

# The Old Testament Understanding of Death

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The Old Testament is a vast literature, extending over a period of more than a thousand years, and containing different schools of thought held in different theological traditions. Therefore it is not possible to present a comprehensive view covering all the aspects of our subject, within the limits set for this brief paper, without making certain generalisations.

Man is regarded as 'a unit of vital power',<sup>1</sup> or a 'psychophysical organism'.<sup>2</sup> He consists of a body (flesh) which is animated by the life-giving breath. The breath of life is not taken for granted, but is believed to be dependent on the life-giving power (breath) of God (Gen. 6:3; Job 27:3; Ezek. 37:5, 6, 14). It gives man life and the power of movement. (Gen. 2:7; 6:17; 7:15; Isaiah 42:5; Job. 27:3; 32:8; Ezek. 37:5, 6, 14, etc.). When the breath leaves the body man is dead (Ps. 104:29; 146:4; Job 34:14f; Eccles. 12:7) and his body returns to the dust (Gen. 3:19). The Hebrew word *Rūah* which means 'breath' could also mean the vital energy or the dynamic power which may diminish or even be absent in adverse circumstances (Josh 5:1; Judg. 15:18, 19), and which may revive under favourable circumstances like getting good news (Gen. 45:27), taking food after starvation (1 Sam. 28:22), etc. Not mere existence, but life full of vitality and vigour, is what the Hebrew regarded as worth living.

Just as light cannot be understood except in relation to darkness, death cannot be understood except in relation to life. There is an appreciation of life as the highest good which man possesses. Here, there is no world negation, no longing to leave the world to enjoy bliss in another form of existence. To enjoy the goodness of God in the 'land of the living' (in contrast to the nether world which is the land of the dead) was what every Hebrew longed for. Life in its fullness consisting of health, prosperity, children and grand-children, favour of God, honour and respect in society etc., and lived to its full span (length of days) was what the Hebrews regarded as the ideal existence. In certain theological circles (e.g., Deuteronomy), such life was regarded as the reward of honouring and obeying God's laws, though this view had to be given up by the hard facts of life (cf. Job, laments of Jeremiah,

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<sup>1</sup> A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, 2nd edition, Cardiff, 1964, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

etc.). The Old Testament believer experiences life when he can worship God and listen to Him (Ps. 63:1-4; Deut. 8:3). In contrast to this, death is there, where the praise of God is no longer possible (Ps. 88:6, 11f.; 118:17; Is. 38:9 ff).<sup>1</sup>

Death in old age is regarded as a satisfactory end, and the fulfilment of life, (Gen. 15:15; Job 42:17; Eccclus. 41:2) and it is accepted without resentment. However, when death strikes a man before time, it is regarded as an evil death, or as caused by divine wrath. For example, when Jacob heard that his son Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, he says, 'I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning', (Gen. 37:35) whereas after many years, when he hears that his son Joseph is alive in Egypt and is Pharaoh's vizier, vitality is restored, and he says, 'It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive; I will go and see him before I die' (Gen. 45:28).

The Hebrews seem to have distinguished between different types of death. The death of the person under normal circumstances is described as 'sleeping with the fathers' (especially of kings) whereas death by illness or in war is described as 'dying'. 'To go down to the pit' (grave), or to Sheol (nether world) is especially used in cases of untimely death (evil death). There are worse things than evil death, miserable existence, exile, etc.

Only in a few passages of the Old Testament, do we come across any reflection on the origin of death. The primeval history in Genesis, which seeks to answer the quests of man about the origin of many human problems, seems to give the explanation that death as such, is the result of the disobedience of the first parents, though this of course is not the only possible explanation of the text:

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

The Old Testament does not explain anywhere that death as such is due to human sin, even in texts which reflect on death as the destiny of all men. But the origin of death is ascribed to sin in Ecclesiasticus (2c. B.C.).

From a woman sin had its beginning and because of her we all die (Eccclus. 25:24)<sup>2</sup>.

The Wisdom of Solomon ascribes the origin of death to the envy of the devil, and holds the view that man was created for immortality (2:23, 24).

The mortality of man becomes a burning problem in the Old Testament only when man is faced with the threat of untimely death:

Man that is born of a woman is few of days, and full of trouble.

He comes forth like a flower and withers. . . . Since his days are determined. . . . look away from him and desist, that

<sup>1</sup> See C. Westermann, *Das Leben Gottes in den Psalmen*, Göttingen, 1963, pp. 120ff.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Rom. 5:12, where St Paul expresses the same belief.

he may enjoy, like a hireling, his day. For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again. . . . But man dies . . . where is he? . . . If a man die, shall he live again? (Job 14:1-14).

Whereas death, as a common human destiny, is not ascribed to man's sin in a general way, the prophets announce God's punishment of death (evil death) to *particular* individuals, groups and the nation for *specific* sins of which they are guilty and for which the Hebrew law demanded capital punishment. David was guilty of the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 12). Ahab was guilty of the death of Naboth (1 Kings 21). In both cases a prophet announces that God will punish them with untimely and evil death. Where the Hebrew law and legal institutions failed to execute justice, the prophet as the messenger of God, proclaims the divine decision to punish the guilty, in a manner that corresponds to the seriousness of the crime. The prophet had no power to carry out the punishment he has announced. But he felt compelled to announce the divine decision<sup>1</sup>. For similar punishment announced to groups and to the people as a whole, see Amos 3:12; 5:1-3; Hos. 9:11 ff., 13:16; Is. 5:1 ff., 29:1-4; Jer. 9, 10, 20, 21, etc. The punishment of death was announced to the people as a whole, because they are regarded as a collective unit, as the human partner of the covenant relation with God. Their life and existence is derived from the goodness of God and their continuance is dependent on their faithfulness in the covenant relationship. The prophets could speak of the death of the people of God even when some members survived the disaster (Amos. 5:3). Death is understood as a process and it begins when God forsakes His people and hands them over to an enemy or to other forces of destruction.

Even though the prophets pronounce the judgment of death on single persons, groups and the people as a whole, they do not reflect on the early or evil death of persons or groups and say that the untimely death they met with, was necessarily due to their own sins and to God's punishment on them. They were aware how innocent people were victims of the violence done by others. They too were in danger of their life and some of them died as martyrs (Jer. 26:20 f.; cf. 2 Chron. 24:20-21).

Death is not only understood in the Old Testament as a happening, which terminates human existence on earth. It is also regarded as an evil power extending its domain into the sphere of life.<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah asks the women to teach the mourning song to their daughters:

Death has climbed up into our windows,  
it is come into our mansions  
cutting off children from the streets  
and young men from the squares. (9:21).

<sup>1</sup> See C. Westermann, *Grundformen prophetischer Rede*, München, 1964, pp. 93ff.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, Vol. I-II, London, 1946, pp. 452ff. and C. Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments*, Zollikon, 1947, pp. 52ff.

Hosea asks:

O death, where are your plagues?  
O Sheol, where is your destruction? (13:14b).<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah speaks of Sheol enlarging its gullet, and opening wide its mouth to swallow people (5:14). *Mwt*, the Hebrew word for death, is the god of death in the Ugaritic pantheon. However unlike the powers of death in other mythologies (Ereshigal, Yama, etc.), Sheol and Death have only relative independence. God can rescue man from the sphere and domain of death.

In situations where a person is threatened by untimely death caused by disease, persecution, or by any other calamity he describes himself as already within the domain of death:

For my body is full of troubles, and my life  
draws near to Sheol . . .  
Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit, in  
the regions dark and deep. (Ps. 88:3-6).  
My heart is in anguish within me,  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me. (Ps. 55:4).  
The cords of death encompassed me, the torrents  
of perdition assailed me;  
the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares  
of death confronted me (Ps. 18:4, 5).

These descriptions of the condition of one who finds himself under the threat of death are all found in the psalms of personal lament through which the sufferer lays his grievances before God. When he asks for God's help he is asking that God may rescue him from the power of death and Sheol<sup>2</sup>.

Be gracious to me, O Lord,  
O thou, who liftest me up from the gates of death (Ps. 9:14).

When the sufferer experiences the rescue from the danger of death, he praises God for the deliverance which he describes as a deliverance from Death itself.

O Lord, thou hast brought up my life from  
Sheol, restored me to life from among those  
gone down to the Pit (Ps. 30:4).  
For great is thy steadfast love toward me;  
thou hast delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol (Ps. 86:13).<sup>3</sup>

One may compare the same language used to describe the condition of the prodigal son, when he returns to the home of his father:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again;  
he was lost, and is found (Luke 15:24).

<sup>1</sup>cf. 1 Cor. 15:55.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Barth, *op. cit.*, pp. 124ff.

<sup>3</sup> See further Ps. 16: 10, 11; 116: 3, 8, etc.

There are at least two views in the oldest parts of the Old Testament about what happens to a person at death. On the one hand death is described as non-existence, as disintegration of the human person, with no continued existence beyond death:

We must all die, we are like water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. (2 Sam. 14:14).

Why dost thou not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?

For now I shall lie in the earth; thou wilt seek me, but I shall not be (Job 7:21).<sup>1</sup>

Such a view is the outcome of the Hebrew idea of the human person which sees man as a body, animated by breath.

On the other hand, death is regarded as a transition to another form of existence in the grave (or Pit) or in Sheol (the nether world). Sheol like the Babylonian nether world is a *land of no return* where the individual continues in a shadowy existence in darkness behind closed gates and bars, away from the presence of God and without any possibility of praising God (Job 10:18-22; Ps. 88:6; Is. 38:9 ff). It is only when life is unbearable, as in the case of Job, that one prefers the grim existence in Sheol. This existence is never described as *life*.

At least in the pre-exilic parts of the Old Testament, there is no hope for the individual beyond death. This is particularly striking as the ideas of coming back to life by resuscitation (1 Kings 17:17 ff; 2 Kings 4:29) or after death (idea of the dying and rising God) were widely known and believed in all the cultures of the Old Testament World. The phenomenon of the vegetation drying up in the autumn and sprouting to life in the spring was seen as the death and rising of the god. This example from nature is used in the New Testament and by the Church Fathers to prove the truth of the resurrection, but never in the Old Testament. Some texts like Hos. 6:4; Job 19:25 ff., have been interpreted as giving the doctrine of resurrection. But scholars are not agreed on this and other interpretations are regarded as more likely. Ezek. 37 does not teach the doctrine of a general resurrection. It shows that life away from Jerusalem in exile (unholy land) is regarded as death.

However in the later sections of the Old Testament there are references to the resurrection. Dan. 12:2 speaks of the resurrection of the notably just and the notably wicked, the former, to everlasting life and the latter to everlasting condemnation. The logic of this faith may become clear if we read the moving story of the widow whose seven sons were all brutally killed because they refused to forsake the sacred law of their fathers (2 Macc. 7). After the seventh son also suffered martyrdom, the widow says:

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world,

<sup>1</sup> See also Ps. 39: 13, Eccles. 3: 20; 12: 7.

who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws. (2 Macc. 7:22,23).

It is most likely that it is the inner logic of Israel's faith which led to this belief in some circles rather than any influence from Persian or any other source. The martyrdom of the righteous had become an agonizing problem (1 Macc. 1:62-64) and belief in the justice of God in the affairs of men led some groups in Israel to accept the doctrine of resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

There is no reference in the Dead Sea Scrolls, so far published, to the doctrine of resurrection. 2 Esdras, an apocalyptic book of the first century B.C. to first c. A.D., teaches universal resurrection (7:32ff) to be followed by reward and punishment. The righteous shall rest in Paradise and the wicked suffer in the Pit of Torment (Gehenna). 1 Enoch (first c. B.C.), also an apocalyptic work, speaks of divisions made 'for the spirits of the righteous in which there is the bright spring of water' and for the wicked who 'shall be set apart in this great pain till the great day of judgement and punishment and torment' (22:9ff). The idea of Gehenna (Hell) as a place of torment is found in 54:1,5 and heaven as the abode of the righteous in 103:1ff.

Even though most of the apocalyptic literature shares the view of resurrection and the final reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked as the final human destiny, the wisdom books of the same period do not share this view. Ecclesiastes does not envisage any existence beyond death. Further, he sees no difference in the final destiny of the righteous and the sinners. Ecclesiasticus can only think of the good name (reputation) of the righteous to endure for ever (41:12ff; 44:8,14). The Wisdom of Solomon, which was clearly influenced by Greek philosophy, teaches the doctrine of the immortality of the soul:

The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God and no torment shall ever touch them.....  
But the ungodly will be punished . . . (3:1-10).

We can therefore trace in the later books of the so-called inter-testamental period two distinct streams of thought, one which believes in the resurrection of the body, and the other only in the immortality of the name or the soul. Both these views find their representatives in the New Testament period in the Pharisees and the Sadducees respectively.

<sup>1</sup> See H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, London, 1965, pp. 167 f.