DEATH CULT IMAGERY IN ISAIAH 57*

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Modern critical scholarship has not come to a consensus with regard to the compositional units of Isaiah 56:9–57:13. The theories are many, ranging from scholars such as Ewald, Volz and Westermann who would divide the pericope into as many as four self-contained compositional units, to scholars such as James Smart (1965, p. 238) who suggested that 56:9–12 “may well have been the introduction to [57:1–13] originally.” Likewise, Paul Hanson (1979, pp. 186ff) argues for a unified pericope blaming the “indefensible massive surgery of the text” on the “old prejudice back to Duhm that judgment and salvation words never appear together in original prophetic units.”

Modern scholarship has not done much better when it comes to ascertaining the people who are being addressed, with suggestions ranging from pre-exilic to post-exilic times. What is clear is that Isaiah 56:9–57:2 is a stinging attack upon the leaders of Israel. The leaders, who were supposed to be watchmen (טפימ) looking out for enemies, were in reality blind men (56:10). A trained sheep dog barks at the approach of danger, but Israel’s leaders are “mute dogs” unable to bark (56:10). Those who are supposed to have their eyes open (טזימ) lie around sleeping, only rousing to gorge themselves with food (56:11) and guzzle beer as they sing their drinking songs (56:12; cf. 28:7ff).  

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1. Reading הוזים with IQIsa rather than MT’s הוים which is a hapax legomenon in Hebrew. חד is common in Arabic with the meaning “to talk irrationally, rave, be delirious.” (cf. Syr hdy) but it is much easier to see a simple graphic confusion between ה and ח. Such a reading fits nicely with the expression יד הוזים in verse 8 (see below).

2. Verse 12 is absent from the LXX, a sure sign that we are dealing with a later addition. It would be quite unlikely for a scribe to omit such a popular drinking song. Perhaps it was added on analogy to Isaiah 28:7ff which specifically attacks corrupt prophets and priests. Cf. also IQIsa’s secondary harmonization of שמש to נשק to agree with the plural נש𝐕א.

The collocation of feasting and “seeing” (זח) which we have here is paralleled in Isaiah 28 which B. Halpern (1986, pp. 114–119) has also placed in the context of the ancestral or funerary cult.
The vocabulary used in this indictment, such as “watchmen” (šōpîm) and “seers” (hōzîm), strongly suggests that false prophets are being singled out in this denunciation. (Note the denigrating parallelism watchmen/dogs/seers/dogs.) Yet šōpîm has connotations wide enough to encompass leaders in general and this, together with the use of “shepherds” (rōʿîm) in verse 11, suggests that the author is most likely attacking political, and perhaps even priestly, leaders along with the false prophets.

The result of such negligent leadership is the death of the righteous (57:1–2). In language reminiscent of the Suffering Servant (cf. 53:2–4, 8–9), the author repeatedly describes how the righteous die without anyone noticing. The author twice uses the idiom that the righteous “are gathered” (neʾēšap) to express their death (they are not simply “taken away” as some translations render). It is clear to see, especially from the parallel term ʿābād (“the righteous one perishes”), that we have a shortened form of the idiom neʾēšap ʿel ʿammāyw, “a person is gathered to his kin” (see below, p. 276).

The reward of the righteous is that they enter the grave in peace (57:2). The author seems to be consciously contrasting the peaceful rest of the righteous in their biers (the word miškāb means both bed and grave [see below]) with the reclining slumber (šōkēbîm) of the false prophets (56:10).

Here we come to a definite break from the author’s diatribe against the leaders’ dereliction of duty. 57:3–13 is a tirade against the wicked who are also hard to identify. Is the prophet, as many commentators assume, using wēʾattem (“But, as for you”) to turn his attention to the people or, as others have posited, is he still addressing the community?

3. sōpeh is used figuratively of the prophets in Hosea 9:8, Jeremiah 6:17, Ezekiel 3:17, 33:7, (cf. Isaiah 52:8). The prophet was to act as one who watches so that the covenant will be kept (cf. the use of ʿiph [with Yahweh as subject] in a covenant context in Genesis 31:49–50).

4. rōʾeh commonly refers metaphorically to the king, yet comes to designate the civil leaders in general in the exile and post-exilic community (Hanson, 1979, p. 196). Cf. LXX’s ponērōi (= rāʾîm).

5. This is the view of P. D. Hanson (1979, p. 196) who notes that the term kēlābîm, “dogs,” is used to denounce both civil and religious figures (see D. W. Thomas, [1969]). Once again, one should refer to Isaiah 28 which specifically mentions priests and prophets. On further parallels between Isaiah 28 and our passage see below.

6. See Smart (1965, p. 240) and Hanson (1979, p. 197).


8. See, for example, J. Muilenburg (1956, pp. 664–665) who states that “they are not the Samaritans (Duhm, Marti, Skinner), or the pre-exilic community (Ewald, Volz, et al.), or
leaders? In either case, the author equates their actions with Canaanite paganism.

It is common to find commentators documenting the use of fertility imagery in Isaiah 57:3–10. After all, the prophet begins the tirade by denouncing the unfaithful as “offspring of an adulterer and a whore” (57:3). The rest of the pericope is then shown to be replete with the sexual imagery of a harlot engaged in her trade. Marvin Pope’s translation (1977, p. 580), for example, explicitly points out the phallic symbols as well as the stripping and mounting of the bed by the “whoring adulteress” who, even when she is weary, never says “enough.” Likewise, Paul Hanson (1979, pp. 186–202) uses vivid language to describe the oracle which “compares the temple . . . to a gigantic bed of prostitution, a brothel on Mt. Zion.” Even verse 9b “You sent your envoys down to Sheol” emphasizes the extremes to which the untiring whore would go.

A handful of scholars have recognized that there are “allusions to necromancy,” to use McKenzie’s words (1968, p. 158), in verse 9. Muilenburg (1956, p. 668), following Feldmann, mentions that the notion that this verse implies sending envoys “to consult the gods of the underworld . . . goes as far back as Cyril of Alexandria (cf. Vulg., et humilia ta es usque ad infernos).” Older commentators suggested that there were references to ancestor worship in verse 8 but this has been rejected by modern commentators who emphasize the sexual imagery. G. C. Heider (1985, pp. 379–382) sees the cult of Molek, which he associates with the cult of the dead, in verses 5 and 9, especially in light of “the explicit chthonic destination of the envoys.”

Yet no one to my knowledge has attempted to reconcile this death imagery with the sexual imagery. Those commentators who recognized

the godless in exile (Feldmann), but the inhabitants of Jerusalem who had yielded to the attraction of the Canaanite cult.”

9. See, for example, P. Hanson (1979, p. 189) who says that 56:9–57:2 is “an attack on the leaders of the community by the prophetic group” and “someone within that same group expanded that composition with the addition of 57:3–13.” “The cult of community leaders is bitterly attacked by equating it with paganism (57:3–11).”

10. Reading wezōnāh with the LXX and most commentators. M. Pope’s (1977, p. 580) translation “whoring adulteress” would be attractive, especially in light of the second feminine singular suffixes in verse 6ff., if it did not necessitate repointing mēnāʾēp to mēnāʾēpet.


12. J. Muilenburg (1956, p. 667) and J. D. Smart (1965, p. 242) both assume a public cult here and thus reject the notion of ancestor worship due to its connection with a household cult. As is apparent in verse 6 (see below), the cult of the dead was not restricted to the household. The door and doorpost in verse 8 are not those of a local household (see below).
death imagery restricted it solely to one or two verses and saw it merely as a switch in metaphor from sexual imagery to death imagery and then back to sexual imagery. Perhaps being influenced by the metaphor of Israel as the unfaithful harlot found elsewhere in the prophetic corpus, no scholar attempted to integrate the death imagery into what the author was trying to achieve in his overall composition. This is what I propose to attempt in the present paper. By building on the work of W. H. Irwin, I hope to show that there is much more death imagery here than has been recognized and that the author skillfully intertwined sexual imagery and death imagery.

Scholars have unanimously pointed out that the author traces the wanton behavior described in these verses back to the whorish ancestry mentioned in verse 3. As C. Stuhlmueller (1968, p. 381) notes, "children manifest what their parents put into them." Thus the wicked who are being castigated by the prophet are bearing the fruit of their upbringing as in Ezekiel 16. They are offspring of an adulterer and a whore and thus, true to character, they act wantonly. But most scholars have failed to pay adequate attention to the fact that the unfaithful are also called "sons of an ēnēnāh" in the parallel phrase of the same verse (vs. 3). What is the meaning of this parallel phrase? I would suggest that it has to do with the realm of the dead.

Isaiah 57:3 is usually translated:

"But you, draw near hither,  
Sons of a sorceress,  
Offspring of the adulterer and the harlot." (RSV)

Scholars, for the most part, skipped over the mention of "sons of a sorceress" (bēnē ēnēnāh) in their hurry to show how the metaphor of the harlot is extended in the verses that follow. No consensus has been reached with regard to the etymology of ēnēnēnāh (meconen) which has usually been translated "soothsayer" ("Wahrsager") or "sorceress." G. B. Gray (1912, p. 54) has stated the alternatives which have been proposed:

... it has been variously explained from ēnh, a cloud, hence rain-producers [or those who divine by interpreting the clouds; cf. W. Baumgartner (1967–1983, p. 811)], from ēn, the eye, hence persons who exercise the power of the evil eye, a power widely believed in and dreaded down to the present day in Palestine; from the Arabic gunnat, a twang, the hum of insects, hence diviners as the interpreters of such sounds, or as

13. E.g., Hosea 1 and 3; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 2:1ff, 20ff; 3:6–10; Ezekiel 16 and 23.
delivering their instructions with such sounds, or 'singing' their spells; and from Arabic ʿanna, to appear, hence dealers in phenomena.\(^{14}\)

To this list could be added ʿnn “to recite (music/charms)” [“to chant or sing a magical text”?] as proposed by W. F. Albright (1968, p. 122, n. 30).\(^{15}\)

Of these possibilities, Arabic ʿanna (suggested already by J. Wellhausen [1927, p. 204]) is the most appealing. It occurs in Arabic meaning “to appear (to or before)”; “to take shape, to form, arise, spring up.”\(^{16}\) In Sabean it occurs with the meaning “to manifest one's self (of a deity)” (Biella, 1982, p. 374). ʿōnēn in Hebrew, as a D factitive, could then mean “to cause to appear” and be used to describe a type of divination involving the raising of spirits or apparitions.\(^{17}\)

In this light it is interesting to note that meʾōnēn is used in close connection with those who consult the dead in Deuteronomy 18:10-11 and 2 Kings 21:6 (= 2 Chr 33:6).\(^{18}\)

Thus the metaphor being used here is two-faced. There is only one woman (parallelismus membrorum; cf. 2 f. sg. suffix in verses 6ff.) but she has two faces: that of a conjurer (female necromancer) and that of a harlot. The suggestion that ʿōnēnah in our present passage (57:3) refers to raising spirits of the dead is given further support by the use of death imagery elsewhere in the pericope to which we now turn. The abundant death terminology in the rest of this passage has gone largely unnoticed.

The crux of the pericope is the expression bēhālēgē nahal helqēk in verse 6 which has traditionally been rendered “with the smooth stones of the wady is your portion.” Scholars have seen here a reference to some

\(^{14}\) Compare also J. Gray (1964, p. 707) and W. Baumgartner (1983, p. 811).

\(^{15}\) Albright’s discussion of this word comes in the context of explaining the expression ʿnn ʿāfīt in Ugaritic which he translates “a play-boy of Athirat.” For a discussion of the occurrence of ʿnn in Ugaritic and the various attempts at interpretation see P. J. van Zijl (1972, pp. 22, 102–104).

\(^{16}\) E. W. Lane (1863–1893, p. 2162); H. Wehr (1976, p. 647); A. de Biberstein-Kazimirski (1960, p. 377). F. M. Cross (1973, pp. 165–166 n. 86, cf. p. 153 n. 30) is of the opinion that “in Arabic the meaning of the verb 'to appear' and the nouns in the sense 'apparition, phenomenon' are most easily explained as denominative, i.e., secondarily derived from the meaning 'cloud, cloud bank.'”

\(^{17}\) ʿōnēn meaning “to cause to appear,” “to raise spirits,” has already been recognized by KB, p. 721 and A. K. Irvine as quoted by J. C. Biella (1982, p. 374). E. F. de Ward (1977, p. 9) also notes the possibility of meʾōnēn being “the one who causes spirits to materialise.”

\(^{18}\) One might also mention that in Arabic (Lane, 1863–1893, p. 2166a) al-ʾanāmu “signifies also [particularly] Death's opposing itself... occurring in a tradition of Sateeh [the Diviner].”
type of idolatrous practice. Yet they have been totally bewildered in attempting to say anything more about what type of cult the “smooth stones” signified. A feeling of perplexity had come to characterize responses to this verse until a new understanding came with the proposal of W. H. Irwin (1967). His solution (identifying הָלָ֑לֶגֶֽה with Ugaritic ḫalqa) is as simple as it is brilliant. One of the best known phrases of the Baal cycle describes the death of Baal with the following words:

mita ʿalʾiyānū baʾlu  
ḥaliqa zubālū baʾlu ʿarṣi

Dead is Mighty Baal
Perished is the Prince, the Lord of the Earth.

ḫalq is clearly parallel to mt, “to die” (cf. Akk ḫalāqu, “to disappear, to perish;” Eth ḫalqa “to come to an end; to perish, disappear;” Arb ḫaliqa “to be old, worn out;” Deir ʿAllā ḫalq “to perish”). The positing of the root ḫalq meaning “to die, perish” for biblical Hebrew is not new (Dahood, 1964, p. 408; 1965, pp. 35, 73, 99, 207). Yet, prior to Irwin’s exposition, no one saw its relevance for Isaiah 57:6. The present context with its heavy use of paronomasia would strengthen the possibility of a lesser known form of ḫalq being used to play on ḫelqēk (“your portion”). Irwin has also pointed out the use of Canaanite imagery and vocabulary used throughout the passage. Thus it should not be surprising to find a key to our passage in Ugaritic ḫalq.¹⁹

Irwin’s translation, “the dead of the wady (nahal),” provides a smooth transition from the previous verse which describes the slaughter of children in the wadies (nēḥālim). Irwin goes on to portray the wady as the traditional place of burial. He reminds us that the wady Kidron is identified as a common graveyard in 2 Kings 23:6 (cf. Jer 31:40; Job 21:33) and that the valley of Ben-Hinnom is the site of child sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10).²⁰ Compare also a Hebrew inscription from a tomb in the wady Kidron which N. Avigad (1955) has read as ḥdr ḫktʾ ḫṣr “(Tomb)-chamber in the side (or slope) of the rock (or mountain).”²¹

¹⁹. In addition to the vocabulary Irwin cites, compare also the expression taʾārīḵū lāšōn in 57:4 with a proposed restoration in CTA 5.2.3 [yaʾarīk lišēna li-kabkabīma (see below). So Ginsberg (1969, p. 138), Cassuto (1975, p. 155), Cross (1973, p. 117) and Coogan (1978, p. 107).

²⁰. At the ASOR section of the 1985 SBL/AAR annual meeting in Anaheim, CA, C. A. Kennedy, in a paper entitled “Isaiah 57:5-6: Tombs in the Rocks,” argued that ḥnīl can designate graves or tombs cut into the sides of rock. He suggested the translation “among the dead of the (rock-cut) tomb is your portion” (cf. KB, p. 649a s.v. ḥnīl 1, 3).

²¹. See also the attractive suggestion of D. Ussishkin (1969) who restores ḫṣr[yh] and translates “a burial-chamber in the side of the rock-cut burial-chamber” or “a burial-chamber in the side of the rock-cut tomb.” For additional connections between tombs and wadis see Avigad (1954).
The resulting translation of Isaiah 57:6 therefore reflects opposition by adherents of Yahwism to death cults in ancient Israel: 22

Among the departed (ḥāliqē) 23 of the wady is your portion (ḥelqēk), they, 24 they are your lot. Even to them have you poured libations, and brought offerings.

Verses 7–11 extend the metaphor of the adulterous and whorish ancestry (zerac mēnāʾēp wēzōnāh) mentioned in verse 3. Yet, just as the whore is paralleled by the conjurer in verse 3, so the language in verse 7–11 intertwines both death cult and sexual imagery. The sexual imagery has been noted by all commentators. The harlot’s bed (miškāb) is referred to in verses 7 and 8. The mention of both the zikkārōn and the yad in verse 8 are taken by many to refer to “an indecent (phallic) symbol” (NAB). The expression yād hāzūt, “you gazed upon the yād,” was certainly meant to allude back to the hōzīm, “seers,” in 56:10. The perfumes and oils of verse 9 are said to be characteristic of the harlot’s trade. Finally, the expression “as far as Sheol” in the last half of verse 9 has been described as “a hyperbolic restatement... to emphasize the extremes to which the whore Israel is willing to go to please the foreign sovereign” (Hanson, 1979, p. 200). Verses 10–11 are then said to describe the untiring harlot who is false to Yahweh.

The author’s artistry in mixing metaphors can be seen upon closer examination. The key word miškāb (“bed of the harlot”) is central to the passage occurring once in verse 7 and twice in verse 8. It is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s miškab dōdim, “bed of love” (23:17). Hanson (1979, p. 200) notes the shocking language we have here where the temple is compared to “a gigantic bed of prostitution, a brothel upon Mt. Zion.” Yet, at the same time, Hanson is well aware that “one does not go up to a bed to sacrifice” (vs. 7). This difficulty is erased when we realize that the key word miškāb also occurs in verse 2 with the meaning of “grave, bier”! The use of miškāb as “tomb” is well represented in Northwest Semitic. 25

22. Irwin (1967, pp. 39–40) vacillates when it comes to articulating the cult of the dead in view here because he shares the opinion of many that “our evidence for a cult of the dead in Israel is doubtful.” See the author’s recent dissertation (1986) forthcoming in the Harvard Semitic Monographs.

23. It is best to revocalize MT’s ḥallēqē as ḥāliqē or the like.

24. Note IQṣaʾaʾs ṣmḥ hmr.

25. Cf. Ezek 32:25; 2 Chr 16:14; and DISO, p. 170. Also note the expression ṯkb miškby ‘imṣk ḫṣū “you will lie down on your eternal bed (= the funerary bench) to die” in Deir ʿAllā II, 11. See Hackett (1984, p. 67) and Hoftijzer and van der Kooij (1976, pp. 233–234). Finally, compare the harlot’s lodgings which are described as miškby ḫṣk, “beds of
Likewise, both zikkārōn and yad (vs. 8), in addition to meaning “indecent symbol” can also mean “memorial, monument,” perhaps here signifying a royal mortuary stela of some sort. The zikkārōn is placed outside the doorpost (mēızūzāh) which also figures in the death cult passage in Ezekiel 43:8 where it refers to the royal palace.⁶⁶

The mention of a pact (wattikrot [bērīt] lāk mēhem, “you made a pact with them”) in verse 8 is also noteworthy. The immediate antecedent for the object (“them”) seems to refer back to the dead ancestors in verse 6. This is all the more intriguing in light of the “covenant with death and Sheol” (kāratnū bērīt ʾet-māwet wēʾîm šēʾōl ʾāšīnū hōzēh) occurring in Isaiah 28:15, 18.⁷⁷ The use of the terms hōzēh and hāzūt in Isaiah 28:15, 18 to designate “pacts” (/bērīt/) is also fascinating in light of yād hāzūt in 57:8 (cf. also hōzīm in 56:10).

If we are correct in seeing allusions to death-cult imagery elsewhere in verse 8, then perhaps the phrase kî mēʾītti gīllī wattāʾālli in 8b, which is traditionally rendered “for, (deserting) me, you have uncovered (your bed), you have gone up (to it),” should be translated, “you tried to discover (oracles) from me (by) bringing up (spirits).” In view of the context, this would also be a reference to cults of the dead where the people turned away from Yahweh (mēʾītti) by seeking oracles and secrets from the dead (compare the use of gīl in Amos 3:7). B. Halpern has suggested to me (personal communication) that perhaps we are dealing with forced paronomasia here. The author is deliberately ambiguous with the choice of the root gīl, once again mixing the imagery of the harlot climbing into bed with that of conjuring spirits from the underworld.

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⁶⁶ On the use of the root zkr in cults of the dead see Lewis (1986, pp. 36, 196-198).

⁶⁷ Compare also the invoking of the name (hazkīr šēm) in Absalom’s erection of his maẖēbēr in 2 Samuel 18:18, as well as in the Hadad inscription from Zinjirli (KAI 214. 16, 21) which tells of Panammu entreating his sons, who will sit on the throne after his death, to “invoke the name of Hadad and Panammu” (wyzkr ʾm ḥḍ . . . pnwn).

⁷⁷ B. Halpern (1986, pp. 117-119) has already pointed out much of the rich funerary imagery in Isaiah 28 including the use of massaʾ as a technical term for a funerary bench. He also noted the pun on “seeing.”
All of this affects the way we treat verse 9. Is the oil and perfume referring to the cosmetics of the harlot or do they refer to the perfumes used at the time of burial? The word translated "perfume," ṛiqquāḥ occurs only here, but the root occurs often enough so that the meaning is not in doubt. The root ṛqḥ is used of perfumes and various spice mixtures including those used at the time of burial (cf. 2 Chr 16:14). In other words, perhaps the mention of "lavishing oil on the king (mlk)" could be a word-play referring not merely to the harlot’s perfume but to the anointing of the dead king and/or his funerary stela. Compare the collocation of harlotry (zēnāt) and a royal death cult ritual (pigrē malkēhem) in Ezekiel 43:7–9.28

If we are correct in seeing death imagery used throughout this pericope, then the mention in verse 9 of sending envoys “down even to the netherworld” (wattašpīl ḫad šērōl) must not be taken as an exaggeration of the extremes to which the harlot would go. The death metaphor is better served by seeing the envoys going to the denizens of the netherworld to seek favors. Compare especially the characteristic use of ṣpl here and in other underworld contexts (Isa 29:4; RS 34.126.22 = KTU 1.161.22).

Coming to verse 11 we find Yahweh formulating his indictment with a question: “Whom did you dread and fear so that you were false?” In the past scholars have pointed out that fear of the foreign gods was one of the motives driving Israel to a life of harlotry. Others, such as F. Delitzsch (1889, p. 376), stated that “it was of men—only mortal men, with no real power—that Israel was so needlessly afraid.” Yet it seems much more reasonable to set this verse also in the context of the cult of the dead we have been describing. It makes much better sense to say that it is the shades of the dead whom they dread and fear. If the dead were not accorded the proper services, such as invocation, libation and funerary offerings,29 they might act malevolently. Once again one can look to the Mesopotamian sphere, especially in incantation literature, where there are numerous examples of placating of the dead.30

28. A less attractive alternative suggested by S. Ackerman in a paper given at the 1987 SBL annual meeting in Boston would be to see a reference here to a “mulk-offering” tying into the child sacrifice mentioned in 57:5.
29. I am using here examples of the essential services (šuma zakāru, mē naqū, kispa kasāpu) found in the Mesopotamian cult of the dead. See Bayliss (1973, p. 116).
30. See Bayliss (1973, pp. 117–118) who argues that the ghosts of the dead are essentially malevolent. For a more balanced approach which also stresses the favorable disposition of the shades see Skaist (1980).
approach would also fit in nicely with the last half of verse 11 where Yahweh says, “Me you did not remember (wē'ōtī lō' zākart)."31

Next, consider the troublesome hapax legomenon qibbūsayik in verse 13. Commentators struggling with this word have either emended the text to šiqqusayik “your abominations” (so McKenzie [1968, p. 157] who calls qibbūs a “non-word”), translated elliptically “let your collection (of idols) deliver you,” or guessed at a meaning such as “your idol-clusters.” In view of the death imagery in the preceding verses it seems likely that the “gathered ones” referred to are the dead ancestors alluded to earlier.32 In other words, the verse could be rendered, “When you cry out, will your dead (those who have “been gathered” and from whom you are seeking favors) deliver you?” The suggestion that the root qbs can be used in this sense similar to the use of the synonym ṣp in the common idiom neʾṣap ṣel ʾammāyw, “he was gathered to his kin” finds support in the Ugaritic Funerary Text (RS 34.126.2–3 = KTU 1.161.2–3) where qbs ddn (qabii.yz “the ‘gathered ones’ of the Didanu tribe”) is parallel to rp ṣarṣ (“the ‘heroes’ [Rephaim] of the underworld”).33 Both terms for “joining” one’s ancestors in the underworld are expressive of a clan solidarity which was strengthened and promoted by cults of the dead which were practiced in Ugarit and ancient Israel despite normative Yahwistic efforts to the contrary.

In light of the above treatment it is worthwhile to reconsider the imagery behind two earlier verses. In verse 4, immediately after the description of the impure ancestry as “offspring of a conjurer//harlot,” the author addresses the questions:

‘al-mi ṭitʾannāgā Of whom are you making sport,
‘al-mi tarḥibū peh At whom are you making faces,
taʿārikū lāšōn And sticking out your tongue? (RSV, JB translations)

A perusal of any modern translation of these three lines leaves one with the impression that they refer solely to a mocking attitude. Yet, is it a mere coincidence that the author chose expressions which are very much at home in the arena of the god Mot (“Death”) swallowing up Baal? Compare the well-known fearful description of Mot in CTA 5.2.2–4:

31. See above (footnote 26) on the use of zkr in the context of the cult of the dead.
32. This has also been recognized by M. Pope (private communication to Heider [1985, 381 n. 759]).
33. For further treatment of RS 34.126 including bibliography on new collations see the author’s dissertation, pp. 2, 10–12, 257–258. See also Watson (1984) on the word-pair ṣp // qbs. Finally, compare the expression yiʾtasip raspu “Reshep gathered to himself (Kirta’s descendents)” in CTA 14.1.18–19.
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šapatu li-’arši šapatu li-šamēmi [ya’arrīk li]sānā’ li-kabkābīma One lip to the earth, one lip to heaven, (Mot) stretched out his tongue to the stars.
yā’rub ba’lu ba-kabidīhu Baal entered his innards,
ba-pīhu yarid He descended into his mouth.

Similarly, note the description of Sheol in Isaiah 5:14:
hirhībāh šēʾōl napšāh Sheol expands its gullet,
pā’ārā pīhā lihī Ḫōq Opens its mouth beyond measure.

and in Habakkuk 2:5:
āšer hirhīb kiṣēʾōl napšō Who expands his gullet wide as Sheol,
hūʾ kammāwet wēlōʾ yīšbāʾ Like insatiable Death (Mot).

In light of these parallels the three questions cited above can be translated more accurately:
‘al-mī titiʾannāgū Over whom do you delight (at the prospect of eating),
tarḥibū peh Over whom do you open wide your mouth,
taʾārikū lāšōn And stretch out your tongue?

The imagery here is not merely one of jeering or “making sport of” as titiʾannāgū is usually translated. Rather, it is the picture of Mot salivating and licking his lips with anticipated delight as he is about to satisfy once again his voracious appetite. tarḥibū peh does not refer to “making faces,” and (taʾārikū lāšōn) is not just a reference to “sticking out the tongue” in mockery. In light of the death imagery used throughout the pericope the author was certainly exploiting the story of Mot’s opening his mouth wide to swallow up Baal and stretching out his tongue so as not to miss a morsel (cf. also hirḥabt miskābēk in vs. 8).

The second verse which requires further analysis is verse 5, of which the first half has usually been translated something like:

You who burn with lust among the oaks,
under every green tree;

There are problems with this traditional understanding. In the first place, the word for “oaks” is usually written ʾēlim דֵּלִים and not ʾēlim דְּלִים as we have in our text here. Such defective writing hardly presents an insurmountable problem! Yet together with the readings from the versions (which all read either “idols” or “gods”), the translation “oaks,

34. See footnote 19 for this reconstruction.
"terebinths" is called into question. This has led several scholars to abandon any reference to the famous terebinths and to translate "growing passionate with the El's." This is certainly on the right track, but it would be a mistake to see a reference to the Canaanite god El here. I have pointed out elsewhere (Lewis, 1986, pp. 41, 67–69, 190, 221–222, 263–264) that the word for "god" (ilu, "êlôhim") is commonly used to refer to departed ancestors.

Secondly, the word translated "burn with lust," nêhâmîm, is also not without its difficulties. Those who translate it "burning with lust" are, of course, taking the problematical nêhâmîm as a Niphal participle of the geminate root hûm, "to be warm, hot." Yet the Niphal of this verb occurs only here. Furthermore, the Greek word used to translate nêhâmîm is parakalein which normally translates the root nhûm. Thus it is suggested that we are dealing with those who are "comforting themselves (nîhâmîm; the root nhûm most commonly occurs in the N stem) with the dead spirits," i.e., a reference to a cult of the dead. Those who translated nêhâmîm as from the root hûm were certainly influenced by the fertility associations of the terebinths.

The second half of verse 5 in the MT is also intriguing. Yet something is amiss here. G. C. Heider (1985, p. 381) has already pointed out that we have a "breakdown of the usual D[euteronomic] usage, which always (save once) accompanies the phrase ["under every spreading tree"] with some form of 'on every high hill.'" Nowhere else does the expression täwâna occur parallel to any of the words for terebinth. I would suggest the following history of this reading: (a) The original A line referred to

36. Hanson (1979, pp. 190, 192c). J. Muilenburg (1956, p. 665) followed Montgomery who translated the phrase "are concupiscent with the El's."

37. In CTA 6 ilûm occurs along with three other terms (ûtûm, rûm, and mtûm) as designations of the deceased, all of which correlate nicely with the use of divine determinatives (il) preceding royal names on the Ugaritic King List (KTU 1.113). The dead Samuel is called an "êlôhim in 1 Samuel 28:13. One could also compare the use of ilû in the Akkadian Ersatznamen, the numerous parallels between ilûnu and etemmu, "spirits," the use of "Ilû to refer to the deceased at Pyrgi and the Hittite Totenrituale in which the dead king "becomes a god" upon death. In short, upon death a ruler was grouped with his deceased ancestors and was referred to as an ilû (or like cognate). These ilû's were not worshipped in the same way that El or Baal were and we find no elaborate cult attempting to make them into high gods. Yet, I do not mean to imply that "becoming an ilû" was nothing more than an idiom for dying. Referring to the deceased as an ilû was an attempt to describe some type of transcendent character, perhaps what we might call preternatural.

38. It is tantalizing to note that parakalein also occurs in Greek meaning "to invoke." Such a meaning (invoking the ancestral shades) would be very attractive for the present context, yet nhûm in Hebrew no where else has such a connotation.
comforting oneself with the ancestral shades. This was paralleled by Yahweh’s statement, “In light of these things shall I be comforted” (misplaced by a later scribe at the end of verse 6). This makes for a remarkably close parallelism (complete with chiastic arrangement, alliteration and phonologically balanced lines):

\[
\text{hanniḥāmîm bāʾēlim} \\
\text{haʾal ʾēlleh ʾennāhēm}
\]

Furthermore, in its present position in the MT (at the end of verse 6) this phrase is out of place prosodically. There are other tricola in this poem (56:11; 57:3, 4, 8, 13), but they are always in some way parallel to the preceding lines and never enjambment (run-on) as in the end of verse 6. (b) bāʾēlim was misunderstood as bāʾēlim leading to the insertion of the gloss concerning the spreading tree (ʾēs raʾānān). Of course, this reconstruction is conjectural and in the end (especially if ʾēs raʾānān is retained as original) all we may be able to say safely is that perhaps the author was again deliberately ambiguous with his choice of ʾēlim meaning both the fertile oaks and the ancestral shades.

The following translation reflects the above analysis:

ISAIAH 56:9–57:13

56:9 All you beasts of the field, come to eat
      All you beasts in the forest.

:10 My* watchmen are all blind,
     They lack knowledge.
     They are all mute dogs,
     They cannot bark;
     The seers* recline,
     They love to slumber.

*Reading ẓōpay

57:11 Dogs, gluttons!
      They never have enough.
      And they are the shepherds!
      They have no understanding.
      They all turn to their own way,
      Each seeks his own gain.

:12 “Come, let me get some wine,
     Let us guzzle beer;
Tomorrow will be like today,
Or even better yet.”

57:1 The righteous one perishes,
But no one takes it to heart;
Devout men are “gathered” (＝ they die),
But no one gives it a thought.

? ? (the righteous one) is “gathered,”

:2 The just one enters (the grave) in peace.
They rest on their biers (miškāb),
Those who walk uprightly.

:3 But you, draw near,
You sons of a conjurer (ʿōnēnāh)
Offspring of an adulterer and a whore (zōnāh*)
*with LXX

:4 Over whom do you delight (at the prospect of eating),
Over whom do you open wide your mouth,
And stretch out your tongue?
Are you not children of sin,
The offspring of lies.

:5 Comforting yourselves with the dead spirits,
In light of these things, should I be comforted? (< vs. 6c)

Slaughtering your children in the wadis (nēhālim),
Under the rocky cliffs.

:6 Among the dead (ḥāliqē) of the wady (nahal) is your portion
(helqēk).
They, they are your lot.
Even to them have you poured libations,
And brought offerings.

:7 On a high and lofty mountain
You have placed your bed/grave (miškāb).
There too you have gone up
To offer sacrifice.

:8 Behind the door and the doorpost
You have put your indecent symbol/mortuary stela (zikkārōn).
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You tried to discover (oracles) from me (by) bringing up (spirits),
You have made wide your bed/grave (miškāb).

You have made a pact for yourself with them (the dead of vs. 6),
You have loved their bed/grave (miškāb),
You have gazed on the indecent symbol/mortuary stela (yād).

:9 You lavished oil on the (dead?) king,
You multiplied your perfumes.

You sent your envoys afar,
You sent them down to Sheol.

:10 You were wearied by your travel,
But you did not say, "It is hopeless."

You found new strength (hayyat yādek),
So that you did not weaken.

:11 Whom did you dread and fear
So that you were false?

You did not remember (zkr) me,
You did not give me any thought.

Was I to remain silent forever,
So that you would not have me to fear?

:12 I will tell of your "righteousness,"
Your deeds will not help you.

:13 When you cry out, will your dead (qibbūšayık) deliver you?39
The wind will carry all of them away,
A breeze shall take them.

But he who takes refuge in me will inherit (nḥl) the land (ʿerey),
He will possess my holy mountain.

In conclusion, the translation of this pericope which I am tentatively proposing tries to render the mixed imagery which our author is utilizing. The prophet indicts the corrupt leaders by employing two metaphors which he sets out in parallelism at the beginning of his tirade in verse 3 ("sons of a conjurer"//"offspring of a harlot"). He then not only extends these metaphors, but intertwines them throughout the rest of the pericope down to verse 13 (verses 5 and 8 remain problematical), skillfully using double entendres.

39. An implied question seems better than the usual jussive translation.
Yet the most important question remains to be answered. What is the nature of the ritual being attacked here? While there is so very little data to work with, I would suggest the following. In spite of the close connections between fertility and death, I do not see the two combined on the ritual level underlying this text. The death imagery is overpowering. The ritual being described is that of a cult of the dead where offerings and libations were being brought to the deceased (vs. 6). Perhaps the command to "draw near" (qirbû) given to the wicked offspring (sons of the conjurer//harlot) in verse 3 was an invitation to some sort of banquet of death. Perhaps there was an allusion in verse 4 to Mot's banquet of death which stood as a negative counterpart to the banquet of life in Isaiah 55:1–5.  

The few hints we can see in verses 8 and 9 would suggest some sort of royal death cult. The zikkărôn and yâd might be a reference to a royal mortuary stela of some sort. Compare once again the collocation of the zikkărôn and the mēzûzâh which are also present in the death cult passage in Ezekiel 43:8. In Ezekiel 43:8 the mēzûzâh does refer to the royal palace. If I am correct in seeing in verse 9 a reference to lavishing oil on the dead king, this too would support a royal cult of the dead. The metaphor of the harlot becomes such a stock idea that it seems that it is merely metaphorical here. Compare a similar usage in Leviticus 20:6 which describes H's contempt for anyone "playing the harlot after necromancers or mediums" (hannepeš ʾāšer tipneh ʾel hā-ōbôt wēʾel hayyiddēʾōnîm liznōt ʾaḥārēhem)." Likewise Ezekiel 43:7–9 describes the death cult there (pigre malkēhem) as harlotry (zēnāt).  

Nevertheless, while the underlying ritual behind Isaiah 57:3–13 may not have entailed both death cults and prostitution, this is not to detract from their mixing on the metaphorical level. Indeed, such a mixing was so frequent that it became proverbial:

[Wisdom] will save you from the harlot,

Who has forgotten the covenant (bērît) of her God;
For her house leads down to death,
her paths to the spirits of the dead (rēpāʾîm).

40. Compare also the banquet in Isaiah 25:6–8 where Yahweh swallows Death (Mot).
41. For a full exposition of these passages and others concerning cults of the dead in ancient Israel as well as Ugarit see Lewis (1986).
42. Proverbs 2:16–18. I owe thanks to Michael Fox for reminding me of this proverb. Compare also Fragment 184 in Allegro (1968, pp. 82–84) which describes the harlot as residing in the "tents of the underworld" (bʾūly dwmh). (Compare the expression bʾūly mwēt.
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**ABBREVIATIONS:**

CAD = A. Leo Oppenheim (1956–) _The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of Chicago_

CTA = A. Herdner (1963) _Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques_

DISO = C. Jean and J. Hoftijzer (1965) _Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest_

JB = _The Jerusalem Bible_

KAI = H. Donner and W. Röllig (1971) _Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften_

KB = L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner (1968) _Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros_

KTU = M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sammartin (1976) _Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit_