Exploring the Garden of Uzza: 
Death, Burial and Ideologies of Kingship

In an article published in a recent volume of this journal, Nadav Na’aman argues that the burial place of the kings of Judah was relocated in the eighth century BCE from the Jerusalem palace to an alternative site, the Garden of Uzza (1). His argument is founded upon a change in the formulaic burial notices given for the kings of Judah in the books of Kings. As is well known, almost every Judahite monarch up to and including Ahaz is said to have been buried “with his ancestors in the City of David” (2), whilst the burial notices for Ahaz’s successors are either inconsistent or non-existent: Manasseh is buried “in the garden of his house in the Garden of Uzza” (2 Kgs 21,18); Amon’s body is interred “in his tomb in the Garden of Uzza” (21,26); Josiah is buried “in his tomb” (23,30); the resting places of Hezekiah and Jehoiakim go unmentioned though their deaths are acknowledged (20,21; 24,6); Jehoahaz is said to die whilst in Egyptian captivity (23,34); and neither the deaths nor the burials of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah are noted. Given the important theological and narrative functions of the death and burial notices in emphasizing the continuity of the Davidic dynasty (3), these variations have proved problematic for many commentators.

In seeking to account for the variations among the burial notices of the later kings of Judah, Na’aman proposes that Hezekiah established a new royal burial ground away from the traditional site in the palace. This relocation, he argues, occurred in response to priestly concerns that the palace tombs defiled the adjacent temple, such as may be reflected in Ezek 43,7-9 (4), in which YHWH demands that the

(2) The subclause “(buried) with his ancestors” is not included in the burial notices for David (1 Kgs 2,10), Solomon (11,43), or Abijam (15,8).
(3) B.O. LONG, 1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature (FOTL 9; Grand Rapids, MI 1984) 22-28; see also K.-J. ILLMAN, Old Testament Formulas about Death (Åbo 1979) 37-48.
(4) So R. WEILL, La cité de David. Compte rendu des fouilles exécutées à Jérusalem, sur le site de la ville primitive: Campagne de 1913-1914 (Paris 1920) 35-40. N. Na’aman correlates Hezekiah’s decommissioning of the palace tombs
people of Israel remove the defiling presence of “the corpses of their kings” which appear to be situated next to the temple (5). He contends that this alternative burial site is the Garden of Uzza, in which Manasseh and Amon are said to be buried in 2 Kgs 21,18.26. In the first of these verses, the Garden of Uzza appears to be equated with Manasseh’s palace garden (תֵּאֵבָּב, “the garden of his house”). On this basis, Na’aman confidently identifies the Garden of Uzza with another garden mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the “King’s Garden” (נהרֵלֶם, to which brief references are found in 2 Kgs 25,4; Jer 39,4; 52,7 and Neh 3,15. This hypothesis is not only held to account for the change in the death and burial notices, but is also offered as an explanation for the absence of any referral to the burial place of Hezekiah, as the king was not buried “with his ancestors in the City of David”, but, according to this theory, in the new royal cemetery in the Garden of Uzza. Lest this disassociation from his Davidic ancestors diminish the favourable portrayal of Hezekiah, Na’aman suggests that the biblical author deliberately cut short his burial formula and ascribed the transfer of the royal burial place to Manasseh, a monarch portrayed in Kings as the most villainous of all the kings of Judah.

This is not in itself an innovative proposal. Brian Schmidt reaches similar conclusions in his discussion of Ezek 43,7-9 (6), suggesting that a tradition underlying the burial notices in the books of Kings claimed that Hezekiah relocated the royal tombs in anticipation of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, fearing their desecration by the enemy. This tradition, he proposes, was altered by the biblical author in view of his contrasting assessments of Hezekiah and Manasseh, so that Manasseh was portrayed negatively as the instigator of the new burial site, and Hezekiah’s interment in the Garden of Uzza was a detail suppressed in the more positive account of his reign.

Both Na’aman and Schmidt are right to recognize the ideological significance of the death and burial notices in the books of Kings. Indeed, I have suggested elsewhere that the location of Manasseh’s


(*) The textual difficulties of Ezek 43,7-9 have given rise to a variety of interpretations, as indicated below.

burial “in the garden of his house in the Garden of Uzza” in 2 Kgs 21,18 functions as a part of the biblical writer’s damning judgement of Manasseh, signalling the king’s post-mortem displacement from his ancestral line (7). Moreover, it is clear that the ideological importance of royal burials was also perceived by other tradents of the biblical traditions. As many commentators have observed, the Chronicler appears to tailor his burial notices to suit his theological appraisal of each monarch (8). Thus the non-specification of a burial place for the favoured king Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20,21 is remedied in 2 Chr 32,33 with a detailed description of Hezekiah’s honourable burial alongside his Davidic ancestors. In view of this theological tendency, it is notable that the Chronicler’s rehabilitated Manasseh is not given a garden burial, but is simply buried וֹתְב, “in his house” (33,20), whilst the burial of the unrepentant Amon is not even mentioned (33,25).

Similarly, the absence of a burial notice for Jehoiakim in 2 Kgs 24,6 appears to be rectified in a tradition reflected in Greek versions of the biblical regnal accounts, in which it is claimed that the sinful king Jehoiakim was buried in the κῶρον Οζᾶ, “Garden of Oza” (4 Kgdms Lucianic 24,6) or a place named Γανοζα, “Ganoza” (2 Par 36,8); the former appears to be a translation and the latter a transliteration of the designation וֹתְב ג, “Garden of Uzza”. This tradition concerning Jehoiakim’s burial may have arisen in direct response to the claim reflected in MT 2 Kgs 24,6 that he “slept with his ancestors”, a formulaic expression argued by many to refer to actual burial in an ancestral tomb or grave (9), and perhaps here taken to indicate the royal burial place last specified in the books of Kings, the Garden of Uzza. However, it is equally likely that the tradition locating Jehoiakim’s burial in the Garden of Uzza alongside the reprobates Manasseh and Amon served to compound his villainous biblical portrayal in assigning him a disreputable grave away from

(8) E.g., E. BLOCH-SMITH, Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead (JSOT/ASORMS 7/JSOTSS 123; Sheffield 1992) 118-119; H.G.M. WILLIAMSON, 1 & 2 Chronicles (NCB; London 1982) 388.
those of his more favoured ancestors in the City of David. This is supported by Jer 22,19 and 36,30, in which Jehoiakim is divinely threatened with a dishonourable burial.

In spite of his recognition that the Garden of Uzza carries negative ideological connotations, Na’aman is not discouraged in seeking to identify the garden as an historical location. As indicated above, the apparent correlation of the Garden of Uzza with a palace garden in 2 Kgs 21,18 prompts him to assume that the Garden of Uzza and the King’s Garden mentioned in 25,4; Jer 39,4; 52,7 and Neh 3,15 are one and the same. This in turn enables him to locate the Garden of Uzza not in the city, but just beyond the walls of Jerusalem, in accordance with details gleaned from biblical descriptions of the city walls in Neh 2,14-15 and 3,15-16. Yet his uncritical assumption of the historicity of the biblical accounts renders this proposal problematic. Discerning the historical reliability of the biblical material pertaining to royal burial sites is notoriously difficult, particularly in view of the theological and ideological tendencies of the biblical traditions as reflected in MT and the Versions. Though there is a valid place for historical reconstruction in scholarly discussions of the burial places of Judah’s monarchs, archaeological evidence for distinctly royal tombs in and around Jerusalem remains elusive. More specifically, it is unwise to subject the biblical Garden of Uzza merely to simplistic tests of topographical hypotheses, for it is likely that a number of religious and ideological concepts underlie the biblical references to this garden. Accordingly, it is proposed here that the biblical claim of royal burial in this location is more complex, and far more significant, than is generally recognized.

In discussing the Garden of Uzza, scholarship has tended to focus upon the mysterious Uzz in whose name the garden would appear to be designated. Commentators generally adopt one of three positions: first, that the name is a contracted form of that of the diseased Judahite king Uzziah (Uzzi) — itself a variant of the name Azariah (Az) — whose garden was utilised for the burials of Manasseh and Amon; second, the


that the garden’s designation recalls the character named Uzza (variously rendered הָזָע or הָוָע in MT), who was killed upon touching the ark of God during its procession to the threshing floor, giving rise to the toponym Perez-uzza (2 Sam 6,3-8; 1 Chr 13,7-11) (13); and lastly, that the garden was a cult place dedicated to the Arabian deity al-Uzzâ(14). Yet, whilst none of these proposals has proved persuasive enough to attract widespread acceptance, the garden itself, as distinct from its name, also warrants attention.

From earliest times, cultivated spaces filled with trees and plants were accorded a special role in ancient Near Eastern cultures, encapsulating the means of subsistence (protective shade and fertile soils) within the controlled bounds of human endeavour. As symbols of cultivated fertility, gardens were imbued with a notable religious significance, as is evident in Mesopotamian texts describing the lush gardens of the gods, which are watered by cosmic rivers and stocked with fruits, spices and medicines, and references to temple gardens, in which their divine owners were believed to enjoy walking, and in which certain rituals were performed(15). The divine power and controlling order manifested in gardens was also perceived in oppositional relation to the mythic concept of the uncultivated wilderness, in which chaotic malice might reside (16). Indeed, biblical portraits of the Garden of Eden exhibit many of these inherited characteristics (17).

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(13) E.g., I.W. PROVAN, 1 & 2 Kings (NIBC; Carlisle 1995) 269.
Given their religious importance, gardens also played a notable ideological role in the socio-political promotion and propaganda of royalty. A number of Neo-Assyrian kings are credited with the creation of monumental gardens within or beside their palaces, which were both visually impressive and horticulturally prestigious in their collections of trees and plants gathered from the furthest reaches of the empire, demonstrating the royal mastery of other peoples, their gods, and the produce of their lands. Like their divine counterparts, these royal cultivators — or “creators” — also enjoyed strolling in their gardens (18). Perhaps the most famous of ancient gardens are the so-called “Hanging Gardens of Babylon”, constructed by Nebuchadnezzar II in the sixth century BCE and modelled upon the Neo-Assyrian palace gardens planted by Sennacherib in Nineveh (19). For the Persian king Cyrus the Great, a large monumental garden was an integral component of his palace at Pasargadae. There is evidence to suggest that this garden was intended to function as a central ceremonial location in the heart of the royal complex, for the palace was open-sided in adjoining the garden, and the garden itself contained stone features designed to support the royal throne and footstool (20). In planting and cultivating gardens, these kings may have been imitating their divine counterparts, creating their own “heavens” on earth (21).

In view of the ideological and religious symbolism of royal and temple gardens, the biblical claim that certain Judahite kings were buried in a garden is significant. The majority of commentators have assumed that the Garden of Uzza was simply a royal pleasure garden which was secondarily utilized as a burial ground, either to take the overspill from...
the palace tombs (22) or, as Na’aman himself argues on the basis of Ezek 43,7-9, to appease temple priests whose efforts to maintain the purity of the sanctuary were compromised by the adjacent royal graves (23). However, neither of these suggestions is persuasive. It is highly unlikely that Judah’s royal tombs might have become overfull. Archaeological excavations of Iron Age II tombs surrounding Jerusalem suggest that, once a corpse had been laid out inside the tomb on a stone bench for some months, the bones of the deceased would be collected and deposited with those of the ancestors in a corner of the tomb, leaving the bench free for a newly-deceased member of the family (24). Biblical expressions describing the dead as “gathered to the kin” or “gathered to the ancestors” may reflect this particular mortuary practice (25).

The appeal to Ezek 43,7-9 as corroborative support for the view that the Garden of Uzza was pressed into service as an alternative royal burial ground is also unpersuasive. Not only does it assume that this difficult biblical text offers a perceptible reference to royal corpses (rather than, for example, offerings to the dead or mortuary memorials)(26), it also accepts uncritically that this information is historically sound. Yet even if this text should record the concerns of Jerusalem priests over the royal graves in the final years of the pre-exilic temple, it would suggest that, despite the assumed burial of later Judahite kings at a new site, the purity of the temple continued to be threatened by the remains of earlier kings who had been buried in the original tombs. Thus the establishment of a new burial

(25) E.g., Gen 25,8; 35,29; Num 20,24; Judg 2,10; Deut 32,50.
ground away from the temple as an act of cultic purification would have been wholly ineffectual if the tombs of earlier kings remained in situ (27). Further weakening the support offered by Ezek 43,7-9 is the alternative interpretation of these verses as an indication of the central location of the Garden of Uzza within the palace complex next to the temple, as might be suggested by הַמָּלָא in 2 Kgs 21,18 (28). In view of these observations, it thus appears prudent to resist any appeal to Ezek 43,7-9 as evidence in favour of a relocation of the tombs of the Judahite kings.

Rather than viewing a garden burial as a secondary or alternative mortuary practice, it is possible that a garden was a most appropriate location for the interment of monarchs. Indeed, alongside the references in 2 Kgs 21,18.26 to royal burials in the Garden of Uzza, the Hebrew Bible offers further glimpses of an association of gardens with death and burial.

1. Mortuary gardens in the Book of Isaiah

In Isa 65,3-5 a group of worshippers are condemned for their seemingly illicit cult practices. They are described as:

3. a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens (יהוֹשָפָן),
and burning incense on bricks,
4. the ones who sit inside the tombs
and spend the night in secluded places (29),
who eat the flesh of pigs,
and the broth of unclean things in their pots (30),

(27) It might be suggested that the bones of all the kings were transferred to the new burial site, given the use of the formulaic phrase מַבְנָה יָפֵל עַבְרָם in 2 Kgs 21,18; however, Ezek 43,7-9 presents the temple of Ezekiel’s time as enduring continued contamination from the מַבְנָה יָפֵל עַבְרָם.
(29) An Akkadian cognate occurring in Mesopotamian burial texts describes the grave as אַשָּר נִסְיִרְתִּי, “the secluded place” (so G. Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance. The Dead, Tradition and Collective Memory in Mesopotamia* [SHR, 68; Leiden 1995] 194). For an alternative interpretation which reads אֵל עֲצֵר in 1QIsaa, Tg., Vulg.
(30) An Akkadian cognate occurring in Mesopotamian burial texts describes the grave as אַשָּר נִסְיִרְתִּי, “the secluded place” (so G. Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance. The Dead, Tradition and Collective Memory in Mesopotamia* [SHR, 68; Leiden 1995] 194). For an alternative interpretation which reads אֵל עֲצֵר in 1QIsaa, Tg., Vulg.

(30) Reading יָפֵל עַבְרָם, with 1QIsaa, Tg., Vulg.
5. who say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you”.

The garden setting of ritual activities in these verses is of a piece with the broader Near Eastern cultural context, in which gardens held a particular religious significance, as the foregoing discussion has observed. Whilst the rather ambiguous nature of “sacrificing” (בְּקָרָב) and “burning incense” (רְפְּקָה) in v. 3 can reveal little about the precise function of these gardens as cult places (31), the activities in the associated tombs are more telling. Several commentators propose that the practices described in v. 4 are those of a cult of dead ancestors, in which the participants are variously understood to worship, commemorate, placate, or communicate with their dead ancestors (32). Certainly, a mortuary context is clearly indicated by the presence of tombs (מֵעֶבֶד), and there are good reasons to suggest that pigs were animals closely associated with the underworld (33). Moreover, there is a wealth of evidence attesting to the possibility that cultic feeding (of the ancestors, the descendants, or both) played an important role in the veneration or commemoration of the dead, as attested by the presence of culinary vessels and food-stuffs in graves (34). Thus whatever the
precise purpose of the activities described in these verses, the view that
they are best understood as rituals within a cult of the dead is probably
correct. This may find further support in the broader context of the
oracle surrounding these verses, in which the motif of ancestors and
descendants is prominent (vv. 7.9). It would thus appear that in 65,3-4,
the gardens are closely associated with tombs and mortuary rites.
Though admittedly this text is not explicit in locating the tombs
precisely within the confines of the gardens, the direct and intentional
association of gardens and tombs is rendered wholly plausible in view
of a further reference to garden cults in 66,17:

Those who sanctify and purify themselves (to go) to the gardens [תֹּנַגוֹ],
following (the) one in the centre, eating the flesh of pigs
and vermin and rodents,
shall come to an end together — oracle of YHWH.

This is also a problematic verse, in which textual difficulties and
interpretative uncertainties render some of the activities described
imperceptible. Yet it portrays the gardens as sacred space in which rituals
elsewhere associated with a cult of the dead are performed. It seems
likely that this text is intended to refer to the same group of worshippers
condemned in 65,3-5: both groups are accused of performing rituals in
gardens, eating pigs’ flesh and other unclean material, and as having a
prominent concern for their sacred status. Moreover, these accusations
employ the same language in referring to the gardens (תונגו), the
consumption of pigs’ flesh (טיהר ירחא), and the consecrated nature of
the worshippers (סר). Of particular note, however, is the fact that in
66,17, the feasting rituals occurring in the gardens are the same as those
occurring in the tombs in 65,4. This suggests that the association of
gardens and tombs in 65,3-5 is more than coincidental; rather, the tombs
in which the worshippers sit and eat in v. 4 are best understood as being
located within the gardens of the preceding verse.

In both 65,3-5 and 66,17, therefore, it would appear that the תונגו
under prophetic attack are mortuary gardens, cult places in which
rituals directed at or concerned with the dead are performed. This
contrasts with the more frequent and mistaken interpretation of 66,17

association of Ugaritic mrzḥ is often discussed in relation to the cultic veneration
of the dead, particularly with reference to Amos 6,7 and Jer 16,5-9; however, this
is all extremely uncertain. See further J.L. McLAUGHLIN, “The marzeah at Ugarit:
A Textual and Contextual Study”, UF 23 (1991) 265-281; ID., The marzeah in the
Prophetic Literature. References and Allusions in Light of Extra-Biblical
Evidence (VTS 86; Leiden 2001); LEWIS, Cults of the Dead, 80-94.
as a condemnation of goddess worship (35), which in turn is fuelled by the assumption that a further Isaian critique of גשהא in 1:29-30 is a veiled allusion to sacred groves dedicated to the goddess Asherah. This latter text reads:

29. For you will be ashamed (36) of the (mighty) trees (37) in which you delighted, and you will blush for the gardens (38) that you have chosen, 30. for you will be like a tree (39) whose leaf is withered, and like a garden (40) without water.

Several commentators read these verses as an allusion to fertility rites supposedly associated with Asherah worship, taking as their cue the verb הפשע, frequently rendered “delight”, “pleasure”, which, they assert, carries connotations of sexual lust (40). This interpretation complements the use of a garden as a setting for love in the Song of Songs and comparative literature (40), yet it is especially encouraged by biblical condemnations elsewhere of cult practices "עיין כל עץ החיים", “under every green tree” (41), which many scholars take as references to ritual sexual intercourse (42). However, there are good reasons to

(35) Most recently, J. Blenkinsopp (“The One in the Middle”, Reading from Right to Left. Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. Clines [eds. J.C. EXUM – H.G.M. WILLIAMSON] [JISOTSS 373; Sheffield 2003] 63-75) has argued that the rituals occurring in the gardens of these verses are to be identified with Asherah worship. His argument hinges around the difficult phrase˚ויב ידכ ריק, “following (the) one in the centre”, which he takes as a reference to the role of a priestess of Asherah, favouring qere ריק for ketib ידכ. However, given the textual difficulties of˚ויב ידכ ריק, this verse is unable to bear the interpretative weight placed upon it (cf. J.A. EMERTON, “Notes on Two Verses in Isaiah [26:16 and 66:17]”, Prophecy. Essays Presented to Georg Fohrer on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday [ed. J.A. EMERTON] [BZAW 150; Berlin 1980] 21-25).

(36) Reading מ賓 for MT מבי.
(37) עץ, frequently rendered “oaks”.
(38) ימין, usually rendered “terebinth”.
(39) E.g., ACKERMAN, Under Every Green Tree, 187-188; cf. BLENKINSOFF, Isaiah 56–66, 270-271.
(41) E.g., Deut 12:2; 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 16:4; Isa 57,5.
consider it unlikely that Isa 1,29-30 refers to sexual practices. Firstly, a sexual connotation of the verb יָדַע is exceptional, for the majority of occurrences are found in a variety of non-sexual contexts, including those in which tree imagery is evident (\(^{(*)}\)). Secondly, the expression נָשָׂא also occurs in non-sexual contexts, in which it appears to function in a metaphorical and polemical sense as a conceptual shorthand signalling religious disobedience (\(^{(*)}\)). As such, the sexual interpretation of 1,29-30 is unfounded. It is also unlikely that these verses refer to Asherah worship. Though the frequent rendering of the term חֵרֶס as “grove” in the Septuagint might suggest that trees and goddesses were interchangeable in the minds of ancient tradents of biblical traditions (\(^{(*)}\)), not every tree condemned in the Hebrew Bible should be taken as indicative of the outlawing of Asherah and her cult. After all, whilst the motif of a sacred tree is certainly well-attested as a symbol or manifestation of Asherah and other goddesses in the material culture of Syro-Palestine and its surrounding regions (\(^{(*)}\)), this motif was not exclusive to goddess cults. Though there is no mention of tombs, ancestors, or related rituals in these verses, text-critics are widely agreed that they are closely related in both theme and language to 65,3-5 and 66,17 (\(^{(*)}\)), in which mortuary gardens and associated cult practices concerned with or devoted to the dead are criticised. Accordingly, and in view of the weaknesses of goddess-focused interpretations, the negative portrayal of trees and gardens in 1,29-30 is better understood as reflecting an Isaian polemic against cultic mortuary gardens.

\(^{(*)}\) E.g., Exod 20,17; Ps 68,17 (ET 16); Job 20,20; Isa 44,9. The verb occurs in conjunction with tree motifs or tree imagery in Gen 2,9; 3,6; Song 2,3; Isa 53,2.

\(^{(*)}\) E.g., 2 Kgs 16,4; 17,10; 2 Chr 28,4; Ezek 6,3; 20,28.

\(^{(*)}\) The Mishneh also reflects an understanding of biblical occurrences of חֵרֶס as references to a tree, e.g., 'Abodah Zareh 3,7.


In spite of the difficulties of 1,29-30, it would appear that the book of Isaiah contains within it a handful of texts illustrating or alluding to the close association of gardens with death and burial; these texts also suggest that garden burials were credited with a certain religious value—a possibility which has been overlooked by most commentators (48). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to propose that the Garden of Uzza is not a pleasure garden, but a mortuary garden, akin to the mortuary gardens of Isa 65,3-5; 66,17 and perhaps also those of 1,29-30. Indeed, it may be that biblical גן is, in certain contexts, better rendered “mortuary garden”, or even “cemetery”. Whilst this last is an attractive proposal, the limited attestations of biblical גן in clear mortuary contexts preclude a more secure conclusion. However, this proposal does find notable support in Ugaritic religious practice.

2. A royal mortuary garden at Ugarit

The important place of the royal cult of deified or divinized dead ancestors at Ugarit is well known, though its details remain a focus for lively debate. Amidst the wealth of liturgical texts relating to this important aspect of Ugaritic monarchy is a description of a series of sacrifices and other offerings made by, or with the participation of, the king and his children (KTU 1.106). The offerings appear to be donated to various members of the divine realms, including the royal dead ancestors (49) and رس, a deity frequently associated with the dead (50). Strikingly, the designation given to one of the palace cult places in which these rituals occur is גן (lines 22, 23), which in Ugaritic, as in Biblical Hebrew, usually means “garden”. Moreover, the time at which this festival occurs is a spring month, which itself is designated גן (usually rendered in this context “Gannu”), perhaps reflecting the

(48) Cf. N. WYATT, “‘Supposing Him to be the Gardener’ (John 20,15): A Study of the Paradise Motif in John”, ZNW 81 (1990) 21-38. Wyatt’s article includes a brief discussion of biblical references to the Garden of Uzza, though it does not refer to the garden cults of Isaiah.


garden location of some of the offerings (51). Certainly, the seasonal and spatial setting of these rituals would appropriately cohere, for as Pardee observes, spring would be evident in the garden itself (52). Some scholars, notably Xella (53) and del Olmo Lete (54), have interpreted this Ugaritic ritual as a funerary practice (55), drawing on the support of comparative inscriptional and archaeological evidence from Ebla concerning the veneration of dead kings and royal burial in the palace garden (56). Consequently, and in independent support of the proposal here, they suggest that in this context, Ugaritic gn should be rendered “cemetery”, rather than “garden” (57). Though neither Xella nor del Olmo Lete associates this ritual with those texts in Isaiah describing cult practices in a mortuary garden, they do draw attention briefly to the designation and function of the biblical יָשָׁן as a royal burial ground (58).

The prominent role of the garden in the royal rituals of Ugarit is also suggested by archaeological excavations of the royal palace, which attest to a vast courtyard located within the eastern part of the palace complex. The courtyard contained a large enclosure filled with fertile soil, which has been widely identified as a garden (59). Whilst the royal tombs appear to have been located in an adjacent part of the

(51) DEL OLMO LETE, Canaanite Religion, 219-220.
palace, they were easily accessible from the garden. Indeed, the architectural layout of the surrounding buildings, courts and internal avenues suggests that the garden was an area of crucial importance within the palace (60). This is quite possibly the cult place of the mortuary ritual detailed in KTU 1.106 (61). Archaeological evidence from Ugarit thus appears to represent a notable point of reference in exploring the biblical Garden of Uzza. The biblical and non-biblical material surveyed thus far suggests that a plausible case based upon cumulative evidence can be constructed to support the proposal that, in certain contexts, biblical נָּחַר is better rendered “mortuary garden”, and that the accepted semantic range for this term might be expanded accordingly. The Ugaritic material is also suggestive of a garden-focused cult practice related to the veneration or commemoration of dead ancestors, shedding some light on the religious significance of the biblical assertion that kings Manasseh and Amon were buried in a garden (2 Kgs 21.18.26). However, little of any certainty can be claimed for the biblical material given that the nature of the evidence, as observed above, is cumulative, rather than conclusive. Indeed, Starodoub-Scharr has also noticed the possible parallels between the royal garden at Ugarit and the biblical Garden of Uzza, but minimizes any connection with a royal cult of dead ancestors on the presumed basis of a lack of evidence from the biblical world (62). Yet it may be that rather more can be made of this connection.

3. An iconographic mortuary garden at Kalḥu

In 878 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian king Aššurnāṣirpal II relocated the capital of his empire from the city of Aššur to Kalḥu. The seat of royal power was now the newly-constructed Northwest Palace, famed for its magnificent interiors. Among these are hundreds of marble wall-slabs engraved in relief, depicting various scenes of kingship. The most


(61) PARDEE, Ritual and Cult at Ugarit, 104, n. 57; del Olmo Lete, “GN, el cementerio regio”, 63. This is reluctantly accepted as a probability by STARODOUB-SCHARR, for whom the association of the palace garden with the ritual detailed in KTU 1.106 is less certain.

frequent of images to decorate the marbled palace walls is the repeated scene of the sacred tree. The recurrent association of this motif and its variations with Neo-Assyrian kingship is widely recognized, though a consensus is yet to be reached concerning its meaning and function (63). Seth Richardson has conducted a detailed study of the sacred tree scene and the nature of its occurrences in the Northwest palace (64). He finds that whilst this scene might include images of the king or divine figures, it most frequently occurs alone and as the dominant motif in the palace, appearing 190 times throughout all its buildings, 96 of these in Room I, in which the sacred tree is the only motif. Though the function of this room is not clearly discernable, most are agreed that it was employed for a ritual purpose, and it seems probable that the room’s function was bound up with the sacred trees covering its walls. Richardson observes that the number of sacred trees in Room I closely approximates the number of deceased kings listed in contemporary recensions of the Assyrian King List, that is, 100 dead kings. This, plus the near-correlation of 96 sacred trees in Room I and 94 sacred trees throughout the remainder of the palace, suggests that the repeated motif of the sacred tree represents a system directly related to the ritual use of the Assyrian King List. Accordingly, a plausible case can be constructed in arguing that each sacred tree in Room I represents a dead king (65), and that this room played a role in a cult of royal ancestor veneration. This “garden of ancestors”, as Richardson describes it, would have been of crucial ideological importance to Aššurnāṣirpal II, for in relocating his capital, he was leaving behind the royal tombs situated conventionally beneath the old palace. “A venerative royal cult to ancestors, situated on a grand scale in the new Kalhu palace, would have supported Aššurnāṣirpal II’s claims to legitimate and traditional kingship, and would have solved the peculiar


(64) “An Assyrian Garden of Ancestors: Room I, Northwest Palace, Kalhu”, SAAB 13 (1999-2001) 145-216. I am grateful to Stephanie Dalley for bringing this article to my attention.

(65) In his discussion, Richardson is quick to acknowledge and to address the apparent disparity between the numbers of sacred trees and dead kings, for which he offers several solutions based upon new reconstructions of Room I and the arrangement of its trees, the grouping of dead kings into their dynasties, and comparative evidence concerning inconsistencies in Egyptian king lists.
problem and thorny issue of the relocation of the royal household without the relocation of the royal dead” (66). This suggests that the veneration of ancestors need not be restricted to the precise site of their burial, leaving open the possibility that two or more locations might be employed within a cult of dead kings. Given the repeatedly demonstrated importance of gardens within Neo-Assyrian royal households, it is likely that the Northwest Palace included a garden in one of its courtyards, which may have performed a complementary religious function alongside the “garden of ancestors” in Room I. More important, however, are the ideological dimensions of the iconography of Room I, which indicate the elevated nature of the horticultural framing of royal mortuary beliefs and practices.

The marble reliefs adorning the walls of Room I in the Northwest Palace at Kalhu would thus appear to present an iconographic mortuary garden, within which the dead ancestors of the royal line are imaged as sacred trees. The alignment of the sacred tree motif with ancient Near Eastern kingship is well known (67). Given the regenerative nature of trees and their pervading association with the divine, coupled with the close association of kingship with the heavenly realm, the use of tree imagery within certain expressions of Neo-Assyrian royal ideology is not unusual. Indeed, similar conceptual configurations are reflected in biblical traditions in which kingship and tree imagery are closely related (68); remarkably, some of these texts are suggestive of a mortuary context for this correlation of kingship and trees (69).

4. **The Garden of Uzza as a mortuary garden**

In Isa 65,3-5, 66,17 and perhaps 1,29-30, faint reflections of the sacred status of mortuary gardens may be discerned. Their function as

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(67) See, for example, Tree, Kings and Politics: Studies in Assyrian Iconography (ed. B.N. Porter) (OBO 197; Fribourg – Göttingen 2003); G. Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religions (Uppsala – Wiesbaden 1951).
(68) E.g., Num 24,6-7; Judg 6,9; 9,8-15; 1 Sam 22,6; Isa 6,13; 11,1,10; Ezek 17,3-10; 28,12-19; 31,2-18; Dan 4,10-33.
(69) For example, the bones of King Saul and his heirs are buried beneath a tree (1 Sam 31,13; 1 Chr 10,12; cf. Gen 35,8) and in Ezek 31,14-18, kings imaged as trees are felled and consigned to Sheol. I will be exploring in a future publication the possibility that sacred trees played a role within ancestral cults of kingship in Judah.
cult places for the veneration of possibly royal dead ancestors finds notable support in textual and archaeological evidence from the royal palace at Ugarit, and iconographical material from the Neo-Assyrian Northwest Palace at Kalhu. In returning to the point at which this discussion began, it would thus appear that the biblical burial of kings Manasseh and Amon in a garden (2 Kgs 21,18,26) resonates with a greater religious and cultic importance than has been previously discerned. Consequently, the widespread assumption that a garden burial reflects a secondary or alternative funerary site is mistaken. Instead, it would appear that the association of royal tombs with a garden is most appropriate. However, this highlights an intriguing irony. In spite of the historical credibility of the garden burial of royalty, and despite the probable religious and ideological prestige of this form of interment, the garden burials of Manasseh and Amon function in the books of Kings as a symbol of theological castigation; in deviating from his formulaic references to the City of David as the site of the royal tombs, the biblical narrator segregates these most reprehensible of kings from their Davidic ancestors. Though this may find partial explanation in the condemnation of mortuary gardens and their associated practices in the book of Isaiah, it is interesting to note that this deviation is heightened by the double-designation of Manasseh’s burial site in 2 Kgs 21,18, in which the king is interred עֶזֶר גֹּבַג, “in the garden of his house in the Garden of Uzza”. Whilst a consensus view is yet to emerge concerning the intended significance or likely identity of Uzza, the pronounced naming of the mortuary garden appears to function as an ideological strategy designed to distance it even further from the royal ancestral tombs by setting up an implicit contrast between עֶזֶר גֹּבַג, “Garden of Uzza” and עֶזֶר דָּוִד, “City of David”. The continued success of this strategy is reflected in several scholarly discussions in which the mortuary garden is geographically distanced from the City of David on the assumption that the garden lay beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

Moreover, the veracity of the tradition naming the burial site as the “Garden of Uzza” appears uncertain upon closer examination. It was noted at the outset of this discussion that the Chronicler does not include this designation in his description of the burial place of Manasseh (2 Chr 33,20)(?) but instead refers only to Manasseh’s

(?) Recall that the site of Amon’s burial is not mentioned by the Chronicler (2 Chr 33,24-25).
interment “in his house” (_bases). It has also been observed that the negative connotations of קֶשֶׁת have probably played a part in traditions assigning Jehoiakim’s grave to the κηπω Οζα, “garden of Oza” (4 Kgdms Lucianic 24,6) or Γανοζα, “Ganoza” (2 Par 36,8). Whether ideologically shaped or not, it would appear that reference to קֶשֶׁת is a variable component of ancient traditions concerning the burial places of the Judahite kings. In turning to Josephus’ accounts of the reigns of the kings, it is interesting to notice that reference to the Garden of Uzza is also absent. Rather, Manasseh is said to have been buried “in his own gardens” (Ant X,46), as indeed is another Judahite monarch, Uzziah (Ant IX,227) (71). Josephus’ paralleled portrayals of the burials of Manasseh and Uzziah is suggestive of a tradition in which the resting places of the two kings were closely aligned. This is probably to be related to the claim in 2 Chr 26,23 that upon his death, the diseased Uzziah was buried "with his ancestors in the burial field belonging to the kings" (72), a claim contrasting with that found in 2 Kgs 15,5-7, in which it is asserted that he was buried with his ancestors in the City of David. The Chronicler is explicit in associating Uzziah’s burial in a field with the disease afflicting the king during his lifetime, for which he was separated from the royal household (2 Chr 26,21.23; cf. 2 Kgs 15,5). Thus his interment in a burial field is portrayed as an ignominious end to his reign (73), much as burial in the Garden of Uzza is indicative of the condemnation of Manasseh and Amon in 2 Kgs 21,18.26.

In view of these observations, it may be tempting to associate the tradition of Uzziah's field burial in 2 Chr 26,23 with that in which Manasseh and Amon’s mortuary garden is designated the “Garden of Uzza” in 2 Kgs 21,18.26. Whilst this finds some support in the

(70) Josephus employs different terms in referring to these gardens: κηπω (Ant IX,227) and παραδειγματος (Ant X,46). This might reflect differing designations for the burial sites in the traditions upon which Josephus drew, as possibly reflected in the biblical use of קֶשֶׁת for Manasseh’s burial place (2 Kgs 21,18) and חֵרֶב for that of Uzziah (2 Chr 26,23).

(72) This verse seems to have proved problematic for some of its ancient tradents, for it appears to have been theologially smoothed: the royal burial field is distinguished from the tombs of Uzziah’s predecessors by the omission of any reference to his burial “with his ancestors” (Syr.; Vulg.) and by the apparent addition of a gloss emphasizing that the king was not interred in the royal tombs (Syr.). The tradition of Uzziah’s burial in a field may have generated the claim in 2 Chr 26,10 that he sponsored farms and vineyards because “he loved the soil”.

(73) Cf. 2 Kgs 23,6.
possibility that the name Uzza (עז) may be a variant of Uzziah (עז), it may be further encouraged by the absence of the label מָתָן in the Chronicler’s royal burial notices, in notable contrast to the presence of his unique material concerning Uzziah’s field burial. Admittedly, there is no need for the Chronicler to consign Manasseh to an overtly dishonourable grave, for he is a repentant cult reformer in this story (74). Indeed, the Chronicler simply asserts in 2 Chr 33,20 that Manasseh was buried “in his house” (בּוֹ). Yet both the Septuagint and Syriac versions of this verse claim that Manasseh was buried in a garden; the former identifies it as “the garden of his house”, whilst the latter asserts that Manasseh was interred “in his house in the garden of treasure”. These complex and seemingly contradictory textual traditions allow for the tentative speculation that the double-designation of Manasseh’s burial place in 2 Kgs 21,18 (אֶתְבּוֹ הָעֵין בַּתֵּרֶס) may be the work of a glossator: perhaps a textual tradition locating Manasseh’s tomb in כּוֹ הָעֵין was embellished with the secondary designation מְתָן הָעֵין, a label deriving from a tradition describing Uzziah’s interment in a royal burial field.

Be this as it may, the variations among the royal burial notices in MT and the Versions suggest that the designation of the royal mortuary garden as the “Garden of Uzza” is not a stable feature of the traditions concerning the burial places of the kings of Judah. Yet commentators have tended to depend upon it as a reliable and key historical detail by which the problematic inconsistencies of the royal burial notices in the books of Kings might be explained. As a result, the religious significance of a royal garden burial has not received due attention. In contrast, this discussion has sought to argue that the Hebrew Bible offers glimpses of the important role of mortuary gardens within the religious heritage of the biblical writers. Indeed, it is interesting to observe that the motif of a royal mortuary garden might be detected in further traditions. In 2 Kgs 9,27, King Ahaziah of Judah flees in fear of his life to a place named Beth-haggan (בּוֹ הָעֵין), a name literally meaning, “the house of the garden”, and which is reminiscent of the designation of Manasseh’s resting place in 2 Kgs 21,18 as כּוֹ הָעֵין. This might have been considered an appropriate place to seek ancestral protection from the murderous, king-killing Jehu (75). A later example

(74) On the Chronicler’s portrayal of Manasseh and his reign, see STAVRAKOPOULOU, King Manasseh, 46-59.
(75) Cf. STARODOUB-SCHARR, “The Royal Garden”, 262*, n. 36. Wiseman (1 & 2 Kings, 222) associates Beth-haggan with royal gardens at Jezreel, rather than
might be found in the New Testament. In the gospel of John, it is claimed that Jesus’ body was laid in a garden tomb (19,41), and that Mary mistook the resurrected Jesus for a gardener (20,15). It seems likely that the motif of a royal mortuary garden has re-emerged within this tradition (*). As it is now found, the motif of a mortuary garden is presented negatively in the Hebrew Bible. Just as many other formerly acceptable cult practices are rejected and censured by the biblical writers, so the mortuary garden cult of ancient Judahite kingship has been cast into the shadows. Thus in Isa 65,3-5; 66,17 and perhaps 1,29-30, the mortuary garden is characterised as an illegitimate and abhorrent cult place despised by YHWH, whilst in 2 Kgs 21,18,26, the garden burials of the Judahite kings Manasseh and Amon illustrate the theological condemnation wrought by their supposed religious depravity. Yet ironically, it would appear that each of these kings has been accorded an historically honourable burial, wholly befitting an ancient Near Eastern monarch.

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SUMMARY

The Garden of Uzza (2 Kgs 21,18,26) is commonly regarded as a pleasure garden in or near Jerusalem which came to be used as a royal burial ground once the tombs in the City of David had become full. However, in this article it is argued that the religious and cultic significance of royal garden burials has been widely overlooked. In drawing upon comparative evidence from the ancient Near East, it is proposed that mortuary gardens played an ideological role within perceptions of Judahite kingship. Biblical texts such as Isa 65,3-4; 66,17 and perhaps 1,29-30 refer not to goddess worship, but to practices and sacred sites devoted to the royal dead.

(*) See also Wyatt, “‘Supposing Him to be the Gardener’ (John 20,15)”, 21-38.