

Review Article:

How Many Histories of Death Does the Hebrew Bible Contain?

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THE PUBLICATION of Matthew Suriano's *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* was bound to be a significant event for scholars who study the Bible and death in antiquity.¹ Suriano brings expertise in biblical studies and Semitic inscriptions and has ample experience in field archaeology in Israel. The question was never whether the book would be worthwhile, but what it would contribute.

The book argues forcefully for the distinctiveness and coherence of Judahite beliefs about death and afterlife. As such, it invites conversation about some fundamental issues of comparative method and our understanding of ancient Judahite religion and culture. Basically, these questions fall under the rubric of unity and diversity: *To what extent does it make sense to speak of norms in Israelite and Judahite religions, and to what extent should one instead emphasize their diversity and plurality?* The question is also a comparative one, insofar as data from other cultural spheres of the ancient Near East often bring into focus details of the biblical text and Judahite burials that are incongruous with the overarching biblical portrayals of the religion, which most scholars agree were heavily shaped by Priestly and Deuteronomistic scribes.

Any number of topics could offer a way into the study of those issues, but death is particularly well suited—partly because the data from burials are ample and complex, and partly because the topic itself is so central to the human experience that it proves inexhaustible. Some years ago, when I was writing a book on

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¹ Matthew Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Page references to Suriano's book are given in parentheses in the text.

death in the Bible and its ancient Near Eastern contexts,² a senior scholar asked, skeptically: “Hasn’t that been done?” It was an understandable reaction—he was thinking of books such as Klaas Spronk’s *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, Theodore Lewis’s *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith’s *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, and Brian Schmidt’s *Israel’s Beneficent Dead*³—but scholarship on death in the ancient world is never done, and Suriano’s book is the latest major entry in this ongoing conversation.

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Suriano has written an elegant book. It is concise, restrained, and confident. Its stated goal is to “address two aspects of death that are particularly interconnected in biblical literature: death as transition and its relational nature” (34). On the first topic, he writes, “Death, in the world of the Old Testament writers, was a dynamic process . . . rather than a static event” (2). Methodologically, the book aims to bring archaeology and text “together under a single heuristic framework” (11).

The book includes seven chapters distributed into two major sections: “The Archaeology of Death in Iron Age Judah” and “Death and Afterlife in the Hebrew Bible.” The first section discusses death as a transition in Judahite mortuary practices (chap. 1) before surveying the history of the Judahite bench tomb (chap. 2) and of Hebrew funerary inscriptions (chap. 3). Suriano argues here that, when the corpse was laid on the bench to decompose, it was not yet viewed as completely dead, partly because it was still recognizable; that is why it needed care and feeding (53-55). Dying was thus a postmortem process to ancient Judahites, rather than a premortem one. The structure and practices of the bench tomb pointed to a “constructed sense of collective ancestry” (97), which had implications for patrimony and its property claims. (Here Suriano is building on Lewis Binford’s and Arthur Saxe’s sociological theorization of mortuary practices, among others [12-19].) The inscriptions, he argues, show that the “dead inside the Judahite tomb were dependent upon the living, but they could also count upon Yahweh for divine protection” (127).

² Christopher B. Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah* (FAT 79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

³ Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986); Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 39; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup 123; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (FAT 11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

Suriano strongly emphasizes the differences between Judahite beliefs and the beliefs of neighboring cultures: “The concepts of death in the Hebrew Bible are unique in comparison with Western thought” (34). “[T]he bench tomb represented a stark contrast with Judah’s neighboring cultures” (91). And he explicitly eschews a comparative method from the outset: “comparing death imagery in the Hebrew Bible with ancient Near Eastern parallels is only slightly more helpful than contrasting it with New Testament and later Christian concepts of heaven and hell. . . . Parallels with the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, . . . risk obscuring the cultural distinctiveness of the Levant, particularly Judah and Israel” (2).

The dispute over the distinctiveness of Israelite religion has a rich history. A long line of scholars—from James G. Frazer to Friedrich Delitzsch to Alfred Jeremias to Morton Smith—saw Israelite religion as basically continuous with its context, with allowances for some distinctive points. A similarly long line has argued, as Suriano does, for its essential uniqueness, with allowances for certain similarities. This latter group has included major figures such as Yehezkel Kaufmann, George Ernest Wright, and Roland de Vaux. Surveys of these figures and others, and the ways in which they approached the questions, are available elsewhere.⁴

The issue most relevant to the present context is the perceived link between cultural distinctiveness and identity. Suriano writes, “Burying the dead in a certain way became part of being Judahite” (129). Specifically, he means that the rock-cut, multigenerational bench tomb was the quintessential Judahite way of burying the dead. This raises an important issue. Fewer than 250 graves in the southern highlands of Judah have ever been identified,⁵ and even though the bench tomb is indeed the characteristic form of burial within this tiny sample, this leaves the vast majority of Iron Age Judahite burials out of the accounting. Furthermore, it is generally recognized that the bench tomb, carved out of stone at great cost, was limited to a small and elite subset of the population—“a minuscule number,” as Elizabeth Bloch-Smith has recently pointed out. She goes on: “[T]he recovered remains may not represent the range of Israelite burial practices. Mention of a commoners’ interment in the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:6) suggests that massive, communal burial grounds may yet be located.”⁶ So if it is true

⁴ See Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014) 15-38. See also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 56-61.

⁵ It has now been more than a quarter-century since Bloch-Smith enumerated 232 burials in the southern highlands. This is no longer comprehensive, but it does give a sense of the scale of the data. See Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 60-62.

⁶ Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Death and Burial in Eighth-Century Judah,” in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah* (ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright; ANEM 23; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018) 365-66.

that the bench tomb defined what it meant to be Judahite, then it is not clear that most Judahites were really Judahite.

Furthermore, the surviving bench tombs varied architecturally in ways that strongly suggest variances in beliefs. Suriano says that the bench tomb “stood apart from other forms of burial and contrasted with the monumental funerary culture of Egypt” (203). Yet some Iron II tombs, for example, at Silwan and St. Etienne’s Monastery, included bathtub coffins akin to Egyptian sarcophagi; these were clearly intended to ensure an undisturbed personal afterlife, just as Egyptian tombs did. Other tombs at St. Etienne’s and at Tel ‘Eton included iconographic details that also suggest unusual beliefs about the afterlife.⁷ Thus, when Isaiah condemns the Judahite high official Shebna in Isa 22:16 for building a *miškān* for himself in the rock in a location where he has no family buried, this reflected live debate within the culture. We can conclude that the condemnations of such variant beliefs often had no effect, much like prophets’ condemnations of Asherah worship.

Suriano writes in the epilogue that “[t]he Egyptian concept of the afterlife . . . casts a problematic shadow on the afterlife of the Hebrew Bible” and “must be resisted” (252). Instead, he says, *real* Judahites believed that “one could transcend death through the continuity of family.” Here he is indeed enunciating the ideology of a significant portion of the biblical authors (i.e., the ones who resisted other forms of afterlife beliefs). But is the proper task of a historian to summarize the preponderance of the biblical texts or to describe what was probably happening historically in the periods they reflect in as much specificity and diversity as possible? To be clear: Suriano’s analysis of the more typical bench tombs is quite cogent; the hesitation is just that it excludes some of the diversity in the data.

Suriano also wants to distinguish Judahite beliefs from Mesopotamian ones. In this effort, he cites Dennis Pardee, who in a 1996 article expressed grave skepticism about the existence of a Ugaritic mortuary cult⁸—there was a funerary cult at the time of burial in Ugarit, he wrote, but not a regularized (mortuary) cult like the Mesopotamian *kispu*.⁹ Suriano uses this to argue against a *kispu*-like cult of

⁷ Those at St. Etienne’s may reflect a belief in afterlife as rebirth (Christopher B. Hays, “‘My Beloved Son, Come and Rest in Me’: Job’s Return to His Mother’s Womb [Job 1:21a] in Light of Egyptian Mythology,” *VT* 62 [2012] 607-21). Those at Tel ‘Eton seem to reflect a belief in death as a great swallower, which is attested in the biblical text (e.g., Isa 5:14; Num 16:30-34) but is still more akin to the beliefs of neighboring cultures (Christopher B. Hays, “Swallowing Death at Tel ‘Eton,” *JNSL* 44 [2018] 103-16).

⁸ Dennis Pardee, “*Marzihu, Kispu, and the Ugaritic Funerary Cult: A Minimalist View,*” in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994. Essays Presented in Honour of Professor John C. L. Gibson* (ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson, and J. B. Lloyd; Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur 12; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996) 273–87.

⁹ Akio Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispu) im alten Mesopotamien* (AOAT 216; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985).

the dead in the southern Levant (155). Pardee, however, reversed his position in later writings, after an Akkadian text from Ugarit conclusively demonstrated ongoing offerings to divinized ancestors.¹⁰

I do not mean to invoke the details of this debate about mortuary cult as a pedantic “gotcha.” Rather, it goes to the heart of the question, in that the dispute between Pardee and other scholars came down to comparative methodology.¹¹ For example, Gregorio del Olmo Lete propounded a much more extensive reconstruction of the Ugaritic cult of the dead than Pardee’s, explaining that it was “solidly based on the ‘royal ideology,’ on the significance of the ancestor cult in the whole Ancient Near East and on the unique importance of the king as supreme officiant.”¹² In response, Pardee objected that del Olmo Lete had effaced the specificity of Ugaritic religion by subsuming it under broad ancient Near Eastern patterns—that he “knew before he began examining the texts what they would say.”¹³ An analogous debate is quietly happening in the pages of *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible*, and since the data are not extensive enough to answer all the questions, readers are left with a similar conundrum. Pardee’s retrenchment illustrates that it is possible for excellent scholars to emphasize uniqueness too much and credit cross-cultural connections too little. (It also illustrates an admirable willingness to rethink when faced with new data.)

Another example in which the conclusions could be better nuanced to fit the data is in Suriano’s discussion of burial ideology. He emphasizes the significance of purity regulations as a reason for extramural burial (44–45). Immediately after arguing this, he rightly admits that royal burials are an exception, since they were seemingly located in close proximity to the palace and temple, as was often the case in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. One might expect that kings’ burials would manifest the religious ideals of the culture, but Suriano’s analysis would mean that they were at least idiosyncratic, and perhaps heretical. How likely is it that the king, the paradigm of his culture, was buried in an “unorthodox” manner?

Suriano goes on to conclude that the royal tombs *were* controversial, citing the critique in Ezek 43:7–9. This gets close to the heart of the issue: even if that passage dates to the prophet’s career in the late sixth century B.C.E., Ezekiel was looking back from a distance of centuries at a monarchic practice that presumably

¹⁰ Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (WAW 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 199; idem, “G. del Olmo Lete’s Views on Ugaritic Epigraphy and Religion,” *UF* 37 (2005) 767–816, here 791–92. See also G. del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion: According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (trans. W. G. E. Watson; 2nd rev. ed.; AOAT 408; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014) 183–205.

¹¹ As I have pointed out earlier, in Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II*, 121.

¹² Gregorio del Olmo Lete, “The Ugaritic Ritual Texts: A New Edition and Commentary; A Critical Assessment,” *UF* 36 (2004) 539–648, here 645.

¹³ Pardee, “G. del Olmo Lete’s Views,” 787.

dated back as far as the tenth century. Furthermore, he was criticizing it from a very particular priestly viewpoint. Who is more likely to have been expressing Judah's "mainstream" preexilic values: a whole line of Davidic rulers, or a highly idiosyncratic prophet living in exile and dreaming about a new temple? It does not seem valid, to me, to retroject Ezekiel's perspective as if it had been the norm for the entire preexilic period; instead, earlier beliefs about burial were probably diverse. The de-emphasis on and outright prohibition of certain afterlife beliefs that Suriano is describing were genuine aspects of Iron Age Judahite religion, but specifically one that the Deuteronomistic and Priestly editors wanted preserved. For this reason, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* has something in common with Philip Johnston's *Shades of Sheol*, which similarly endorses the biblical texts' protestations of distinctiveness.¹⁴

In this first section of the book, Suriano very interestingly suggests that tombs were used in "an effort to establish a sense of cultural identity and tie it specifically with the settlement of the area" (129). In particular, the extramural burial sites of Jerusalem "encircled the living space of the city with the collective presence of the dead" (91). Although I am not sure the data are ample enough to substantiate this point, I find it provocative and worthy of discussion. If Suriano is correct, then it still seems that the data could be analyzed in various ways. It might be that the dead were thought to be supernatural protectors of the living, as they were at Ugarit.¹⁵ The efforts of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rulers to attack hostile nations by disinterring their royal dead is another example of the role of burials in international warfare and diplomacy. But comparative data such as these are excluded from Suriano's analysis, by design.

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Suriano returns to theory at the beginning the second part of the book, in an excellent discussion of the care of the soul that makes reference not only to classical texts but to a wide variety of modern scholars of religion including Johannes Pedersen, Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, in addition to the foundational work of biblical scholars such as Jacob Milgrom and Saul Olyan. Suriano argues that "[i]n the Hebrew Bible, the idea of the afterlife was inscribed on the body. This idea, revealed through the treatment of the dead, was rooted in a notion of functional immortality that was prevalent throughout the ancient Near East. An ideal fate ultimately involved the hope of joining a greater collective, the ancestors" (133). This is a very fresh and invigorating section that brings important outside voices to bear.

¹⁴ Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

¹⁵ So, e.g., *KTU*³ 1.161.

Although some of the theoretical perspectives may strike some readers as excessively etic, Suriano brings the conversation back, time and again, to the primary data. The discussion of care for the dead in chap. 4 is built around an analysis of the use of *npš* and its cognate *nbš*, terms that Suriano translates as “defunct soul.” That translation seems overdetermined by his conclusions and a bit clunky, but the discussion of the use of *npš* in Persian-period Aramaic inscriptions (150-54) is very useful. Among biblical texts, he focuses particularly on Leviticus and Numbers.

In the context of the analysis of *npš/nbš*, Suriano goes on to contrast the biblical censures of feeding the dead in Deut 26:14 and Hos 9:4 with the references to it in the Hadad and Katumuwa stelae from Zincirli. Invoking an inscribed bowl from Beth Shemesh, he argues that the Judahite dead were akin to the poor, who needed offerings: “offering food for those in need could overlap with offering food for the dead. The status of the dead would thus be comparable to other groups that required provisioning” (161), so that they “should not be read as a force that is active and powerful” (176). Similarly, he describes the care of the Mesopotamian dead as indicating their “impoverishment” (182). This section is thought provoking—but, as Jo Ann Scurlock has cogently demonstrated, the neediness and power of the dead are far from being mutually exclusive. Indeed, it was the perceived neediness of the dead that made them potentially angry and dangerous, so as to require cultic care—much as a deity would. Through their very prohibitions, Deut 26:14 and Hos 9:4 (as well as Ps 16:3-4) testify to the currency of the practice of food offerings to the dead in Judah. It appears that some portion of the population believed in the power of these offerings, since we presume that biblical authors did not often condemn practices that were largely unknown. Nor can an analysis of food remains in burials determine the extent of ancestor cults, since those cults were commonly practiced apart from tombs. For example, the recently discovered Katumuwa stele from eighth-century Sam‘al (Zincirli) indicates that ancestor cult was practiced at a distance from the body, a phenomenon also known from the Neo-Assyrian empire at about the same time.¹⁶ If the biblical *teraphim* (e.g., Genesis 31) were ancestor figurines, as is commonly supposed, that would lend even more weight to the assumption of ancestor cults.¹⁷

It is quite clear that ancestor cult was an aspect of Israelite religion, minimally at the household level and perhaps beyond. Christophe Nihan has pointed out that the compatibility of ancestor cult and Yahwism was assumed in the earliest bibli-

¹⁶ Jo Ann Scurlock, “Ghosts in the Ancient Near East: Weak or Powerful?,” *HUCA* 68 (1997) 77–96. See also Eudora Struble and Virginia Rimmer Herrmann, “An Eternal Feast at Sam‘al: The New Iron Age Mortuary Stele from Zincirli in Context,” *BASOR* 356 (2009) 15-49; and Seth Richardson, “An Assyrian Garden of Ancestors: Room I, Northwest Palace, Kalḫu,” *SAAB* 13 (1999–2001) 145–216.

¹⁷ Karel van der Toorn and Theodore Lewis, “תרפִים,” *TDOT* 15:777–89.

cal law collections but was increasingly excluded in later ones, beginning with Deuteronomy.¹⁸ This is consistent with the observation that the polemic against the dead was initially championed by the eighth-century prophets out of a concern about necromancy as a competing form of divination,¹⁹ since Deuteronomism is widely recognized to have been influenced by the prophets. As with the evidence of burials, the discussion of death and Sheol in the Psalms is quite diverse, but one example must suffice. The promise not to lift up the names of the dead in Ps 16:4 (which Suriano mentions briefly on p. 234) reflects the assumption that one might do just that. The psalmist explicitly opposes that possibility of calling on the “holy ones in the earth” (16:3) with the worship of Yhwh (16:2, 5). The invocation of the dead would not have to be disavowed if it were not a significant temptation. Much the same goes for the disavowal of commensality with the dead in Deut 26:14.

The remainder of the book is dedicated to readings of specific texts: the stories of Joseph’s and Jezebel’s remains (chap. 5), the burials of Sarah and Rachel, that of the “man of God” from 1 Kings 13 and 2 Kings 23 (chap. 6), and the nature of Sheol in the Psalms (chap. 7). Suriano contrasts the fates of Joseph’s bones (which are re-interred in Shechem) with the remains of Jezebel (which are desecrated and lost). Both in this instance and in the stories of the man of God, Suriano draws on Olyan’s model of “Israelite interment ideology,” which ranked more and less desirable forms of burial.²⁰ In the case of Jezebel’s fate, as Suriano recognizes, a category beyond Olyan’s “nonburial” is needed; I have elsewhere proposed “anti-burial.”²¹ The man of God’s burial in someone else’s family tomb is only slightly less desirable than burial in one’s own family tomb; it “assured that the old prophet would experience a good death, even though the tomb would be threatened several centuries later” (215). As suggested by the lovely title of Suriano’s chapter (“The Narrative of Bones”), human remains tell a story, and to have none is to be cursed and forgotten.

These distinctions are cogent and meaningful. The use of Olyan, however, brings up a more fundamental issue. Both he and Suriano make admirable contri-

¹⁸ Christophe Nihan, “La polémique contre le culte des ancêtres dans la Bible hébraïque: Origines et fonctions,” in *Les vivants et leurs morts: Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 14–15 Avril 2010* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand, Thomas Römer, and Jürg Hutzli; OBO 257; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012) 139–73 passim.

¹⁹ Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel,” *JAOS* 108 (1988) 277–84; Nihan, “La polémique,” 140.

²⁰ Saul M. Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects of Israelite Interment Ideology,” *JBL* 124 (2005) 603–7.

²¹ Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II*, 38, 161; idem, “Death and Burial in the Iron Age Levant,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts of Ancient Israel* (ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018) 381–87, here 384.

butions to our understanding of a certain *strand* of ancient Judahite ideology, but I am convinced that it does not make sense to speak of a single viewpoint. Rather, it appears from both text and archaeology that for many Judahite elites the ideal form of burial was not burial in a family tomb but rather individual burial in an undisturbed sarcophagus. This was likely true of the kings of Judah and was emulated by other elites. The fact that this practice was condemned by a prophet such as Isaiah (Isa 22:15-19) does not mean that Isaiah spoke for the majority of the culture (the proto-Isaianic literature itself gives somewhat the opposite impression, namely, that Isaiah's words generally fell on deaf ears; e.g., 6:9-10; 7:10-13; 8:6-7). The structural continuity from the cave burials of earlier periods to the bench tombs of the Iron II does suggest a certain consistency of values among families who were prosperous but not royal, but the picture gets fuzzy outside that group, on both the common side and the elite side.

The recognition of plurality within Israelite and Judahite religion certainly seems to have carried the day in the wider field, with recent discussions of Israelite religion emphasizing its diversity. Indeed, the term is often pluralized: Israelite religions.²² In a volume entitled *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, Jeremy Hutton coins the term "micro-religions" to describe "small-scale local religious expressions"²³ and to emphasize that "biblical, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence points to an unfathomably complex religious environment in the southern Levant."²⁴ To preempt one objection: this is not to say that Judah was not in some sense Yahwistic, but rather that Yahwism was understood and practiced in ways that were very diverse. (This is true of Judaism and Christianity today in spite of centuries of established tradition in both cases. How much more true must it have been for the emerging religion of ancient Judah!) It does not make sense, under these conditions, to speak of a single ideology of burial.

In the final chapter, Suriano proposes analyzing Sheol from the perspective of liminality, primarily focusing on Psalms 16, 49, 88, and 116. He argues that Sheol is not a permanent destination for most of the dead but a temporary state through which they must pass. (In what precedes, he has already described the temporary marginality that Sarah and Rachel experience in their burials.) Thus, "[t]he process of dying involves a liminal period during which the psalmist is alone" (243) but "[t]he dead ultimately become reunited with their kin inside the

²² See, e.g., Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001); Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The plurality of Israelite religions is, of course, not a discovery of the twentieth century, but the phenomenon is having a moment of greater recognition.

²³ Jeremy M. Hutton, "Southern, Northern and Transjordanian Perspectives," in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (ed. Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton; London: T&T Clark, 2010) 149-74, here 150-51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

ritual space of the tomb” (248), and “[t]he term ‘Sheol’ thus conveys a kind of limbo.” If, then, Sheol is to be compared with part of the Judahite bench tomb (247), it would be the bench itself, where the corpse lies exposed and alone until its eventual reunion with the ancestors in the charnel pit. In my view, this is an idea that deserves consideration. Even if texts like Pss 16:10; 30:4; Isa 14:15; 38:18; and Ezek 31:16 instead equate Sheol with the Pit, there is no reason to think that the image of Sheol in the Bible should be consistent everywhere. Suriano’s theory about death as transition and Sheol as a liminal state will clearly run into disagreement—for example, Bloch-Smith very recently wrote, “Postulating successive stages in a transition from life to a possible ancestral collective, such as transitory residence in Sheol, lacks any textual support.”²⁵—but this is a conversation well worth having.

Suriano notes that “evidence from Judahite mortuary practices and biblical regulations regarding corpses, taken together, reveals an overarching concern for discretion rather than outright denial. The data . . . suggests a concern for maintaining boundaries separating the dead from the living” (219). This raises the significant question *Why?*—a question that is not quite answered, though Suriano may implicitly be leaning on the foregoing discussion of purity concerns. For Suriano, the “blurred contours and vague boundaries indicate that Sheol is best understood as a liminal concept” (220). I might suggest that this blurriness and vagueness are instead to be explained by literary-historical diversity among the Hebrew Bible’s descriptions. The descriptions do not point to one reality, despite some basic similarities; rather, they serve different authorial needs at different moments. In the same way, a scholar of English literature would not analyze Donne’s, Shakespeare’s, and Eliot’s writings about heaven to determine what heaven really was in England in the second half of the second millennium, but rather would analyze what each one did with the concept.

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It is not clear whether Suriano means to embrace the linear/evolutionary models of beliefs about death and afterlife that were characteristic of a previous generation. That argument is not a major emphasis of the book, but because of the emphasis on a normative view, that idea does inevitably creep in at times, for example: “by the Hellenistic period we see emerging concepts of individual resurrection and postmortem judgment (2 Macc 7:10-14), most notably in Dan 12:1-3. By the early Roman period we even have a few scattered instances in Judea of shaft graves for individual burials” (251). In reality, though, both the hope of an individual fate in the afterlife and the burial forms that reflected such a hope were found in Judah much earlier. The Silwan and royal tombs have already been

²⁵ Bloch-Smith, “Death and Burial in Eighth-Century Judah,” 374.

discussed. In keeping with their Late Bronze Age predecessors, Iron Age Levantine kings manifestly expected to rise and feast with the gods (see, e.g., the Hadad inscription [KAI 214]), and Ps 23:5-6 is among the indications that elites of Israel and Judah sometimes shared a similar hope.

In the same vein, it is perplexing when Suriano states that “[e]ventually the afterlife ideal that the ancestors embodied faded. . . . Josephus’s description of Jewish sectarian groups shows that by the first century CE there was no consensus of belief regarding death, resurrection, or the soul” (256). This perpetuates a myth of original unity and purity in Israelite religion—presumably not the same myth as that described by Kaufmann and Wright, for whom the religion of ancient Israel was revealed once and for all to Moses on Mount Sinai, but rather a myth in which the Deuteronomists and Priestly authors spoke for a broad consensus within the culture. As I have tried to indicate above, there was never a time when consensus reigned regarding the meaning of burial. The *degree* of diversity may be debated, but not its essential existence.

By drawing connections among kin, land, and afterlife, Suriano (mostly implicitly) enters a conversation with H. C. Brichto, who wrote a significant article on that topic nearly a half century ago. After denying a Judahite belief in the power of the dead, Suriano writes firmly, “The ideal of the family tomb was one of ancestor veneration. It was not about worshiping ancestors as deities, as Fustel de Coulanges once theorized. It was about memory” (216). On the one hand, it is easy to doubt the relevance of de Coulanges’s work to the Hebrew Bible; after all, the work in question (*La cité antique*, from 1864) was not about the Hebrew Bible at all.²⁶ But to focus on that is to overlook the enormous amount of comparative-religions work affirming Judahite cults of the dead that was carried out in the second half of the twentieth century. Brichto produced one of the important early works in that vein. Analyzing most of the same biblical data, he emphatically *affirmed* that the Judahite dead were in some sense divinized and were supplicated as such. He wrote that Israelite beliefs about kin, cult, and afterlife are “not to be confused with ‘immortality only in their posterity,’ a phrase which usually reflects the modern notion of the transmission of ancestral genes; nor with a vague hope that the dead continue as individuals or names in the memory of later generations.”²⁷ Certainly Brichto pressed his case too hard at times, for example, by arguing that the dead were *the* “constituent principle of the ancient family,”²⁸ but it seems to me that he had it right and that critical scholars of Israelite religion have followed him with varying degrees of nuance and caution.²⁹ Bloch-Smith, who is not lacking in

²⁶ N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1864).

²⁷ H. C. Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife—A Biblical Complex,” *HUCA* 44 (1973) 1-54, here 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 (emphasis added).

²⁹ In addition to Brichto, this includes all of the works in n. 3 above, except for Schmidt. For a survey, see Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II*, 135-47.

archaeological *bona fides*, has recently restated her conclusion that some sort of cult of the dead was practiced in Judah alongside or as part of Yahwism.³⁰

None of this is to say that Judahites regarded the dead as being on a par with major deities. Although Brichto did not shy away from calling the divinized dead “gods,”³¹ he made a distinction between the divinized dead and the God of Israel. This is typical among scholars of Judahite religion: within the world of ancient Near Eastern religions, it was the norm to have various divine beings within a single religion. Thus, when scholars ask, for example, whether Asherah was worshiped in ancient Judah, they usually assume that this took place (up to a certain time period) within the bounds of Yahwism. To devotees of Asherah, Yhwh “had a wife.”³² It is likely that ancient Judahites who endorsed cults of the dead thought in a similar way; it would have seemed normal to most of them to worship both Yhwh and the ancestors at different times. Indeed, the advocates of necromancy in Isa 8:19-20 sound a bit flummoxed even when refracted through the prophet’s negative lens: “Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter! Shouldn’t a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?” Presumably Isaiah’s opponents would have been insulted to be considered heterodox! The cult of the dead was a long-standing tradition in the Levant, after all. Why should Yahwism and necromancy not have seemed compatible?³³ That was a later decision (as noted above).

This brings one back to Suriano’s judgment that ancestors were not worshiped as deities. It raises fundamental questions: *What is a god?* and *What constitutes worship?* Since Brichto held that the dead did not receive worship in ancient Israel but only “veneration,” it is not clear whether he would disagree with Suriano. Brichto and others, however, have argued that כבוד in the commandment to honor father and mother in Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16 includes the expectation to venerate them after death, that such veneration took place on a regular schedule of cultic practices, and that the dead were seen as powerful. Émile Durkheim defined a cult of the dead as repeated standardized practices oriented toward the dead at ritual locations associated with the dead.³⁴ I have argued elsewhere that cults of the dead implicitly acknowledge the power of the dead; indeed, the primary sense

³⁰ Bloch-Smith, “Death and Burial in Eighth-Century Judah,” 371-72: “Post-mortem divine status is evident in the appellations *ʿēlōhîm* (“divinities”) (1 Sam 28:13; Isa 8:19) and *qədōšîm* (“holy ones”) (Ps 16:3) as well as the receipt of offerings and tithes (Deut 26:14; Ps 16:3-4). . . . Cultic service, beyond mere veneration, seems indicated by legislation forbidding offering tithed food to the dead.” The same conclusion is reached by Nihan, “La polémique,” 139-73.

³¹ E.g., Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife,” 46.

³² See William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

³³ Nihan, “La polémique,” 172.

³⁴ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (trans. J. W. Swain; London: Allen & Unwin, 1915) 63.

of the word “cult” is “worship . . . rendered to a divine being.”³⁵ As that last point relates to ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible, Suriano clearly disagrees with Brichto (and me), since he emphatically denies that the dead were seen as “active and powerful” (176).

To review: Ancient Judahites brought foodstuffs to the temple and supplicated the gods, who were powerful and might bring weal or woe on them; we call this “cult” or “worship.” They also brought foodstuffs to the tomb, to mourning feasts at special venues (Jer 16:5-8), and to household shrines. Kings in Jerusalem seem to have kept the remains of their predecessors close by, much as Assyrian kings did. The Hebrew Bible is full of stories of the transportation of the bones of various prominent figures and their miraculous powers (e.g., 2 Kgs 13:21). In view of the evidence delineated here, it seems likely that the dead were seen as lesser divine powers. A distinction can certainly be made between types of devotion and service, but illiterate Judahite commoners are not likely to have made it.³⁶ As noted above, it is doubtful that any Judahites were sensitized to such a distinction until sometime in the midst of the biblical period, which is one reason we can perceive such interesting and diverse testimonies about the dead in the Bible.³⁷

* * *

To return, in closing, to the widest frame: Suriano is certainly correct that the *biblical portrait* of death, taken as a whole, is distinctive—indeed, it was unique for its time. And something of this distinctiveness must have been latent (even aboriginal?) within Israelite religion. As Peter Machinist has pointed out, one of the most distinctive things about ancient Israel was its insistence on its distinctiveness.³⁸ But this is a rhetorical trope: the main pictures the Bible gives of its norms regarding burial and afterlife do not necessarily reflect religious norms throughout monarchic history in Israel and Judah. The oldest surviving critiques of the cult of the dead were enunciated by the eighth-century prophets, and such condemnations

³⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cult”; Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II*, 94-95.

³⁶ The reader may have noticed that the debate is reminiscent of the Reformation-era dispute between the Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians over the veneration of saints. Protestants accused Catholics of worshiping the saints as gods, and the response was that this was not worship (*latreia*) but merely veneration (*proskynēsis*). Note the Byzantine iconoclasm controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., and particularly the statements of the Second Council of Nicaea.

³⁷ Christopher B. Hays, “‘Your Dead Shall Live’: Reimagining the History of Judean Eschatology in Light of Isaiah 24–27,” in *Deathless Hopes: Reinventions of Afterlife and Eschatological Beliefs* (ed. Alexander Massmann and Christopher B. Hays; *Altes Testament und Moderne* 31; Zurich: LIT, 2018) 33-63.

³⁸ Peter Machinist, “The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; *Essential Papers on Jewish Studies*; New York: New York University Press, 1991) 420-42, here 426-27.

were the views of a tiny elite. It is not likely that any serious effort was made to carry out reforms in this regard until the late seventh century under Josiah,³⁹ and the “canonical” view of death as it stands is a product of the Persian period. Even then, the postexilic prophets make it very clear that cults of the dead endured (e.g., Isa 57:3-11; 65:1-5).⁴⁰

If we are comparing historical realities of the Iron Age, then perhaps the best comparative model would be analogous to our understanding of Iron Age national alphabetic scripts: the distinctiveness of each national culture can be recognized—in the nuances of letter forms—but within the broader reality of cultural similarity.⁴¹ New forms and ideas naturally appear in human history, but never wholly apart from the ebb and flow of extant cultures.

Suriano’s book argues its theses worthily, and there is more value to it than a review such as this one can capture. It brings fresh primary sources and theoretical approaches into the conversation, and so it has an enduring place in the conversation about death and burial in Israel and Judah, alongside the books mentioned above. The book is cleanly written and edited, on the whole.⁴² In a contested subfield in which data are far too scarce and there is no unassailable place to stand, Suriano gives one of the major positions its most advanced treatment to date, refining it and enunciating it well. The question remains how many histories of death in ancient Israel and Judah remain mostly untold in the Hebrew Bible. The comparative evidence and the fragmentary testimonies of Syro-Palestinian archaeology and historical criticism of the Bible suggest that the answer is—many.

³⁹ I do, however, consider that a historical Hezekian reform is a possibility.

⁴⁰ For discussion, see Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

⁴¹ I am thinking of Frank Moore Cross, “Alphabets and Pots: Reflections on Typological Method in the Dating of Human Artifacts,” *Maarav* 3 (1982) 121-36.

⁴² There are a number of Hebrew typos, which seem to have been related to technological problems in production, e.g., p. 110 (בצה for בצב), p. 111 (בצנ for בצב), and p. 119 (word order of BLei 1). A few other errors include the following: words seem to be omitted in the first line of p. 13; chaps. 2 and 3 are omitted from the overview of the book on p. 27; on p. 213: “The standard curses ... involves...”; and it would have been nice, and more consistent with the rest of the book, to have been given the Hebrew text of BLei 5-6 on p. 120. Finally, for lack of a better place to note it: Suriano’s analyses of the Psalms are not helped by the decision to present them in paragraph form rather than lineated.

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