



## Feeding the Dead as a Complementary Practice to Worshipping Yahweh: Deuteronomy 26:14 Revisited

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### Abstract

Within Christian tradition, particularly Protestant, the ritual of making offerings to the dead (i.e., feeding the dead) is often seen as contrary to Christian faith. Justification for this view is often taken from Deuteronomy 26:14. This verse details a pledge to avoid making offerings to the dead out of loyalty to Yahweh. Thus, I review the academic literature on the rationale behind this pledge to explore whether feeding the dead is contrary to the worship of Yahweh. To this end, I will discuss several studies regarding the ritual of feeding the dead in ancient Israelite society that use archaeological and textual evidence. This paper concludes that feeding the dead and worship of Yahweh are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

*Key words: feeding the dead, ancestor veneration, Deuteronomy 26, tithe, death in the Old Testament*

This paper draws on the author's own experience as a Christian of Chinese descent. In Chinese culture, being respectful of one's parents is a moral obligation. When parents die, this obligation remains. One form of showing respect for one's deceased ancestors is to offer them food. Thus, the ritual of feeding the dead is carried out regularly and long after one's parents have died. Thus, the bond between descendants and ancestors is preserved. Not only do direct descendants participate in this ritual but also those of later generations, even if they have never met their ancestors.

As a Christian since childhood, I was taught to refrain from participating in the ritual of feeding the dead. However, some of my family members practiced the ritual because they were Confucian or Catholic. These differences often caused tension within the family. My personal experience led me to question whether it is true that feeding one's deceased ancestors contradicts

Christian teachings. In the Protestant tradition I live in, such questions need to be answered with reference to the Bible. Those who hold the view that Christianity rejects the ritual of feeding the dead find arguments to support this in the Bible. In the Old Testament, several verses are often understood as arguments against the ritual of feeding the dead. One of these verses is Deuteronomy 26:14. This verse states that one should not

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make offerings to the dead as a form of obedience to Yahweh. The cancellation of these offerings has been seen as a definitive sign that making offerings to the dead is contrary to the worship of Yahweh.

Interpreters disagree on the extent to which the verse is a prohibition against ritual offerings to the dead. Thus, this paper will discuss interpreters' opinions regarding the reasons why making offerings to the dead is discouraged, if not prohibited, in the Christian tradition. Further, this paper will discuss archaeological evidence showing that feeding the dead was a custom commonly practiced in ancient Israelite society. This archeological evidence will be supported with textual evidence. Subsequently, this paper will describe how belief in the dead can be complementary to the worship of Yahweh. This analysis assumes that the Israelites did not find their belief in the permanence of their ancestors after death to be mutually exclusive with their belief in Yahweh. It is even possible that these beliefs can complement each other.

## Methodology

This paper studies literature to discuss the intention of Biblical writers who discourage the feeding of the dead as expressed in Deut 26:14. The scholarly works this paper consults base their opinions from analyses of archeological finds and textual evidence. Furthermore, this paper describes the complementarity between feeding the dead and worshipping Yahweh. Regarding the manner in which the dead are addressed by the living, this paper uses a theory from religious studies proposed by Teeter describing communication between the living and the dead.

## Reasons for refusing to make offerings to the dead

As noted above, Deuteronomy 26:14 is often used as a basis for prohibiting the feeding of the dead:

I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God, doing just as you commanded me. (NRSV)

Loyalty to God is stated as the reason for not making offerings to the dead. The context of this verse can be traced back to verse 12, which is about setting aside the tithe of

the harvest. The recipients of the offering are identified as the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. They must be given a portion of the harvest so that they do not go hungry. The assumption here is that the lives of the tithe's recipients depend on said tithe. Thus, individuals are asked not to be hesitant in delivering the tithe to the needful. Regardless of the circumstances, this offering must reach those in need. The promise is solemnly spoken before God as a sign of loyalty to Him. However, verse 14 reveals a circumstance that may exempt an individual from making this offering: mourning or, possibly, post-interment rites. This implies that when there was a funerary ceremony, a food offering was made. Thus, the food seems to not only be offered to the living, but to the dead, as well. Thus, if a funeral rite took place during the tithe period (every third year), perhaps the portion of the harvest that would have been given to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow was diverted to the death ceremony instead. As related in verse 14, to prevent that from happening, individuals promised not to reallocate their harvest for any other purpose than the tithe. This implies that the tithe had to be prioritized over funerary rites.

The specific mention of funerary offerings seems puzzling in this context. Why are death rites singled out as something that people had to swear would not interfere with the distribution of the tithe? Was there no other reason why individuals could be exempted from giving the tithe? Perhaps it is true that dealing with corpses could stain the purity of the person, which is why any activity related to the dead should not be performed simultaneously with a sacrificial rite such as paying the tithe. However, the prohibition against touching corpses applies exclusively to priests, whose duty to serve God requires them to maintain their purity (Lev 22:4). In this passage, however, this prohibition appears to be extended to people who pay the tithe. Moreover, it is not God who receives the tithe. Therefore, the consideration of maintaining one's purity—by way of not dealing with the dead—as a reason for not making offerings to the dead is difficult to accept. Von Rad (1966) argues that the tithe is the development of an earlier provision. Originally, the recipient of the offering was Yahweh. In later developments, this shifted to the Levite and other people who comprised "the poor of the locality" (Von Rad: 160–161). However, the tithe was still given as if it was offered di-

rectly to Yahweh. Consequently, failing to perform this rite would be tantamount to failing God.

Meanwhile, Blenkinsopp (1995) argues that the motive behind prohibiting offerings to the dead was actually to eliminate family religion. In their daily life, Israelite families practiced rituals which are not entirely the same as the official religious practices. Offerings to the dead is one of those rituals identified by scholars as family religion. However, the Deuteronomists (the writers of the passage containing the verse) saw such rituals as inappropriate to Yahwistic religion. The spirit of religious purification promoted by the Deuteronomists resulted in the prohibition of family rituals—which, in the context of this study, refers to making offerings to the dead. Blenkinsopp posits that the Deuteronomists wanted to transfer the role of the family to the state. Thus, by prohibiting funerary offerings, the power of the state was affirmed; subsequently, people were formally required to bring the tithe to a central sanctuary and to perform the rite there. This shows how religion can become articulated with the state through the latter’s control of a central sanctuary, as the Deuteronomists effectively represented the state’s religious ideology. Regardless, none of these centralization attempts seemed to deter family religion practices among the Israelites. In response to this, rites that involved making offerings to the dead were eventually banned.

Verse 14 presents a firm oath to abandon any care of the dead that the families would have otherwise performed. Hays (2011) indicates that such a prohibition dated back long before the post-exilic period (as was thought by Blenkinsopp [1995]); he argued that it originated with the threat of the Assyrian Empire, which had already attacked several places in Judah during their campaign in 701 BCE. Further, Hays states, “Sennacherib’s destruction of outlying Judean towns in 701 would have severed the crucial link between land and kin for many families by forcing them to abandon their property. Therefore, it is likely that the marginalization of ancestor cults was already happening during Isaiah ben Amoz’s time, and that the prophet himself was a proponent of that process” (2011: 175). Meanwhile, Karel van der Toorn (1996) sees Deut 26:14 as a reflection of the Deuteronomist writers’ stance against the religious practices commonly observed by the Israelites. The Ephraimite scholars who wrote Deuteronomy were from the north; however, after

Samaria fell in 721 BCE, they fled to the south. Once there, they found that the region’s religious practices were incompatible with their own views. One such practice was the feeding of the dead, which they considered inconsistent with worshiping Yahweh. Furthermore, van der Toorn sees Deut 26:14 within the specific context of the presentation of the tithe at the temple. At that time, those who presented their tithe declared before the temple authorities that the offerings they made did not come from offerings to the dead. Although efforts to abolish Israel’s religious practices lasted centuries, these practices endured. Isaiah 65:4 details the practice of death rituals during the post-exilic period. Moreover, in the 2nd century BCE, the practice of feeding the dead persisted, as recorded in Tobit 4:17 and Sirach 7:33; 30:18 (Tsan: 2013).

Another opinion comes from Klaas Spronk (1986) who posits that the prevailing rejection towards the feeding of the dead may have been intended as a rebuke toward the Canannites’ worship of chthonic gods. It is argued that rituals devoted to Baal Peor highlighted the respect for the dead (Spronk, 1986). This may have given rise to the widely held belief (as depicted in the Bible), that Baal was a dead god. Accordingly, the making of offerings to the dead may have become associated with the worship of Baal. Thus, Deut 26:14 can be interpreted as a rejection of Baal. This way, feeding the dead became incompatible with the worship of Yahweh. However, Schmidt (1994) contends that the presence of the feeding the dead rite, as indicated in Deut 26:14, is a mere rhetorical ploy with a weak historical basis.

Furthermore, Brueggemaan (2001) explains that Deuteronomic theology chooses life and accepts life from Yahweh. From this perspective, life is not an abstract concept, as it is closely related to crops in the context of agriculture. The tithe in Deut 26:14 symbolizes individuals’ gratitude for a good harvest, which refers to the availability of food that is necessary to sustain life. In this sense, offerings to the dead would look like countering the intention to glorify life and Yahweh as the source of life, or even the manifestation of life itself. By offering to the dead, one has treated the dead as important while they are in fact not.

Woods (2011) has another view regarding Deut 26:14. He suggests the discouragement of offerings to the dead is a consequence of Israel’s holiness. Israel should show

that they are unlike other nations. They were chosen to be different. In Israel, being holy means they must separate themselves from the others. This view of Woods represents the thought that Israel was a unique nation. However, the uniqueness of Israel is problematic. It is hard to be proven historically. Rather than finding reasons to differentiate Israel from other nations, scholars have found more and more evidence showing a close tie between Israel and other nations who lived either in the neighborhood, or together with them.

Despite their different perspectives, the above-mentioned scholars seem to agree that Deut 26:14 requires no offerings be made to the dead. However, not all scholars agree on this point. For instance, Kerry M. Sonia (2020) emphatically contends that the text does not comprise a prohibition against ritual offerings to the dead. Instead, she argues that the verse's main purpose was to preserve the sanctity of the tithe. As mentioned above, being in contact with the dead is seen as self-defilement. In agreement with Sonia (2020), Albertz and Schmitt (2012) posit that the tithe-giver must abstain from contact with the dead so that the tithe remains unblemished.

Thus, following the argument of Sonia and Albertz and Schmitt, the focus of the verse in question appears to be firmly set on the tithe itself. Although the tithe was intended to support the needful, namely, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, tithe-givers' primary goal was to maintain their purity, as the tithe was being offered to Yahweh himself. The rationale behind this is that making offerings to the dead carries the risk of coming into contact with the dead, so it should be avoided; however, avoiding is not the same as negating altogether. In the analyzed verse, the tithe-giver does not state that they want to abolish the feeding of the dead. Consequently, it is possible that the Israelites continued to perform the feeding of the dead in addition to other rituals, including tithing and offerings directed to Yahweh.

It is interesting to think that the feeding of the dead is directly linked to the tithe. Suriano (2018) posits that this association shows that Israelites may have believed that the dead were of somewhat equal standing with the living needful. People in need were considered weak. Therefore, regardless of whether Levites, strangers, orphans, widows, and the dead are of equal standing, they are all in need of care from others. However, the assump-

tion that the dead needs care from the living would place them in a weaker position than the living. In that case, the assumption should be challenged. The dead may not be as weak as assumed. Hays (2019), who followed Jo Ann Scurlock's view, doubted that the dead have little or no power in the Israelite society as suggested by Suriano.

After discussing such diverse opinions about the Israelites' treatment of the dead, perhaps one should agree with Hays (2019) in saying that the Israelites' views on the dead were never uniform.

### **Caring for the dead**

The ritual of feeding the dead is part of a larger group of death rites and displays of respect for one's ancestors. Various studies on ancient Israelites' death rites and their views on death have been published recently. Scholars who conduct studies on this topic frequently try to combine field data (archaeological finds) with textual (biblical) evidence. These archaeological finds typically consist of ruins and gravesites, along with the various objects found there. These archeological sites are located near the territory of Judah and its surrounding areas. The prevailing assumption among scholars is that Israelites' habits were not very different from those of neighboring peoples. In terms of caring for the dead, the nations of ancient southwest Asia had similar customs. Of course, this view does not necessarily ignore the differences found in this study. However, the similarities that exist must be recognized as significant. Therefore, to understand ancient Israelites' funerary customs, information obtained from more or less the same area can be employed.

#### *Material evidence*

In the region of Judah, archaeologists have found various bench tombs dating from the 8th century to the end of the 6th century BCE. These tombs bear a resemblance to the Israelites' houses. Sonia (2020) provides examples of household utilities such as wood panels, gabled ceilings, lamp niches, and headrests. Of the many kinds of objects found in the graves, the cutlery, such as plates and bowls, stands out. This evidence shows a link between the activity of eating and drinking and funerary rites. However, Sonia (2020)

points out that this evidence does not necessarily make it clear whether the tools were used by the living when they came to the graves or if they were meant for the dead. It is also unclear whether these tools are traces of a rite performed only once, such as a funeral, or during a rite performed periodically in memory of the deceased. Regardless of this uncertainty, the one thing we can say for certain is that some Israelites performed funerary rituals that involved eating and drinking.

Additional evidence carefully compiled by Elizabeth M. Bloch-Smith (1992a, 1992b) shows that from the late Bronze Age onward, tombs in Canaan and Judah were filled with various tools. She posits that from the 10th century BCE onward, ceramic utensils were commonly used to prepare, serve, and store food (Bloch-Smith, 1992a). Moreover, traces of food were found in the graves (Bloch-Smith, 1992a), although in small amounts (Bloch-Smith, 1992b). Thus, she concludes that “nourishment in the afterlife was of paramount importance. Undisturbed tombs yielded bowls for foodstuffs, jugs for liquids, lamps for light, and jars and juglets for scented oils, perfumes, spices, and oil for lamps” (Bloch-Smith: 218). Albertz and Schmitt (2021) suspect that “the small portions of food for each burial were not intended as supplies for an extensive period, let alone for eternity, but for a liminal phase, during which the spirit of the deceased was still thought to be present in the grave” (p. 218). From these findings, it can be ascertained that the Israelites cared deeply for their deceased family members. Meeting the needs of the deceased is a sign of devotion and respect from the family. Simultaneously, this practice demonstrates the belief that the dead do not simply disappear. Family relations between those who are still alive and those who have died are well maintained.

### *Textual evidence*

As has already been stated, the attitude of biblical writers toward rituals relating to the dead was rather negative. Often, these rituals are contrasted with the worship of Yahweh. The concern that the spirits of the dead could override Yahweh’s position can be found in every text that criticizes or prohibits such rituals. Nevertheless, the Bible can still be used as a source of information regarding Israelites’ rituals for the dead. Van der Toorn (1996) states,

“although the biblical records have been largely cleansed of references to a cult of the dead, the social framework within which this cult had its function has left its imprint on a multitude of passages” (p. 206). The traces identified by van der Toorn include the blessings that a father may bestow on his son, which would then be passed on to his grandson. These blessings relate to the land passed down by ancestors to their descendants. By keeping ownership of the land, children and grandchildren protected the existence of their deceased ancestors (van der Toorn, 1996). In addition, town names derived from a person’s name indicate that the place was previously owned by the ancestor whose name was used as the name of the town. Naming a town after the ancestor who inherited the land is a form of respect for the ancestors. Further, the Israelites erected memorials in memory of their deceased ancestors. These monuments are markers of the constant presence of the deceased parents. For instance, Jacob erected a pillar over Rachel’s tomb (Gen 35:20); Absalom erected a memorial for himself because he had no son to erect one when he died (2 Sam 18:18); and in the New Testament, the custom of erecting memorials for the dead was still practiced (Matt 23:29). Moreover, Jeremiah 16:6-8 describes a death ritual consisting of lamentation, laceration, shaving of the head, making offerings to the dead, and a feast. Every year, the Israelites performed a ritual to remember their ancestors by visiting their tombs (1 Sam 20:6). Deceased kings are given a special graveyard that is called a hero’s grave garden situated in a palace environment (2 Kings 21:18, 26). However, necromancy was forbidden (Isa 8:19-20; Deut 18:11), despite Saul once invoking Samuel’s spirit with the help of a seer at En-Dor (1 Sam 28). This prohibition was probably to avoid displacing prophets from their role (Smith & Bloch-Smith: 1988). Prophets’ role of predicting the future was threatened by people’s attempts to call upon the spirits of the dead for the purpose of divination. However, the prophets did not originally forbid necromancy (Smith & Bloch-Smith: 1988). It was not until the late 8th century such a prohibition came into effect (Schmidt: 1994).

After studying the archaeological evidence and biblical texts, it can be concluded that the ancient Israelites believed that the spirits of deceased ancestors did not merely vanish. This implies that they did not believe that death was the end. As Spronk (1986) puts it, “the ancient

Israelite funerary customs point to a belief in some kind of continued existence of life after death” (p. 251). In addition, the notion that the dead are contrary to holiness and cannot be reconciled with Yahweh is not entirely true. As reported by Sonia (2020), funerary inscriptions from the 7th century reveal a priestly blessing that mentions Yahweh’s name: “the presence of these invocations in a burial setting suggests that, at least for the writers of these inscriptions, YHWH is not excluded from such ritual spaces because of corpse pollution” (p. 63). According to Suriano (2018), from the inscriptions found in the tombs, it can be concluded that: “...the dead were not disconnected from the deity [...] The dead inside the Judahite tomb were dependent upon the living, but they could also count upon Yahweh for divine protection” (p. 127). Thus, the question that remains is whether the dead were believed to have the same power as Yahweh (Hays: 2019). The debate among scholars on this point is inconclusive. It is impossible to determine whether the dead were equated with God. However, what we can say is that there were several contrasting views among the Israelites on the dead vis-à-vis God.

### **The dead and Yahweh**

After reviewing these studies, it is difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion about the extent to which the Israelites believed in the power and role of the dead. Nor can we be certain that belief in the permanence of the dead contradicts the belief in Yahweh. Therefore, it is safe to argue that these two beliefs exist in a complementary relationship. In this case, the belief in the role and power of the dead is positively related to belief in Yahweh. The dead are not enemies, but friends to Yahweh. For the surviving family, the relationship with their ancestors is as meaningful as their relationship with Yahweh. Thus, maintaining a good relationship with one’s deceased ancestors and Yahweh would be considered a call for the Israelites. It is logical that both beliefs complement each other. Therefore, it is compelling to read Deut 26:14 from that perspective. This text does not say that feeding the dead and loyalty to Yahweh are mutually exclusive. In fact, both beliefs were held and practiced, albeit on different occasions and for different purposes. Thus, we should explore how this complementarity affects those who prac-

tice ritual offerings to the dead and worship Yahweh.

#### ***The deceased are strengthened by Yahweh.***

The desire to preserve the dead in various forms is something that many cultures—if not all of them—have in common. The making of tombs and memorials, as well as the placing of tools in graves as a way to remember the dead, are practices found in many cultures. After the advent of photography, people began putting up photos of the dead on the walls of their homes to commemorate them.

God could be thought to be similar to the dead in the sense that He exists without being materially present. However, religious doctrine teaches us that He is not dead nor similar to those who have died. Indeed, it categorically states that God may not be equated with the dead; although immaterial, He is a living god. Conversely, the dead are barred from life. Nevertheless, this religious distinction has done little to prevent people from treating the dead as if they exist alongside with the living. Similarly, this practice has made it difficult to avoid thinking about God in the same terms one thinks about the dead.

In the context of Deut 26:14, the mention of the dead alongside that of Yahweh opens up the possibility that the figure of Yahweh is associated with that of the dead. In other words, a person who makes an offering to a dead ancestor and to Yahweh may expect that both entities are somehow interlinked. Although the idea of death is often associated with the absence of movement or change, once the dead are associated with Yahweh, their inanimate state may be expected to become animated. This way, the dead come alive, perhaps not physically, but mentally and spiritually; they carry on with their own lives. Thus, the ritual of making an offering to the dead does not have an inanimate object as its target. Rather, the interaction between the dead and the living is not hampered by the fact that they are not in the same realm.

#### ***Yahweh is strengthened by the deceased.***

It is also worth exploring whether the association between Yahweh and the dead affects Yahweh to some degree. In another paper, I argue that the presence of deceased ancestors can add value to the worship of God (Setio: 2019). This occurs as a result of God being seen as

a figure that is difficult for humans to reach. It is important to acknowledge the distance between God and humanity because they are inherently different. According to religious canon, God has qualities that cannot be comprehended by human thought. Thus, humans’ imperfect intellect leads them to describe and conceptualize God only according to what they can comprehend, which provides them with a limited idea of God. However, this ineffability may lead some to believe that God is completely separate from the reality of human life.

Conversely, some individuals may have felt closer to their living dead ancestors than to God; this intimacy is natural, considering that the ancestors whom they were honoring may have once lived with them. Subsequently, others may have believed that their ancestors would always be with them. This latter perspective, when integrated into our idea of God, would make Him a familiar figure. Moreover, as these rituals indicate that the Israelites believed their ancestors played a role in the welfare of descendants even after death, so too should be our understanding of God. This way, the living feel closer to God through the bond they share with their deceased ancestors. This would not be possible if our ancestors were perceived as being completely separate from God. Thus, in communicating with God, our thoughts and feelings may be similar to those we experience when making offerings to our ancestors. Nevertheless, this does not mean that God is the same as they are. They are different; however, this difference is not absolute. Accordingly, it is possible that the belief in God and in one’s dead ancestors are not opposite but complementary; in other words, one’s closeness to God is linked to one’s ancestors.

Another positive aspect of the Israelites’ belief in the power of their ancestors related to their daily needs. The close bond between the living and their dead ancestors was strengthened by the former’s belief that the latter could help them for practical purposes. According to Tee-ter (2011), “the messages (of communication) from the living to the dead were usually practical rather than philosophical. The living did not seek omens or advice from the beyond, but instead hoped to enlist the support of the dead with everyday matters – resolving disputes, gaining power over rivals, or securing the favor of the gods or protection from divine or human enemies” (p. 148). This phenomenon is also common among indigenous reli-

gions. The belief in the dead’s supernatural powers is not an intellectual abstraction based on rational pursuits, but a practical belief for the solution of real problems. However, this does not mean that the dead’s supernatural powers only served human needs. The relationship between living and supernatural power goes both ways. As the living received help from the dead, the latter (including the ancestors’ spirits), would receive offerings from the former. This is an important aspect of the preservation of the relationship between the living and the dead.

Thus, the Israelites maintained a constant and close relationship with their ancestors; accordingly, it is possible that their relationship with Yahweh was influenced by their relationship with their ancestors in such a way that they became complementary.

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of archeological evidence, it can be concluded that feeding the dead, especially one’s ancestors, was a common custom in ancient Israel. Further, various passages in the Bible reference these rituals; however, the conclusions that can be drawn from them are inconclusive. Some posit that since nothing happens after death any action directed to the dead is nonsense, while others give an impression that death does not prevent the dead from communicating with the living. Additionally, others only admitted the possibility of life after death in a functional sense, namely, through the continuity of the bloodline or legacy of the dead. The interpretation of biblical passages that touch on the subject of death yields similarly inconclusive results. This comes as no surprise as the texts themselves are equivocal. In the midst of this uncertainty, it is strongly suggested that we do not understand the dead as the competitor, or the enemy of Yahweh. Thus, mortuary rites, including the rite of feeding the dead, may coexist with the worship of Yahweh. Loyalty to Yahweh is not mutually exclusive with the practice of feeding the dead; similarly, belief in the permanence of one’s dead ancestors is not mutually exclusive with belief in Yahweh. Thus, the relationship among the living, the dead, and Yahweh is similar to that between the members of a community; there is always contact between them for different reasons and within different contexts.

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