


“Breaking a Dog’s Neck” as a Metaphor for Oppressing the Weak. An Exegetical-Historical Analysis of the Expression עֶרֶף כֶּלֶב (Isa 66:3)

Andrzej Łukasz Jędrzejczak

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

andrzejjedrzejczak@onet.eu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8892-3632>

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses Isa 66:3 and presents a new interpretation of the expression עֶרֶף כֶּלֶב “breaks a dog’s neck.” There are various proposals to explain this enigmatic expression. One points, for example, to a possible ritual in which dogs were to be sacrificed by breaking their necks. This ritual was supposed to have been practised in the ancient Levant, including the Israelites/Judahites. This explanation is called into question in this article. It is pointed out that the phrase can be understood as a metaphor for people who impinge on the dignity of others. The exegesis of biblical texts, the examples cited from ancient Near Eastern literature, and the analysis of archaeological material indicate that this expression may have a different meaning from that hitherto accepted.

KEYWORDS: Trito-Isaiah, dog, servant, metaphor, ritual

The concluding chapter of the Book of Isaiah begins with the speech by YHWH (Isa 66:1–4). Part of this speech condemns the people conducting worship (vv. 3–4). The biblical author uses the enigmatic expression עֶרֶף כֶּלֶב, “breaks a dog’s neck.” It is found only once in the Hebrew Bible. It is often emphasised that this is the only literary evidence of the ritual practice of sacrificing dogs from the Levant.¹ According to some scholars, Isa 66:3 could also be a reminiscence of earlier Hittite ritual practices.² Some non-Yahwistic religious practices are also indicated.³ These scholarly suggestions are sometimes accepted indiscriminately.⁴ Finally, an argument has been made from this biblical verse

1 H. Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium B.C.E. Levantine Dog Burials as an Extension of Human Mortuary Behavior,” *BASOR* 379 (2018) 28.

2 J.M. Sasson, “Isaiah LXVI 3–4a,” *VT* 26/2 (1976) 202–207.

3 D.J.A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. VI. פ–ט (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2011) 415. The literature contains opinions that the biblical author refers to “anti-Yahwistic” cults, whose rituals are mentioned in Isa 65:3b–7; 66:3–4; 66:15–17; U.F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah. Its Composition and Final Form* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2012) 496. Unfortunately, as is the case with the cited scholar, the provenance of these rituals is not indicated.

4 B.J. Collins, “The Puppy in Hittite Ritual,” *JCS* 42/2 (1990) 224.

that the Jews continued idolatrous practices, including sacrificing dogs, during the Second Temple period.⁵

This article posits that the phrase כָּלֵב עֶרֶךְ does not necessarily refer to dogs sacrificed in honour of a deity but may be a poetic term for people who act wickedly towards others. It has already been pointed out in the literature that this phrase may be an idiomatic expression, the meaning of which is not yet known.⁶ This article, therefore, puts forward a possible explanation of this expression. One of the premises that make this new interpretation possible is that כָּלֵב, “dog,” may be equivalent to עֶבֶד, “servant.” The article begins with a presentation of the *status quaestionis* of the biblical passage examined, followed by a presentation of its interpretations. The exegetical analysis comes next, highlighting the grammatical problems of Isa 66:3. An analysis of the texts using the roots נָכָה and עֶרֶךְ has been performed. This may bring one closer to an answer as to whether the suggested interpretation is correct. Perhaps “breaking a dog’s neck” is not a term for performing a mysterious ritual in which a canine is sacrificed but refers to people for whom the lives of those worse off are worthless.⁷ The article provides examples from Near Eastern literature in which the term “dog” is equivalent to “servant.” The last part of this article also seeks potential archaeological traces of a worship practice of breaking dogs’ necks in honour of some ancient deity.

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- 5 M. Edrey, “Dog Cult in Persian Period Judea,” *A Jew’s Best Friend? The Image of the Dog through Jewish History* (eds. P. Ackerman-Lieberman – R. Zalashik) (Brighton – Portland – Toronto: Sussex Academic Press 2013) 21–22. At the same time, he points out that this understanding of Isa 66:3 has already been known, cf. M. Edrey, “The Dog Burials at Achaemenid Ashkelon Revisited,” *TA* 35/2 (2008) 270. Not all scholars are willing to consider such an explanation plausible, B. Hrobon, *Ethical Dimension of Cult in the Book of Isaiah* (BZAW 418; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2010) 215. This belief may have been reinforced by the terminological link between Isa 66:3 and Isa 65:1–7, in which the biblical author refers to forbidden worship practices, P.A. Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito-Isaiah. The Structure, Growth and Authorship of Isaiah 56–66* (VTSup 62; Leiden: Brill 1995) 131–132. However, it is difficult to determine if these terminological connections are coincidental. Noting the rarity of the term קָוִיר, one can assume that the connection is intentional. On the other hand, however, only some of the expressions are repeated in both texts. Therefore, it is difficult to make a conclusive statement about the close links between the texts mentioned.
 - 6 E.U. Dim, *The Eschatological Implications of Isa 65 and 66 as the Conclusions of the Book of Isaiah* (Bern: Lang 2005) 133.
 - 7 The suggestion that כָּלֵב could mean “servant” was made by O. Margalith. He indicated that it would be appropriate to speak of a homonym in this case, O. Margalith, “Keleb: Homonym or Metaphor?,” *VT* 3/4 (1983) 494. A review of archaeological and ancient literary data on the dog and its Near Eastern and biblical symbolism is presented in G.D. Miller, “Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel: A Reassessment,” *JSOT* 32/4 (2008) 487–500; J. Lemański, “Negatywny obraz psa w Biblii,” *CTO* 1 (2011) 51–96; A. Basson, “Dog Imagery in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East,” *JS* 15/1 (2006) 92–106; J. Schwartz, “Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud,” *JJS* 55/2 (2004) 246–277; I. Breier, “Man’s Best Friend: The Comradeship between Man and Dog in the Lands of the Bible,” *JANESCU* 34 (2020) 1–21; S. Menache, “Dogs: God’s Worst Enemies?,” *Society & Animals* 5/1 (1997) 23–44; M.D. Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dogs’ (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?,” *BibInt* 17 (2009) 448–482; I. Breier, “‘Who Is This Dog?’: The Negative Images of Canines in the Lands of Bible,” *ANES* 54 (2017) 47–62.

1. *Status quaestionis*

Modern translations of the biblical text remain consistent in their rendering of the expression in question עָרַף כֶּלֶב. An overview of selected modern translations is presented below, followed by the conclusions of the analysis.

The review begins with selected English translations, starting with the King James Version: “he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck” (KJV); “he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck” (ESV); “The one who sacrifices a lamb is like one who breaks a dog’s neck” (NASB); “He that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he broke a dog’s neck” (JPS Tanakh 1917); “breaking a dog’s neck” (NAB); “whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck” (NRSV). Interestingly, some modern English translations presented pair the phrase עָרַף כֶּלֶב with the preceding זָבַח הֶשֶׁה. The New American Bible translators did not link the two expressions but showed one among several other activities condemned by YHWH. The phrases עָרַף כֶּלֶב and זָבַח הֶשֶׁה are also linked in some other translations, e.g. German: “wer ein Schaf opfert, gleicht dem, der einem Hund das Genick bricht” (Lutherbibel 2017); “Sie schlachten für mich Schafe – und zugleich opfern sie Hunde” (Gute Nachricht Bibel); “man opfert Schafe - und bricht einem Hund das Genick” (Einheitsübersetzung); Italian: “uno immola una pecora e poi strozza un cane” (CEI 2008); “sgozzano una pecora, ma strozzano anche un cane” (TILC); “uno immola una pecora e poi strozza un cane” (CEI 74); Spanish: “el que sacrifica oveja, como se degolló un perro” (JBS); as well as French: “Celui qui sacrifie un agneau est comme celui qui romprait la nuque à un chien” (LSG). Two tendencies are thus evident: translators pair the expressions זָבַח הֶשֶׁה and עָרַף כֶּלֶב or employ a comparison.

Commentators point to the predicament posed by the enigmatic and ambiguous grammatical construction used in the verse in question. There are two possible interpretations regarding the pairing of successive expressions.

A – orthodox worship and syncretism – Isa 66:3 is understood as a discussion with the priestly establishment,⁸ which had hitherto fulfilled its duties as part of worship practices. At some point, the priests’ actions raised concerns about abandoning legitimate worship in favour of alien practices⁹ by doing the unacceptable. Perhaps the biblical author is

⁸ Hanson even suggests this discussion took place between the different priestly divisions, P.D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (IBC; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1995) 250. The problematic part of this opinion is that some of the sacrifices mentioned were not prohibited by law. It is also difficult to determine which groups of priests might be involved.

⁹ J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible 19; New York: Doubleday 2003) 297; J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* (World Biblical Commentary 25; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2005) 931; Dim, *The Eschatological*, 128; Berges, *The Book of Isaiah*, 491; C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1969) 411; G.V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (NAC 15B; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman 2009) 1054; J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah. An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1993) 887. Westermann refers to a quotation from one of Justin’s works, which mentions a proclamation by the Persian king Darius to the Carthaginians to stop sacrificing humans and eating the flesh of dogs, Westermann, *Isaiah*, 414. This juxtaposition does not yet suggest that breaking a dog’s neck was a special ritual practice observed by the Carthaginians.

likening orthodox worship to false worship, which was part of the beliefs of other peoples living in the ancient Levant.¹⁰

B – orthodox worship and social justice – the priests' behaviour is ambiguous, and one suspects them of being capable of morally evil acts in addition to conducting worship practices. These include putting a person to death or breaking a dog's neck.¹¹ Criticism of this social group can also lead to downplaying the validity of engaging in worship practices.¹² This interpretation is more veiled, for the biblical author is not necessarily seeking to reject worship practices but rather to encourage them while maintaining social justice and an adequate moral life.¹³ It is not so much a matter of reducing the position of the temple and worship but rather a reminder of the superiority of YHWH over the worship promoted by the priests.¹⁴

The new interpretation put forward in this article fits into the second group of proposals for interpreting the passage in question. Isa 66:3 mentions priests (or socially superior individuals) who perform ritual practices and behave morally wickedly, as evidenced by the metaphorical utterances in the second of each pair of expressions ("kills a man/breaks a dog's neck").¹⁵ The proposal highlights the partial lack of worshipful context for some of the expressions in v. 3ab. In exegetical studies, the prevailing view is that the whole verse has a sacrificial context.¹⁶

The difference between the possible ways of interpreting this passage is thus apparent. While the first interpretation points to the possible incorporation of elements of worship alien to the Israelites, the second proposition refers not only to ritual but also to social issues, including social justice. Some of the expressions in Isa 66:3 can be read as metaphors for actions aimed at the underprivileged (עֲרֵךְ כֶּלֶב, מַכֵּה אִישׁ). This interpretation is made possible, for instance, by reference to the tradition of reading successive pairs

Furthermore, if the prophet condemned the sacrifice of dogs, why would he refer to the practice promoted by the Carthaginians? If YHWH's adversaries were Jerusalem priests or Persians, such a remark is unnecessary.

10 J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998) 668.

11 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 297; Westermann, *Isaiah*, 412; Watts, *Isaiah*, 931.

12 Dim, *The Eschatological*, 129.

13 Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 158; Hanson, *Isaiah* 248; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 668–669.

14 P.V. Niskanen, *Isaiah 56–66* (Berit Olam. Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press 2014) 93–94; Berges, *The Book of Isaiah*, 486.

15 J.M. Sasson ruled out the metaphorical use of כֶּלֶב, focusing on the use of the Hebrew word "dog" in the context of sacred prostitution, Sasson, "Isaiah," 201.

16 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 297; Westermann, *Isaiah*, 412–413; Dim, *The Eschatological*, 129. There are also contrary positions, such as that of A.E. Gardner, who believes that Isa 66:1–4 is actually based on a contrast between the poor and oppressed and people who are much better off or those marked by arrogance and pride, A.E. Gardner, "Isaiah 66:1–4: Condemnation of Temple and Sacrifice or Contrast Between the Arrogant and the Humble?," *RB* 113/4 (2006) 506–528. However, the author did not use extrabiblical arguments, either textual or archaeological, to justify her claim.

of participial expressions together with the comparative participle כ. The ancient texts (1QIsa^{a17}; LXX¹⁸; Vg¹⁹; TgJ²⁰) are witnesses to this tradition:

1QIsa^a:

שוחט שור כמכה איש זובח השא עורפ כלב מעלה מנחה מד חוזיר מזכיר לבונה מברך און גמ המה בחרו
בדרכיהמה ובשקוציהמה נפשמה חפצה

LXX:

ὁ δὲ ἄνομος ὁ θύων μοι μόσχον ὡς ὁ ἀποκτείνων κύναι, ὁ δὲ ἀναφέρων σεμιδαλιὺν ὡς αἷμα ὕειον, ὁ διδοὺς λίβανον εἰς μνημόσυνον ὡς βλάσφημος· καὶ οὗτοι ἐξελέξαντο τὰς ὁδοὺς αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ βδελύγματα αὐτῶν, ἃ ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτῶν ᾗθελήσεν

TgJ:

נבֿיס תורא כקטיל גבר דבֿח אימר כנקיף כלב מסקי קורבן דם תזירא קורבן מתנההון מתנת אונס אף אינון אתרעיא
באורסתהון ובשקוציהון נפשמהון אתרעיא

Vg:

Qui immolat bovem **quasi qui** interficiat virum, qui mactat pecus **quasi qui** excerebret canem, qui offert oblationem **quasi qui** sanguinem suillum offerat, qui recordatur turis **quasi qui** benedicat idolo, haec omnia elegerunt in viis suis, et in abominationibus suis anima eorum delectata est

Some scholars, however, suggest replacing the comparative participle with a conjunction ו (*waw*)²¹ or treating it as a group of synonymous expressions.²² These scholars point out that comparing an element of official worship to one whose practice is forbidden would constitute an attack on orthodox sacrificial worship itself²³ or mean confusing it with elements of alien worship.²⁴ This position’s problem is that it maintains a biblical interpretation as official for all Jews of the Second Temple period. The artificially manufactured vision of orthodox sacrificial worship stipulates that whatever does not fit within its framework is unquestionably forbidden. Scholars pointing to syncretism in the activities of the priests also point out that similar practices are rejected by biblical authors in other inspired texts (e.g. Isa 65:3–5).²⁵ The problem with this argument is that the prohibition of sacrificing dogs does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, and similar worship practices in the ancient Near East are difficult to find. The exegetes in favour of the MT reading, while

17 *The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a). A New Edition* (eds. D. Parry – E. Qimron) (STDJ 32; Leiden: Brill 1999) 106–107; *Scrolls from Qumran Cave 1. The Great Isaiah Scroll. The Order of the Community. The Pesher of Habakkuk* (eds. J.C. Trever – F.M. Cross) (Jerusalem: The Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and The Shrine of the Book 1972) 121.

18 *Septuaginta*, <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/LXX/ISA.66> [access: 9.08.2024].

19 *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/VUL/ISA.66> [access: 9.08.2024].

20 Niskanen, *Isaiah*, 94; B.D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum. Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* (ArBib 11; Wilmington, DE: Glazier 1987) 126.

21 Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 156.

22 Niskanen, *Isaiah*, 95.

23 Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 156.

24 Niskanen, *Isaiah*, 95.

25 Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 156.

rejecting the readings of 1QIsa^a and the LXX, which allow the reading of Isa 66:3 with the comparative participle כּ, stress that this is an addition to the Hebrew text. At the same time, they acknowledge that the best possible interpretation is to point to accusing priests of syncretism.²⁶ This study, however, argues for the tradition of combining pairs of participles using the conjunction כּ. This is motivated by the ancient tradition of reading Isa 66:3 and the analysis of the expressions מכח־איש and ערף כלב, which are not necessarily used in the context of worship.

2. Exegetical Analysis of Isa 66:3

2.1. Synoptic Table

Author’s translation	TM(BHS)
He who kills a bull [is like one who] kills a man (a)	שׁוֹחֵט הַשּׁוֹר מִכַּח־אִישׁ
He who offers a sheep [is like one who] breaks a dog’s neck (b)	זֹבֵחַ הַשֶּׁה עֵרַף כָּלֵב
Sacrificing pig’s blood, burning incense, blessing idols (c)	מַעֲלֵה מִנְחָה דֹם־חֲזִיר לְבִנֵּי מִזְבִּיר לְבָנֵי מִכְרֹךְ אֱנוֹן
They have chosen their paths, and their souls delight in their abominations (d)	גַּם־הֵמָּה בָּחָרוּ בְּדִרְכֵיהֶם וּבִשְׂקֻצֵיהֶם נַפְשָׁם חִפְצָה

2.2. Isa 66:1–4 as a Textual Unit

There is no consensus among scholars on the division of Isa 66 into smaller units. A division into five sections, which are separate poems, is often proposed.²⁷ The subdivision by genre is different.²⁸ The academic literature on the division of Isa 66 also includes the view that this chapter is a single unit.²⁹ The most straightforward division isolates the two

26 Dim, *The Eschatological*, 133–134.
27 The division into five parts is not uniform. One such division was proposed by Webster: vv. 1–4, 5–11, 12–17, 18–22, 23–24, E.C. Webster, “A Rhetorical Study of Isaiah 66,” *JSOT* 34 (1986) 93. A different division into five parts was suggested by Gärtner: vv. 1–4, 5–14, 15–17, 18–21, 22–23, while pointing to v. 24 as a later addition, J. Gärtner, “The Kabod of JHWH. A Key Isaianic Theme from the Assyrian Empire to the Eschaton,” *The History of Isaiah. The Formation of the Book and Its Presentation of the Past* (eds. J. Stromberg – J. Todd Hibbard) (FAT 150; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021) 433–436. Westermann put forward yet another: vv. 1–4, 5, 6–16, 17, 18, 24, Westermann, *Isaiah*, 411–429. Berges also divides Isa 66 into five parts but disagrees that v. 5 is the beginning of the second part, pointing to the continuity of thought in vv. 5–6 with what is said in vv. 1–4, Berges, *The Book of Isaiah*, 485. This exegete follows the text’s theme and the correspondence of (only some) terms and pays little attention to its grammar. He does not enter into a polemic with the frequently used criterion in the division of the biblical text, which is the imperative שְׁמַעוּ (v. 5). This criterion is used not only in the prophetic texts but always opens a new section (e.g. 2 Sam 20:16; Job 21:2; 34:2; 37:2; Ps. 49:1; Prov 4:1).
28 Webster, “A Rhetorical,” 93.
29 Webster, “A Rhetorical,” 93.

main parts of Isa 66: vv. 1–4 and vv. 5–24³⁰ or vv. 1–16 and vv. 17–24.³¹ Goldingay separates the section vv. 1–6 from Isa 66:1–17. He also indicates an internal division of v. 3 (vv. 3a–3b–4), linking it through the subject matter (YHWH’s declaration to wicked-doers) with v. 4.³² This treatment is perhaps structurally the closest to what is presented in this study. Exegetes also propose dividing Isa 66 into three units (vv. 1–6; 7–14; 15–24).³³ Some scholars favour separating vv. 1–4 as one section.³⁴ However, they do not always treat it as a thematically compact unit.³⁵

This article proposes isolating Isa 66:1–4 as a separate section.³⁶ The introductory phrase of the oracle: “Thus says the Lord” (כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה – v. 1) opens this short section. The previous section ends similarly: “Says the Lord” (אָמַר יְהוָה – Isa 65:25). The device used by the biblical author allows for a delimitation, thus separating Isa 65 and 66.³⁷ The biblical author addresses social issues in Isa 65, combining them with elements of creation theology, to repeat them in a similar fashion in Isa 66:1–4. The difference between Isa 66:1–4 and the preceding text is also apparent. Isa 65 presents the idyllic vision of happiness on earth that will come about through the blessing of YHWH. The situation is different in Isa 66:1–4, with its ominous emphasis directed against the wicked, who offer sacrifices but persecute the defenceless and the worse off.³⁸

The Isa 66:1–4 section culminates in v. 4, which thematically ties in with v. 3d through YHWH’s announcement of the coming of an ominous time for all whose behaviour – regarding worship and social interaction – is scandalous. The verses are also linked grammatically, for the formula “They have chosen [...], I also will choose [...]” (בָּרְכוּתָם – גַּם־אֲנִי) indicates cause-and-effect relationships. The deviant group is also condemned in v. 17, but no element connects it with v. 3. The wicked people are also mentioned in v. 24, although this is already a foreshadowing of their disastrous defeat rather than a representation of the forms of worship they practised. In v. 5, another prophetic speech by Isaiah begins: “Hear the word of the Lord” (שְׁמַעוּ דְּבַר־יְהוָה). While Isa 66:1–4 speaks about the poor in the third person

30 M.A. Sweeney, “Prophetic Exegesis in Isaiah 65–66,” *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah. Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (eds. C.C. Broyles – C.A. Evans) (VTSup 70; Brill: Leiden 1997) 462. The same author, in another paper, provides a similar proposal for a division: vv. 1–5, 6–24, cf. Sweeney, *Isaiah 40–66* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2016) 357–365.

31 Webster, “A Rhetorical,” 93–94.

32 J. Goldingay, *Isaiah 56–66: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; London: Bloomsbury Academic 2014) 478.

33 Webster, “A Rhetorical,” 94–103; Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 153.

34 Smith, *Isaiah*, 1056; Motyer, *Isaiah*, 887.

35 Westermann, *Isaiah*, 412; Dim, *The Eschatological*, 117–118.

36 Cf. Sweeney, “Prophetic Exegesis,” 462. This textual unit (vv. 1–4) has also been divided into smaller sections in the history of exegesis due to the likely textual tradition from which they are supposed to have originated. Accordingly, Trito-Isaiah was indicated as the source of vv. 1–2 and the Hellenistic textual tradition for vv. 3–4 (Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction*, 153). Pointing to such a late redaction is justified by a negative reference to alien worship practices, although these had already been initiated in the past.

37 G.A.F. Knight, *The New Israel. A Commentary of the Book of Isaiah 56–66* (ITC 5; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1985) 103.

38 Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 371.

singular (הָ – v. 2), YHWH directly addresses a group of oppressed people in the following verses (e.g. אֲחֵיכֶם – v. 5).³⁹

The expression עַרְף כָּלֵב is found in Isa 66:1–4. It is important to point out two issues raised in it: the omnipresence and omnipotence of YHWH. God is depicted as perfect and present everywhere (v. 1a), for whom no temple is required since the world is His dwelling (v. 1b), and creation is the temple.⁴⁰ God performs the act of creation, and to Him as Creator, all things belong (v. 2a). In spite of his omnipotence and power, God does not support the strong but turns first and foremost to the flawed, poor and disadvantaged (v. 2b). In the following sentences, he enumerates all those who while undertaking ritual practices, forget the disadvantaged, acting to their detriment. They piously offer sacrifices while despising other people (v. 3ab). Their worship practice is impeccable: they bring food offerings and burn incense (v. 3c), but they do so for show and take great pride in it. They have chosen their path in life (v. 3d), which is not according to God's will (v. 4c). Therefore, God will repay them accordingly (v. 4a), for they have not heard His voice in the poor and oppressed (v. 4b). Interestingly, those who conduct the practices mentioned may be part of the chosen people. The biblical author enumerates rituals not forbidden by Jewish law,⁴¹ hence the easy conclusion that he may be referring to the social situation among the Israelites.⁴² It is difficult to identify unequivocally the group to whom the prophet's criticism may have applied. Perhaps these were the priests whom Isaiah warns of the severe punishment laid down by YHWH.⁴³ This would align with the identification of the oppressed as people who have been excluded from temple worship. This alienation is not only religious but also social and economic.⁴⁴ The division outlined also fits with Isaiah's concept of enemies. Whereas in Deutero-Isaiah, the enemy was the Babylonian empire, the next part of the book bears witness to the friction and unrest within the chosen people.⁴⁵ Given the connections between Isa 65–66 and Isa 1 (especially vv. 10–17), it can be presumed that the people of tainted reputation are the members of the chosen people.⁴⁶ Perhaps the warnings are directed at

39 Oswalt points out that the wicked are not indicated as the addressees at any point in YHWH's speech, and hence, there can be no question of a change in the recipient of God's message, Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 665. However, there is no doubt that in Isa 66:1–4, the poor and oppressed man was not considered the addressee of YHWH's speech, so it is possible to point to some changes in the biblical text and use them during delimitation.

40 Gärtner, "The Kabod," 433. This problem is viewed differently by A.E. Gardner, "Isaiah 66:1–4," 509–512.

41 Gardner, "Isaiah 66:1–4," 518.

42 Hrobon, *Ethical*, 213.

43 J. Blenkinsopp, "The Servant and the Servants in Isaiah and the Formation of the Book," *Essays on the Book of Isaiah* (FAT 128; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2019) 23.

44 J. Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book. Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (FAT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2006) 69–70.

45 W. Ma, *Until the Spirit Comes. The Spirit of God in the Book of Isaiah* (JSOTSuppl 271; Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press 1999) 142–144; A. Zawadzki, "Sprawiedliwy ginie, a nikt się tym nie przejmuję (Iz 57,10) – obraz judejskiej elity w inwektywach Trito-Izajasza (Iz 56–57). Kryzys przywództwa w prowincji Jehud w połowie V wieku przed Chr.," *Bib.An* 13/2 (2023) 251–295.

46 Sweeney's intertextual analyses, among others, have made such an observation possible, Sweeney "Prophetic Exegesis," 464–465. However, the author admits elsewhere in his article that the words of instruction

those who undertook the task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, hinted by the reference to building activities in YHWH’s speech (66:1–2a).⁴⁷ The reference to the community responsible for renovating the temple tabernacle could indicate the difficulties faced by the poorer people, to whom the economic hardship of the building activity in Jerusalem may have been transferred. Scholars have, moreover, presented arguments for the redaction of this part of the prophetic book in the Second Temple period.⁴⁸ Sasson suggests otherwise, stating that someone outside Israel observed these practices.⁴⁹ However, the biblical author appears to emphasise the tension between fulfilling worship duties and immoral behaviour.⁵⁰ However, this still does not explain why scholars point to the potential mention of sacrificing dogs in Isa 66:3.

2.3. Analysis of Isa 66:3

The term כלב is translated as “dog.”⁵¹ In biblical texts, the term is often used as an insult⁵² or to emphasise someone’s faithfulness, which is why it is also interpreted as “servant.”⁵³ This solution may be an argument for a change in the understanding of Isa 66:3. The term may thus have become part of a metaphorical expression for an action harmful to someone of a lower standing. In this case, someone who “breaks the necks of dogs” does not cause physical harm to an animal but performs some act that definitively harms weaker and disadvantaged people.

If, then, the biblical author were to use the term כלב in a metaphorical sense, what might his purpose be? He could be mentioning instances of abuse in the cultic and public sphere at the same time. It seems that by talking about those who “break the necks of dogs,” he is not referring to any ritual that he may have witnessed or that was gaining popularity among the Judahites. The problem is more likely to concern public life and the relationship

would have been addressed to an unknown audience, Sweeney “Prophetic Exegesis,” 473. His commentary on the Book of Isaiah expresses similar doubts when he draws attention to the corresponding expressions, Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 381–384.

47 It is difficult to find a reference to other temples in this biblical text; hence, scholars usually assume that Isaiah is discussing the Jerusalem Temple staff, cf. *Isaiah*, 295; Dim, *The Eschatological*, 127–128. The question remains as to which exact moment of the Second Temple period is meant. This question goes well beyond the scope of this article, and the reader can find more suggestions in Watts, *Isaiah*, 928; Berges, *The Book of Isaiah*, 452.

48 Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 378–379; Sweeney, “Prophetic Exegesis,” 472–473.

49 Sasson, “Isaiah,” 199–207.

50 Hrobon, *Ethical*, 214.

51 G.J. Botterweck, “כלב,” *TDOT* VII, 147; D.W. Thomas, “Kelebh ‘dog’: Its Origin and Some Usages of It in the Old Testament,” *VT* 10/4 (1960) 410–427. J.M. Hutton describes an interesting interpretation concerning the expression אֵשׁ כָּלֵב, “dog’s head” (2 Sam 3:8), which supposedly does not refer to a dog at all but metaphorically refers to the shape of a human skull similar to that of an animal. However, compelling evidence for such a claim is lacking, cf. J.M. Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog: Self-Abasement and Invective in the Amarna Letters, the Lachish Letters, and 2 Sm 3:8,” *ZA* 15/16 (2003) 3.

52 Gardner, “Isaiah 66:1–4,” 522–523. The Greek term κύων, “dog,” has a similar usage in the LXX, for example, in Ps. 22:22; LSJ, 1015.

53 M.J. Fretz – R.I. Panitz, “Caleb,” *ABD*, 1214–1215; Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 3; Winton Thomas, “Kelebh ‘dog,’” 414–415.

between a servant and a master. Indeed, it appears that the biblical author is metaphorically referring to the difficult relationship between a ruler or a high-born person and a servant or a person of lower station. The term כלב could thus correspond to איש found in the first pair of phrases in v. 3ab. This link can be illustrated as follows:

αα – שוחט השור

ββ – מכה-איש

αβ – זובח השא

ββ – ערף כלב

In this system, there are two constituents composed of two parts, α and β. Grammatically, they do not correspond fully. While the first part (α) of the two constituents (a and b) consists of a participial root (שחט, זבח) and masculine nouns (שור, שה), a clear difference is seen in the second part. In the second part β, the biblical author uses נכה participle Hifil in the construct state with the noun איש. This expression corresponds to v. 2b: נכה-רוח, which can be rendered literally as “bruised in spirit.” Here, the scholar of the Hebrew text also deals with metaphorical language, for the expression can be understood as “repentant in the spirit [of God?].”⁵⁴ A terminological correspondence between v. 2b and v. 3a is thus apparent. On the one hand, the biblical author refers to a man who obeys God’s will and the precepts of the law, describing him as “poor” (עני)⁵⁵ and “bruised/repentant in the spirit [of God]” (v. 2b).⁵⁶ On the other hand, there are those who, in spite of the sacrifices offered, persecute and oppress the “bruised/repentant in the spirit [of God]” and, in addition, do not earn this noble designation, and the biblical author refers to them as מכה-איש.

The appearance of two terms to describe an inferior or oppressed social group in Isa 66:2 supports the metaphorical use of כלב. The play on words is apparent, making it possible to emphasise a fundamental problem in the community of believers: when offering a sacrifice, one must remember that one must also act towards others according to God’s will (Prov 28:9).

The proposed use of the term כלב as a synonym for the word “servant” is also supported by the fact that a servile formula, similar to that used, for example, in ancient epistolography, is also found in the Bible. Hazael, the future king of Aram, addressed Elisha during their meeting by referring to himself as a “servant” (עבד) a “dog” (כלב) (2 Kings 8:13). A similar formula also appears in 1 Chron 17:19 (עבדך וכלבך), although this has become the subject of wider debate. However, there are many indications that this formula could be rendered

54 Blenkinsopp translates the phrase similarly, juxtaposing it with שפל-רוח, “humble in spirit” (Isa 57:15), *Isaiah*, 296. Other solutions to this problem are also proposed, such as the literal translation “broken and needing repairing,” Knight, *The New Israel*, 104.

55 The term עני appears earlier in Isa. The biblical author refers to it as two groups of people: those who suffer war or exile (10:30; 14:32; 49:13; 51:21; 54:11) and those who live in poverty (3:14, 15; 10:2; 32:7; 41:17; 58:7).

56 The terminological correspondence does not constitute a grammatical correspondence between these expressions. While in the expression נכה-רוח, the term רוח is given in the subjective genitive, the expression מכה-איש uses איש rendered in the objective genitive.

as “your dog/servant.”⁵⁷ These passages require a separate study, although the similar use of the term כלב in Isa 66 and 2 Kings is already apparent.

2.4. The Root נכה in the Hebrew Bible

An argument for a new reading of the expression ערף כלב is the biblical author’s use of the ambiguous root נכה. Many modern translations include a phrase indicating a strike resulting in death. This is not necessarily an overinterpretation but how successive generations of translators have dealt with this ambiguous term. Reading the expression מכה־איש no longer as “killing a man” but as “striking a man” not only changes the meaning of this phrase but also makes it possible to suppose that the biblical author links it to the phrase ערף כלב studied here. It is worth mentioning that scholars have repeatedly questioned the validity of translating נכה as “to kill.”⁵⁸ Some, however, suggest that in Isa 66:3aβ, the phrase should be read as causing the death of a man since it is also found in Ex 21:12, a text relevant to the application of the law.⁵⁹ The translation of the expression מכה־איש, therefore, appears to require more attention. It is interesting to note, for example, that this formula does not appear in the LXX Isa 66:3.⁶⁰ However, there should be no doubt that by employing the term נכה, the biblical author attempts, in many cases, to indicate an unambiguous act of aggression.⁶¹ In several texts, it is difficult to determine if this term refers to a use of force that always results in the loss of life of another person or some group of persons. The assumption that such a strike always results in death may have led some scholars to believe there was a ritual whereby dogs were killed by having their necks broken. Thus, it is important to note the different meaning of the term נכה than that which has hitherto prevailed in the translations of Isa 66:3. The term נכה is found in the Hebrew Bible five hundred times; hence, the limitation of the study of the semantic field of this root should be understandable. There are several contexts for its use. These include the aforementioned strike, which does not necessarily end in the death of the person receiving it. This group of texts includes the narrative of Moses’ early activity in Egypt when he noticed two Hebrews fighting (Ex 2:13). The biblical author does not suppose anyone in this situation lost his life. Earlier, however, having seen a Hebrew tormented by an Egyptian soldier, Moses is not unmoved and kills the Egyptian, then hides him to avoid punishment for the murder.

⁵⁷ Margalith, “Keleb,” 493.

⁵⁸ Knight, *The New Israel*, 105.

⁵⁹ Hrobon, *Ethical*, 215.

⁶⁰ D.A. Baer points out an ethical difficulty: sacrifices offered to YHWH mean nothing when they do not align with the sacrificer’s moral attitude. If this is the case, such a sacrifice can be compared to some of the most repulsive acts for ancient Jews, such as contact with pig’s blood or with a dog’s corpse, cf. Baer, *When We All Go Home. Translation and Theology in LXX Isaiah 56–66* (JSOTSup 318; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2001) 71. However, he does not explain why the translator of the biblical text into Greek omitted the expression מכה־איש. In the Aquila translation, the Hebrew root נכה is rendered as τῆπειν, “to strike,” *An Index to Aquila. Greek-Hebrew, Hebrew-Greek, Latin-Hebrew with the Syriac and Armenian Evidence* (eds. J. Reider – N. Turner) (VTSup 12; Leiden: Brill 1966) 241. In view of this, it is thus difficult to justify why the LXX translator omitted this phrase.

⁶¹ Clines, “נכה,” *DCHV*, 684–691; Koehler – Baumgartner – Stamm, “נכה,” 655–656..

This is how the story is usually read, although an unconscious man can also be hidden in the sand. However, the matter is later clarified by one of the arguing men, drawing attention to the transgression Moses committed when he “killed” (הרג) an Egyptian soldier (Ex 2:14). This short passage alone contains two ways of reading the term נכה. Moreover, it is difficult to devise any specific criteria that would be a stable determinant of how the term should be read, so the context in which it occurs is essential.

An interesting example of the use of נכה is a legal case which concerns a situation where the wife of one of the men in a fight seizes his adversary by the genitals. This aggressive action by the woman does not lead to the man's death but causes serious damage to his health (Deut 25:11–12). The root נכה of the verb in the conjugation Hifil is used twice in the Book of Isaiah. It first appears in the Third Servant Song, who has not yet died as a result of the wounds sustained from the numerous blows, although the emerging image of the suffering man is gruesome. The second time this term appears is in a warning concerning the proper exercise of the penitential practice of fasting. In order to exercise it properly, care must be taken to ensure that it is not practised at the same time as doing moral evil (Isa 58:4).

It is also worth considering the function of the participle Hifil מכה. This linguistic construction occurs sixteen times in the Hebrew Bible, and, as with the verb, its translation is not unambiguous. Perhaps the only certainty about the term נכה in this form is that it always refers to a violent move, but ultimately, this move does not lead to the death of the person against whom it is made. In the Hebrew Bible, מכה occurs in the aforementioned narrative of Moses' early activity in Egypt before the revelation of YHWH to him. The biblical author relays information about the dramatic situation witnessed by the future chief of the people when he saw an Egyptian soldier mistreating one of his fellow Hebrews (Ex 2:11–15). This scene sums up the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt, where they suffer humiliation. The use of the term נכה would emphatically stress their miserable position. Thus, it can be suggested that the biblical author is emphasising not only the violence suffered by the Hebrews who remained in Egyptian slavery but also their extremely difficult sociological situation – they are humiliated by the stronger.⁶² The term נכה is used to illustrate social relations, which abound in aggression that does not lead to the loss of life after all.

Also ambiguous is the use of the term מכה in the participle Hifil in the list of laws concerning the organisation of a network of cities where people who have accidentally led to someone's death can seek asylum (Num 36:11, 15, 30; Josh 20:3, 9). In these biblical passages, the root רצח in the participle *Qal* “murderer” is additionally used. The use of this phrase may indicate that נכה did not explicitly refer to such violent action that resulted in someone's death. The term appears in the description of the plague of changing the water of the Nile into blood (Ex 7:17). The striking with the staff (בַּמִּטָּה מִכָּה) is intended to have the effect of bringing the plague upon Egypt and turning the Nile into a rushing torrent

62 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia. Wstęp-Przekład z oryginału-komentarz* (NKB 2; Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła 2009) 126.

of blood. The mere striking with the staff does not yet constitute this change. Moreover, only in a few of the biblical verses in which the term מכה appears can one be certain that this striking leads to the inevitable death of the one to whom it is inflicted (Ex 21:12; 2 Sam 14:7; 2 Kings 6:22).

2.5. The Root ערף in the Hebrew Bible

The root ערף in verb form in the sense of "to break, to break the neck" appears in the Hebrew Bible six times.⁶³ The biblical authors use the term when giving guidelines for the redemption of the firstborn ass (Ex 13:13; 34:20). Another legal disposition is how to avenge a slain person when it is uncertain who committed the crime. A heifer is to be sacrificed, and its neck is to be broken (Deut 21:4, 6). The verb is also used in Hos 10:2 when the prophet predicts the future actions of YHWH. Hosea mentions the altars on which idolatrous sacrifices were offered, due to which they will be broken (Hos 10:2). Perhaps the biblical author has in mind the destruction of the horns attached to the altars.

In the case of the guidelines for the redemption of the donkey found in Ex 13:13 and 34:20, there is no mention of blood, which may even raise some doubts when it comes to animal sacrifice. Presumably, breaking the neck of an animal considered unclean, such as the donkey was for the Israelites, was intended to result in a situation where blood remains in the animal's body; hence, it cannot be consumed.⁶⁴ However, later Greek translations suggest that the animal dies as a result of bloodletting.⁶⁵ Despite the lack of a clear answer, the context in which the term ערף is used remains cultic.

Another legal case that allows for "breaking the neck" is a situation where a murder has been discovered, but it is not known who committed it (Deut 21:1–9). In this case, "the elders of the city which is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer [...] and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley" (v. 3–4). Again, there is no bleeding from the body of the killed animal. The absence of animal blood is supposed to mean that the inhabitants of the city which was nearest to the human corpse found are not responsible for the man's death. No instructions are given for when a heifer is not available, which shows that the author of the provision did not take such an inconvenience into account. One can, therefore, hardly look for a substitute such as a dog here.

Another text in which the biblical author uses ערף in the sense of "to break the neck" is Hos 10:2. In this case, the altar (מזבח) can hardly have a neck, hence the translation does not include this word. The target of YHWH's attack would become the altars the Israelites had erected for other gods. The chosen people, by failing to show gratitude to YHWH and

⁶³ Clines, "ערף," *DCH* VI, 565; W. Gesenius, "ערף," *Hebraisches und Aramaisches Handwörterbuch Über das Alte Testament* (Berlin: Springer 1962) 621.

⁶⁴ Lemański, *Księga Wypisów*, 311.

⁶⁵ J.W. Wevers, *LXX. Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (SCS 30; Atlanta, GA: Scholar Press 1990) 201; D.M. Gurtner, *Exodus. A Commentary on the Greek Text of Codex Vaticanus* (SCS; Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill 2013) 327.

continually misappropriating His love by worshipping gods, provoked God's wrath. In the future, this was to lead to the destruction of the objects of worship.

The cited examples of the use of the term עָרַף make it impossible to sustain the claim of a ritual during which dogs were sacrificed, which was supposedly practised by the ancient Israelites. If this was the case, it would be necessary to indicate the possible significance of such a ritual for Israelite religiousness, the manner in which this ritual was performed, and the theological sense of this hypothetical practice. Defenders of the claim about the possible sacrifice of dogs by breaking their necks base their argument on the meaning of the root עָרַף, forgetting other possible explanations of the passage Isa 66:3. The term עָרַף does not only appear in biblical texts of a cultic nature. This expression in Isa 66:3b was already difficult to translate for the Greek authors, who used the term ἀποκτείνω "to kill" or "to condemn to death."⁶⁶ The Greek verb also takes on a metaphorical meaning in some New Testament texts. Thus, in Eph. 2:16, it already signifies the destruction of a certain inner reality in man, and in Rom 7:11, it refers to death in a spiritual and moral sense. This example makes it clear that a given verb can have different meanings. This also applies to the Hebrew term עָרַף.

3. Analysis of Archaeological Material and Near Eastern Literary Sources

3.1. Archaeological Material Concerning the Burial of Dogs and Possible Sacrifices of the Animal

The debate over when humans first tamed the dog and domesticated the animal has a long history. Researchers argue not only about the time when humans supposedly did this but also about the place where the dog might have first become a member of a family and found its place next to the hearth.⁶⁷ The history of the relationship between man and dog is similar in different places and times.⁶⁸ A review of archaeological data on graves containing the remains of individual canines or groups of them may make it easier to answer the question of whether Isa 66:3 indeed refers to some ritual practice known in the ancient Near East.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ H.G. Liddell – R. Scott, "ἀποκτείνω," *LSJ* X, 205.

⁶⁷ Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs," 489; M. Nikzad – I. Rezaie – M. Khalili, "Dog Burials in Ancient Iran," *IrAnt* 55 (2020) 49–50. The stretch of this process over time is very well illustrated by a map showing zooarchaeological evidence of human-dog interactions over several millennia BC, M. Price – J. Meier – B. Arbuckle, "Canine Economies of the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean," *JEA* 46/2 (2021) 82.

⁶⁸ Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, "Dog Burials in Ancient Iran," 50.

⁶⁹ The discussion among archaeologists also revealed serious difficulties in collating archaeological data and textual evidence, C. Çakırlar *et al.*, "Persian Period Dog Burials in the Levant: New Evidence from Tell El-Burak (Lebanon) and a Reconsideration of the Phenomenon," *Archaeozoology of the Near East X. Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium on the Archaeozoology of South-Western Asia and Adjacent Areas* (eds. B. De Cupere – V. Linseele – S. Hamilton-Dyer) (ANESSup 44, Leuven: Peeters 2013) 260. Dog burials do not necessarily indicate that these mammals were venerated by humans. An example of such a phenomenon is the mummification of dogs in ancient Egypt, with a simultaneous lack of worship of this animal, C. Kitagawa,

Some researchers point to possible cultic functions of dog graves. These animals were usually laid in graves after their natural death.⁷⁰ Dog burials can be classified into several groups: graves in which only dogs were buried; graves in which other animals were also buried;⁷¹ or graves in which a dog was buried alongside a human.⁷² It is presumed that the person next to whom the dog(s) were buried was their owner. This issue is still debatable, as researchers are unsure why people were placed in one grave together with dogs.⁷³ Perhaps this was a display of pragmatism by the ancients; since the dog was the owner’s property during their lifetime, it remained so even after their death. Dogs may also have had a defensive function in the afterlife. This may be indicated by the fact that the animal is an attribute of chthonic deities. Perhaps the ancients, by burying dogs together with humans, emphasised their affection for these animals. An unequivocal answer seems impossible. Archaeologists face a similar problem with interpretation when they discover animal bones in a cultic context, i.e. within a temple complex.⁷⁴

The discovery of dog graves within a temple complex (e.g. the Isin temple) may suggest the use of these animals in temple worship. Studies showed that these dogs had fractured fore or hind limbs. However, it is not certain whether this was the direct cause of death or whether these fractures had some ritual function. It is possible that these limbs were only

“Tomb of the Dogs in Gebel Asyut Al-Gharbi (Middle Egypt, Late to Ptolemaic/Roman Period): Preliminary Result on the Canid Remains,” *Archaeozoology of the Near East X. Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium on the Archaeozoology of South-Western Asia and Adjacent Areas* (eds. B. De Cupere – V. Linseele – S. Hamilton-Dyer) (ANESSup 44, Leuven: Peeters 2013) 343. Dog worship was, however, recorded in the late New Kingdom period, Botterweck, “*כלב*,” *TDOT* VII, 148; Basson, “Dog Imagery,” 98.

70 Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 24–25. An interesting find is the Isin cemetery, where 33 dog skeletons were found, with a significant number identified as skeletons of very young dogs, S. Nett, “The Dogs of the Healing Goddess Gula in the Archaeological and Textual Record of Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Fierce Lions, Angry Mice and Fat-tailed Sheep. Animal Encounters in the Ancient Near East* (eds. L. Recht – C. Tsouparopoulou) (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research 2021) 57–58.

71 An interesting finding is the discovery of a bone from the rib of a goat or sheep, which bears an inscription written in Greek: *παρὰ κυνὸς ὀστέον* [ν--], “bone from a dog.” This is only part of the inscription, so one can only assume that it may have been part of an ancient incantation, H.M. Cotton *et al.* (eds.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. A Multi-Lingual Corpus of the Inscriptions from Alexander to Muhammad*. IV. *Iudaea/Idumaea* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2018) [part 2. 3325–3978] 1192.

72 Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, “Dog Burials,” 52; Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 20–21. Dog bones were also found in Jewish ossuaries. An example is the turn-of-the-era ossuary of Simon, who described himself as the builder of the temple. However, it is uncertain whether this refers to the Jerusalem Temple or another. Bones of a man, a woman, and a dog were found in the ossuary, cf. H.M. Cotton *et al.* (eds.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. A Multi-Lingual Corpus of the Inscriptions from Alexander to Muhammad*. I. *Jerusalem* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2010) [part 1. 1–704] 98.

73 Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, “Dog Burials,” 56. A list of reasons why dogs were buried with humans is cited by Edrey, “Dog Cult,” 12.

74 Three possible answers are given: the bones are the remains of a sacrifice made to the gods; the bones are the remnants of the meals of people who resided in the temples or in their immediate vicinity; the bones are the remnants of a ritual during which a deity and a human consumed a meal, Z. Wygnańska, “Equid and Dog Burials in the Ritual Landscapes of Bronze Age Syria and Mesopotamia,” *Aram* 29/1 (2017) 142.

broken after death.⁷⁵ The only site where, among other remains, graves of dogs with broken necks have also been discovered is Tel Haror (Israel). Perhaps the biblical author was referring to some Canaanite burial ritual.⁷⁶ The graves were discovered on the site of a temple founded during the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1500 BC). The cult context is, therefore, clear, but it has later undergone some modifications.⁷⁷ Decapitated dog remains from a later period were discovered at Tell el-Hesi (Israel). The find is dated to the late Persian or early Hellenistic period.⁷⁸ The excavation report does not in any way suggest that the dogs buried at this site were to be placed in graves as part of a cultic ritual.⁷⁹

Dog burials from the Persian and Hellenistic periods in the Levant are attested at a number of sites.⁸⁰ Of greatest interest to researchers are perhaps the remnants of mass burial of dogs which were discovered in Ashkelon in 1985. Researchers argue about the reasons why such a large group of dogs was buried at this site. Some point to possible cultic connotations. The dogs were supposedly buried at this site by the Phoenicians, and the burial may have been ritualistic.⁸¹ The dogs may also have simply been buried after their natural death.⁸² It is also pointed out that this mass burial of dogs may have been the result of a plague affecting these animals and the graves discovered are not ritualistic.⁸³ The absence of a ritual context may also be indicated by the fact that so far no remains of an ancient temple have been discovered near the site.⁸⁴ However, some researchers are of a different opinion, pointing to the functioning of a temple of Asclepius⁸⁵ or Aphrodite Urania⁸⁶ in the vicinity,

75 C.E. Watanabe, "Association of the Dog with Healing Power in Mesopotamia," *At the Dawn of History. Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of J.N. Postgate* (eds. Y. Heffron – A. Stone – M. Worthington) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2017) I, 693.

76 Wygnańska, "Equid and Dog," 154.

77 Edrey, "Dog Cult," 16; "The Dog Burials," 275.

78 Edrey, "Dog Cult," 17; "The Dog Burials," 275.

79 W.J. Bennet Jr. – J.A. Blakely, *Tell el-Hesi. The Persian Period (Stratum V)* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1989) 64–65. Perhaps the decapitated dogs whose graves were discovered at Tell el-Hesi can be linked to Greek tradition. Among the many sacrificial offerings, Achilles also offers headless dogs, and the whole ritual takes place after the death of Patroclus (*Iliad* ʔ 173–174). The significance and functions of the Greek ritual Kynomartyrion are discussed in M. Sergis, "Dog Sacrifice in Ancient and Modern Greece: From the Sacrifice Ritual to Dog Torture (kynomartyrion)," *Folklore* 45 (2010) 61–88.

80 These include sites such as Khalde, Tel Dor, Tel el-Hesi, Tel Hayar Eyid, Tel Ashdod, Shoham, Tel Qasile, Ashkelon, Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs," 491; Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, "Dog Burial," 51; Çakırlar *et al.*, "Persian Period," 256–258; Dixon, "Late 1st-Millennium," 22–24; Edrey, "Dog Cult," 17; "The Dog Burials," 276.

81 Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs," 492; A.S. Fink, "Why Did 'yrh' Play the Dog," *AuOr* 21 (2003) 51–52; Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, "Dog Burials," 51–52; Edrey, "The Dog Burials," 268.

82 Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, "Dog Burials," 51–52.

83 Nikzad – Rezaie – Khalili, "Dog Burials," 52.

84 Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs," 493; Dixon, "Late 1st-Millennium," 26; A.M. Smith, "The Ashkelon Dog Cemetery Conundrum," *JS* 24/1 (2015) 93–94.

85 A. Attia, "Disease and Healing in the Book of Tobit and in Mesopotamian Medicine," *Mesopotamian Medicine and Magic. Studies in Honor of Markham J. Geller* (eds. S.V. Panayotov – L. Vacić) (AMD 14; Leiden: Brill 2018) 60–61.

86 Edrey, "The Dog Burials," 273. There is a similar debate surrounding the discovery of dog skeletons within the temple complex in Isin. Some scholars are not convinced that these dogs were to be sacrificed to the goddess Gula, S. Nett, "The Dogs," 58.

although these are only speculations. No sacrificial offerings were found in these graves, and the dogs were placed in them without maintaining a specific orientation with respect to geographic directions.⁸⁷ This burial has also been linked to the sale of dogs by Phoenicians living in Ashkelon at the time.⁸⁸

Some of the better-preserved dog graves from the Persian period were discovered at Tell el-Burak (now Lebanon, south of Beirut⁸⁹). At the archaeological site there, researchers also came across Bronze Age wall paintings depicting a hunting scene involving a mastiff-type dog. However, no clear link can be made between these paintings and the remains of dogs from the Persian era.⁹⁰

It is now difficult to find a ritual prescription for a cultic sacrifice of a dog (or dogs) which had to have its neck broken (e.g. in order to gain divine favour). It is also not certain that the dog remains found – even if they do have visible damage – were used in ritual practices. Very few remains from dog graves in the Levant have been thoroughly investigated using laboratory methods.⁹¹ The general characterisation that can be drawn based on the currently available data makes it impossible to say conclusively whether the burial of dogs in the Levant in the 1st millennium BC was cultic.⁹² A different view, however, is held by M. Edrey.⁹³ Based on the data he has collected, he suggests that the traditions of ritual burial of dogs or their use in worship in the Southern Levant have a long history.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the data cited by Edrey does not come close to explaining that the ritual burial of dogs was practised in Judah. The biblical authors say nothing on the subject. Similarly, an analysis of extrabiblical sources does not yield a positive result.

3.2. The Term “Dog” as Equivalent to “Servant” in Extrabiblical Texts

Ancient texts written in the Near East employed a certain rhetorical device; to emphasise man’s submissive and loyal attitude towards a deity, a distinctive notation was used: “dog of [name of the deity].” This notation retains similarity, not only in structure but also in meaning, to another expression, namely “servant/slave of [name of the deity].”⁹⁵ The use of the *klb* element in names was already known in early Akkadian texts,⁹⁶ as well as in later Phoenician and Punic traditions.⁹⁷ There are many known Phoenician and Punic inscriptions that use the term *klb*, but none of them suggest that someone either sacrificed a dog or

⁸⁷ Edrey, “Dog Cult,” 17–18.

⁸⁸ Smith, “The Ashkelon Dog Cemetery Conundrum,” 99–105.

⁸⁹ A brief description of the archaeological sites at Tel Megadim and Khaldeh, not far from Beirut, is provided by Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 31. The discovered tombs do not show any cultic features.

⁹⁰ Çakırlar *et al.*, “Persian Period,” 244–245.

⁹¹ Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 27–28.

⁹² Cf. Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 32.

⁹³ Edrey, “Dog Cult,” 19.

⁹⁴ Edrey, “The Dog Burials,” 276.

⁹⁵ Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 34; J.B. Burns, “Devotee or Deviate. The ‘Dog’ (keleb) in Ancient Israel as a Symbol of Male Passivity and Perversion,” *JRS* 2 (2000) 4; Margalith, “Keleb,” 492.

⁹⁶ H. Dirbas, *Animal Names in Semitic Name-Giving* (AOAT 464; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag 2019) 77.

⁹⁷ Dirbas, *Animal Names*, 135.

buried a dog with a broken neck.⁹⁸ In Punic and Ugaritic, the term also refers to a member of the temple staff.⁹⁹

The Amarna letters contain interesting phrases addressed by kings to superior rulers:

See, I am the slave of the king and a dog of his house, and I am protecting all Amurru for the king my lord. (EA 60:6–9)¹⁰⁰

[Thu]s Abdu-Aširta [your] slave [and] the mud of your feet, the do[g o]f the house of the king my lord... (EA 61:2–4)¹⁰¹

The author of these phrases is Abdi-Aširta, King of Amurru, who, in his correspondence, assured the Egyptian ruler of his great loyalty.¹⁰² He addressed the more influential ruler in humbling words, wanting to secure his support. It is, of course, difficult to ascertain whether the biblical author made use of the literature of the Amarna period, but it is possible that he may have been aware of the existence of this humbling formula. Given that the dog was known for its submissiveness towards humans, this may have prompted the biblical author to use this motif also in Isa 66:3 and to replace the term “slave” with “dog.”

Similar unceremonious expressions, in which the sender equates himself with a dog, appear in the Lachish letters. However, the derogatory nature of using the term “dog” has a very specific purpose, which is to indicate loyal devotion to the ruler:¹⁰³

To my lord; your servant, a (mere) dog, he (?) will bring forth... (L 21:1–4)¹⁰⁴

Who is your servant, a (mere) dog, that my lord has remembered his [ser]vant? (L 2:3–5)¹⁰⁵

Who is your servant, a (mere) dog, that you have [s]ent [t]hes[e] let[ters] to your servant? (L 5:3–6)¹⁰⁶

The appearance of this formula in the Lachish texts demonstrates that this way of referring to a ruler or someone of higher rank was popular in the ancient Near East. The Lachish ostraca and the Amarna texts are nearly a thousand years apart, and the relationship of loyalty and submissiveness is still reflected in written form.

⁹⁸ Cf. Dixon, “Late 1st-Millennium,” 35.

⁹⁹ Breier, “Who Is This Dog?,” 52.

¹⁰⁰ Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 5; I. Breier, “Representations of the Dog in Seventh-Century BCE Assyrian Letters,” *JNSL* 39/2 (2013) 23–24.

¹⁰¹ Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 5.

¹⁰² Cf. Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 6; Burns, “Devotee or Deviate,” 7; Breier, “Who Is This Dog?,” 53; Margalith, “Keleb,” 492.

¹⁰³ N.S.S. Jacobs, “‘What about the Dog?’ Tobit’s Mysterious Canine Revisited,” *Canonicity, Setting, Wisdom in the Deuterocanonicals. Papers of the Jubilee Meeting of the International Conference on the Deuterocanonicals Books* (eds. G.G. Xeravits – J. Zsengellér) (Berlin: De Gruyter 2014) 221; Margalith, “Keleb,” 492.

¹⁰⁴ Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 9.

¹⁰⁵ A. Lemaire, *Inscriptions hébraïques. I. Les ostraca. Introduction, traduction, commentaire* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 1977) 97; Hutton, “Abdi-Aširta, the Slave, the Dog,” 10; Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 24; J.M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature 2003) 125.

¹⁰⁶ Lemaire, *Inscriptions Hébraïques*, 117–118; Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, 129.

Similar expressions, suggesting the royal official’s full devotion to the reigning ruler, can be found in correspondence from the Neo-Assyrian period. In one letter, a Babylonian official, addresses his words to the then King Esarhaddon, and writes:

[From] the very beginning I have been a dog who loves [the house of] his [lord]. (ABL 717:9–10; SAA XVIII, no. 182:150)¹⁰⁷

Another of the Babylonian officials, Bēl-ibni, addresses the following words full of devotion to King Ashurbanipal:

Just as the dog loves [his master, when (the master) says]: ‘Do not come near the palace...’ (ABL 281:29–30)¹⁰⁸

King Esarhaddon is also the addressee of another letter in which a priest known as Nabû-šumu-iddina addresses him with full humility:

I am a dog, but the king, my lord, has remembered me. (K 1050; ABL 67:6)¹⁰⁹

Not only officials wrote letters to rulers to testify to their loyalty and submission to the royal majesty. There is also a well-known letter whose sender is a man of dubious reputation. In his letter, he admits to the acts he is accused of, but, noting his obedience to the authority of the ruler, he adjures the ruler to spare him the punishment:

I have committed a serious crime against the house of my lords. I (deserved) to be killed and not to be kept alive. You the king, my lord, had mercy on his dog. ... May the king h[ave] mercy on his dog. I am a servant who loves his lords. (ABL 620:1–3, r. 4–6; SAA XVI, no. 36:34)¹¹⁰

These texts also contain a combination of the terms “dog” and “servant”:

From these words and these blessings which the king, my lord, sent and with which he blessed his dog, his servant, and the old man of his house... (ABL 9:11–14; SAA X, 218:172)¹¹¹

Sometimes, the term “dog” is also used by the sender of the texts to perform an act of complete self-abasement before the king:

¹⁰⁷ Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 21.

¹⁰⁸ Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 21.

¹⁰⁹ S.W. Cole – P. Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (SAA XIII; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1998) 83; I. Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 22.

¹¹⁰ Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 22.

¹¹¹ Breier, “Representations of the Dog,” 23.

I am a dog, but the king, my master, treats me justly before the gods. (ND 2380 + ND 2396; CTN 5 t21c)¹¹²

The above text demonstrates that the term “dog” was used in a variety of contexts. Authors of ancient texts used it to replace the term “servant” or combined the two words.

The referenced texts confirm that the formula of using the term “dog” in the sense of humbling oneself before the ruler and emphasising one’s loyalty was popular in the ancient Near East. It can, therefore, be assumed that this formula was also known to the author of the biblical text. By using the term כלב, he probably did not intend to indicate the animal and its use in some cultic ritual. Rather, he might have leaned towards the metaphorical meaning of the term כלב and thus referred to the familiar formulas that functioned in correspondence between royal officials or vassal kings and the reigning monarchs of the time.

Conclusions

The data presented above make it possible to draw a concrete conclusion. In favour of the proposed change in the understanding of the expression ערף כלב is the lack of mention of the dog sacrifice ritual in the biblical texts (e.g. in Isa 1). It can also be argued that the expression in question relates to social issues on the grounds that dog sacrifices were not prohibited in Jewish law. The curse was directed at a certain portion of the chosen people who displayed wickedness. The reprehensible behaviour consisted of practising worship while simultaneously targeting the defenceless. An analysis of the terms נכה and ערף has made it apparent that Isa 66:1–4 raises social issues alongside cultic issues.

If dogs were used in cultic practices, they may, of course, have lost their lives in them, but it is difficult to establish now whether the direct cause of death was the breaking of the canines’ necks. Archaeological evidence is insufficient, and no clear conclusions can be drawn from much of it. Archaeologists often admit that their interpretations of animal (including dog) bones found are sometimes questionable. They also often give many possible solutions to a given discovery. The absence of a clear answer should be considered in favour of a new interpretation of the expression ערף כלב.

For a better understanding of the expression ערף כלב, it is helpful to cite extrabiblical texts in which the term “dog” takes on the meaning of “servant.” The evidence collected shows that this literary device was popular even before the text of the Book of Isaiah was redacted. The correspondence of the inferiors with the Assyrian rulers and the Lachish ostraca are the texts that were produced temporally closest to the redaction of the biblical Book of Isaiah. The thesis that in Isa 66:3, the term כלב takes on a meaning that is different from the commonly accepted one is also strengthened by an analysis of vv. 2b–3a. The biblical author’s play on words is clearly visible here. Using the language of metaphor, he describes

¹¹² M. Lukko, *The Correspondence of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II. From Calah/Nimrud* (SAA 19; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2012) 198.

the social situation he witnesses. He sees injustice in the behaviour of some people towards others. He distinguishes between those who make a sacrifice and persecute others and those who are persecuted by them. In view of the above, it is possible that the term כֶּלֶב has acquired a metaphorical meaning here and may be equivalent to the term עֶבֶד.

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