SACRIFICES FOR THE DEAD

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Providing food for the dead or honoring them with a meal was a common practice in the ancient world. People believed that the dead could influence the world of the living; they could help the living if the latter attended to their needs, or harm them if they neglected them. Thus, is there any evidence of this custom in the Bible?

DEUTERONOMY 26:12-14

Scholars cite Deuteronomy 26:12–14 in this context.[1] These verses are part of the declaration to be made when a person finished removing all the tithes from his house. It concludes with a prayer that the Lord bless His nation and His land. As part of this declaration, the household must state that *I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead* (v. 14). A mourner was forbidden to eat consecrated foods.[2] Here in the Tithe Confession, the individual refers to what he has done and what he has not done to show that he had obeyed the Lord. Some say that the following clause means that tithed produce may not be used as an offering to the dead (a common practice among pagans), whether by leaving it at their tombs or by eating it at a feast in their honor. Ibn Ezra said that it means "giving food to the dead – that is, to satisfy their needs. Some say, for idolatry. The sense behind this statement is that it is forbidden to use some of the grain for any purpose until after the tithe, which is holy, has been taken, because taking the tithe from what is left over is a mark of disrespect; and so too if they gave it when unclean." The practice of an offering to the dead is attested in the Second Temple times. In the book of Tobit in the Syriac version: "My son, pour out thy wine on the graves of the righteous, rather than drink it with evil people" (4:17). The Greek version has "Pour your bread," which is impossible since a person cannot pour bread. The Vulgate reads "Lay out your bread and wine upon the burial of a just one and do not eat and drink of it with sinners." Similar advice is mentioned in the book of Ahiqar where the sage says, "My son, pour out your wine on the grave of the righteous rather than drink it with evil men" (Syr 2:10; Arm

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2:13). While in Sirach 7:33 we find "Give graciously to all the living and withhold not kindness from the dead."

Tigay notes that niches like those found in tombs in Ugarit have been found in tombs excavated in Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. These niches were used to hold food and drink for the dead. He maintains that the Torah does not ban this practice, but only forbids using tithes for it, because contact with the dead is defiling.[3] Bloch, too, believes that the prohibition refers to tithes but not to the actual practice of offering food to the dead.[4] A different interpretation was offered by Lewis, who conjectures that the ban may refer to "offerings made periodically as part of the continuing death cult as well as those offerings presented after the initial interment."[5]

It is possible, however, that "to the dead" does not refer to leaving food for the dead but to eating the funeral meal. This is the view of S. D. Luzzatto, who says that the householder is declaring that he did not employ the second tithe to prepare food for a funeral feast for the mourners, even though comforting mourners in this fashion is a precept. Among the moderns, Schmidt also believes that the reference is to the funeral meal.[6] From Jeremiah 16:7 we learn that they gave bread to mourners and offered them a cup of consolation after the burial. When David was mourning for Abner, *all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day* (II Sam. 3:35). And when the Lord instructs Ezekiel to suffer his wife's death in silence and not to sit in mourning, this includes not eating the bread of other people (Ezek. 24:17). This refers to the first meal after burial, when the mourner does not eat of his own food. According to the Talmudic sages, "a mourner is forbidden to eat of his own bread on the first day [of mourning]."[7]

Other commentators provided different explanations for the phrase *I have not…offered any of it to the dead* (v. 14). According to Rashi it means "to prepare a coffin and shrouds." Ramban notes that it is forbidden to use tithe redemption money to purchase garments even for the living more so for the dead. An interesting interpretation was given by Abarbanel, who explains that it was a customary among the cheaters in those days to avoid giving the second tithe by maintaining that they had given it to the poor who were already dead. By making a vow, a person declared that he indeed gave the second tithe to the living poor.

Thus, the weight of the evidence is that even in mourning the Israelites were instructed to remember their commitment to the underprivileged and were forbidden to employ their tithes when they were in mourning or wanted to console others.[8] Nothing suggests that the passage is referring to regular offerings to the dead.

BAAL PEOR

An explicit reference to offerings to the dead is found in the retelling of Israelite history in Psalm 106: *They attached themselves to Baal Peor, ate sacrifices offered to the dead* (Ps. 106:28). This verse apparently expands on Numbers 25:2. The expression *zivhei metim* 'sacrifices to the dead' is a biblical hapax and can be interpreted in two different ways. It may refer to offerings made to idols, who are dead, rather than to the Lord, who is the living God,[9] or it may mean offerings to the shades of dead ancestors.[10]

According to the primary account in Numbers (25:1–5), the Moabite women invited the Israelite men to the "sacrifices for their gods," which the verse in Psalm modifies to "sacrifices to the dead." There are a number of passages in which "gods" and "the dead" are parallel terms.[11] According to David Kimhi, "They ate sacrifices to the dead, as is written [in Numbers], 'they invited the people to the sacrifices for their gods.' Their gods are the dead." Ibn Ezra and Sforno make the same equation.

The Israelites were seduced by the cult of Baal Peor when they came to the site of his temple, where they committed lewd acts with the daughters of Moab (Num. 25:1–5).[12] According to the text, the woman who had intercourse with Zimri son of Salu was a Midianite princess (v. 6). According to Numbers 31:16, it was Balaam who advised the Midianites to have their women seduce the Israelites to practice idolatry. Because the verbs *z.n.h* and *tz.m.d,* used to denote what the Israelites did, have sexual connotations,[13] some scholars believe that the festival at Baal Peor included sexual contact.[14] Milgrom rejects this idea and takes the *nifal* form of the verb *tz.m.d* in the sense of "attached itself to, perhaps by covenant" – that is, they transferred their allegiance from the Lord to Baal.[15] Levine agrees that the text in Numbers deals with paganism and marriage to Moabite and other foreign women, which is forbidden by Deuteronomy 23:4.[16] That is, the verse in Numbers deals with sacrifices to foreign gods.

According to the interpretation that the ritual of Baal Peor is a funerary cult, "the dead" of Psalms 106:28 is not a derogatory characterization of a pagan deity, but actually means the spirits of the dead, who were appeased by sacrifices.[17] The problem with this is that the passage in Numbers explicitly refers to foreign gods. The plague that ensued left an imprint on the biblical consciousness, and we read about it again in Deuteronomy 4:3, Hosea 9:10, as well as Psalms 106:28. Perhaps the last of these reflects a different tradition, according to which the plague at Baal Peor was punishment for sacrifices to the spirits of dead ancestors and should be dated to a later period.

PSALMS 16:3-4

There may an allusion to libations of blood to the dead in Psalms 16:3–4: *To the holy and mighty ones that are in the earth . . . their libations of blood I will not pour out*. But the phrase could also be read as "the holy and mighty ones that are *on* the earth" is understood as referring to the pious ones who comply with the Lord's commandments[18] – which is why the psalmist says that "all my delight is in them." It seems more likely, however, that the reference is to the deities of Canaan.[19] If so, the intention is to extol the Lord as compared to the gods of Canaan, and we should emend the text and read "I have no interest in them"– the gods of Canaan. Spronk adds that in this verse "holy ones" (*qedosim*) means underworld spirits here but "lower deities" elsewhere. He sustains this theory by the fact that *eretz* often denotes the underworld.[20] Indeed like its Akkadian cognate *eretz* can mean the netherworld. As such it is parallel to Sheol,[21] a place of darkness (143:3) and shadow (Job 10:21). We also find *eretz tahtit* 'the underworld' (Ezek. 31:14,16, 18; 32:18,24) and *tahtiyyot eretz* 'the depths of the earth' (Isa. 44:23; Ezek. 26:20; Ps. 63:10). *Tahtit* is yoked to Sheol also: "For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depth of Sheol" (Deut.32:22); "You have saved me from the depth of Sheol" (Ps. 86:13). Schmidt rejects this take on *qedosim;* he says that it always refers to angels or living saints.[22] However *qedosim* is the name of the Canaanites deities the Yehawmilk Inscription from Byblos calls the gods *mphrt qdsm* "the assembly of holy ones." More so he overlooked the fact that here the phrase used in parallel to *qedosim* is *addirei* (*addirim*) 'mighty', which sometimes describes the waters associated with the underworld (Ex. 15:10), and sometimes God (I Sam. 4:8). What is more,

the psalm deals with the believer's appeal that the Lord does not abandon his soul to the underworld (v. 10).

The poet rejects the gods of Canaan (or cult of the dead) and wants no part of their libations of blood (v. 4). The standard libation consisted of wine; but here it is blood, a custom of idolaters. Perhaps the poet was disparaging idolaters, whose gods are thirsty for blood rather than wine. Rashi glosses: "I will not follow their example and sprinkle blood offerings in honor of the idols." Support for the interpretation that the reference is to the cult of the dead is the continuation of v. 4, "their names will not pass my lips." The attendants of the ancestral shades were obligated to make funerary offerings, pour water, and invoke their names.[23] Calling the name of the dead brings up their picture in imagination. Wherever a person's name was mentioned, his spirit too was found. When people were named for ancestors, every time the child was called by name, they were invoking the ancestor as well.

Thus Psalm 16 is a prayer in which the poet expresses his confidence in the Lord. After describing the practices of idolaters, he declares that he will not pour libations of blood, which are libations of the dead.

ISAIAH 65:4

"Inquiring of the dead" appears on the list of magical practices condemned by the Bible (Deut. 18:11). Isaiah refers to this practice when he condemns those *who sit inside tombs and pass the night in secret places* (Isa. 65:4). Apparently, sitting inside a tomb was part of the rite to raise the spirits of the dead by means of a ghost. The purpose, according to Rashi was to enable "the defiling spirit of demons to rest upon them." Similarly, Ibn Ezra glosses the phrase as meaning "to inquire of the dead and to listen to the spirits." As for "passing the night in secret places," we should perhaps prefer, along with Dahood, the reading of the Septuagint and the Peshitta, which reflects a Vorlage "between rocks."[24] Ibn Ezra and Radak understood it to mean "ruins." The latter adds, "they stay overnight in ruins, where they believe, the demons will appear to them, because baneful spirits appear in ruins to those who believe in them." The Talmud warns against entering ruins because demons frequent them.[25] According to Jerome in his commentary on Isaiah, the reference is to the practice of incubation, which is, sleeping in a tomb or temple in order to obtain an oracular dream: ". . . where they had been accustomed to

lie on 'spread fleeces' of sacrificial victims so that they might know the future by dreams." The Septuagint understands the verse as a reference to incubation, interpolating here δι ἐνύπνια "for the sake of dreams"; that is, they sought to commune with the dead in their dreams. The phenomenon of incubation is attested in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 46:1-4; I Kgs.3:4) and in the ancient world. People would go to a particular spot considered to be sacred and offered sacrifices to God, and fall asleep, hoping that they would be visited by Him in a dream. The content of the dream is supposed to provide advice and guidance. Similarly in our text advice was thought to come from the dead. It was believed that the dead had knowledge of the future (I Sam. 28:7-11).

The second half of the verse refers to those *who eat the flesh of swine, with broth of unclean things in their bowls*. This may refer to some form of totemism-a rite in which the people of Judah sometimes ate the flesh of prohibited animals in order to establish a link with the underworld powers. The consumption of a totem animal links the eater with the ancestors symbolized by the totem.[26] The pig was sacred to many peoples. The Egyptians, for example, sacrificed pigs to the moon god and later to Dionysus, and then ate the flesh of the animal even though it was considered to be impure and otherwise they would not touch it.[27] Among the Greeks, too, the Argives and Cyprians sacrificed pigs.[28] The Bible, of course, prohibits eating swine (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8), which was denigrated as an abomination practiced by the nations. Leviticus 11: 7 and Deuteronomy 14: 8 prohibit the consumption of pig for it does not chew its cud. Although never stating explicitly why pig is prohibited, the opening words of Deuteronomy 14:1-3 imply that it is not fitting for children of God, and that it is an abomination. Leviticus 11:43-47 implies that it is not something to be consumed by the holy ones and that it defiles those who eat it. It is possible that the biblical prohibition is some distant echo of totemism.

Evidently, Isaiah refers here to the practice of incubation. The prophet condemns people who worshipped idols. They went to a grave site and slept there in a belief that the spirit of the dead would appear to them in a dream. The eating that is mentioned in our verse was part of the sacrifice to the dead to receive a message from them about the future.

CONCLUSION

Our study shows that the practice of offering food and libation also prevailed among the Israelites. This is indicated by Psalms 106:28 which states that the Israelite offered sacrifices to the dead. There is also allusion to libations of blood to the dead in Psalms 16:3–4, while Isaiah refers to the practice of Incubation where people sat in tombs and ate the flesh of prohibited animals to establish a link with the underworld powers. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 26:14 does not display a reference to offering food and libation to the dead. The Israelites were instructed to remember their commitment to the underprivileged and were forbidden to employ their tithes when they were in mourning or wanted to console others. Although the practice of offering food and libation is mentioned, the Bible is clearly antagonistic about providing the dead with food and drink. This practice was not part of Israelite culture, and when it did penetrate, it was rebuffed.

NOTES

1. Brichto, *Kin, "*Cult, Land and Afterlife-A Biblical Complex," *HUCA* 44(1973):29; T.J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press,1989), pp.103–04; Spronk, Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker: Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), pp. 39, 49, 241, 248.
2. According to Leviticus 10: 16–19, Aaron and his sons did not eat the flesh of the sin-offering slaughtered on the day that Nadav and Avihu died; see also Hos. 9:4.
3. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary*: *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish publication Society, 1996*),* p. 244; E. L. Sukenik, "Arrangements for the Cult of the Dead in Ugarit and Samaria," *Mémorial Lagrange* (Paris: Gabalda, 1940), pp. 59–65; M. Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," *Iraq* 35 (1973): 115–125; T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, p. 97.
4. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, (JSOTSup 123; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press,1992), p. 123.
5. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, p. 103.
6. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead,* p. 198.
7. TB *Moed Qatan* 27b.
8. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, p. 199–200.
9. According to Schmidt, what we find in Numbers 25:2 as well as in Psalms 106:28 is "a polemical depiction of foreign gods as lifeless or dead" (Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, p. 266).
10. See: Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150* (AB 17A; Garden City , New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 73–74; Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7c; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 217; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, pp. 231–33; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, p. 167; Bloch Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, pp. 123–124.

11. See: 1 Sam. 28:13; Isa. 8:19–20. For Ugaritic see: KTU 1.6 VI. 47–48; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, pp. 49–50; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, pp. 231–233. For arguments against the equation of the gods and the dead see: Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, pp. 201–220; Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), p. 144.

12. The name Peor is derived from the root *p.e.r*, as in "therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth (*u-pearah piha*) beyond measure" (Isa. 5:14). According to Spronk, this deity represents the chthonic aspect of the Canaanite god of fertility Baal (Spornk, *Beatific Afterlife*, p.231.

13. There is also Hosea 9:10, *when they came to Baal-peor, they turned aside to shamefulness* (*boset*), if we interpret *boset* literally rather than as a dysphemism for Baal.

14. See: George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 105–121.

15. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary*: *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 212.

16. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36* (AB 4A; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 284.

17. Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 479–480.

18. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, p. 171 n. 14.

19. The term "holy ones" is applied to the gods of Canaan in a Ugaritic hymn: the mighty ones This is another name for Phoenician gods. In Phoenician there is parallelism between *qdsm* and *adr*. See Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I*:1-50 (AB17; Garden City , New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 87–88; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, p. 172 n. 17. Theodor H. Gaster, "The Canaanite Epic of Keret," *JQR* 37(1946-47):292.

20. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, pp. 334–338; B. Lang, "Life After Death in Prophetic Promise," ed. J.A. Emerton. VTS 40. Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986.(Leiden: Brill, 1988), p. 148 n. 11; J. Tropper, Nekromanite: Totenbefragung im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament (AOAT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn,1989), p. 163; M. Smith and E. Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," [review of K. Spronk, Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East], *JAOS* 108(1988), 283; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, p. 166;van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) p. 210.

21. Ex.15:12; 1Sam. 28:13; Isa.26:19; 29:4; Jer. 17:13; Jon. 2:7; Ps. 7:6; 18:18; 22:30; 63:10; 71:20; 95:4; 106:17; 141:7; 143:3; 147:6; 148:7, Job. 10:21; 12:8; 15:29; Prov. 25:3

22. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead,* p. 264.

23. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, pp. 334–347; M. Smith and E. Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," p. 283; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, pp. 53, 166; CAD Z, 18bc; KAI 214: 16–17, 21–22; J. C. Greenfield, "adi baltu: Care for the Elderly and its Rewards," in *AFO Beiheft* 19 (Horn, Austria: Ferdinand und Sohne, 1982), 310d, 311bc.

24. Mitchell Dahood, "Textual Problems in Isaiah," *CBQ* 22 (1960): 408-409.

25. *Ber.* 3a.

26. We find echoes of totemism in the Bible, too, notably in persons who bear animal names, such as Rachel "ewe," Caleb "dog," Huldah "weasel," Laish "lion," Eglon "heifer," Achbor "mouse," Hezir "swine." See: George A. Barton, *A Sketch of Semitic Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1902), pp.35-36; George W. Wade, *The Book of The Prophet Isaiah* (2nd ed.; London: Methuen, 1929), p. 407.

27. Herodotus, *The Histories*. II 47.
28. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of The Semites* (2nd ed.; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), p. 291.

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