6; 21:11; 23:4; 34:20; 68:31; 119:21).¹¹ Indeed a broken section of the first amulet asserts protection “from *every* snare and from (the) evil” (מִכָּל פֶּחַ וּמִהָרַע). This desire for comprehensive protection is consistent with the hope for divine assistance in every phase of life, even into the afterlife.

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

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



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

¹¹ Barkay et al. 2004, 61, 68; Ahituv 2008, 51, 54; Smoak 2015, 19, 31.

Polysemy in the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East

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

Polysemy in Egyptian and Neo-Hittite Mortuary Art

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



Polysemy in the Ugaritic Cult of the Dead

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

... šlm . ‘mr[pi] w . šlm . bn’h .¹⁴
 šlm . t_{ryl} šlm . bth .
 šlm . ugrt šlm . t_{grh}

Peace to ‘Ammurapi’, and peace to his sons!
 Peace to Tarriyelli! Peace to her house!
 Peace to Ugarit! Peace to her gatekeepers!



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

<i>rp]um</i> ¹⁵ . <i>tdbhn</i>	The Rāpi’ūma shall feast
š]b ‘d . <i>ilnym</i>	the spirits [sev]enfold
] <i>kmtmtm</i>	[] like the ancient dead. ¹⁶

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

¹⁴ Or *bth*, “his house.” The word is written *bah*.

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

¹⁶ More woodenly, “the dead of the dead.” Cf. Theodore Lewis’s translation (Parker 1997, 197).

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

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

w ykn . bnh . b bt .
šrš . b qrb hklh .
nšb . skn . ilibh .
b qdš ztr. ‘mh .
l arš . mššu . qtrh
l ‘pr. dmr. atrh .
tbq . lht nišh .
grš . d. ‘šy . lnh
ahd. ydh . b škrn .
m ‘msh [k]šb ‘ . yn .
spu. ksmh. bt. b l
[w]mnth. bt. il.
th . ggh. bym [ti]t .
rḥš . npšh . b ym . rt

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

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



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

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



Polysemy in the Psalms

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

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

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

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

Poetic Wordplay

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

קרבם בתימו לעולם
משכנתם לדר ודר
קראו בשמותם עלי אדמות

The first two lines are relatively straightforward:

Their graves²³ are their homes forever,
Their dwelling places from generation to generation.



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

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

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



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

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

Ritual Language

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

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

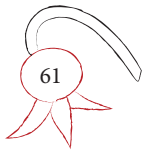
The reticence of ritual texts to explain themselves is widely observed. It is a truism among scholars that these texts, even when they describe rituals, “do not shed light on how the ancients thought the rituals actually brought about what they were supposed to accomplish” (Aaron 2001, 195).²⁵ Wade Wheelock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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

Metaphor and Comparison

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

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

²⁷ See discussion in Watts 2007, 8.

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

In a somewhat humorous aside, Aaron points out:

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

A Case Study: Psalm 15

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

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

Analysis of Ps 15 sheds light on these issues:

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

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

³³ For example, Koch 2005, 15.



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



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

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

³⁴ Reading מַאֲס for MT נִמְאָס; cf. LXX πονηρευόμενος. Presumably the object (“the Lord”) is supplied by the second colon.

³⁵ cf. LXX τῷ πλησίον αὐτοῦ.

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

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

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

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

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



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

³⁸ See also Lambert 1960, 118–20.

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

precinct (cf. Neh 8:16). However, neither “tabernacle” (שֹׁכֵן) nor “tent” (אֹהֶל) is commonly associated with “booth” (סֹכֵה).⁴⁰

Instead, these questions originally referred to the tombs of the kings who were buried in or near the Temple (Ezek 43). To be buried there would have been the greatest privilege a Davidic ruler could be accorded in the afterlife. The ensuing questions about the ethics of the (originally royal) supplicant are intended to ensure his worthiness to lie in the Temple, and (as we will see) to feast with Yahweh in the afterlife.⁴¹ If this view has been argued previously, I do not know of it, so it requires demonstration: The *miškān*, within the biblical narrative, refers first to the Tabernacle (e.g., Lev 15:31), but often signifies the Temple in Psalms (26:8; 43:3; 46:5; 49:12; 74:7; 78:60; 84:21; 132:5, 7).⁴² The *miškān* thus connotes the dwelling of a divine being.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

his ‘house’ (ביתו).” It is commonly observed that Judahite bench tombs approximated the layout of a house, so the “grammar” of the image was clearly available to the prophets to adapt pejoratively.⁴³

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁵ This was the assertion of Sigmund Mowinckel, who overambitiously sought to incorporate practically all of the Psalter’s cultic material into his theory of a Fall Enthronement Festival. He explained away statements like these as the yearnings of those who could only visit the Temple briefly, expressing their desire to stay longer (2014, 825–26).



He will tabernacle on the heights (הוא מרומים ישכן);
 his refuge will be the fortresses of rocks (סלעים);
 his food will be supplied, his water assured.

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

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

The understanding that Ps 15 is a prayer for a king who wishes to be buried in proximity to the Temple also makes better sense of the ensuing ethical instructions. While it is true that concerns for moral purity are attested in temple entrance texts, they are even more prominent in particularly extensive compendia in prayer texts in which the supplicant fears the wrath of the deity (e.g., the Mesopotamian *diġir-ša-dab₅-ba*) and when a person faces judgment in the afterlife, as in the well-known “negative confession” of Book of the Dead Spell 125. The latter connection has particularly been noted, yet older interpreters resisted making the connection, presumably because of the field’s previously underdeveloped sense of Judahite afterlife beliefs (e.g., Galling 1929, 130). As these different comparanda suggest, there is no warrant to suggest direct influence from those texts to the psalm; rather, what they suggest is that there was a fairly pervasive concern with personal holiness when a human encountered a deity.⁴⁶

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



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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁸ It is generally taken for granted that the Davidic royal tombs were rock-cut like other elite tombs of the period, even if their location is much disputed. For a summary of attempts to locate the Davidic royal tombs, see Rahmani 1981; Tarler and Cahill 1992, 2:64–65; Zorn 2006.



“The righteous will never be removed (צדיק לעולם בל-ימוט), / but the wicked will not stay in the land (ורשעים לא ישכנו-ארץ).” (This was probably a threat against both one’s burial and one’s patrimonial territory, in light of the use of graves as boundary markers.⁴⁹) Since Jerusalem was on a seismic fault, and vaulted tombs carved into the rock would have been at risk in earthquakes, the promise that the deceased would not be shaken is particularly relevant and vivid.

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

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



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

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

⁵¹ See, “*zakāru*” CAD Z, 18.

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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