

**DEAD, CULT OF THE.** Periodic rituals performed by the living on behalf of the dead members of the family. These rituals were conducted subsequent to and apart from funerals and usually included offerings at the grave site of food and drink which were intended for the well-being of the dead. These occasions were also social gatherings of heirs, relatives, and friends of the deceased, who in some cases was considered the host as well as the beneficiary of the memorial meal.

- A. The Cult of the Dead in the ANE
- B. The Cult of the Dead in Israel
- C. The Cult of the Dead in the Early Church
- D. Conclusions

### **A. The Cult of the Dead in the ANE**

There is abundant evidence for cults of the dead in the pagan world that surrounded Israel. In Mesopotamia the *kispu* ritual included the invocation of the name of the dead, the presentation of food, and a libation of water. In the Mari texts (18th century B.C.E.) offerings to the dead were prescribed four times each month. At Ugarit and elsewhere tombs were equipped with libation tubes or jars without bottoms to conduct fluids into the grave. The reason for the ritual is to be found in the ancient view that the dead as spirits maintained an ongoing relationship with the living, albeit in a weakened state of existence. This may be the root meaning of the *rěpā'im*, "the shades of the dead." The care and feeding of the dead was a sacred obligation for members of the family, especially the son and heir, as a means of perpetuating the relationships of the family that death could transform but never eradicate. Funerals ritualize the process of separation of the dead from the living. By contrast, the cult of the dead stressed the continuity of kinship and family status. In the words of the Arabic proverb, "Were it not for the living, the dead would have died long ago."

### **B. The Cult of the Dead in Israel**

Whether a cult of the dead existed in Israel is more problematic. The answer given depends on the manner in which the case is made. Scholars have proceeded in three ways: (1) to compile the biblical texts on death and burial and draw conclusions from them; (2) to place the experience of Israel in the context of the ancient world, using the resources of comparative religious studies; and (3) to reassess the translation and interpretation of the biblical text, utilizing the material remains recovered by archaeology.

The first approach, represented by de Vaux (*AncIsr*, 56–61), assumes the special character of the religion of Israel and the biblical revelation, both of which make Israel unique. All texts pertaining to death rituals are considered to refer to funerals and not subsequent memorials. With this assumption there is no clear evidence in the text for a cult of the dead among the Israelites.

The rise of comparative studies in the 19th century, typified by Frazer's *Golden Bough*, afforded a second way to examine the issue. Israel had to be seen in the context of other ancient societies. Lods (1932: 219) sums up the results of this research as follows:

1. Israelites up to the Exile believed in the survival of the individual after death.

2. Before the advent of Yahwism, and even after, during the period that Yahwism held sway, in the popular belief the dead were regarded as beings endowed with supernatural power and knowledge, as *'elōhîm*.
3. The Hebrews in the remote past carried on an organized cult of the dead, especially of their ancestors.

“Nothing persists like funerary rites,” said Lods. Over the course of time, however, the interpretation of these rites changed, following social fashions and theological perspectives. Lods demonstrated that behind the biblical record lay ancient rites that explain why mourning is obligatory for a father, mother, or members of the patrilineal line and why it is essential to have male offspring; both relate to conserving the patrimony of the family through the maintenance of proper relations with the dead ancestors.

The third approach applies the discoveries of archaeology to the Bible in two ways. The material remains from tombs and shrines can be correlated with passages in Scripture, while the literary finds (clay tablets, inscriptions, scrolls) provide resources for comparative philology that result in better translations and interpretations of the biblical text. Albright’s study of the high place is a model of this kind of research. The standing stones (*maṣṣēbōt*) associated with burials (Gen 35:20) are a feature of the high places. From this Albright inferred that the primary function of these sanctuaries was as a mortuary shrine, part of the cult of the dead (1957: 243).

None of these approaches has been completely convincing. The inherent difficulty in the first approach is that the reports of earlier cultic practices in Israel must be read through the theological filter of the latest editors of the biblical text. The comparative approaches are attractive and suggestive but are inconclusive at the point of ascertaining Israelite involvement in the cult. There can be no question that many of the elements pertaining to the cult of the dead are already found in the Bible: laments, periods of mourning, acquisitions of tombs along with the erection of monuments, memorial stones, and concern for the possession of the *těrāpîm*, the family god(s). It is this last group of activities that goes beyond the pragmatic need to dispose of the dead in a socially acceptable and expeditious manner and arrives at a concern for the well-being of the dead and their relationship with the living. The cave at Machpelah, for example, was originally purchased as a burial place for Sarah (Gen 23:4). In time it also became the grave of Abraham, then of Isaac and Jacob, along with Rebecca and Leah. The site is still a shrine for the children of Abraham in Hebron “to this day.” Such durability of the practice of visiting a tomb-shrine indicates that, legal injunctions and prophetic denunciations notwithstanding, the Israelites continued to share many of the cultural and social assumptions of the Canaanites when it came honoring the dead.

In Judg 17:5 an *'ēpōd* and *těrāpîm* are installed in a family shrine at which the son will serve as priest, a combination of factors that strongly suggests an ancestral memorial. The *těrāpîm* were ancestral images that could be life-size (1 Sam 19:13) or as small as a mask. Rachel’s theft of the *těrāpîm* (Gen 19:31) is interpreted as her way of maintaining a controlling influence in her family’s affairs. The *těrāpîm* as a mask recalls the various forms of necromancy that were so common in popular religion (Isa 29:4; *Ber.* 18b; *Šab.* 152b). The LXX translates *těrāpîm* in Gen 19:31 as *eidōlon*, i.e., an image [of the dead]. The Latin lexicographer Fulgentius derived the word *idol* somewhat freely from the Gk expression “image of grief.” He traced the invention of portraiture to a grieving father who wished a permanent reminder of the face of his dead son.

This derivation may help to explain the NT opposition to food offered to idols (Acts 15; 1 Corinthians 8). Memorial meals retained their popularity well into the Roman period and beyond.

Another indication of the care of the dead is the custom of secondary burial in which the bones of the deceased are collected after an initial burial during which time the flesh has decomposed. In rock-cut tombs of the Iron Age, pits were dug into the floor to serve as collection bins for these bones. The practical motivation would be the conservation of space, allowing for the reuse of the tomb. The reburial of Jacob and Joseph, however, from Egypt back to the land of their fathers (Gen 50:4ff.; Exod 13:19) shows a different concern: the need to be buried with the fathers in the land of their children. In these cases the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead is paramount. In the Exile Nehemiah laments that Jerusalem, “the place of my fathers’ sepulchers, lies waste” (Neh 2:3). Behind his anguish is the general belief that memorial rituals can only be conducted at the proper place by members of the family. During the period of the Second Temple, the fashion of reburials in ossuaries has been interpreted as reflecting a change in Jewish thinking about the afterlife and resurrection. The anonymity of the tomb-pit has been replaced by individual containers bearing the name of the deceased. But this fashion seems to coincide with the reemergence of family tombs for those wealthy enough to afford them and with what has been called the renaissance of the cult of the ancestral tombs in the Herodian period. The change in burial customs could be explained on genealogical as well as theological grounds: during a time of national upheaval, a person’s status depends on family connections, not public office or relationships with a national temple.

Food offerings to the dead are specifically condemned (Deut 26:14; Ps 106:28) and yet there are biblical narratives describing family shrines and yearly sacrifices for all the family (1 Sam 20:6). That David can use this excuse to leave Saul’s table at the time of the new moon suggests that family sacrifices were more highly regarded than royal feasts. The nature of the family sacrifice can be inferred from Rendtorff’s study of sacrifices in the OT. He sees a distinction between the sacrifices of the public cult (*’olâ*) and those offered within the clan (*zebah*). The *zebah* sacrifice is connected with a meal (Exod 34:15) but with the critical stipulation that the blood be poured out on the altar of the Lord (Deut 12:27b). This injunction has the air of ecclesiastical compromise about it: “If you must eat these family sacrifices, at least dedicate the blood to the Lord and not to the dead.” If the meat were permissible to the living on other grounds, the blood as nourishment for the dead was totally unacceptable. Pig’s meat was forbidden at any time, because the sacrifice of a pig was closely connected with rites for the dead (Isa 65:4).

Several tombs have been excavated that show structural provision for the offerings of food and drink. A small, curving shaft from ground level leads into the chamber of Tomb 2 at Beth-shemesh. Originally called an “air shaft,” it is more likely that it served to carry food and liquids for the refreshment of the dead.

The dead especially needed liquid refreshment, since the realm of Death (*Mot*) was widely regarded as an arid place, a desert devoid of life-giving rain. Liquids—water, wine, and blood—were particularly welcome. This need on the part of the dead raised a problem for the living. The libations poured on graves could be matched by cups of wine drunk by the living. Much piety was a threat to sobriety. Jer 16:5ff. catalogues the dangers lurking in the “cup of consolation.” Inebriation led to other forms of debauchery. The repeated references to Israel playing the harlot with the Canaanite gods may have been intended more literally than metaphorically (as is usually done). Israelites still frequented the high places and their “beds” on which they celebrated with

food, drink, and sex (Isa 57:7–8). The problem was as old as Baal-peor (Num 25:1–10), but still in the Greek period mourners were segregated sexually to prevent unseemly behavior in mourning (Zech 12:12).

The national cult of YHWH in Jerusalem made very slow progress against the family shrines. Whereas the care and feeding of the dead could only be done by the family, the national religion served historical and political needs of the monarchy. Consequently, Yahwism had to desacralize and demythologize death radically in order to check the popularity of the family cults. The dead were declared outside the sphere of God's cult (Ps 88:3–12) and therefore divorced from him. They no longer required food and drink, much less sex, since they are in a state of rest.

In the Apocrypha the pragmatic argument is made that drink poured on a mouth closed in death was as much a waste as food left on a grave. Equally useless is offering fruit to an image of the deceased, "for it can neither eat nor smell" (Sir 30:18–19).

### **C. The Cult of the Dead in the Early Church**

In Matt 23:29 Jesus refers to the tombs of the prophets that came into prominence in the Hellenistic period as places of veneration and pilgrimage. From the literary sources Jeremias (1958) was able to catalogue over 40 such shrines. These tombs are not family shrines but memorials to saints and martyrs of the "household of faith." Depending on one's point of view, these tombs are either a victory for the national cult over the ancestral shrines or a compromise with them; the cult of the dead heroes of the faith is sanctioned by the religious authorities.

If one views Jesus as a prophet (cf. Matt 16:14), then his burial place could be included in the category of a prophet's tomb. It is difficult to imagine that the disciples of Jesus who gathered in Jerusalem after Easter would not visit the place of the Resurrection. Several scholars have proposed that the Christian community may have come to the tomb of Jesus to celebrate the Resurrection, so that the empty tomb became a type of *weli* or shrine. Pagan opponents accused Christians of preaching a cult of the dead Jesus. One factor that would contribute to this misunderstanding is the timing of the Resurrection appearances. Roman memorial meals were held on the 3d, 7th, 9th, 30th, and 40th days after death, a chronology that is remarkably close to the gospel sequence of appearances. Also, the custom of meeting early on the first day of the week, perhaps after a vigil the night before, to commemorate the Resurrection would tend to reinforce this interpretation among Jews and pagans. Christian apologists responded that Jesus is risen, not dead; therefore their celebrations were not memorial services or meals, but thanksgivings. Paul had a difficult time at Corinth making this distinction clear (1 Corinthians 11). A service remembering what Jesus did "on the night in which he was betrayed" is not a wake for the dead Jesus. The Corinthians had opted for the latter interpretation, which would explain the quantities of food they brought to their meetings. Paul's tradition insisted on the former interpretation of the meal in the upper room.

The cult of the dead in Christianity followed the patterns set by Judaism. The tombs of the Christian martyrs, like those of the Jewish prophets before them, stood as separate monuments; later some were incorporated into church buildings. In Christianity, as in Judaism, the cult of the saints represented a compromise between the traditions of folk religion and the theology of the establishment.

### **D. Conclusions**

The cult of the dead was primarily a family affair, totally divorced from public and national concerns. Its purpose was to perpetuate the status of the deceased within the family structure and to validate the succession of the patrimony. The cult was of necessity connected with specific tracts of land. Site names in Palestine such as Baal-hazor (2 Sam 13:23) and Baal-shalisha (2 Kgs 4:42) were probably family cult centers for certain districts. The term *ba'al* would seem to be transformed through time from an original meaning of husband/father to a generic name for lord/god and finally to a specific Canaanite god. The archaeological evidence and the textual evidence both confirm that the cult of the dead preceded the establishment of the Israelite confederation, but it would be unwise to conclude that the Israelites did not engage in such rituals until they entered the land.

Yahwism opposed these cult centers because private, family shrines threatened the Deuteronomic ideal of one God worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the debaucheries associated with the shrines were morally offensive. In the Exile, when the national life was at a very low ebb, this second aspect was addressed more forcefully. Memorials and tombs were denounced as unnecessary for the *righteous* dead, whose deeds would be memorial enough, while the unrighteous would "have no reward, but the memory of them is lost" (Eccl 9:5).

Christianity, as had Judaism before it, effected a *modus vivendi* with the converted pagans. The annual Parentalia, memorial rituals for family members would in time become the feasts of All Saints and All Souls.

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