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

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Abstract

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[8] Mandell and Smoak 2016; Sonia 2020.

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

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

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

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

Corpse Impurity

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

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

[10] Smith 1987; Asad 1997, 43–45.

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

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

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

[12] See Saxe 1971; Morris 1991.

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

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

gardless of whether it was a symptom of extramural burial customs or the cause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two Beth Shemesh Case Studies

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

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

in the early twentieth century: Tombs 2 and 8. Both tombs date to the eighth century BCE.

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

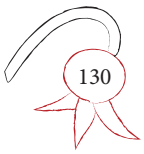
Here, we have the occurrence of two closed vessels. The jug's stopper and the use of the plate as a lid may suggest a concern for preserving food left inside the burial chamber, though it is unclear what the purpose of preservation might have been. One possible explanation for preserving the food, or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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

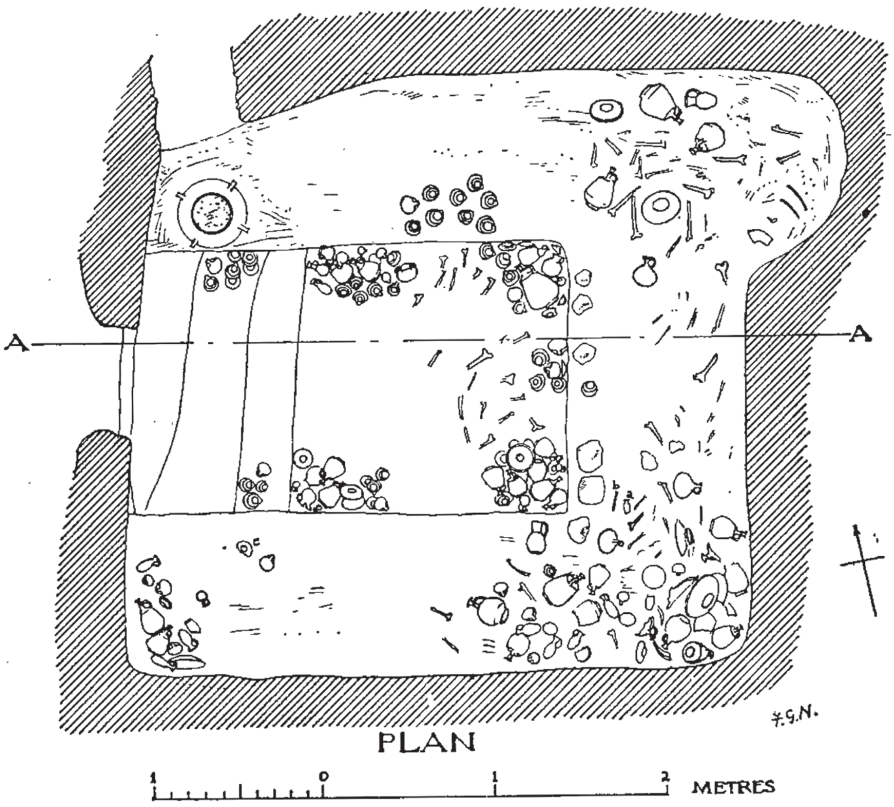


Figure 1: Beth-Shemesh Tomb 8 (MacKenzie 1912–1913)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Comparative Evidence: Zincirli/Sam'al

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[43] Sanders 2013. See Greenfield 1973.

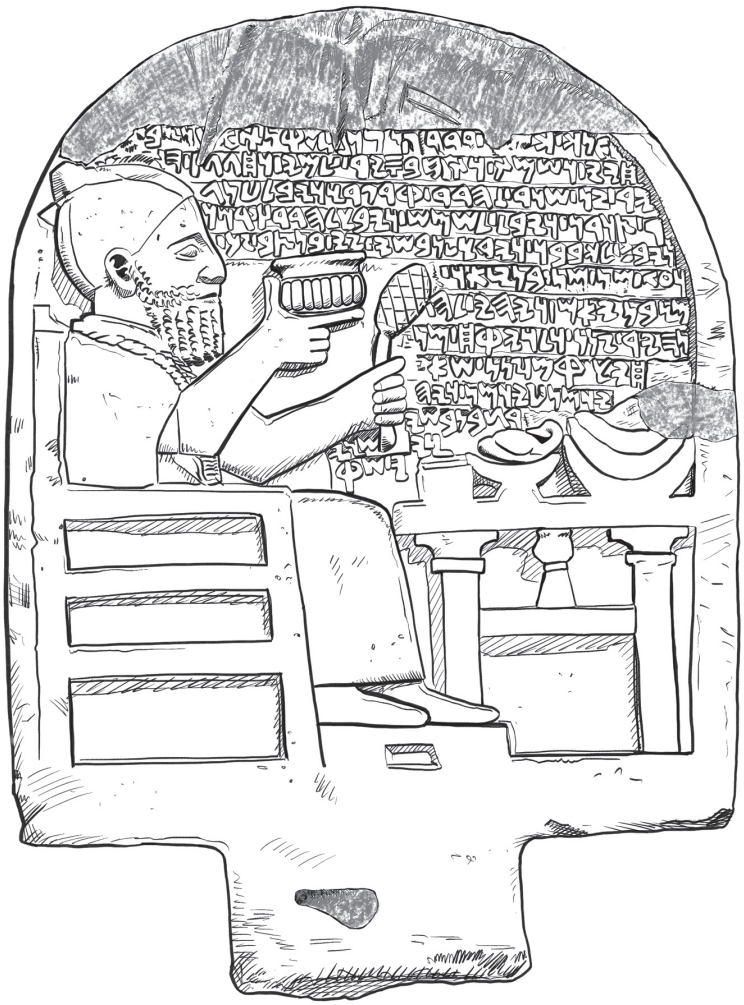


Figure 3: The Katumuwa Stele (Drawing by Dan McClellan, reproduced with permission)

Conclusion

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

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

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