



The Covenant with Mut: A New Interpretation of Isaiah 28:1-22

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Abstract

Many difficulties and perplexities in Isa 28 1-22 can be resolved by reading the text as a condemnation of the Judeans' seeking protection from Assyria by means of a covenant with one of Egypt's major deities, the mother goddess Mut. Her close association with the Egyptian throne would have given her the "right" to make a covenant, her protective aspect explains why those in distress would seek her, her motherhood explains why the Judeans who seek her are characterized as children, the prominence of drunkenness and flowers in her cult explains the appearance of those elements in Isaiah 28. She also was associated with the underworld as a protectress of the dead, and it is likely that her name sounded very much like the Hebrew word מות, "death", making Isaiah's *double entendre* a natural play on words. Other features of the text such as the overwhelming flood refer to the Neo-Assyrians, Isaiah warns that Egypt and Mut cannot protect Judah from their assault.

Keywords

cult of the dead, Egypt, death, Israelite religion, wordplay, paronomasia, syncretism, drunkenness

Isaiah 28:1-22, which revolves around the reference to a "covenant with *mut*", has been subject to numerous interpretations. Although much of the work that has been done is helpful and basically accurate, the passage still seems at best a bit disjointed, due to its mixed imagery of torrential storms, drunkenness, flowers, and small children:

- (1) *Hôy*, proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim,
fading lotus-blossom of its glorious beauty,

*) I would like to thank Brent A. Strawn, J. J. M. Roberts, Gay Robins, and especially David L. Petersen for reading and commenting on this study.

- which is upon the head flowing¹ with perfumes²
of those hammered³ with wine
- (2) See, the Lord had one who was strong and mighty,
Like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest
like a downpour of mighty, overflowing waters,
he brought them to the ground with his hand
- (3) They will be trampled underfoot,
the proud garlands⁴ of the drunkards of Ephraim,
- (4) and the fading lotus-blossom of its glorious beauty
which is upon the head flowing with perfumes
will be like an early fig, before summer—
whoever sees it swallows it as soon as it is in his hand
- (5) In that day, YHWH of hosts will be a beautiful garland
and a wreath of glory to the remnant of his people,
- (6) and a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who repel the assault at the gate
- (7) These, too, stagger from wine and stumble from beer,
priest and prophet are swallowed up⁵ because of wine,
they stumble on account of beer, they err in vision, they are unstable in
judgment
- (8) For all the tables are full of vomit,
filth overruns the place
- (9) Whom will he teach knowledge?
And to whom will he explain the report?
To children just weaned from milk?
To those who have hardly outgrown⁶ the breast?

¹ Read גאי for גיא Cf 1QIsaa, also G R Driver, “Another Little Drink—Isa 28 1 22”, in P R Ackroyd and B Lindars (eds.), *Words and Meanings: Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas on His Retirement from the Regius Professorship of Hebrew in the University of Cambridge, 1968* (London, 1968), pp 48-49 Driver suggests that this unusual term was chosen to create a play on words with גאות in vv 1, 3

² The plural שמנים perhaps reflects blended aromatic oils used for anointing the head, cf Song 1 3, 4 10, Amos 6 6

³ Cf הלמות, “hammer”, Judg 5 26 There is also an untranslatable play on words here that evokes חלם, “to dream” That is to say, the prophet implies that the dreams and visions of this group (cf vv 15, 18) are merely alcohol induced

⁴ Read תרמסנה to agree with עטרת

⁵ HALOT’s suggestion to relate this form to בלל abolishes Isaiah’s play on words and is not to be adopted Cf J J M Roberts, “Double Entendre in First Isaiah”, *CBQ* 54 (1992), pp 41-43

⁶ Taking עתיק in the sense of ‘old’, cf Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (2 vols., New York, 1903), pp 1129-1130

- (10) For it is “poo-poo,⁷ poo-poo, bleh-bleh,⁸ bleh-bleh”,
 a little here, a little there
- (11) For with derisive speech and a foreign tongue,
 he will speak to this people
- (12) He has said to them,
 “This is the place of rest, give rest to the weary,
 and this is the place of repose—” but they refused to listen
- (13) So the word of the Lord will be for them
 “poo-poo, poo-poo, bleh-bleh, bleh-bleh”,
 a little here, a little there
 So that they will go and stagger backward,
 They will be broken and snared and captured
- (14) Therefore hear the word of YHWH, you scoffers who rule⁹ this people in
 Jerusalem¹⁰
- (15) Because you said,
 “We have made a covenant with Mut (death),
 and with Sheol we have made a pact¹¹
 When the overwhelming torrent passes over,
 It will not reach us,
 for we have set a lie as our shelter,
 and hidden ourselves in falsehood
- (16) Therefore thus says the Lord, YHWH
 “Look, I am laying¹² in Zion a stone,
 a stone of testing,¹³ a costly cornerstone,

⁷ See discussion below 1QIsa’s alternate reading זָא for זָא unfortunately sheds no light

⁸ See discussion below This translation is an admittedly insufficient attempt to get at the double sense of nonsensical baby talk and regurgitation

⁹ Another double entendre on the dual sense of מָשַׁל (“to rule”/“to make a proverb”) emphasizing the rulers’ “ability to coin a clever turn of phrase” (Roberts, “Double Entendre in First Isaiah”, p. 43)

¹⁰ In my view, the best interpretation is that it is the rulers who are “in Jerusalem”, rather than the people, but I have allowed the indeterminacy of the Hebrew to remain

¹¹ The terms חִזָּה here and חִזוֹת in v. 18 have been widely discussed in the secondary literature. Two theories are often cited: that of G. R. Driver, who connected the term to OSA *dyt*, “things that correspond, agreement” (“Another Little Drink”, p. 58), and that of E. Kutsch, that these terms derive from the common root חִזָּה, “to see”, and that בְּרִית is similarly related to the Akkadian *barû*, “to look upon, inspect” (“Sehen und Bestimmen Die Etymologie von בְּרִית”, in Arnulf Kuschke and Ernst Kutsch (eds.), *Archäologie und Altes Testament Festschrift für Kurt Gallig* [Tübingen, 1970], pp. 165-178)

¹² Read יָסַד, cf. J. J. M. Roberts, “Yahweh’s Foundation in Zion (Isa 28 16)”, *JBL* 106 (1987), pp. 27-45

¹³ Although בָּחַן may be related to an Egyptian word for a specific type of rock (see discussion below), here I have allowed the obvious play on the Hebrew root בָּחַן (“to test”) to take precedence

- a foundation of a foundation¹⁴—
 the one who trusts will not tremble.¹⁵
- (17) And I will set justice as a measuring line
 and righteousness as a plummet.
 But hail will sweep away the shelter
 and waters will overwhelm the hiding place,
- (18) and your covenant with death (:Mut) will be covered over,
 and your pact with Sheol will not stand.¹⁶
 For when the overwhelming torrent passes through,
 you will be its stomping-ground.
- (19) As often as it passes through, it will take you—
 for morning by morning it passes through, by day and by night
 and it is sheer terror to understand the report.
- (20) For the bench is too short to stretch yourself out,
 and the shroud too narrow when it is gathered up.¹⁷
- (21) For as on Mount Perazim YHWH will rise up,
 as in the Valley of Gibeon he will rage.
 Strange is his work, and his service—foreign is his service!
- (22) And now, do not scoff lest he make your chains heavier,
 for destruction has been determined—
 I have heard from the Lord, YHWH of hosts—
 against the whole land.¹⁸

¹⁴ Hebrew frequently repeats words for emphasis, such as *מטה מטה ... מעלה מעלה* (Deut 28:43) or the common phrase *עדי עד*. Thus this phrase might also be translated “the deepest foundation”. More literally, the sort of huge stones envisioned here and in the references to “costly stones” used in Solomon’s house (1 Kgs 5:31; 7:9-11) might indeed be viewed by a builder as “a foundation for a foundation”.

¹⁵ Cf. the Ugaritic root *ḥ-š*, “to tremble, be alarmed” (DUL p. 412); Akkadian *ḥāšu* B, “to worry”, CAD H, pp. 146-147. See already Driver, “Another Little Drink”, p. 60; Roberts, “Yahweh’s Foundation”, p. 36.

¹⁶ There is an untranslatable double entendre here: the *חזות* picks up the double senses of “pact” and “vision”, and the verb *קום* works with either sense: “your pact will not endure” (cf. Amos 7:2; Nah 1:6; Isa 40:8; etc.) or “your vision will not come to pass” (cf. Isa 7:17; 8:10; 14:24; 46:10; etc.).

¹⁷ 1QIsa^a differs remarkably from the MT for much of this verse—it reads *משחתיים והמסכסכה* vs. MT’s *מהשתרע והמסכה צרה*. E. Y. Kutscher suggests that “the large number of strange substitutions in this verse makes it seem likely that the text which the copyist transcribed was illegible at this point” (*The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll [1QIsa^a]* [Leiden, 1974], p. 379; cf. also 289). Although the LXX and Theodotion might have understood something like the Qumran text, it would be very difficult to make sense of.

¹⁸ It is no use translating this final, dangling phrase as if it were part of the flow of the verse, when it is not.

The difficulty of this passage is commonly attributed to rather heavy redactional work;¹⁹ however, I would like to offer an interpretive key that can explain the disparate images. That key is the identity of *mw̄t*, a figure who, in addition to making sense of the mixed imagery, should ideally meet certain criteria:

1. *mw̄t* should plausibly have been known to a Judean author in the period in which the text was composed;
2. *mw̄t* should be capable of making a covenant, at least figuratively;
3. *mw̄t* should be a figure known to offer protection; and
4. *mw̄t* should have some connection to death or the underworld so that the play on Hebrew מוֹת, “death”, makes sense.

There is, in fact, one figure who fits the entire profile: the Egyptian mother goddess Mut, whose name in Egyptian (*Mwt*) apparently provided the prophet with an irresistible opportunity for *double entendre*. Wordplay is pervasive in Isaiah, particularly paronomasia/*double entendre*.²⁰

The phonology of Egyptian *Mwt* and Hebrew *mw̄t* seems to allow for such a wordplay. First, the bisyllabic Masoretic pointing מוֹת is probably not historically accurate to eighth-century Judah. Instead, the term would have been pronounced /mawt/; the diphthong did not contract to /ô/ as in northern Hebrew.²¹ Second, this is of interest, since both the name of Mut and the name of Mot (the god of death) could be spelled the same way in Greek: Mouθ.²² The Greek spelling attests the preservation of the diphthong in Mut’s

¹⁹ For a summary of redactional theories, see David L. Petersen, “Isaiah 28: A Redaction-Critical Study”, in P. J. Achtemeier (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers, 1979* (Atlanta, 1979), 2: 102-104.

²⁰ See Roberts, “Double Entendre in First Isaiah”, pp. 39-48, also Immanuel M. Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament”, *JBL* 12 (1893), pp. 105-167, esp. chart p. 167, Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Sheffield, 1981), pp. 121-125, and note the large number of examples from Isaiah in Stefan Schorch, “Between Science and Magic: The Function and Roots of Paronomasia in the Prophetic Books of the Hebrew Bible”, in Scott B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, Md., 2000), pp. 205-222.

²¹ W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000-586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 38-39.

²² For Mut, see Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 374 B, see also Christian Froidefond (ed.), *Isis et Osiris (Plutarque Oeuvres Morales, Tome V, 2e partie)* (Paris, 1988), p. 305. For Mot, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1:10:34. On the etymology of Mut’s name, see W. Brunsch, “Untersuchungen zu den griechischen Wiedergaben ägyptischer Personennamen”, *Enchoria* 8 (1978), pp. 123-128. The Egyptian *mt* means “death/dead (person)/to die”, but

name as well. An analogous play on words is found in Amos 8:1-2, with קיץ (“summer fruit”) and קץ (“end”).²³ The cultural currency of such phonological wordplay suggests that hearers were not too distracted by variations in diphthong pronunciation to appreciate the play.

Mut certainly could have been familiar to a Judean intellectual who had contact with Egyptians in the eighth or seventh century. Most scholars would agree that at least Isa 28:7-22 is a response to Judah’s seeking Egyptian support under the Neo-Assyrian threat. The image of floodwaters strongly evokes the Assyrians (cf. Isa 8:7-8; 14:4; also Nah 1:8, etc.).²⁴ With the seacoast and the former northern kingdom already firmly under Assyrian control by the end of the eighth century, Judah would have had no nation to turn to for support but Egypt, specifically the Nubian Twenty-fifth Dynasty (732-653 BCE) and perhaps the Saite Twenty-sixth Dynasty (672-525 BCE). Indeed, it has long been observed that a treaty with Egypt underlies the image of the covenant with Death.²⁵ However, as John Day remarked, “scholars are at a loss to explain satisfactorily why Egypt should be called Death or Sheol”.²⁶ Isaiah’s wordplay on the name of Mut would answer this long-standing scholarly dilemma.

there seems to be no native Egyptian etymological connection in Egyptian between *mt* (death) and *mut* (Mut)

²³ Given the uncertainty about Amos’s regional dialect, it is impossible to know just how he might have pronounced the words, but they may have sounded identical. Francis I Andersen and David Noel Freedman deem it possible “that the pronunciation of both words was originally *qes* in Amos’s presentation” (*Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 24A, Garden City, NY, 1989], p. 796).

²⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Judah’s Covenant with Death (Isaiah XXVIII 14-22)”, *VT* 50 (2000), p. 474.

²⁵ Paul Auvray, *Isaie 1-39* (Paris, 1972), pp. 250-251; Edward J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1941), p. 318 (“the meaning is not that they had entered into a compact with the gods of the underworld, but that they had taken adequate measures to ensure the safety of the state”); D. Karl Marti, *Das Buch Jesaja* (KHC 10, Tübingen, 1900), p. 207; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB, Grand Rapids, 1980), p. 230; Marvin Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39, With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL 16, Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 369 (tentatively, and with allowance for an allusion also to the *marzeah*); Gary Stansell, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds (Isaiah Together)”, in R. Melugin (ed.), *New Visions of Isaiah* (JSOTSup 214, Sheffield, 1996), p. 78.

²⁶ John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 85. See also Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 229. “Exactly why Egypt could meaningfully be described metaphorically as ‘Death’ (Mot) is not clear unless it was the apparent religious preoccupation of that country with death and the care of the dead”.

Given that much of the research on Mut is quite recent even within Egyptology, it is unlikely that many biblical scholars will be familiar with her. Therefore I offer an extended discussion of her and her cult before returning to Isaiah and to her significance for Isa 28—although I think that this significance will begin to emerge rather clearly along the way. |

Mut during Isaiah's Time

Mut was a goddess who rose to prominence relatively late in the history of Pharaonic Egypt, in the middle of the second millennium BCE.²⁷ She took her place as the wife of Amun(-Re), a god who assumed primacy at Thebes, and who became the chief deity of the Nubian kingdom of Napata. Alongside Amun-Re, Mut achieved great popularity in the New Kingdom, with cults and temples around the Delta. The chief among these was at Thebes, site of the famous royal necropolis. Mut is prominent in Ramesside-period inscriptions there and at temples in other places. For example, in the temple of Ramses III (1183-1152) at Karnak, images of Mut are pervasive.²⁸

The Third Intermediate Period is relatively poor in inscriptions compared to earlier periods, but it is clear that Mut was a very prominent deity for the Nubians and Saïtes. The excavators of the Precinct of Mut in Thebes noted: "it seems clear that considerable—one might even say special—attention was given to the Mut Temple during Dynasty XXV and very early Dynasty XXVI."²⁹ Nor was this effort limited to Thebes. Mentuemet, the fourth prophet of Amun at Karnak during the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, wrote:

I have renewed the temple of Mut-the-Great, Isheru's mistress,³⁰
so that it is more beautiful than before
I adorned her bark with electrum
all its images with genuine stone.³¹

²⁷ A fresh discussion of some of the earliest attestations of Mut's name is undertaken by Audrey O. Bolsharov, "Mut or Not? On the Meaning of a Vulture Sign on the Hermitage Statue of Amenemhat III", in Sue H. D'Auria (ed.), *Servant of Mut: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Fazzini* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 23-31.

²⁸ Harold Hayden Nelson, *Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak* (Chicago, 1936), *passim*.

²⁹ Richard A. Fazzini and William Peck, "The Precinct of Mut during Dynasty XXV and Early Dynasty XXVI: A Growing Picture", *Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities Journal* 11 (1981), p. 125.

³⁰ Isheru is the name of a sacred lake that surrounded Mut's temple.

³¹ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (3 vols.; Berkeley, Calif., 1973-1980), 3:32.

Egyptologists frequently remark on Mut's meteoric rise during the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period. A hymn to Mut from the reign of Ramses VI (1142-1134) gives her the epithet "mistress of every city", and its translator concludes that the title may "have been more than purely honorary", since most major Egyptian towns seemingly did have at least guest cults of Amun and Mut at that time.³²

The Mythology of Mut

Mut's mythology was multifaceted, as is typical of Egyptian deities. Her associations with kingship, motherhood, and the dead shed light on her appearance in Isaiah 28.

Mut's name was written with the vulture hieroglyphic sign, and so she could be portrayed as a vulture in iconography. However, "Mut" means "mother" (the common noun is identically transliterated as *mwṯ*),³³ and indeed she was the queen of the gods, and part of the "Theban Triad", with husband Amun and son Khonsu.³⁴ (For this reason she was interpreted as Hera by the Greeks.) She was frequently portrayed holding a child in her lap. However, she was a figure not only of gentleness but also of maternal ferocity. In this role, she was portrayed "standing behind Amon and raising a protective hand by his shoulder",³⁵ and she was also a guarantor of the pharaoh's power—indeed, she is its divine embodiment. A Ramesside hymn called her "King of Upper and Lower Egypt", a title that no other deity in the pantheon claimed:³⁶

³² H. M. Stewart, "A Crossword Hymn to Mut", *JEA* 57 (1971), p. 90. The reference is to the Crossword Hymn, horizontal line 22. Cf. László Török, *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization* (Leiden, 1997), p. 311.

³³ Writes Herman te Velde: "it is tempting to assume that the name of the goddess actually meant 'mother'" ("The Goddess Mut and the Vulture", in Sue H. D'Auria (ed.), *Servant of Mut: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Fazzini* (Boston, 2008), p. 243; see also idem, "Toward a Minimal Definition of the Goddess Mut", *JEOL* 26 [1979-1980], p. 4).

³⁴ Török, *Kingdom of Kush*, p. 308. A first-century BCE relief of Ptolemy XII worshipping Mut has recently been published. In the scene, Mut is enthroned, while Hathor and other goddesses stand behind her in her entourage (W. Raymond Johnson and J. Brett McClain, "A Fragmentary Scene of Ptolemy XII Worshipping the Goddess Mut and Her Divine Entourage", in *Servant of Mut*, pp. 134-140). This process in which other goddesses were subordinated to Mut was clearly underway in the eighth century BCE.

³⁵ Te Velde, "Toward a Minimal Definition", p. 8.

³⁶ Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman, Okla., 1999), p. 143.

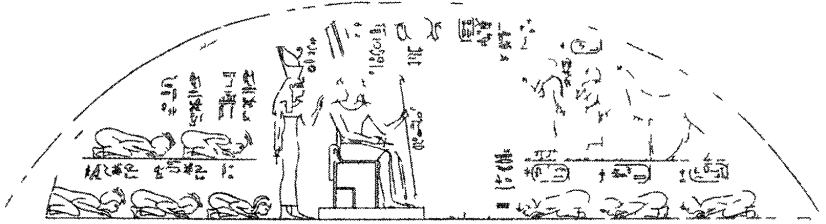


Figure 1. The lunette from the Victory Stele of Piye. Mut is the farthest-left standing figure.

She has no equal, the unique one who has no peer.

There has come into existence none like her within the Ennead.³⁷

There are no goddesses among tens of thousands of her form.

Her manifestation on earth is kingship.³⁸

As the symbol of kingship, she became a national god, not unlike Aššur in Assyria.

In light of her political significance, it seems entirely natural that she should have been in the position of overseeing treaties between Egypt and its vassals, such as the loyalty-oath that the Saite ruler Tefnakht swore to Piye when the latter conquered Lower Egypt in 725.³⁹ The relief in the lunette of the stele (Fig. 1 portrays Amun seated behind Piye; but standing behind Amun is Mut, as if she were also a guarantor of the whole arrangement.⁴⁰

Mut was in fact thought to enforce covenant curses in the most horrific ways. There is good evidence for the burning of political rebels on her brazier during the Third Intermediate Period. The classical Egyptian historian Manetho (third century BCE) reported that the Nubian pharaoh Shabako (721-707 BCE), burned alive Bocchoris, who was Tefnakht's successor at Sais. Bocchoris had broken a covenant "by proclaiming himself king. In succeeding Tefnakht, Bocchoris had compounded the offence, since the vassal treaty which one may assume accompanied the oath was probably binding on descendants,

³⁷⁾ A grouping of nine major Egyptian deities

³⁸⁾ Herman te Velde, "Mut and Other Ancient Egyptian Goddesses", in *Ancient Egypt, the Aegean, and the Near East Studies in Honor of Martha Rhoads Bell* (San Antonio, Tex , 1997), 2 459-460

³⁹⁾ Piye Victory Stela, lines 126-144, trans Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 79-80

⁴⁰⁾ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 66

and he was therefore a subject in revolt against his overlord".⁴¹ A ritual text, also native to Egypt, also portrayed Mut as a destroyer of "rebels", a goddess who consumed with fire those who undermined Egyptian authority. The text is the "Ritual to Repulse the Aggressor", which combines an earlier ritual (probably New Kingdom) and a later commentary (probably Third Intermediate Period, i.e., roughly 1100-650 BCE).⁴² Two of its sections show that death by fire was likely a real punishment, at least in the later period.⁴³ There are also multiple Hellenistic references to human sacrifice to Mut.⁴⁴ There is a general scholarly consensus that this was no mere attempt by Western authors to portray Egypt as barbaric, but rather reflected actual historical practice in the Third Intermediate Period.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Anthony Leahy, "Death by Fire in Ancient Egypt", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27 (1984), p. 201

⁴² Jean Yoyotte, "Hera d'Héliopolis et le sacrifice humain", *Ecoles Pratiques des Hautes Etudes, Ve section, Annuaire Resumes des Conférences et Travaux* 89 (1980-1981), pp. 31-102

⁴³ Formula 2 of the ritual refers to the punishment of "20 enemies [who were] conspirators". In the later commentary, the punishment is spelled out in considerably greater detail "Let them be cursed so that they are burned in the brazier of Mut" Again in Formula 7 it is primarily the Third Intermediate Period commentary that is of interest "The wrath of the Great One is against you, that you should be destroyed your flesh is incinerated, your ba-soul will not escape in the brazier of Mut which is in Heliopolis" Yoyotte, "Hera d'Héliopolis", pp. 80-82

⁴⁴ Most notable are the many accounts of the Egyptian king Busiris, who supposedly slaughtered foreigners, and the sacrifice of the Typhonian men (Diodorus Siculus 1.88) "Men the color of Typhon [i.e., red] were of old sacrificed by kings by the grave of Osiris" For a full discussion of classical evidence, see J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Human Sacrifice in Egypt: The Classical Evidence", *ASAE* 48 (1948), pp. 409-423. Also Yoyotte, "Hera d'Héliopolis", *passim*. There are a handful of iconographic portrayals of human slaughter in Egyptian iconography, but their significance is disputed (Yoyotte, "Hera d'Héliopolis", pp. 36-39). Furthermore, at the temple of Philae, an inscription reads, "May you deliver these scheming men who detest the King to the brazier of Mut and thus slaughter His Majesty's adversaries" Georges Bénédite, *Le temple de Philae* (Mémoires publiés par les Membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire 13, Paris, 1893), pp. 116, 19, Yoyotte "Hera d'Héliopolis", p. 77

⁴⁵ Ramesside rulers sometimes claimed to have "burned the flesh of my enemy with my rays". If YHWH is the one who burns the enemy, and if YHWH is being cast as a king, then the imagery of the pharaohs may lie somewhere in the background of the biblical description as well, albeit more indirectly (solar imagery is not present in Isa. 30:27-33 as in the Egyptian examples). For examples of such Egyptian rhetoric, see Michael G. Hasel, *Domination and Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern Levant, ca. 1300-1185 B.C.* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 84-86. I do not know of examples of such rhetoric among the sparse corpus of Iron Age Egyptian royal inscriptions.

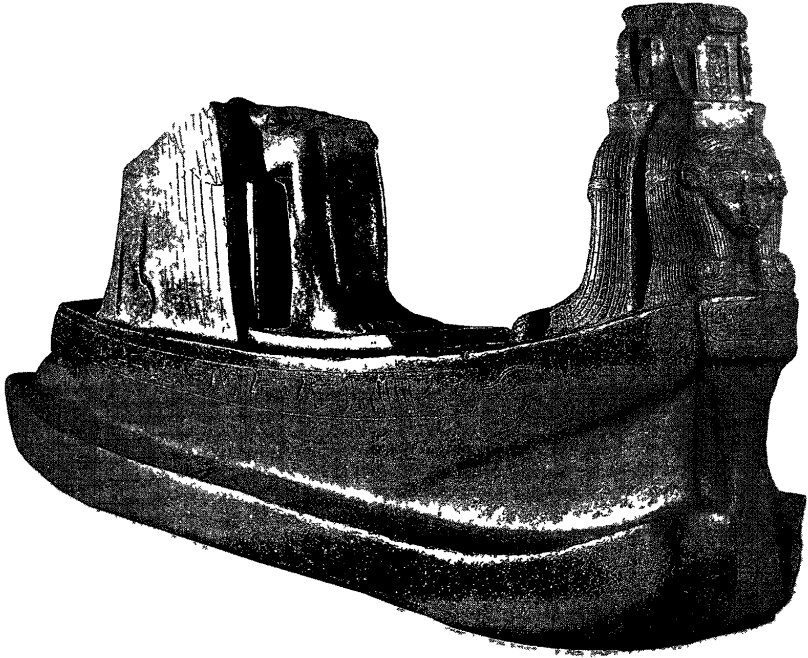


Figure 2. Statue of Mutemwia in the British Museum.

Thus, Mut “not only protected the person of the king but also the state itself with a power which was as fierce as it was final”;⁴⁶ “her arms are a protection around the king and her fiery breath is against his enemies”.⁴⁷ Such a ritual of burning humans alive both evokes the supposedly protective human sacrifices practiced elsewhere in the ancient world, and also would have *enacted* protection for the state (at least in the minds of those who ordered it), by destroying enemies who might have undermined Egypt’s power. However, Mut’s protective aspect also had a comforting side; she was portrayed iconographically as a vulture with protecting wings, as in a statue of Mutemwia, the mother of Amunhotep III, that resides in the British Museum (fig. 2).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (London, 2003), p. 154.

⁴⁷ Te Velde, “Mut and Other Ancient Egyptian Goddesses”, p. 459.

⁴⁸ For a photograph, see Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer (eds.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1992), p. 78. For discussion, see Lesko, *Great Goddesses of Egypt*, p. 141. Mut’s protective aspect could also be assumed by human Egyptian queens, see Betsy M. Bryan, “A Newly Discovered Statue of a Queen from the Reign of Amenhotep III”, in

Given the so-called “democratization of death” in later periods in Egypt, it is no surprise that the protective role that Mut played vis-à-vis the state and monarchy spread to other elites. An excellent example of the more popular adoration of Mut can be seen in the tomb inscription of a Heliopolitan scribe from the period of Ramses II (1303-1213), who changed his name from Kiki to Samut (“son of Mut”). The hymn expresses devotion and the expectation of protection:

As for him whom Mut makes a protégé, no god knows how to assail him,
the favorite of the king of his time, being one who passes away into honor.
As for him whom Mut makes a protégé, no evil will attack him,
and he will be sheltered every day until he joins the necropolis.
As for him whom Mut makes a protégé, how happy is his life!
The favors of the king which endue his body belong to the one who sets her in
his heart.
As for him whom Mut makes a protégé,
when he issues from the womb, favor and fate are his,
and beauty upon the brick. He is destined for honor.
As for him whom Mut makes a protégé how happy is he whom she loves.
No god will cast him down, being one who does not know death.⁴⁹

The text is functionally a donation inscription: Samut “found the goddess Mut so powerful a protector that he left all of his property in her temple”.⁵⁰ It demonstrates the expectation of the goddess’s sheltering might.

As the presence of these elements in tombs indicates, Mut’s protection extended over this life and the next. Indeed, the inscription of Samut makes no distinction between the two; having experienced the goddess’s favor in his life, he expects it in his afterlife as well. He was not alone; that expectation was also canonized in the Book of the Dead. Spell 164 reflects a specific expectation of protection in the afterlife, invoking “Mut the divine-souled...”.

...who keeps sound their corpses, <who> preserves them from the execution place of the rebels who are in the (judgment) hall of the evil one, without lassoing them.

Servant of Mut, pp. 37-39; also Gerry D. Scott III, *Temple, Tomb, and Dwelling: Egyptian Antiquities from the Harer Family Trust Collection* (San Bernardino, Calif., 1992), pp. 132-134.

⁴⁹ Te Velde, “Toward a Minimal Definition”, p. 9; see also J. A. Wilson, “The Theban Tomb (No. 409) of Si-Mut, Called Kiki”, *JNES* 29 (1970), pp. 187-192; Pascal Vernus, “Les inscriptions de S3-Mut Surnommé KYKY”, *Revue d’Égyptologie* 30 (1978), pp. 115-146.

⁵⁰ Wilson, “Theban Tomb (No. 409) of Si-Mut”, p. 192.

The goddess says with her own mouth: “I will do as ye say, (ye goddesses,) ye progeny, for the Son”, when they prepare the burial for him.

To be said over <an image of> Mut having three faces—one like the face of *Pḥ3t*, wearing twin plumes, another like a human face wearing the white crown and the red crown, another like a vulture’s face wearing twin plumes—and a phallus and wings, with a lion’s claw(s).

...

Then he shall be divine among the gods in the god’s domain and shall not be kept away forever and ever. His flesh and his bones shall stay sound like (those of) one who is alive; indeed, he shall not die...⁵¹

It would appear that this spell, with its reference to “the execution place of the rebels”, conflates the slaughter of traitors on the brazier of Mut with the judgment of the dead in the afterlife. Mut is called upon to keep the deceased from the execution place, so that he or she may reach the happy afterlife. This is an understandable development, since the “Ritual to Repulse the Aggressor” already expresses the desire to destroy not only the body but the *ba* of the rebels, i.e., their soul.⁵² Thus, Mut seems to have increased her power: once a guarantor of earthly power, her authority soon reached the underworld, even though she was not originally a chthonic deity.⁵³ As Barbara Lesko observed, “Mut then was able to rescue and protect the deceased Egyptians who called on her. Thus, at least by the post-Empire or Third Intermediate Period, her power could extend beyond the world of the living and save souls fettered in the Netherworld”.⁵⁴ There are other indications of Mut’s association with the underworld as well. A passage from the Crossword Hymn seems to refer to her as having been present at the creation of the

⁵¹ Thomas George Allen (ed.), *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: Documents in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago* (Chicago, 1960), pp. 160-161.

⁵² I beg the reader’s pardon for this oversimplification of Egyptian anthropology.

⁵³ Mut is not the only deity with similar duties; Nut was also known as a protectress and “mother” to the dead. In one very late text, Nut says to the deceased, “My beloved son, Osiris N., come and rest in me! I am your mother who protects you daily, I protect your body from all evil, I guard your body from all evil. I make your flesh perfectly hale” (cited in Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* [trans. David Lorton; Ithaca, N.Y., 2005], p. 170). It is not clear whether some assimilation between Mut and Nut might have taken place, as was common among Egyptian deities.

⁵⁴ Lesko, *Great Goddesses of Egypt*, p. 147.

netherworld and having millions of spirits under her protection.⁵⁵ Vulture elements in Egyptian tombs of the Ramesside and later periods might also reflect a belief in Mut's protective power over the dead.⁵⁶

The Cult of Mut

Details such as the flower garlands and heavy drinking related in Isa 28 were also part of the Egyptian cult of Mut. These factors are less determinative, since flowers and inebriation were part of a number of Egyptian cults.⁵⁷ A Twenty-fifth-Dynasty stele from Tell Edfu shows a man and his wife presenting gifts before Mut. Among them is an offering of flowers; the text in front of the man reads, "The giving of floral-offerings of the forest..."⁵⁸ The text of the stele also reflects inebriation as a form of religious practice; the main part of the inscription reads (with emphasis added):

O Mut, celestial and solar goddess, who is the first-ranked in Isheru,
He inebriates himself for you, the priest of Amun who resides at Karnak, the
 one who is known to the king, son of the priest, second class, of Amun,
 king of the gods, the eyes and ears of the king, Patenf.

⁵⁵ Vertical line 65 "She is as the goddess of Thebes, the mistress who was in the heart, when the netherworld came into existence She makes Thebes content Millions of spirits, which Re has made for her through his sight, they are known That is, they are promoted like what she has made" Stewart, "Crossword Hymn to Mut", pp 103-104

⁵⁶ The New Kingdom tombs of Pharaohs Merneptah, Siptah, and Ramses IV all had patterns of vultures with spread wings across their ceilings, surely expressing the hope of protection in the afterlife Furthermore, various Ramesside queens were associated with Mut (Richard A Fazzini, "Standard Bearing Statue of Queen", in A K Capel and G E Markoe (eds), *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven Women in Ancient Egypt* [Cincinnati, 1996], pp 114-115) Still, on a traditional reading, the Ramesside vulture ceilings are likely better understood as representations of Nekhbet

⁵⁷ Osiris seems to have been associated with the Greek god Dionysus by both Greeks and Egyptians, at least in later periods (e.g., Herodotus, *Histories* 2.42) On inebriation in the Hathor cult, see François Daumas, "Les objets sacres de la deesse Hathor à Dendara", *Revue d'Égyptologie* 22 (1970), pp 75-76, Lasló Torok observes that in Kushite-period iconography, "[a] close relationship between Hathor(-Tefnut) and Mut allows them to appear as incarnations of the same deity" (*The Image of the Ordered World in Ancient Nubian Art The Construction of the Kushite Mind (800 BC-300 AD)* [Probleme der Ägyptologie 18, Leiden, 2002], p 78)

⁵⁸ R Engelbach, "Notes of Inspection, April 1921", *ASAE* 21 (1921), pp 188-196

He rejoices for you. Count him among your servants, those whom [you] love... his patron.

Protect this man *who inebriates himself* for the golden goddess.⁵⁹

Moreover, the Crossword Hymn refers to Mut as “The lady of the lotuses... She who is beautiful of face, the lotus being associated with her beautiful face”.⁶⁰ The associations of the so-called blue lotus (*Nymphaea coerulea*, actually a water-lily) with hopes for the afterlife may be significant here: because they open in the morning and close at night, “the Egyptians saw in them an image of rebirth or regeneration. The flowers were used to symbolize the deceased’s entering into the underworld and the rebirth in the hereafter to a new life”.⁶¹ Thus, not only does Mut’s mythology illuminate Isa 28; so does her cult.

Flowers in general were common in Egyptian funerary rituals: they were used as funerary offerings to the gods; garlands were used to decorate mummies and burial equipment and were also worn by guests at funerary banquets.⁶² Faience collars decorated with floral patterns were placed around mummies’ necks. In late versions of the Book of the Dead, “a round floral wreath [is] the symbol of successfully withstanding the Tribunal of the Dead before Osiris”.⁶³ Finally, there may be a connection between drunkenness and flowers, since the Egyptians may have known how to enhance wine with the narcotic alkaloids in the lotus flower.⁶⁴

It is plausible that an eighth-century prophet would have understood these associations of the lotus; based on iconographic evidence, it is clear that some similar Egyptian motifs infiltrated Judean culture.⁶⁵ The term *צִיָּץ/צִיָּץ* found in Isa 28:1, 4 also appears in the description of Solomon’s temple in 1 Kgs 6:18, 29, 32, 34, where it seems to refer to lotus blossoms (cf.

⁵⁹ M Fernand Bisson de la Roque, “Complément de la stèle d’Amenemhêt, fils de PN, Époux de Kyky”, *BIFAO* 25 (1925), p 48 The reference to the “golden goddess” reflects some form of assimilation between Mut and Hathor, who usually bears that title

⁶⁰ Vertical lines 62, 66, Stewart, “Crossword Hymn to Mut”, pp 103, 104

⁶¹ Renate Germer, “Flowers”, in *OEAE*, 1 541

⁶² Bernhard Asen, in a study of the use of flowers in death-cult rituals, mentions the relevance of Egyptian data but does not note any specific connections (“The Garlands of Ephraim Isaiah 28, 1-6 and the Marzeah”, *JSOT* 71 (1996), pp 71-87)

⁶³ Germer, “Flowers”, p 543

⁶⁴ W Benson Harer Jr, “Lotus”, in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2001), 2 305

⁶⁵ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans Thomas H Trapp, Minneapolis, 1998), p 249, see also index for other references

1 Kgs 7:19).⁶⁶ John Strange has argued that the lotuses used in the decoration of the First Temple were a reflection of Egyptian beliefs about afterlife and resurrection.⁶⁷ If these ideas did have currency in Judah, then the choice of נבל to modify ציץ in both instances in Isa 28 seems particularly forceful from a rhetorical standpoint: the lotus symbolizes rebirth, but the prophet announces that it will wither and perish.⁶⁸

A final excerpt from an Egyptian harper's song (i.e. a funerary song) ties together flowers, perfumes and wines in a way very like that of Isa 28:1:

I have wept! I have mourned!
 O all people, remember getting drunk on wine,
 with wreaths and perfume on your heads!⁶⁹

The dual association of these cultic elements with Mut and funerals invites the sort of idea-play in which Isa 28 engages, portraying the goddess' cult as death-seeking behavior.

Mut's Appearance in Isa 28

The foregoing sketch should suffice to indicate that Mut is a most apt referent for *mwt* in v. 15: She was a goddess of terrifying power who was held in great esteem by the Nubian and Saite dynasties upon whom Judah leaned in the face of an Assyrian threat. She was understood as a protector of Egypt and its king, to the point that she became known as a destroyer of the nation's enemies, who were burned on her brazier. Her protective role was eventually extended to others in this life and the next; she was worshiped in rites that included inebriation and offerings of flowers; and her name sounded similar

⁶⁶ Cf. *HALOT*, p. 1023 (ציץ); pp. 1454-1455 (ששן); John Strange, "The Idea of Afterlife in Ancient Israel: Some Remarks on the Iconography in Solomon's Temple", *PEQ* 117 (1985), pp. 35-40.

⁶⁷ Strange argues that the lotuses were a deliberate syncretistic flourish by Solomon to "merge the Israelite Religion with the religion of his indigenous subjects" ("Idea of Afterlife", p. 38). Whether or not the religious and historical presuppositions of that statement can be sustained, his essential point that Solomon may have employed motifs similar to those of Egyptians, and with similar mythological referents, seems sound.

⁶⁸ Isaiah 40:6-8 reuses the image but appears to have forgotten the mythological significance of the ציץ, since the lotus is not a flower of the field.

⁶⁹ Erich Lüddeckens, *Untersuchungen über religiösen Gehalt, Sprache und Form der ägyptischen Totenklage* (MDAIK 11; Berlin: 1943), pp. 149-150.

to Hebrew מוֹת Although scholars have never, to my knowledge, found any reference to Mut in the Hebrew Bible, this appears to be due not to any defect in the theory but to gaps in scholarly knowledge of Mut, which persisted until relatively recently⁷⁰

In what ensues, I am *not* arguing that this text is an *accurate* reflection of Mut's cult, any more than the anti-idol polemics throughout the Hebrew Bible are accurate reflections of iconic cults. Instead, I am arguing that Isaiah has *refracted* Mut's cult through *his own theological lenses*, perhaps with West Semitic mythemes (such as Mot's battle with Baal) also in mind.

Excursus: Other proposals about the mythical referents of the "covenant with Death" all have their problems, and generally the same ones Why should the deity be called *Mwt*, even if he or she was associated with the underworld? Did the deity have a notable protective aspect? And can the deity account for imagery such as that of drunkenness, flowers, and infants? One popular theory is that *Mwt* refers to Osiris, since he is the king of the Egyptian underworld,⁷¹ but few of the other details of the Isaiah passage fit, and it is more often the goddesses who were invoked for protection in the underworld In short, the Egyptians aspired primarily to *become* Osiris, not simply to be protected by him

Day argued that *Mwt* referred to Molek,⁷² but there is no hint of the characteristics of the Molech cult, such as child sacrifice, and no good reason why the god's name should have been obscured here

The least speculative of older theories is that *Mwt* refers to the familiar, Syro-Palestinian Mot⁷³ It is sometimes elaborated with the idea that Sheol refers to an Egyptian deity, and that the pair reflects joint negotiations with the seacoast and

⁷⁰ Herman te Velde observed that "little particular attention has been paid to Mut" ("Toward a Minimal Definition", p 3), and he noted that Egyptologists as recently as the 1970s could call Mut "a colourless local goddess" and "a rather pallid figure who only achieved eminence as the wife of the powerful Amun" (see citations in "Mut and Other Goddesses", p 457) The former scholarly neglect also extended more generally to the later periods of Egyptian history (John D Ray, "The Late Period An Overview", in *OEA* 2 267)

⁷¹ Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (4th ed., Göttingen, 1922), pp 199-200, Johann Fischer, *Das Buch Jesaja, Teil I* (Bonn, 1937), p 188, Auvray, *Isaie I* 39 pp 250-251, John Skinner perceived that "Death and Sheol" were Osiris and Isis (*The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I-XXXIX* [2nd ed., Cambridge, 1915], p 225)

⁷² Day, *Molech*, pp 58-64

⁷³ E.g., John L McLaughlin, *The Marzeah in the Prophetic Literature References and Allusions in Light of the Extra Biblical Evidence* (Leiden, 2001), p 184, Theodore J Lewis, Mot (deity), *ABD* 4 923, John F Healey, "Mot", *DDD*², p 601, H J Fabry, 'מוֹת', *TDOT* 8 205-209

Egypt to find allies against Assyria⁷⁴ (Going farther still, van der Toorn took the terms כוב, “לֹא”, and שֶׁכַר, “falsehood”, as encoded terms for Chemosh and Milcom)⁷⁵ The problem with theorizing a covenant with the god Mot known from Ugarit is that there is no indication that Mot made covenants⁷⁶ In fact, as Day pointed out, “a Mot cult in Judah is otherwise unknown at this time”⁷⁷ The most developed version of this theory is that of Blenkinsopp, who (following Harmut Gese)⁷⁸ argued that Mot would have seemed an apt treaty partner, because he was the enemy of Baal, whose role was filled in Mesopotamia by Hadad, who in turn “was venerated by the Assyrians as a war deity and [who] is also named as a guarantor of treaties, and played an important role in divination and mortuary rites”⁷⁹ This argument is not only tortuous, it confuses the issue If the Judeans’ covenant is with Mot, then Hadad’s covenant-making and underworld aspects are irrelevant

Finally, other exegetes decline to address the mythological issues Wildberger perceived unspecified secret protective rites,⁸⁰ and Kaiser asserted that the prophets’

⁷⁴ E.g., Jacques Vermeylen, *Du prophete Isaie a l’apocalyptique Isaie, I-XXXV, miroir d’un demi-millenaire d’experience religieuse en Israel* (2 vols., Paris, 1977-1978), p. 393 n. 1

⁷⁵ Karel van der Toorn, “Echoes of Judean Necromancy in Isaiah 28, 7-22”, *ZAW* 100 (1988), p. 203

⁷⁶ Healey, “Mot”, p. 601 J. C. de Moor and Klaas Spronk thought that CAT 1 82 included a reference to a covenant with Mot in line 5 (“More on Demons in Ugarit (KTU 1 82)”, *UF* 16 [1984], pp. 239-240), but the correct reading appears to be *tgrm lmt brqk*, “unite your rays against Mot”, rather than *tgrm lmt brtk*, “You are pledging your covenant to Mot”, see DUL, p. 239, 326, also Andre Caquot, *Textes Ougaritiques*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1989), p. 65 n. 174 CAT 1 82 appears to be a collection of apotropaic incantations, see G. del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (trans. W. G. E. Watson, Winona Lake, Ind., 2004), pp. 373-376, esp. 374 n. 140. The idea of sickness as a battle against Mot is attested in the Kirta epic (1 16 vi 13)

⁷⁷ Day, *Molech*, p. 85. Ziony Zevit has hypothesized a cult of Mot in ancient Israel on the basis of (1) Isa 28 15, 18 and (2) a handful of seals with the theophoric element *mw*t (Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallelic Approaches* [London, 2001], pp. 604-609. Cf. Jeffrey Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* [HSS 31, Atlanta, 1986], pp. 65-73). Against this interpretation stands the lack of any other sign of a cult of Mot in Israel or Judah, or even in Ugarit. Furthermore, Egyptian gods are named in similar seals, including Amun (Mut’s “husband”), Horus, Bes, and Isis. Therefore, I would argue that the seals reflect not Mot but Mut, who was prominent at that time and had an active cult.

⁷⁸ Hartmut Gese, “Die Stromende Geißel des Hadad und Jesaja 28 15-18”, in A. Kuschke and E. Kutsch (eds.), *Archäologie und Altes Testament: Festschrift für Kurt Gallig* (Tübingen, 1970), pp. 127-134

⁷⁹ Blenkinsopp, “Judah’s Covenant with Death”, pp. 477-478

⁸⁰ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39: A Commentary* (Continental Commentaries, Minneapolis, 2002), pp. 39-40

opponents were simply “*behaving as though* they [had] made a pact with death and the underworld . . . as though they were immortal, though of course only for a time”⁸¹

The Historical Contexts of Isa 28:1-22

The text may be roughly divided into four sections: vv. 1-4 (indictment of the northern kingdom); vv. 5-6 (announcement of YHWH’s rule);⁸² vv. 7-13 (indictment of the southern kingdom);⁸³ and vv. 14-22 (announcement of judgment). Verses 7-13 expand the indictment of vv. 1-4 and most likely function as the substance of the prophet’s case against the Jerusalemite leaders named in v. 14. Older interpretations tended to view the oracle, even vv. 7-22, as highly fragmentary, the result of a complex redactional process.⁸⁴ As the ensuing discussion will show, the recognition of the reference to Mut does much to lend the passage coherence. I will argue that most of vv. 7-22 dates from the end of the eighth century, or perhaps the early seventh, and refers to a crisis brought on by the Assyrian threat to Judah at that time.⁸⁵ It may not even be necessary to theorize two separate redactional layers for the northern and southern sections, although such extensions of old oracles are assumed to be common.⁸⁶ In any case, it is clear that Israel continued to be

⁸¹ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39 A Commentary* (trans R A Wilson, OTL, Philadelphia, 1973), p 251

⁸² The common view that vv 5-6 are late (see, e g, Stansell, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”, pp 68-69) depends on a larger conclusion about the use of the phrase “on that day”, which may or may not be an indicator of redactional activity As Marvin Sweeney notes, in the present form of the text, the announcement of vv 5-6 “sets the tone for the entire passage by stating that YHWH’s leadership will be the result of the punishments announced throughout the subsequent verses” (*Isaiah 1-39*, p 362)

⁸³ Sweeney perceives a continued message against Ephraim in vv 7-13, but I share the common view that **וְגַם אֱלֹהִים** marks a shift from the North to the South as the object of the oracle, even though the Judahites are not named until v 14

⁸⁴ Again, see Petersen, “Isaiah 28 A Redaction-Critical Study”, pp 102-104

⁸⁵ On the basic authenticity of the passage, see Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, p 37, Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp 355-358 I would take vv 19b and 22d as expansions Although I do not agree that there is anything inherently late about the perspective implied in the phrase **עַל כְּלִי-הָאָרֶץ** (cf Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, p 45), it does seem to dangle awkwardly at the end of v 22

⁸⁶ Matthijs J de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (VTSup 117, Leiden, 2007), p 448 The alternative theory would be that Isaiah is using the example of the northern kingdom’s collapse as a warning to Jerusalem leadership The verb of 28 2 (**הִנִּיחַ**) is perfect in aspect Although translators almost uniformly take it to be a “prophetic perfect”, it might also

viewed in Judah (at least by the Deuteronomists) as a source of wrongdoing and heresy long after Samaria's destruction. The Samaritans, having fled to Judah, have now "infected" Jerusalem with apostasy (indeed, Isaiah may have associated the Mut cult with the northern kingdom),⁸⁷ and as a result both they and the native Jerusalemites will be trampled again. Roberts thinks that the passage is a self-extended oracle based on an original *hōy*-oracle in 28:1-4.⁸⁸

The imagery of the raging flood (vv. 15, 17-18) again alludes to YHWH's employment of the Assyrians in judgment, which had already befallen the North and was now threatening the South.⁸⁹ There is no reason to look beyond a Neo-Assyrian offensive for the historical setting; the flood is

be a simple reflection on past events "He brought them to the ground" Isaiah drew a comparison between the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 and a coming destruction. The imperfect תרמסנה (v 3) may seem to contradict the theory that vv 1-4 postdate the fall of the northern kingdom, however, it is not the "Ephraimites" themselves who are threatened, but rather the floral garlands that the prophets associate with their anti-Yahwistic practices. It does not seem far-fetched that a Judean prophet should have continued to condemn aspects of the northern kingdom's cultic behavior even after its fall. Alternately, one could argue that תרמסנה does not express the future tense but is an archaic preterite form, or that this is simply a non-perfective use of the prefix conjugation—which would be all the more plausible in a poetic context (Cf Bruce Waltke and M O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, Ind., 1990], pp 502-504)

⁸⁷ From the eleventh through the seventh centuries, vultures on stamp seals are documented mainly in the North, which could reflect a greater familiarity with Mut there (Silvia Schroer, "Vulture", in *Iconography of Deities and Demons*, accessed electronically in pre-publication on Nov 12, 2007)

⁸⁸ On self-extended oracles, see William Holladay, *Isaiah Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (Grand Rapids, 1978), pp 59, 84. Roberts writes that vv 1-4 may have originated as an oracle against the northern kingdom during the Syro-Ephraimitic War—one that "Isaiah reused in the Assyrian period to introduce his oracle against the Judean leaders, who were just as irresponsible as the northerners had been" ("Yahweh's Foundation", p 37, cf J J M Roberts, "Isaiah's Egyptian and Nubian Oracles", in B E Kelle and M B Moore [eds], *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History in Honor of John H Hays* [Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 446, New York, 2006], p 207). J Cheryl Exum hints at the same conclusion on literary grounds: "a strong similarity between v 14ff and vv 1-4 in terms of both form and content serves to show the Jerusalemites that their situation is not so different from that of their northern neighbors" ("Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?" A Literary Approach to Isaiah 28", in David J A Clines, David M Gunn, and Alan J Hauser [eds], *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* [JSOTSup 19, Sheffield, 1982], pp 109-110)

⁸⁹ Pace Stefanie Ulrike Gulde, who perceived an image of a Canaanite weather-god (*Der Tod als Herrscher in Ugarit und Israel* [FAT 22, Tübingen, 2007], pp 236-238)

described in v. 18 as “stomping” on the Mut covenanters, and Isaiah elsewhere associates trampling with Assyria (see 10:6). The year 701 naturally suggests itself, although less is known about Assyria’s campaigns in the West after 689 than one would like; presumably Judah lived for quite some time under the threat of annihilation.⁹⁰

The Covenant

At the time when the oracle was delivered, the Jerusalem leadership lacked confidence in their ability to survive, and sought out a pact with Egypt. On the basis of the discussion above, it seems likely that such a treaty would have been guaranteed by the threat of Mut’s wrath, and that the Jerusalem court would have been warned by the Egyptian representatives of the fate that awaits rebels and traitors.⁹¹ It can be inferred that the covenant ceremony involved the cultic invocation of Mut’s protection as a symbol of Egypt’s military support for Judah. Priests, prophets, and other leaders in Jerusalem, having lost faith in YHWH’s ability to protect the city, participated in the rituals, donning flowers and drinking heavily.⁹² This was not necessarily necromancy, although Karel van der Toorn has remarked that the supplication of a deity’s chthonic aspect would naturally have involved necromancy.⁹³ Divination and, in particular, necromancy were commonly linked with drunkenness in the ancient world.⁹⁴ As with 5:11-13, it would seem more likely that Isaiah is rhetorically conflating the Mut rites with the *marzēah*. In this case, it was probably a small leap, since at least in Syro-Palestinian religious tradition one could devote a *marzēah* to any deity.⁹⁵

Obviously enough, Isaiah professed to see no glory in these rites. In place of the garlands for Mut, he objects (perhaps referencing an earlier oracle) that

⁹⁰ Jeffrey A. Blakely and James W. Hardin, “Southwestern Judah in the Late Eighth Century B C E”, *BASOR* 326 (2002), pp. 11-64

⁹¹ Here again, one can point to the lunette of Piye’s Victory Stele, which represents submission to Piye as also submission to Piye’s gods

⁹² So also Blenkinsopp, “Judah’s Covenant with Death”, p. 479

⁹³ Van der Toorn, “Echoes of Judean Necromancy”, pp. 199-204

⁹⁴ Van der Toorn, “Echoes of Judean Necromancy”, pp. 212-213

⁹⁵ See, for example, John L. McLaughlin, *The Marzeah in the Prophetic Literature: References and Allusions in Light of the Extra-Biblical Evidence* (VTSup 86, Leiden, 2001). On the *marzeah* aspects of Isa 28, see, e.g., Marvin Pope, “The Cult of the Dead at Ugarit”, in Mark S. Smith (ed.), *Probative Pontificating in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature: Collected Essays* (Munster, 1994), p. 245

YHWH will be the crown of his people (vv. 5-6), but only after the Assyrians have trampled many of them and devoured whatever they can grab (vv. 3-4). The threefold image of the crown, the spirit of wisdom, and strength seems to express the completeness of YHWH's provision for his people, empowering key segments of society: rulers, sages, and warriors. The passage suggests that there is no need to turn to Mut when YHWH can give the people all they need. It is often assumed that the formula **ביום ההוא** with a positive vision of the future must be a late, proto-apocalyptic form, but there is no clear indication that vv. 5-6 should be taken as a late insertion.⁹⁶

Seeing (or imagining) the scene of debauchery surrounding the bacchanalian rites for Mut, Isaiah condemns those who participate. The wrongdoing is not, of course, entirely cultic,⁹⁷ but these memorable cultic excesses become the peg on which the prophet hangs the oracle. He portrays them as suffering from uncontrolled vomiting and defecation, a disgusting performance worthy of babies, not grown adults. He characterizes his opponents as infants *because they seek the care of a mother* (Mut). Worshipers of Mut could indeed refer to themselves as her children, as in a building inscription of Taharqa (r. 690-664) at the Mut temple at Napata: "What he made as his monument for his mother, Mut of Napata. . .".⁹⁸

Surely, Isaiah concludes, YHWH will not instruct or enlighten such pitiful people as these. Much as in Isa 6:9-10, YHWH curses the people not to understand. The odd speech of vv. 10 and 13 (**צו לצו . . . קו לקו**) is designed to mock and mislead the Jerusalem leadership (v. 11), because they have already rejected YHWH's word (v. 12).⁹⁹ The words **קו** and **צו** still resist definitive explanation, but the interpretation that they are an impression of baby talk fits best with the context.¹⁰⁰ By comparison with **קיא** and **צאה** in v. 8, these words may be "babyisms" for excrement and vomit, respectively. J. A. Emerton, who concluded that **קיא/קו** and **צו/צאה** are alternate nominal forms of

⁹⁶ **ביום ההוא** was used in Day of the Lord threats in an early period (e.g., Amos 8:9, etc.) and may just as well have been used for positive oracles.

⁹⁷ A comparison of v. 12 with Mic 2:1-11 suggests that the indictment in both cases is the same as that of the series of *hōy*-oracles in Isa 5: the consolidation of property and exclusion of the poor by wealthy landowners. Note the grabbing of land in Mic 2:2, the denial of rest (**מנוחה**) in Mic 2:10, and the imagery of drunkenness in all three passages.

⁹⁸ Tötörök, *Image of the Ordered World*, p. 75.

⁹⁹ So also Exum, "Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?," p. 122.

¹⁰⁰ Driver, "Another Little Drink", p. 55; Baruch Halpern, "The Excremental Vision: The Doomed Priests of Doom in Isaiah 28", *HAR* 10 (1986), pp. 109-121; Exum, "Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?," p. 121.

the same two roots, has adduced compelling support for that theory from comparative Semitics and from the Versions and classical translations.¹⁰¹ Indeed, speech acquisition accelerates at about the same time as weaning, after one year of age, with toddlers frequently babbling half-intelligible syllables. As Baruch Halpern notes, “Comparison with English euphemisms (such as ‘wee-wee’) suggests that herein lies some of the reason for the repetition in the refrain”.¹⁰²

On another level, the repeated phrase in vv. 10 and 13 appears to be a reference to the speech of the Nubians. Much as the Greeks’ term for foreigners (βάρβαροι) mocked the “strange” sounds of their speech, so Isaiah refers to the Nubians as the “קוֹ-קוֹ people” in 18:2, 7.¹⁰³ YHWH is speaking through the Nubians. Taken as a whole, this complex of imagery conveys that the speech of the Nubians in the Mut cult, which sounds like nonsense to Judeans, is YHWH’s way of confusing the Jerusalem leadership and keeping them in the dark. In addition to 6:9-10, one might adduce 8:22, in which YHWH seems to punish the practitioners of necromancy by causing them to see only darkness. Isaiah repeatedly asserts that YHWH has control over forms of divination that are ostensibly outside his purview.

Excursus: The other primary theories regarding vv. 10 and 13 are unconvincing.¹⁰⁴ It has been argued that these are a reflection of Akkadian, for example, the commands of an Assyrian taskmaster leading the people into exile.¹⁰⁵ However, the translations produced on the basis of this assumption do not suit the context well, and it is highly unlikely that the Assyrians gave orders to the inhabitants of

¹⁰¹ J A Emerton, “Some Difficult Words in Isaiah 28 10 and 13”, in A Rapoport-Albert and G Greenberg (eds), *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts Essays in Memory of Michael P Weitzman* (JSOTSup 333, Sheffield, 2001), pp 51-55 Emerton notes that Theodotion and the Peshitta both understood something like “dung” and “filth” for קו and צו. The comparative data is diverse for צו, and includes Ethiopic *sd*, Akkadian *zú*, Syriac *sata* “dung, filth”, Sabaic *syw*, “be contaminated” (cf *HALOT*, p 992 on Heb צִאָה, “filth”, and צִאָי, “filthy”) The evidence for קו as a noun meaning “vomit” is less strong, but Emerton notes that קִיקִלֹן in Hab 2 16 is treated as two words and translated *vomitus ignominiae* in the Vulgate, thus at least קי may have been recognized as a noun for “vomit”

¹⁰² Halpern, “Excremental Vision”, p 115

¹⁰³ The sense of קוֹ-קוֹ in 18 2, 7 is disputed (for a summary of theories, see Wildberger, *Isaiah 13-27*, p 208), but its association with the Nubians (Cushites) is not

¹⁰⁴ After I had completed my study, it came to my attention that Emerton had come to a similar conclusion regarding the untenability of other theories in his “Some Difficult Words in Isaiah 28 10 and 13”, p 56

¹⁰⁵ A van Selms, “Isaiah 28 9-13 An Attempt to Give a New Interpretation”, *ZAW* 85 (1973), pp 332-339

Palestine in Akkadian, since the latter would not have understood that language, outside of perhaps a few specially trained scribes at the court. Van der Toorn has recently lent support to an older theory that 28:10 and 13 reflect “phrases spoken during séances”.¹⁰⁶ However, there is no good evidence of cognate sounds or phrases used in this way. A third theory holds that it is Isaiah’s opponents who speak these words, mocking the prophet with nonsense talk. However, the phrase is clearly attributed to YHWH in vv. 11 and 13, and implicitly in v. 21. Finally, W. W. Hallo lent his support to that theory that *qaw* and *saw* are names of consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so that the phrase is the singsong of a teacher speaking to children.¹⁰⁷ However, in the first place, it is not at all clear why two letters in the middle of the alphabet should have been chosen; furthermore, there is no menace or judgment in the image of YHWH or the prophet as a teacher, although the context calls for it.

Isaiah condemns the Egyptian pact from another angle as a “covenant with Death”. Verse 14’s reference to rulers (משלי) is nonspecific and intended as a catchall for Jerusalem elites named in v. 7 and those left unnamed.¹⁰⁸

The double entendre of the ברית את־מות unfolds in stages. I have already argued that “Mut” and “death” likely sounded similar. Thus, it is after the first stich of v. 15 that it begins to become clear that this is no ordinary comment by the proponents of Mut but rather a self-condemnation placed on their lips. In the first place, the use of ברית to describe apostasy from YHWH is highly unusual—there is no case in which the Israelites are said to make a covenant with any other god.¹⁰⁹ The statement “we have made a covenant with Mut” is thus unique in biblical literature and perhaps already contains an implicit charge of apostasy, since some biblical covenants seem to be modeled on suzerainty treaties. Such treaties were exclusive, so to make a covenant with Mut was almost certainly, in Isaiah’s eyes, to abrogate the covenant with

¹⁰⁶ Van der Toorn, “Echoes of Judean Necromancy”, p. 208; he is quoting Samuel Daiches, “Isaiah and Spiritualism”, *The Jewish Chronicle Supplement*, July 1921, p. vi. Specifically, van der Toorn detects “bird-like twittering and groans” (“Echoes”, p. 209).

¹⁰⁷ W. W. Hallo, “Isa 28 9-13 and the Ugaritic Abecedaries”, *JBL* 77 (1958), pp. 324-338. So also Alistair C. Stewart, “The Covenant with Death in Isaiah 28”, *ExpTim* 100 (1989), pp. 375-377.

¹⁰⁸ So also Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, p. 37. “To this group belong, first of all, without a doubt, the politicians, but the priests, prophets, wise, and other good ‘patriots’ in Jerusalem would fit as well”.

¹⁰⁹ One might raise in objection the divine name בעל־ברית (“Baal-Berith”/“master of the covenant” [Judg 8 33, 9 4]), whom the Israelites are said to worship—but a covenant with this god remains an inference and is never elaborated in the biblical text.

YHWH.¹¹⁰ The prophet's voice emerges even more strongly in the parallel stich: "with Sheol we have made a pact". At this point the hearer would have grasped fully the paronomasia of *Mwt*: the agreement is not merely heretical, but fatal.

When the judgment clause finally arrives, it is rather odd: What does it mean that YHWH will place a stone in Zion? Two features potentially connect v. 16 with Egypt: First, the phrase *פנת יקרת מוסד*, "a cornerstone precious to the foundation". Perhaps this is YHWH's answer to the "cornerstones of their [Egyptian] tribes", which in 19:13 refers to the sages (and perhaps necromancers) of pharaoh. The rhetorical thrust is that YHWH has a cornerstone of his own, and the one who wishes to stand firm on it will practice faith, justice, and righteousness rather than drunken foreign rites.

The second feature of v. 16 that may evoke Egypt is the term *בִּחֵן*. The word is a *hapax legomenon* in classical Hebrew, and the best available etymology relates it to the Egyptian *bhn*, referring to a black or green metamorphic rock.¹¹¹ This type of stone is not known to have been used for building in Palestine in Isaiah's time, as the context would suggest, but one cannot help thinking of all the stelae made of black stone that are known from the ancient Near East, from the Hammurabi Stele to the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser (and certainly black stone was also widely used in Egyptian stelae and statues). Such objects were routinely placed or installed by monarchs as symbols of power and markers of authority or possession. The word *בִּחֵן* may also have evoked the more common Hebrew *בָּחַן* ("testing"). However, given the context, the implied test is whether the hearers will trust in YHWH and not fear,

¹¹⁰ So also Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 393. Blenkinsopp connects this to the Sinai covenant on the basis of Isaiah's use of *חזה* by comparison with the account of the seventy elders who "saw God" (*ויחזו את־האלהים*) on Sinai. Given Isaiah's emphasis on Royal Zion theology, I am more inclined to think he would have referred to the covenant with David (see J. J. M. Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* [Winona Lake, Ind., 2002], pp. 313-357).

¹¹¹ Thomas Lambdin, "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament", *JAOS* 73 (1953), p. 148; Roberts states ("Yahweh's Foundation", p. 30): "It is not surprising that scholars have searched the languages which were either cognate with Hebrew or which heavily influenced the Hebrew vocabulary for stone names that could explain Hebrew *bohan*. The best candidate that has emerged from that search is the Egyptian word *bhn*, a word that designates schist gneiss, a black or green siliceous schist that was used in Egypt for making statues, and a number of scholars have explained the Hebrew *bohan* as a loanword from this Egyptian term. H. Wildberger and M. Tsevat reject this identification, because this stone is not found in Palestine, and there is no evidence that the Israelites imported it into Israel for building purposes. This is not a fatal objection, however, because as a loanword *bhn* could easily have come to designate fine building stones quite distinct from the original Egyptian stone designated by the term".

or will not trust in YHWH and thus be destroyed (vv. 17-19, cf. also v. 13).¹¹² There is a clear intertextual relationship between Isa 28:13, 16 and 8:14-15, since both entail the motif of stumbling over a stone placed by YHWH.¹¹³ In 8:14, the stone is YHWH himself, and in 28:16 it seems to at least represent the deity or his word.

Putting together the two halves of this double entendre, one wonders whether the building images of vv. 16-17 are merely metaphors and the *בֶּחֶן אֲבֵן בֶּחֶן* some ceremonial object such as a stele or palladium, to which Isaiah could point, and which might symbolize YHWH's demand for allegiance.¹¹⁴ Could YHWH's "stone of testing" be an answer to an Egyptian monument placed in the Judean court, something akin to the "weapon of Aššur" that Sargonids placed in foreign vassal kingdoms to mark their lordship (1.3.)? Of course, the comparisons of the line and plummet in v. 17 to justice and righteous clearly mark those items as metaphorical, so the same might be true of the "stone". If the "foundation stone" has a physical referent at all, it could be almost anything in which Isaiah is calling the people to trust—including the prophet himself. In the end, the meaning of this stone is a matter for conjecture.

The image of hail and rushing water (vv. 17-18) portrays YHWH's abolishment of the false shelter of the Mut covenanters through the agency of the Neo-Assyrian flood. The covenant will be abolished, and the pact will not stand. I have already noted the paronomasia of *חִזוֹן*; here the meaning "vision" suggests itself even more strongly, given v. 18's phrase *חִזְוֹתֵכֶם אֶת-שְׂאוֹל לֹא תִקוּם*; the alternate meaning "your vision of Sheol will not arise" springs easily to mind, recalling the spirit of Samuel rising from the ground (1 Sam 28:13; even if there the verb is *עָלָה*).¹¹⁵ The prospect of a covenant with Mut certainly could have looked like "a vision of hell" to a prophet of YHWH.

¹¹² Wildberger describes *בֶּחֶן אֲבֵן* as "almost... a *terminus technicus*" for divine testing (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 42).

¹¹³ Petersen attributed the relationship to a redactional addition in Isa 28:13 ("Isaiah 28: A Redaction-Critical Study", p. 110).

¹¹⁴ Slightly different is the view of Knud Jeppesen, "The Cornerstone (Isa 28:16) in Deutero-Isaianic Re-Reading of the Message of Isaiah", *ST* 38 (1984), p. 95: "I find it more appropriate to assume that the cornerstone was a real, material stone to which the original prophet was able to point". Jeppesen, however, sees the stone as likely the actual cornerstone of the temple.

¹¹⁵ The intervening particle *אֶת* of course makes this a strained reading, but not an impossible one: *אֶת* could be read as a direct-object marker rather than a preposition.

The inadequacy of Mut's (i.e., Egypt's) shelter is the topic of v. 20 as well. The image of the "bed" actually evokes the bench tomb, but it is extremely terse and requires some explanation. Because the prophet is mocking those who seek protection from a goddess known for protecting the dead, he likens them to those who would hide in a tomb and wrap a shroud around themselves. This image may have been a reflection of Egyptian hopes; in ancient Egypt, death could be seen as a reentry into the protecting womb, with the sarcophagus symbolizing the womb. Texts reflecting this hope were inscribed on coffins. One such text reads:

My beloved son, Osiris PN,
 come and rest in me [i.e., in the coffin]!
 I am your mother who protects you daily.
 I protect your body from all evil,
 I guard your body from all evil.¹¹⁶

So one can see again here the connection of motherhood, death, the tomb, and protection. Typically Nut was the mother goddess in these cases, but in Merneptah's tomb, Neith played the role because she was the "protective deity of his corpse"; given the fluidity of Egyptian theological thought, it is quite possible that this same motif could be applied to another mother goddess such as Mut.

Isaiah subverts the hope of protection: "playing dead" may work for certain animals which use it as a tactic for self-defense, but it will not work for the Jerusalemite leaders, he says; the tomb will not have space for them to lie down in comfort and peace, and the shroud will be too small to gather around them. The term *מסכה* is used also in Isa 25:7, where the context makes clear that it specifies a burial shroud similar to the ones used in Judean burials.¹¹⁷ The term *מצע*, "bed", is from the same root (*צע*) that is used in Ps 139:8 of "making [one's] bed in Sheol" and in Isa 58:5 of "laying down in dust and ashes", so some explicit mourning or funerary connection is possible.

¹¹⁶ Cited in Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, p. 170.

¹¹⁷ See Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup 123; Sheffield, 1992), pp. 108-109. One might perceive a connection between *mskh* and *mksb*, which is used for the covering of a corpse in Isa 14:11. Neither word is common in classical Hebrew. It is possible that one is dealing with two similarly spelled words for similar items, but it may also be that *mskh* I, "(cast) idol" has exerted some influence in the mind of either the author or a copyist, that is, creating a double entendre: "the shroud/false god will not protect you...".

The tomb is not just any symbol of futility or false hope; it also should have evoked certain strong aversions in its Judean hearers. First, the idea of lying down in a tomb (probably unappealing to anyone) would be particularly horrific to one concerned with cultic purity and corpse contamination, as some of Isaiah's audience certainly would have been. Second, simply invoking the burial of ancestors may have called attention to a primary concern of the audience: the integrity of the royal burials, which would have been seriously threatened by any Neo-Assyrian invasion, if the Sargonids' violation of the remains of royalty is any indication.¹¹⁸

The coming destruction is related by means of a startling twist on what must have been traditional holy-war imagery at the time of the text's composition. The references in 28:21 to YHWH's warring on Israel's behalf at Gibeon (Josh 10:11-12) and Perazim (1 Sam 5:20) reference precisely the same two natural forces that are named in vv. 2 and 17: hail and flood—but this time YHWH will harness these forces *against* his people, rather than on their behalf. It would have been a “strange” and “foreign” picture, indeed, for the inhabitants of Jerusalem to face the wrath of YHWH (not coincidentally, it is the same picture that is painted by the Neo-Assyrians in 36:10; and by Isaiah in 10:5, etc.). This twist may be seen as an instance of *jus talionis*: those who embraced a foreign god and her strange rites were to be threatened with the strange and foreign wrath of YHWH.

Conclusion

In sum, it appears that many difficulties can be resolved and many complexities explained by reading Isa 28:1-22 as a condemnation of the Judeans' seeking protection from Egypt by means of a covenant with one of its major deities, the mother goddess Mut. Her close association with the Egyptian throne would have given her the “right” to make a covenant; her protective aspect explains why those in distress would seek her; her motherhood explains

¹¹⁸ Sargonid kings frequently claimed in their inscriptions to have violated the tombs of enemy dynasties, disinterring cadavers and strewing the bones of the royal ancestors, most notoriously Aššurbanipal's exposure of the dead Elamite kings “The burial places of their early (and) later kings, who had not feared Ashur and Ishtar, my lords, (and) who had made my royal predecessors tremble, I devastated, I destroyed (and) let them see the sun, their bones I removed to Assyria I laid restlessness on their spirits Food-offerings (to the dead) and water-libations I denied them” The account may be found in *Annals*, col 6, lines 70-76 See Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten Assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Ninivehs* (1916, repr., Leipzig, 1975), pp 54-57

why the Judeans who seek her are characterized as children; the prominence of drunkenness and flowers in her cult explains the appearance of those elements in Isa 28. She also was associated with the underworld as a protectress of the dead, and it is plausible that her name sounded very much like the Hebrew word מוֹת, “death”, making Isaiah’s *double entendre* a natural play on words. Other features of the text such as the overwhelming flood refer to the Neo-Assyrians; Isaiah warns that Egypt and Mut cannot protect Judah from their assault.



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