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Graves, Missing Graves, Ideology and Mortuary Rituals : A Mixed Salad in the Archaeological Bowl

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Approaching the Dead

Studies on Mortuary Ritual in the Ancient World

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RAZ KLETTER

Graves, Missing Graves, Ideology and Mortuary Rituals

A Mixed Salad in the Archaeological Bowl

Introduction

At the core of this article stands the question of identifying mortuary/funerary rituals and ideology from material remains, specifically biblical rituals and remains of tombs in the areas of Judah and Israel. Can we identify mortuary/funerary rituals that are mentioned in the Bible with remains found in the tombs? This requires, of course, identifying the rituals from the biblical sources. Perhaps we can move in the other direction too, identifying first rituals from the material remains, then compare them to the biblical sources? Rituals can involve material (such as putting an object before a cult statue, burning incense, or killing a sacrificial animal) as well as immaterial components (for example, praying and singing). Can we identify the spiritual or the ideological in material remains? Do tombs that originate in (or perhaps originate in) Israel/Judah reflect an ideology that matches the Bible?

In treating these questions, we will discuss first the Judean Iron Age II bench tombs – several hundred of these hewn tombs are known and many of them have been excavated, providing a rich archaeological source on death and burial in the Kingdom of Judah. Next, we will study the opposite case: the lack of tombs in the highlands of Palestine in the Iron I period. Is the lack of tombs indicative of certain beliefs or ideologies of “ancient Israel”?

We will discuss only briefly the biblical sources, mainly reviewing scholars who have identified mortuary/funerary rituals in the Bible. In comparing Iron Age tombs and biblical sources, we do not make claims about “early” dating of the written sources.

In this study, we do not discuss the definition of “ritual.”¹ There is no agreed definition, but we can follow the concept of ritual as a structured and repeated human behavior, performed in order to achieve a certain aim.² The risk with such a general definition is of finding rituals everywhere. For example, brushing teeth daily in a certain order is a structured, repeated act. However, it is not a ritual, unless we see every daily act or custom as ritual.

Judean Iron Age II Tombs and Rituals

Hundreds of Judean Iron Age II hewn “bench” tombs (Fig. 1) are known from dozens of sites in late Iron Age II Judah (8th–7th centuries BCE). They usually have an entrance shaft with a rectangular doorway leading to one or more (usually rectangular/square) burial chambers. The deceased were placed on benches along the walls, or sometimes in *loculi* (niches) cut in the walls. Many tombs had sunken repository pits, that is, a space dug deeper than the rest of the tomb, often located inside one of the burial chambers. From time to time, when place was needed on the benches for new burials, the bones and vessels of former burials were removed from the benches and placed in (or thrown into) the repository pit.

¹ See Hobsbawm and Ragner 1983; Insoll 2004; Snoek 2006; Bell 2009, with references.

² Gruenwald 2003, 3–8.

GROUP OF TOMBS Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

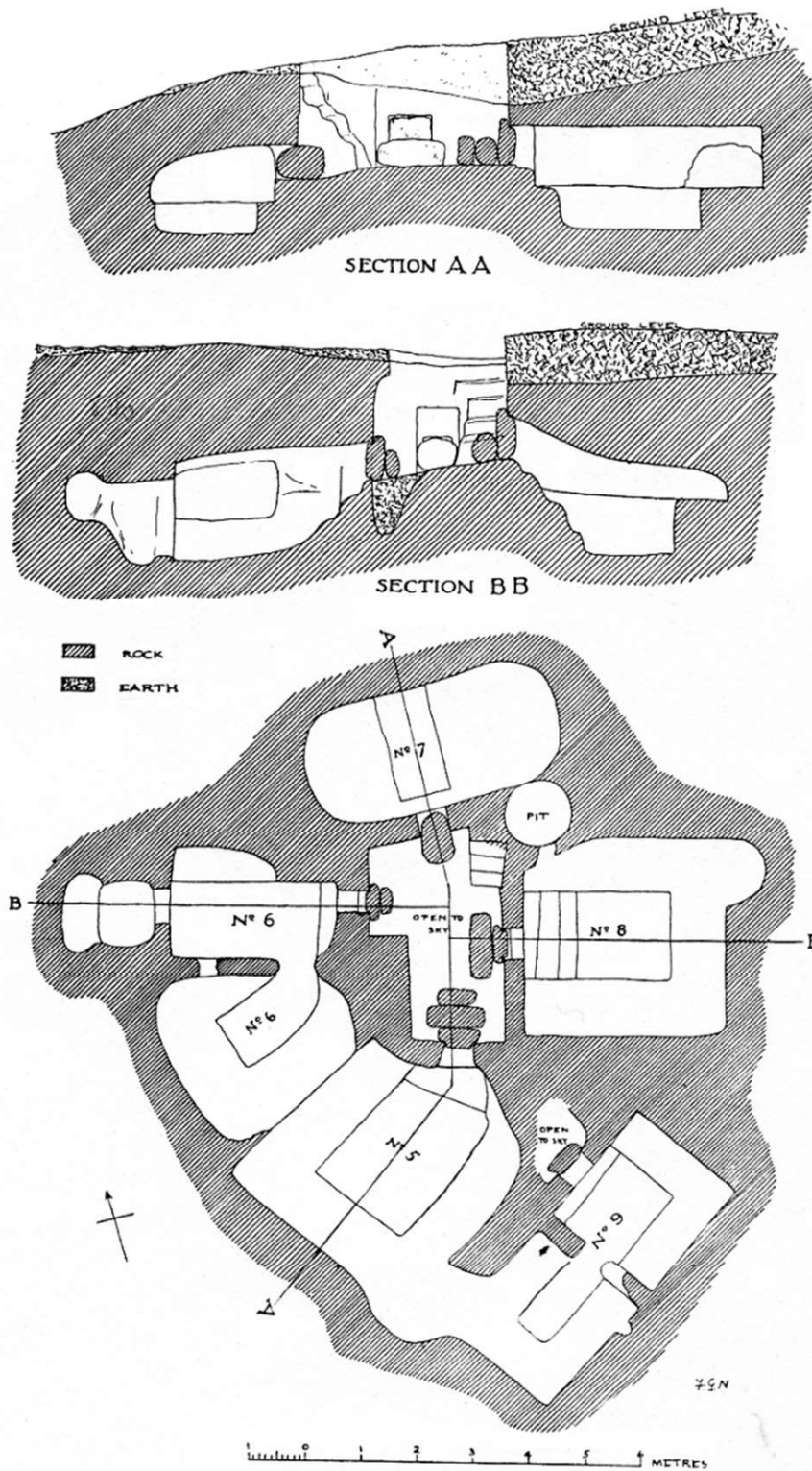


FIGURE 1. BETH SHEMESH TOMBS 5-9 (MACKENZIE, D. 1912. THE EXCAVATIONS OF AIN SHEMS II. PEF ANNUAL: PL. 7).

Detailed studies deal with the origins, typology and architectural aspects of these tombs;³ their date and distribution;⁴ arrangement in cemeteries;⁵ human remains and various pottery and other finds.⁶ Important are also comparisons to tombs of the same period in neighboring areas, such as Northern Israel⁷ and Philistia.⁸

Burial in bench tombs was primary – complete bodies were placed on the benches. Presumably when space was needed for new burials, the bones and finds were moved to the repository pits, or sometimes the floor of a chamber instead.⁹ Some bench tombs were single tombs.¹⁰ However, most of them included multiple burials. We assume that they were family tombs, but we lack direct evidence proving this (DNA analysis proving kin relations was not published so far).

Bench tombs were often interpreted as tombs of the rich.¹¹ However, there are great differences among them, for example in size, plan, number of burials, and quality of hewing, even at the same site. Bench tombs appear in the capital, Jerusalem, as well as in small rural sites. It seems that some bench tombs belonged to the elite, while others reflect less wealthy people.¹²

Bench tombs are not the only tombs in Iron Age II Judah: a variety of other, less common tombs is known, from natural caves to shallow pit graves. Poor people were apparently buried in simple, shallow pit graves, which are mostly invisible to us (because they do not survive well); but a few have been found, for example, at Lachish.¹³ Compare biblical references to burial of “common” persons (e.g., Jer 26:23).

Against the consensus view, Osbourne interprets the repositories of bench tombs not as a practical means for clearing space for new burials,

³ Barkay 1994; Wenning 1994; Bautch et al. 2000; Yezerki 2002; 2013a; 2013c.

⁴ Yezerki 1999; Fantalkin 2008; Yezerki 2013c; Nablusi 2015, 19–72.

⁵ Ussishkin 1993; Amit and Yezerki 2001; Yezerki 2013a; Borowski 2013.

⁶ For example, Arensburg and Rak 1985; Wenning 2005; Mandell 2017.

⁷ Yezerki 2013b; Mazow 2014.

⁸ Ben-Shlomo 2008; Faerman et al. 2011.

⁹ Wenning 2005, 127–128; Borowski 2013, 7.

¹⁰ Barkay 1994, 109.

¹¹ Bloch-Smith 1992, 49; Magness 2012.

¹² Barkay 1994, 162; Barkay 1999, 99; Wenning 2005, 112–114; Borowski 2013, 4; Yezerki 2013, 22; Yezerki 2013c, 52; Nablusi 2015, 49.

¹³ Barkay 1994, 148; Yezerki 2013c, 52; Fantalkin 2008, 20–23; Faust and Bunimovitz 2008, 152; Osbourne 2011, 39; Ilan 2017, 60.

but as places of secondary burial with ritualistic meanings.¹⁴ Osbourne is aware that there is hardly any biblical reference to a custom of secondary burial.¹⁵ In fact, biblical references speak against the idea that secondary burial was practiced in Israel and Judah. In 2 Sam 21 Rizpah protected the exposed dead of Saul's family until David ordered to bury them in Saul's family tomb. Meyers¹⁶ sees here a regular "period of decomposition" for secondary burial, but this story implies nothing of the sort. The intention was *not* to bury the bodies, and only therefore were they left exposed. Exposing bodies to animals or to the elements is considered throughout the Bible not just as lack of burial, but as a despicable, shameful fate. It is a horror reserved mainly for enemies. Without funerary rituals, burial, and offerings, the dead might remain hungry and restless in Sheol, or disappear into oblivion.¹⁷ So the unique, exceptional story of 2 Sam 21 does not indicate any custom of secondary burial.

There is no evidence that moving the bones to the depositories in the Judean bench tombs was accompanied by rituals, although it is possible. Moving bones to free space for new burials has deep roots in the Ancient Near East. For example, in Middle Bronze Age shaft tombs, when place was required for new burials, primary burials were moved (often carelessly) into heaps of secondary burials.¹⁸ In some Judean bench tombs with *loculi* the dead were not moved at all, so primary burial was the only and final form of burial.¹⁹ In Ezekiel (32:25) the dead are described as resting in peace "on their beds" (*mishkav*), implying that the benches/*loculi* were regarded as the main or final resting place (cf. Isa 57:2), even if in practice the bones were moved later into a repository pit.

¹⁴ Osbourne 2011; see also Meyers 1970; Suriano 2010b, 57. Osbourne (2011, 46) claims that he provided "a compelling case for the existence of a robust secondary mortuary practice in [the bench tombs in] ancient Judah"; and that the bench tomb was, allegedly "the locus of symbolically charged ritual activity whose goal was to incorporate the deceased into the world of the ancestors" (ibid, 50–51). Exactly what this "ritual activity" was he does not say.

¹⁵ Osbourne 2011, 43; but see 1 Sam 31, 11–13.

¹⁶ Meyers 1970, 11.

¹⁷ Horowitz 2000; Olyan 2005, 603–611; Mansen 2015, v.

¹⁸ Kletter and Levy 2016, with references. The article by Cradic (2017) is an example of 'ritualizing' remains, interpreting almost everything in MB tombs as ritualistic. The end result is a lot of speculative assertions; but do they have substance?

¹⁹ Barkay 1994, 128–131.

In the warm Southern Levant bodies decompose fast – a matter of weeks.²⁰ There is some evidence that bodies were left for a longer period on the benches than the time required for decomposition. At Tel ‘Ira Tomb 15 there were three chambers with two benches in each. In Chamber 115, 12 (out of a total of 23) individuals were found on the benches. On one bench there were an adult woman and a child; on a second bench three layers of skeletons: an elderly female, five adults, and five youths. On the floor were partial remains of three articulated skeletons. In Chamber 120 two individuals were found on the same bench. In Chamber 119 there was a bench occupied by a primary burial, and a bone pile on the floor with at least eight individuals. The bone pile was topped by three articulated skeletons.²¹ In Lachish Tomb 4005 some individuals were pushed aside before decomposition.²² In Lachish Tomb 521 two individuals were placed one on top of the other on the same bench, and two more skeletons were found on the floor.²³ Seven bodies were found on the benches of a tomb at Ramot.²⁴ At Khirbet Beit Lei Tomb 1 there were six benches, each occupied by one primary burial.²⁵ At Mt. Zion there were five individuals on two benches in one chamber.²⁶ These finds hint that all the benches in a tomb were ‘filled’ before moving remains to repositories; that former burials were not always removed, but left on benches; and that some dead were given primary burials in repositories/on floors, or removed from the benches still before decomposition. These cases speak against the idea that moving the bones to the repositories after decomposition was the main, all-important act, implying secondary burial, while the primary burial on benches was a temporary, “technical” phase.

What do we know about mortuary/funerary rituals from the archaeological remains of Judean bench tombs? It is difficult to answer this question, because the discussion of these tombs is interwoven with the biblical sources. The written sources remain in mind, even if the focus is

²⁰ Duday 2009, 50–52.

²¹ Bloch Smith 1992, 203; Beit Arieh and Baron 1999, 152–155.

²² Tufnell 1953, 240; Bloch Smith 1992, 205.

²³ Tufnell 1953, 222–224; Bloch Smith 1992, 206.

²⁴ Bloch-Smith 1992, 207–208.

²⁵ Bloch Smith 1992, 230.

²⁶ Bloch Smith 1992, 236.

archaeological. Scholars do not reconstruct Judean mortuary rituals from the archaeological remains; rather, they identify rituals in the biblical sources, and try to corroborate them through the archaeological remains. One reason for this is that the Judean tombs are mostly robbed and damaged, and the finds are disturbed or found mixed in the repositories. A more crucial reason is that archaeology deals with materials aspects, while rituals may include immaterial as well as material aspects.

This is admitted by scholars in various forms. Abercrombie lamented the “dearth of literary information to amplify or crystallize our understanding of the funerary remains.”²⁷ According to Borowski, reconstruction of rituals from Judean bench tombs is “very difficult.”²⁸ Schmitt noticed that specific ritualistic objects hardly appear in Judean tombs (items that are sometimes mentioned in this regard, like figurines, are not necessarily ritualistic).²⁹ Nablusi writes, in regard to the moving of bones to repositories, that: “lacking textual evidence we cannot make assumptions regarding a spiritual or ritual meaning associated with this practice.”³⁰ Hays states: “archaeology alone cannot determine anything conclusive about Judean mortuary religion toward the end of the monarchic period.”³¹ Yet this is precisely the period when the archaeological data about burial in Judah is the richest.

This does not mean that there were no funerary rituals related to Judean bench tombs and their assemblages. Presumably there were, but we cannot reconstruct them from the archaeological remains. Two features (carved headrests and lamps) may serve as examples.

Carved Headrests

Barkay suggested that some Ω-shaped carved headrests in Judean bench tombs resemble the typical headdress of the Egyptian Goddess Hathor. However, Keel interpreted them as a womb of earth – symbol of life and fertility – implying that the dead hoped to return to the motherly warmth

²⁷ Abercrombie 1979, 187.

²⁸ Borowski 2013, 7.

²⁹ Schmitt 2012, 453.

³⁰ Nablusi 2015, 58.

³¹ Hays, 2011, 149; see also Horwitz 2000, 121.

of the womb. In response, Barkay modified his view, and suggested that the headrests were a mere decorative element, which reflected beds used in houses.³² Keel and Uehlinger³³ maintained their interpretation as a symbol of a womb, but without the relation to the Hathor mythology. They base this interpretation on similar Ω -shapes that appear in much earlier (Middle and Late Bronze) terracottas and amulets from far away Babylonia, which possibly relate to goddesses and miscarried infants. Magness pointed to similar headrests in Etruscan tombs, and to rectangular pillow-shaped headrests in Cypriot and Phrygian tombs.³⁴ A metal bed found in one of the Etruscan tombs shows that the headrests imitate real beds, supporting the modified interpretation of Barkay. Hays brings the Hathor mythology back: not just the headrests, but the entire tombs symbolize the womb, in relation to the Hathor mythology – and to Job 1:21, where a human being's life cycle is described as emerging naked from the mother's womb and returning naked to the womb again.³⁵

I join the more cautious stand of Barkay and Magness. Nothing ties the carved headdresses to either the mythology of Hathor or to Job 1:21 (whether Job reflects Iron Age beliefs is another issue). Following Barkay and Magness, the Judean headrests in the tombs probably reflect use of beds with similar headrests in houses. The resemblance to the Hathor headdress can be random or decorative, without hidden mythological meanings. If the tomb headrests were part of the Hathor mythology, why don't we find similar headrests in Egypt? Egyptian (detached) headrests, found in many tombs since the Early Kingdom Period, are completely different, and bear no special relation to Hathor.³⁶ Add that the so-called "Hathor headdresses" appear all over the Ancient World: "in many cases, hairstyles described as Hathoric are neither Hathoric nor Egyptian."³⁷

³² Barkay and Kloner 1986; Barkay 1988; 1994, 150–151; Keel 1987.

³³ Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 25–26, 367.

³⁴ Magness 2001, 85–88; cf. Barkay 1994, 159.

³⁵ Hays 2012, 618–621.

³⁶ Summers 2016; According to Hellinckx (2001), the shape, motifs, and colors of Egyptian headrests bear no relation to Hathor, but to the *akhet* (horizon) hieroglyph and the sky. These objects relate to concepts of being awoken after death and received by the sky Goddess Nut among the sun and stars; "the headdress made the head rise from the 'depths' of the nether-world and caused the deceased to reach heaven" (ibid, 95).

³⁷ Bouillon 2017, 209.

While each scholar is entitled to a view, we have no written allusions to the Judean headrests, and cannot tell if they were related to rituals.

Pottery Lamps

Lamps are found, sometimes in large numbers, in Judean bench tombs. Triangular niches for candles/lamps are also found, mainly in southern Judah. Some lamps are found near the head of the deceased. Remains of soot indicate that many lamps have been used.³⁸ Did the lamps have practical aims, ritualistic meanings, or both? Opinions vary.

Abercrombie suggested that lamps were used in the tombs for burning incense.³⁹ There are biblical references to fire in funerals of Kings (e.g., Jer 34:5; 2 Chr 21:19), but not specifically to incense burning.

Barkay observes that the number of lamps is far too large to serve just for the practical arranging of the funeral, or visits by relatives.⁴⁰ Maybe the lamps lighted the way of the dead in the dark afterworld, or were symbols for the soul of the dead (based on Prov 20:27: “the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord”).

Borowski believes that lamps placed near the deceased relate to a cultic ritual⁴¹ – but which ritual?

Wenning suggested that some lamps were practical means to light the dark underground chambers in order to handle the funeral. However, lamps could also have various symbolic meanings: they could be lit to honor a deity, or to cover and protect the dead with their light. Creating brightness in the tomb, even if for a limited time, could symbolize that the dead are not excluded from light/the society. Perhaps lighting many lamps was a symbolic compensation for the limited duration of burning of a single lamp. According to Wenning the lamps were not given to the dead to light the afterworld, and were not “eternal lights” symbolizing eternal life.⁴²

³⁸ Yezerki 2002, 69; Borowski 2013, 8.

³⁹ Abercrombie 1979, 190; following De-Vaux and Pedersen.

⁴⁰ Barkay 1994, 153.

⁴¹ Borowski 2013, 8.

⁴² Wenning 2005, 130–131.

Osbourne assumes that the living need the lamps “to perform their burial rituals,” but that the cutting of niches for lamps “implies continued symbolic use after the living had departed, as does the deliberate placement of lamps by the head of the deceased when niches are not present.”⁴³ It is not clear on what evidence this is based. The cutting of niches for lamps could be a practical matter. The same can be true for lamps on benches: we too put lights near the head of our beds, not for symbolic reasons, but because we do not see with our feet. Funerary customs may imitate customs of life, not necessarily having ‘hidden’ symbolic meanings.

Yezerki observes that during the day, if not closed by the *gelal* stone⁴⁴, the tombs do not require artificial light. So perhaps the lamps were used for night funerals. Alternatively, they may have had some role in funerary ceremonies.⁴⁵ The question is which role, and in what sort of ceremonies?

Potential factors and explanations are many. Were funerals made at night? Were lamps practical lighting means, or symbolic objects? Were they gifts, or personal objects of the dead? Were they given to the dead to use in the dark afterworld, as a symbolic gift, or as an offering (e.g., for burning incense)? Meanings and functions could change from individual to individual, and even for the same lamp during its “life cycle.”

Biblical Mortuary/Funerary Rituals

Biblical sources about funerary rituals have been studied intensively, and we will not describe them in detail here. Subjects that occupy much attention include necromancy and the cult, veneration, and feeding of the dead;⁴⁶ mourning;⁴⁷ and human sacrifices, mainly of babies to

⁴³ Osbourne 2011, 42.

⁴⁴ *Gelal* stone is a mean for sealing tombs in order to protect them (for example from animals). The stones can be rectangular (fitted as a cork to the entrance) or round (a sliding stone).

⁴⁵ Amit and Yezerki 2001, 191; Yezerki 2002, 70; for the *gelal* stone see Williamson 1990.

⁴⁶ Spronk 1986; Lewis 1989; Schmidt 1994; Lewis 2002; Schmitt 2012.

⁴⁷ Pham 1999; Olyan 2004; Schmitt 2012, 433–436.

Ba'al/Molech.⁴⁸ For the relation of the biblical *marzeah* to funerary rituals, see Töyräänvuori (p. 19–20) in this volume.

None of these subjects have direct relation to the Judean bench tombs. I shall refer here mainly to the recent treatment of Schmitt, because it is useful and updated, and because Schmitt looked for any possible archaeological correlation to funerary rituals mentioned (or allegedly mentioned) in the Bible. The sole material expressions mentioned by Schmitt of mourning are wailing female figurines.⁴⁹ However, they appear in Philistia and Beth Shean, not in Judean tombs. Biblical sources for feeding the dead are scarce and opinions about them vary. Storage and dining vessels and remains of food were found in bench tombs,⁵⁰ but it is not certain if they were food for the dead. If they were, do their limited quantities imply “practical” needs for a transitory period (e.g., until the dead reach She'ol), or symbolic food for eternity? The finds were probably placed in the tomb at the time of the funeral, and do not prove constant, long-term feeding/cult of the dead. There is no clear evidence for funerary meals taken by relatives in or near Judean tombs. There is no evidence that figurines of horses and riders found in bench tombs represented ancestors.⁵¹ Schmitt interprets Jerusalem Cave I as evidence for ritual commemoration of the dead.⁵² However, this cave is not a tomb, there are hardly specific ritual/cultic objects in it, and given its small size and large assemblage of finds it seems to be a storage place of domestic vessels, not a place for rituals. Schmitt refers to one mask from Hazor, which was perhaps used for “divination practices,” as evidence for communications with the dead.⁵³ Yet, the mask is not from a tomb, its function is unknown, and it is not related to the area of Judah. What indicative remains do we expect to find, for example concerning necromancy? The Endor “witch” (1 Sam 28) did not use specific gadgets and

⁴⁸ Vainstaub 2010; Garroway 2014, 178–197.

⁴⁹ Schmitt 2012, 436.

⁵⁰ Schmitt 2012, 457.

⁵¹ Thus Schmitt 2012, 462.

⁵² Schmitt 2012, 462–469.

⁵³ Schmitt 2012, 106, 471.

when the figure of Samuel rose from the pit it did not leave footprints behind.⁵⁴

Other studies focus on biblical customs of burial, beliefs in the afterlife, treatment of bodies, and transfer of human remains.⁵⁵ We can find customs that match the tombs. For example, the dead were probably buried clothed so we find toggle pins of dresses. Did it involve a ritual? Possibly;⁵⁶ but based only on material remains we cannot know. A “ritual analysis” of bench tombs runs the danger of interpreting everything found in them as “ritualization of death.”⁵⁷ A ritualistic vocabulary may seem trendy but does not necessarily improve the quality of our articles.

There is no “one” unified biblical funerary ritual, but different rituals, probably relating to different circles and times. There are various scholarly views about them. The textual description of rituals (“textualized rituals”) could be different from the actual way of performance of the same rituals by factors such as improvising, intonation, etc.⁵⁸ “Regular” burial rituals are hardly described in the Bible, while sensational rituals like necromancy or cult of the dead (if performed in/near Judean tombs) did not leave clearly identified material elements.

Why are such biblical religious rituals (as interpreted by biblical scholars) not reflected in the material remains of Iron II Judean tombs? There can be several explanations. Maybe the reason is the limitation of the ‘mute’ and fragmentary material finds, which hardly offer a full image of things like rituals. Another possibility is that rituals mentioned in the Bible were not something that was performed (or commonly performed) in practice (cf. Gudme 2009). A third possibility is that such rituals were

⁵⁴ Compare Ragner 2009. Ilan (2017:62) suggested that those who were buried in Judean bench tombs were elite people that “favoured ancestor cults,” while those buried in simple pits without accompanying objects “conformed to Yahwistic orthodoxy.” Where is the evidence? Why relate “ancestor cult” with bench tombs, but assume that it cannot fit ‘simpler’ pit tombs? Compare the great variety of tomb shapes in modern Israel, even within the same orthodox community. Some tombs are very modest, others elaborate and expensive, and this bears no relation to different religious beliefs.

⁵⁵ Horowitz 2000; Johnston 2002; Olyan 2005; 2009; Suriano 2010a; Nablusi 2015, 199–264, etc.

⁵⁶ Compare Nordström 2016 on textiles and mourning.

⁵⁷ Suriano 2016.

⁵⁸ Gudme 2009; Frevel 2016. Since biblical texts about rituals are usually brief and vague, attempts to wrench detailed information from them are “doomed to fail” (Gudme 2009, 70). If we cannot “restore” rituals from these texts, how can we do so from “mute” material remains? We end up transplanting rituals assumed from texts onto the material remains.

performed, but not inside/near the Judean bench tombs. If with a database of so many tombs we can say little about mortuary rituals, can we say anything based on a study of missing tombs? We will review this subject in the following section.

Missing Israelite Tombs and Ideology

Since rituals typically contain immaterial components, they concern beliefs and ideas. It is therefore interesting to review here recent suggestions to find ideologies of “ancient Israel” from tombs – or rather, from lack of tombs. If we can identify complex constructions like ideologies from (missing) tombs, surely we should be able to identify from them also ideas and beliefs, and hence, rituals. However, at first we have to explain the phenomenon of the missing tombs.

In the Iron I and early Iron II periods (roughly 12th–10th centuries BCE) we find very few tombs in the highlands of Palestine. This was hardly discussed until recently – scholars imagined a natural development without breaks:

It should be no surprise that the archaeological evidence for burial customs of Israelite villages of the Early Iron Age indicates little difference from the burial customs of the pre-Israelite period or of the non-Israelite neighbors.⁵⁹

Where are the burials of the supposedly “Israelite villages of the early Iron Age”? A few highland tombs, such as at Dothan, relate to Canaanite cities that survived into the early Iron Age. Such tombs are Iron Age by date, but Canaanite by culture.⁶⁰ Tombs that can be ascribed to the new Iron I highland villages are rare or doubtful.⁶¹ Perhaps people were buried in shallow pit burials or natural caves without gifts. Such tombs might become invisible to us, since either they did not survive, or cannot be dated and defined.⁶² For example, we would not know if there are earlier (say 11th or 10th century BCE) bone remains in bench tombs or in natural

⁵⁹ Mendenhal 1992, 73; cf. Bloch-Smith 1992; 2004.

⁶⁰ Kletter 2002; for Iron I ethnicity see Kletter 2014.

⁶¹ Vitto 2001; Livingstone 2002; Alexandre 2003.

⁶² Kletter 2002.

caves, because (so far at least) the tombs are datable by finds such as pottery, not by bones.

The Iron II Judean bench tombs reflect a society with differences of wealth/status between “classes.” This is apparent from the archaeological remains, for example, the differences of size and funerary objects between various bench tombs, but also from biblical sources.⁶³ The lack of burials in the Iron I reflects perhaps a relatively poor society.⁶⁴ This fits other aspects of the Iron I highland society, such as settlement forms (small, rural settlements of a similar size) and pottery assemblages (simple, functional vessels, with few imports or elaborate decoration). The picture is not clear cut, because no society is completely “egalitarian.” A society can be “egalitarian” in some aspects, but not so in other aspects. Add that tombs do not necessary reflect social realities,⁶⁵ and that negative evidence in archaeology is inconclusive.

Faust also explained the scarcity of Iron I highland burials by the use of simple, shallow burials.⁶⁶ He correctly pointed out that funerary gifts do not have to be expensive, so the early Israelites could have afforded some.⁶⁷ However, Faust added a new explanation based on ideology:

The lack of any observable burials in the Iron Age I (as well as in part of the Iron Age II) resulted from an ideology of egalitarianism and simplicity ... the use of the simplest type of tomb is therefore a reflection of this ideology or ethos.⁶⁸

I believe the answer lies in an ideology of egalitarianism and *simplicity*. The *simplest* type of burial is *simply* a reflection of this ideology or ethos.⁶⁹

⁶³ For the latter see Wenning 2005, 112.

⁶⁴ Kletter 2002.

⁶⁵ McGuire 1988. Or, in the words of Charles Sorely, “great death has made all his for evermore” (Sorely, “When you see millions of the mouthless dead,” <https://poets.org/poem/sonnet-xxxiv>).

⁶⁶ Faust 2004, 175–176.

⁶⁷ Faust 2004, 177.

⁶⁸ Faust 2004, 180.

⁶⁹ Faust 2013, 47, emphases added; cf. Faust and Bunimovitz 2008, 158; Faust 2008, 151; Faust 2006, 92–93.

Faust did not deny that Iron I Israel/Judah was poorer than Iron Age II Israel/Judah.⁷⁰ However, in his view this is not a sufficient explanation; and the use of simple forms of burials did not stem from social reality, but from following Israelite ideologies of “simplicity” and “egalitarianism.”

Three questions arise in relation to this interpretation: is it really an archaeologically-based interpretation (as Faust believes)? Can archaeology bring back to life lost ideologies of the past? Are “simplicity” and “egalitarianism” ideologies?⁷¹

Concerning the first question, the notion of Israelite simplicity and egalitarianism does not spring from either the Judean bench graves or the missing Iron I graves. It is an old view, which appeared before the bench tombs were ascribed to Judah and before the scarcity of Iron I tombs was noticed.⁷² While some archaeologists supported this view, it was created by biblical scholars, based not on archaeological finds, but on certain interpretations of biblical sources.

To the second question, archaeology cannot reconstruct lost ideologies. As the famous ladder of Hawkes describes,⁷³ one may infer from archaeological remains about techniques and subsistence economies. It is considerably harder to infer about social and political institutions, and even more so about spiritual realms. The “New Archaeology” claimed that it can do better. In a much quoted study, Binford divided artifacts of a culture into three sub-systems: “technomic” (mainly tools), “sociotechnic” (objects whose “primary functional context” are social), and “ideotechnic” (objects whose primary function is in the “ideological component.” like figures of deities).⁷⁴ However, how do we tell what the “primary function” of an object is? Not to mention that the same object may change functions and meanings over time.⁷⁵ In fact, Binford admitted that archaeologists cannot explain “sociotechnic” and “ideotechnic”

⁷⁰ This is not something new, but a consensus view; cf. Guillaume 2016. Poverty and wealth are always relative (we measure them in relation to other persons or groups of persons, and they also depend in part on subjective feelings). See also Ilan 2017, 52–53.

⁷¹ The following discussion is a revised summary of Kletter 2016.

⁷² This was noticed even by Faust (2004, 182, n. 22).

⁷³ Hawkes 1954, 161–163.

⁷⁴ Binford 1962.

⁷⁵ Appadurai 1986.

objects, since anthropologists must first develop relevant theories for them (*sic*). Without noticing it, Binford repeated Hawkes' ladder, only with three instead of four steps.

Post-processual archaeology stressed agency, cognitive, and symbolic interpretations, and in its early phases followed mainly Marxist perceptions of ideology.⁷⁶ Today we have many "archaeologies" with different approaches. Probably most of us work in a "processual plus" mode.⁷⁷ We excavate the remains in a processual mode; analyze them culturally by typologies, and add a symbolic, post-processual coating of theory — Yet it seems that Hawkes' ladder stands firm: Archaeology cannot reconstruct lost ideologies.

As for the third question, "simplicity" or "egalitarianism" are not ideologies. For many decades, Marxism perceived ideology as an illusion or distortion, a false mask that hides class conflicts.⁷⁸ Althusser's still saw ideology negatively, but as something universal that affects humans profoundly, creating collective "subjects." It also does not present existing, but imaginary class relations.⁷⁹

Mannheim pointed out that since all historical, political or social thought is affected by the thinker's point of view, not one view is objective truth.⁸⁰ Following Mannheim, scholars define ideologies as constellations of beliefs that reflect consciousness of a certain time or group,⁸¹ while scholars influenced by Foucault define ideologies as dynamic discourses involving power and language.⁸²

As a result, the focus shifted from discussing if ideologies are "true" or "false," "good" or "bad," to studying how ideologies are constructed, change through time, and relate to other ideologies.⁸³ Ideologies are addressed to large groups of people. They contain core, adjacent and

⁷⁶ Hodder 1982a; Renfrew 1982; Renfrew and Zubrow 1994; Thomas 2000.

⁷⁷ A term coined, but used differently, by Hegmon 2003.

⁷⁸ Lichtheim 1965; Seliger 1977; Leone 1984, 26; Eagleton 1991, 3; Hawkes 2003, 7 Griffin 2006, 78.

⁷⁹ Althusser 1971; see Freedman 1996, 25–30; MacKenzie 2003, 6; McGuire and Bernbeck 2011, 168–169.

⁸⁰ Mannheim 1952 (first published 1929), later called the "Mannheim paradox," Geertz 1973, 193–194; Mullins 1979.

⁸¹ Lichtheim 1965, 194; Duby 1974, 152; cf. MacKenzie 2003, 7–8; Jaeggi 2009; Vincent 2010, 18.

⁸² Barrett 1991; Van-Dijk 2006; Newsom 2009, 543–545.

⁸³ Freedman 1996; Vincent 2010.

peripheral elements. Core concepts are fixed (for example, a core concept of socialism is equality). Adjacent concepts explain them and limit their interpretation. Peripheral concepts can easily be added or discarded. Similar core concepts can be arranged in different constellations with various meanings, therefore, they can be found in different ideologies. Ideologies change with time, because they are oriented at acting in or interpreting the world, and the world is dynamic.⁸⁴

Ideologies are inevitable in all areas of life, they are as old as civilization and will remain as long as it exists. But it is important to maintain that ideologies are never simple or fixed. They are not essences or substances, but dynamic relationships.⁸⁵ Ideologies are hardly shared by entire societies and they do not exist in isolation: there are various ideologies in any period/society, competing, overlapping, or merging with each other.⁸⁶

Faust grasps “ideology” as immovable property. It is an “emblem”⁸⁷ or even a “trait,”⁸⁸ which is static and shared by entire societies:

Although the archaeological record is a result of past behaviour, there is an element that could stand between the record left by this behavior and the actual structure of the society that produced the record – that is, ideas and beliefs.⁸⁹

[Ideology] indicates a society with a “world view” (or “ethos” or “ideology”) shared by all classes despite their differences.⁹⁰

[Ideology means] elements that stand between the record left by behavior and the actual social structure of the society that produced the archaeological record. In short, Ideology can influence behavior...⁹¹

Ideology comes between human behavior (and the archaeological record) and “real” social structure.⁹²

⁸⁴ Freedden 1996; Freedden 2005, 2.

⁸⁵ McGuire and Bernbeck 2011, 2–3.

⁸⁶ Stråth 2006, 32; Vincent 2010, 15–18; McGuire and Bernbeck 2011, 166.

⁸⁷ Faust 2006, 88.

⁸⁸ Faust 2012, 268.

⁸⁹ Faust 2004, 178.

⁹⁰ Faust 2012, 267.

⁹¹ Faust 2013, 47.

⁹² Faust 2013, 62.

This is a rigid linear model, originally with three “boxes”:



This model derives from Behavioral Archaeology, a form of Processual Archaeology of the 1970s. Major axioms of it were a search for scientific laws and the view that social phenomena are explained by behavioral processes.⁹³ Wittgenstein and Chomsky criticized sharply to behaviorism in other fields, such as linguistics and psychology. Culture and mind played little or no role in Behavioral Archaeology and universal behavioral rules can hardly explain historical cases, which are each unique.⁹⁴

Faust just added a box of “ideology” to this behavioral model, probably (the quotes are a bit vague) between “social structure” and “behavior”:



The behavioral model is incompatible with this crude transplant. Can ideology be an “element that stands”? Ideologies do not stand. They are not “produced” by reality, but by people’s perceptions of it. Ideologies create the social structure as much as they are affected by it.

Faust acknowledges that ideology is not reality:

Thus, for instance, Lemche recognized a discrepancy between reality and ideology in Scandinavian societies ... A similar gap exists in Saudi Arabia, where extremely wealthy kings are buried in a simple burial due to their religious ideology of egalitarianism. Thus, a society’s egalitarian ideology may be expressed in its material culture, but only careful research can distinguish between the society’s ideal and the actual reality.⁹⁵

Yet while the two examples speak about sharp gaps between ideology and reality, Faust continues by talking about a match between egalitarian ideology and material reality. Perhaps the material aspects of the (missing) Iron I tombs were simple, but the funerary rites could be elaborate.

⁹³ Reid et al. 1975; Schiffer 1975; 1976; Deetz 1972; Walker et al. 1995.

⁹⁴ O'Brien 1988, 495; Leahey 1992, 380–385, 418–420; Walker et al. 1995, 2.

⁹⁵ Faust 2012, 222.

Crucially, there is no direct step from simple or egalitarian materiality to simplistic or egalitarian ideas, and therefore, these are not convincing explanations for the lack of tombs.

In the case of a Saudi King, for example, the tomb may look simple, but the funeral is not – and it differs from that of a “common” Saudi person: thousands accompany the funeral process, headed by Kings and world leaders. Similarly, Bedouin tombs can be modest and lack grave goods, but it does not mean that Bedouin beliefs about death are ‘simple’ or that Bedouins believe in “simplicity.”⁹⁶

For Faust, the identified ideologies form a match to the reality of ancient Israel: Iron I Israel not only believed in ideologies of egalitarianism and simplicity, but was at the same time largely egalitarian and simple. However, to believe in “simplicity” a person must perceive lack of simplicity, that is, complexity. The pastoralist is ‘simple’ mainly to those who are not pastoralists, and grasp themselves as “complex.” If ideologies can realize fully their ideals, they cease being ideologies and become realities.

There is no “ideology of simplicity.” Outdated neo-evolutionary thinking separates “simple” from “complex” societies. However, there is no simple human society (or individual):

Communities or societies are not complex or simple; rather, they have both complex and non-complex dimensions.⁹⁷

“Simplicity” and “egalitarianism” are not ideologies. They are ideas that can form components in various – and conflicting – ideologies. Many Buddhists, Christians, Marxists, and Zen followers claim that their ideologies are “simple.” For some people, “egalitarian” is a Marxist principle. For others it is found in the Christian or Islamic doctrine that all people are equal before God. In the 1960s it could mean belonging to a hippie community. It can perhaps be found in all human societies, only in varying degrees.⁹⁸ To say that the ancient Israelites believed in “simplicity” or “egalitarianism” is as meaningful as saying that they were either

⁹⁶ Kressel et al. 2013.

⁹⁷ Verhoeven 2010, 19.

⁹⁸ Sparks 2008.

Islamists, or Zen Buddhists, or Hippies. It would be similar to telling the police that the suspect has either black, red, blonde, or brown hair, adding nothing of value.

Faust assumes that the Israelite lack of burials is “unique in comparison with other regions or periods.”⁹⁹ This is not so – mention of just two examples would be sufficient. First, Many graves are known from the Early Bronze I period in the southern Levant, but very few from the Early Bronze 2–3 periods, although these periods were much longer and also urban.¹⁰⁰ Second, there are very few graves from Persian Period Egypt (27th–29th Dynasties). It does not mean lack of burial, because both before and after this period one finds similar burial customs. In this case too, the explanation of shallow surface graves was suggested (among other things).¹⁰¹ We know nothing about the ideologies of Early Bronze age Palestine (there are no written sources); but there is no reason to think that Persian Period Egyptians believed in “simplicity” or “egalitarianism.”

Faust and Bunimovitz extended the ideological explanation to the Judean bench tombs, interpreting them both on the basis of assumed social (differences between nuclear and extended families, rich and poor) and ideological factors. Allegedly, the bench tombs were family “emblems” that stressed the ideologies of “generational continuity and the permanent nature of the family;” they were “a symbol of permanence.”¹⁰² However, nothing here resembles an ideology as understood by scholars of ideology. To posit on the basis of tombs that a certain society has an ideology of “generational continuity” says nothing of consequence, for it is a universal aspect of all human societies (Fig. 2).

⁹⁹ Faust 2004, 184.

¹⁰⁰ Ilan 2002.

¹⁰¹ Aston 1999, 22.

¹⁰² Faust and Bunimovitz 2008, 154.



FIGURE 2. TOMBSTONE IN PARNAMÄE, ESTONIA (PHOTO R. KLETTER).

Each ideology has a unique “brand” name: communism, capitalism, etc. An ideology exists when it is recognized as such both by insiders (the believers) and outsiders (those who do not follow it). An ideology needs a specific name, since otherwise people cannot recognize (whether accepting or refuting) it. “Simplicity” or “egalitarianism” have never achieved such recognition. Perhaps they can become ideologies in some unseen future time, though their generic nature makes this unlikely.

Conclusions

The relation of (textual) rituals to the archaeological materiality of rituals is loaded with difficulties. The remains of Iron II Judean bench tombs do not lead to identification of Judean funerary rituals. Rather, scholars identify rituals from written (biblical) sources, then try to compare them with the archaeological remains.

For the Iron I and early Iron II periods we have almost no graves from Judah, and settlements are few and far between.¹⁰³ The Iron I and early Iron II population could afford a few funerary gifts; but one must

¹⁰³ Ofer 1993.

not jump to the conclusion that the lack of tombs/funerary gifts indicates a purposeful ideological avoidance.¹⁰⁴ A simpler explanation is that people did not leave objects in tombs because they did not have a custom of giving funerary gifts. This may indicate that, at least in funerary contexts, objects were not status symbols. It fits well the view that the Iron Age I and early Iron Age II highland population was *relatively* egalitarian and poor in relation to later periods.

A relatively egalitarian society in the Iron Age I developed marked differences of wealth/rank in the later Iron II. Only then could people – perhaps only some people – develop an awareness about social justice, which is expressed in the biblical (especially prophetic) literature.

Perhaps the material aspects of the (missing) Iron I tombs of Judah can be called simple, but this says nothing about their assumed mortuary/funerary rituals, which could be complex and elaborate. There is no direct step from “simple materiality” into a “simple” society, and from this to ideologies of simplicity and egalitarianism.

While archaeology cannot reconstruct lost ideologies and rituals of the past, it also cannot free itself of trying to do so, using all its imperfect tools, including imagination.

ADDENDUM

Some articles were noticed, or published, too late for discussion. They include Fuensanta and Crivelli 2015 (lack of Uruk period burials); Gudme 2018 (mortuary rituals); Zinn 2018 (use of Egyptian headrests); Pedde 2018 (lamps in middle and Neo-Assyrian graves); and Yezerski 2020 (an intact Judean tomb with lamps near skulls).

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¹⁰⁴ Thus Faust 2004.

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