Wishing for Death or Fighting for Life?:

Death Wish as Negotiating Strategy in the Hebrew Bible.

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I want to give you a first taste of my new research project called *Discourses on Death*.[1] My presentation will be twofold, the first part will be a more conventional paper presentation called: *Wishing for Death or Fighting for Life?: Death Wish as Negotiating Strategy in the Hebrew Bible,* and as a second part I want to present some ideas for the bigger project, which hopefully will be a new book project.

1) Introduction (and Conclusion):

"A death wish is not necessarily a wish to die."

"I was sitting on a rock … It was sunny, in winter. I just prayed to die, but it didn't work." So Robert Rijxman, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, recalls. "Praying for death 'didn't work,' is what he said. 'Not to this day,' he added."[2]

"It is enough; now, take away my life" Elijah asks God. (1 Kg 19:4)" "Why did you let me out of the womb? Better had I expired before any eye saw me," Job laments. (Job 10:18) In the stories of Elijah and Job the death wish is an expression of pain and desperation - as in the story of Robert Rijxman. The death wish is an expression of unbearable suffering. Death seems to be the last solution. "I prayed to die, but it didn't work." They wished for death, but death did not come.

But what about Moses, Jonah, Rebecca and Rachel, and the people wandering in the desert, do they wish to die? We will look at some of their stories later, but I can already now say that the conclusion of what I am going to talk to you about for the next 20 min or so can be summed up

[1] This paper is not a ready and done text, it is planned as an oral presentation, a first draft of ideas for my new project. That also means footnotes, bibliographical info etc is not updated here.

[2] New York Times 22/01/09. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/arts/design/22abro.html?_r=2

in the following sentence: “A death wish is not a wish to die.” Or more precise: “A death wish is not (necessarily) a wish to die.”

To me many of the death wishes expressed in the Hebrew Bible seem to have very little to do with death; and in this paper I will primarily investigate one overlooked function of the death wish: the death wish as a negotiating strategy.

Actually I am a bit disappointed, if one may say so about research findings. When I started working with what I refer to as “death-wish-texts” in the Hebrew Bible, I wanted to look into the struggle, the suffering and the desperation which drives humans to long for death, yes even to pray for death. I came to these texts via lament theology and I was interested in them also for our contemporary theological reflection on death and death wishes.

In the beginning when reading the narratives of Job, Jeremiah and Elijah, my pre-understanding of these texts was confirmed. There are stories of genuine suffering and desperation in the Hebrew Bible where death seems to be the only way out – so one prays for death. This use and understanding of the death wishes has also been recognized in previous research. Hans Walter Wollf wrote in his study *Anthropology of the Old Testament*: “It is only in extreme misery that a man can long for death.”[3]

But when working my way deeper into the material – reading more of these narratives – I did not believe the death wishes of the characters anymore. The characters seemed sometimes to be more like Livia Sopranos, than people in deep suffering, longing for death. Livia Sopranos, the mother of the mafia boss Tony Sopranos,[4] from the well known TV series with the same name. She is often portrayed saying: “Let me die.” “Oh I wish the Lord would take me now.” “Let me die.” From the context in the TV series it is obvious that Livia Sopranos’ death wishes are not a wish to die, they are uttered as a strategy to achieve certain things in life.

The Hebrew Bible characters are maybe not as manipulative as Livia Sopranos, but many of them utter death wishes with no wish to die. They use the language of the death wish to add force to their arguments. They are using death as a negotiating tool, and when they do, it actually seems to work.

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[3] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 1974, p. 112-113.

[4] “Livia Soprano, the family matriarch, was scheming, manipulative, conniving and abusive. She seemingly derived little pleasure from life other than making the people around her miserable, especially her three children.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livia_Soprano

2) Definition

How then do I define a death wish? What is a “death-wish-text”?

We find several texts in the Hebrew Bible which in a first reading could be understood as expressing a death wish. These texts are spread “all over the place” in the Hebrew Bible.

They are not of a common genre; they do not follow the same pattern. This said I have discovered that there are some structural similarities in the texts where the death wishes function as a negotiating strategy and I will return to this later.

The fact that these texts are not to be found in one delimited text corpus and that they lack a common genre I believe is some of the reasons why these texts have fallen between the cracks so to say – and why death wish as a negotiating strategy has been overlooked.

I have been working with different ways to identify the death wish texts in the Hebrew Bible and to organize the text material.

One approach is to differentiate between those characters who explicitly say that they want to die on the one hand and those who “only” question why they live or whether their lives are meaningful on the other. This is not a clear cut differentiation, when questioning ones life, the death wish is close, there is probably a continuum here. Elijah in 1 Kg 19:4 which I have quoted already can serve as an example of the first category: “He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Whereas Rebecca in Gen 27:46 illustrates the second category, she says: "I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?"

Another approach is to ask whether the death wish is part of a lament or not. Many of the death wishes in the Hebrew Bible appear in a lament or a lament context. Those who ask to die or question their lives also ask לָמָּה “why”– לָמָּה is a strong indicator of lament.[5] Rebecca asks why,[6] Moses asks why,[7] the people in the desert ask why[8] and so does Job.[9] But not all death

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[5] Ballentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible* (1993): p. 126 and footnote 13 same page. See also Westermann, *Die Klagelieder* (1990): 86 and Westermann, *Lob und Klage* (1977): 134-135.

[6] Gen 25:22 and 27:46

[7] Num 11:15

[8] Num 14:3 and 20:4,

[9] Job chap 3 and in 10:18.

wishes appear in laments, so death wishes as such do not belong to the lament genre. Elijah,[10] Jonah[11] and Samson[12] do not ask "why."

Further there is a difference between uttering a wish to die and a wish that one's whole life and existence would be wiped out. Job and Jeremiah wish for death but even more so they wish they were never borne.[13] In German there is a special term for this: "Geburtsverwünsch." To me this is stepping up the argument even further, wishing ones life eradicated is more radical then "only" wanting to die.[14]

Lastly, should we differentiate between the death wishes addressed to God and death wishes uttered to someone else? The death wish is always part of a dialogue; it is addressed to someone in 2nd person.

The addressee might be human or divine, but which of the ones does actually not seem to make a big difference for the utterance. Still, is there a difference in praying to die and "just saying it"?

All these differentiations are helpful. They provide crucial information about the texts and in my bigger project *Discourses on Death* - which this paper is the mere beginning of - I will deal with all of these questions, all of these categories.

But there is one last differentiation that I will concentrate on here and which has received little focus in previous debates. This differentiation seems to me to be truer to the text material than many of the others. This is the differentiation between a death wish uttered as a wish to die on the one hand and death wish as negotiating strategy on the other.

3) Death wish as negotiating strategy: An overlooked use of the death wish in the Hebrew Bible: Notes on previous research.

Little has been done on death wish in the Hebrew Bible. The topic is sometimes touched upon in commentaries when the text unit at hand includes a death wish; and it is discussed in more

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[10] 1 Kg 19:4
[11] Jonah 4
[12] Judges 16
[13] Job 3 and Jer 15:10 and 20:14-18.
[14] See for this also Hans Strauss, „Tod (Todeswunsch,; Jenseits?) im Buch Hiob „(1993): 239-249 and Ecc 4:1-3

comprehensive studies on death. Some of the texts are also included in lament studies etc. In addition there are some studies on suicide; I will return to the question of suicide shortly.

So far I have found only a few articles and no comprehensive studies that more explicitly deal with death wish in the Hebrew Bible, and there is only one of the articles we need to take into account here. It is the article relevant for this presentation: "Death as Release in the Bible" written by David Daube in 1962.[15] Early in the article he states the focus for his study: "Our case is that of a person's death - ...- being felt to be the best thing for himself, that individual's rescue from distress or even his fulfillment."[16]

Daube differentiates between death as:

1. *Escape from Threat*. Here most, if not all of the Hebrew Bible's suicide stories are discussed.
2. *Union in death*,
3. *Death as Good* and
4. Death as *Escape from Burdens.*[17]

In other words Daube focuses on the concept of "death" and how death is constructed or understood in these texts. The article is entitled "Death as Release in the Bible" which is somewhat puzzling because Daube states explicitly that few, if any, texts in the Bible actually construct death as release.

He argues that death as release is found first in Tobit[18] and in connection with the death of Plato. He refers to the death of Plato as the first occurrence in world literature "of the notion of death as release where a man is in hopeless misery. [19] Still when reading his article one gets a nudging suspicion that the concept of death as release is an underlying assumption in his reading of most of the biblical texts, an assumption which comes in the way of the texts.

Most of the texts that I read as death-wish as negotiating strategy are by Daube understood as examples of *Death as Escape from Burdens*. He opens this discussion as follows:

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[15] Daube, David, "Death as Release in the Bible" *Novum Teatamentum* V (1962): 82-104.
[16] Daube, "Death as Release" p. 82.
[17] Daube, "Death as Release" p. 94ff
[18] First occurrence in world literature "of the notion of death as release where a man is in hopeless misery" Daube, "Death as Release" p. 99.
[19] Daube, "Death as Release" p. 98-99

> "Let us go on to the case where death is seen as an escape, not from an immediate, fearful threat, but from a life which has become burdensome on more general grounds, because of disease, misfortune or even indifference to pleasures. One significant feature is common to all these instances ...: however fed up with the life the person concerned may be, however eulogistic of death, he never actually resorts to suicide."[20]

This last observation is correct and represents somewhat of a paradox. Because the Hebrew Bible have stories of characters who decide to die, characters who take their lives and death in their own hands. And certainly suicide, committing suicide can be seen as a strong and definitive expression of a death wish. A death wish one acts out, and thus these stories could be interesting for my study. But this said, in the suicide stories no death wishes are expressed, neither as a negotiation strategy nor as a lament or prayer to God, with the exception of the story of Samson.[21] The "death wishers" in the Hebrew Bible do not die, those who commit suicide do not pray.

Daube discusses the stories of Rebecca, Rachel, the slavery in Egypt, the people's situation after the Exodus, Samson, David,[22] Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah and he reads all of these stories with this perspective: "death seen as an escape… from a life which has become burdensome…." He also includes the story of Jesus in Gethsemane here.

In most of these cases – but not all – I will argue that the death wish is not a wish to escape burdens by death; it is used as an argument and rhetorical device to achieve their wishes in life.

To me it seems as Daube's focus on the concept of death, what death may represent has made him miss out on some of the dynamics of the death wishes in these texts.

4) Some text examples

After this presentation of the bigger picture of death wishes in the Hebrew Bible we will look into a couple of text examples where death wish is used as a negotiating strategy. I do not have the time to go into details here, but hopefully I can present some leads on how I reflect on these texts. Let's start with Moses in Numbers 11.

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[20] Daube, "Death as Release" p. 94.
[21] Judges 16.
[22] vicarious death, 2 Sam 19:1, Daube, "Death as Release" p. 95

Moses in Num 11:15

"Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the LORD,

"Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!'

I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me."

After this Moses hits the punch line:

v.15 If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once -- if I have found favor in your sight-- and do not let me see my misery."

WTT Numbers 11:15 וְאִם־כָּכָה׀ אַתְּ־עֹשֶׂה לִּי הָרְגֵנִי נָא֙ הָרֹ֔ג
אִם־מָצָ֥אתִי חֵ֖ן בְּעֵינֶ֑יךָ וְאַל־אֶרְאֶ֖ה בְּרָעָתִֽי׃

"Put me to death at once" or as JPS translates: "Kill me rather, I beg you." Moses is addressing God, asking God to kill him.

This is a death wish expressed in prayer. It is also a death wish appearing in a lament context. Verse 11 starts with לָמָּה - why?

But this is not an individual lament; this is Moses – as Morrow formulates it – Moses as "covenant mediator."[23] Samuel Ballentine agrees, when he writes: Moses' "address to God … raises an ominous threat for the Israelites. Should this request be granted, they would be left with no mediator between themselves and God."[24]

Yes, it is a threat to the Israelites, but also a threat to God, after all God also needs Moses.

What it is than that Moses wish for, what is it he tries to achieve?

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[23] Morrow, *Protest Against God*, p. 155.

[24] Ballentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 121.

Ballentine writes. “If God is to act in this manner, to bring evil on a faithful (and undeserving) servant, then Moses does not wish to live to witness it.”[25]

I do not agree with Ballentine here. I do not think the point is that Moses would prefer to die. Moses is negotiating with God and he pulls the highest card out of the stock – the death card: If this is how you are going to behave: kill me now! The negotiation is presented in a conditional sentence, as is often the case in these death-wish-as negotiating-strategy- texts:

“If this is the way you are going to treat me… (then) put me to death at once … “ The protasis - the if clause – is introduced with **אִם** which is often the case in Hebrew.

Moses’ negotiating is successful, God gives him what he asks for: Moses said: “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”

God answers him: “I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.” (v.18)

In passing I can mention that Ex 32:32 is a similar example, here again Moses is in dialogue with God, saying: **“**But now, if you will only forgive their sin -- but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written."

The condition is set fort – if you will… but if not, blot me out”

Rebecca in Gen 27:46

We turn to Rebecca in Gen 27:46:

“Then Rebekah said to Isaac, ‘I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?’"

WTT Genesis 27:46 וַתֹּ֣אמֶר רִבְקָ֗ה אֶל־יִצְחָק֙ קַצְתִּ֣י בְחַיַּ֔י מִפְּנֵ֖י בְּנ֣וֹת חֵ֑ת
אִם־לֹקֵ֨חַ ׀ יַעֲקֹ֣ב אִשָּׁ֗ה מִבְּנ֤וֹת־חֵת֙ כָּאֵ֔לֶּה מִבְּנ֥וֹת הָאָ֖רֶץ לָמָ֥ה לִ֛י חַיִּֽים׃

[25] Ballentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, p....?

This is not a prayer. Rebecca addresses Isak, not God. She does not explicitly ask to die, she says: “I am weary of my life”, but she also questions the meaning of her life: “what good will my life be to me?” or more direct: “what is life to me” לָמָּה לִּי חַיִּים׃

Again לָמָּה is used, but the question is if this is a genuine lament? Westermann lists this text as an example of an individual lament, whereas Morrow does not, with the argument that this text is an “inter-human-connection” and not a prayer.[26]

Anyways, Rebecca does not long for death here, this is not a wish to die, what she wishes for is to have no more Hittite daughters in law. She wants Jacob to find a wife she approves of. She is also negotiating, saying: If so… אִם־ why do I live?”

And she succeeds. The next thing we read in the narrative is: “Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women.” (Gen 28:2)

5) Conclusions

These are the texts we had time to look into for now, more narratives could haven been included: For example Gen 30:1 where Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" or the story of the people in the desert in Numbers 14:2 “All the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!”

Rachel wants children (Gen 30:1), Rebecca does not want another Hittite daughter in law (Gen 27:46) and Moses does not want to carry the burden of the people by himself (Num 11:15). In these narratives the death wish is part of a negotiating strategy; it is a rhetorical device to achieve a certain goal. The characters do not want to die, they do not seek death, nor do I think they prefer death to the situation they are in, as Daube has argued.

[26] Morrow p 14+ 30

They want to live and they want to live the life of their desires, a life including what they want. Their desires and goals are totally legitimate and understandable, but to achieve them they use the rhetoric of death. It is not a desire to die, but a desire to live; they are fighting for their lives.

Ideas for my new project:

Wishing for Death or Fighting for Life?: Discourses on Death

Introduction:

- Point of departure was the Hebrew Bible's characters praying for death, then I saw the nuances: not everyone who expresses a wish for death wants to die.
- Can all death wishes be treated as one category with different functions or are there different categories?
- A death wish is not necessary a death wish!

What is death?

- Definitions of death
- Concept (s) of death in the Hebrew Bible (how much of this discussion must be included in my work?)

Establishing material / texts (Criteria for identifying death wishes)

a. Is the death wish part of a lament or not? How do death wishes function within the lament tradition? There are no death wishes in the psalms of lament, is that significant somehow?
b. Is the death wish a prayer addressed to God or not?
c. Is the character in the narrative "only" questioning the meaning of life or a real death wish
d. What does the character want to achieve in expressing a death wish?
e. What about Jeremiah and Job who wants to extinguish their whole life? Geburstverwünsch!
    i. From death wish to discourse on death?
    ii. What is a discourse on death?

Death wish as negotiating strategy: An overlooked use of the death wish in the Hebrew Bible.

- This actually seems to be the main use / function of the death wish expression (or at least one of the main ones)
- Death wish as a negotiating strategy is a form of empowerment!

Text material:

(Gen 25:19-28 (v 22)	Rebecca, reconsider, cf Tamara Eskanazi)
Gen 27: 46	Rebecca
Gen 30:1	Rachel
Ex 32:30-35	Moses
Num 11:15	Moses

Where does Jonah fit?

Jonah 4, 1-11 (3, 8, 9) Death wish? Negotiating? (Suicide attempt earlier in the book?)

Death wish in despair (does this mean that the negotiator is not in despair?)

It is enough now… Death as the last solution?

Text material:

1 Kg 19:1-18 (v 4) Elijah

Job 2:9-10 (v 9) Job's wife has a death wish on his behalf?

Job 6:8-9, 7:14-15; Job 10:1; 17:13-16??

Geburtsverwünsch – the wish to eradicate one's life

Text material:

Jeremiah 15:10-11 (v10)

Jeremiah 20:14-18

Job3:1-6

Job 10:18-19

Reflection text to the topic: Ecclesiastes 4:1-4

“Let me die with the philistines…” Suicide-murder Samson

Lack of death wish in the suicide stories, Samson is the exception

Text material:

Judges 16:23-31 (v 30) Samson: Death wish, Suicide, Murder

Other suicide stories? Here there are no discourses on death, but a lack of it!

Wishing for Death - Fighting for Life.

Possible twofold agenda: Wishing for death -- Fighting for life.

Where do these texts belong?

Ex 14:12	was it because there were no graves in Egypt…?	
Ex 16:3	If only we had died…	?
Num 14:1ff	Would we have died…	?
Num 20:1fff	Would we have died…	?
2 Sam 19:1 (18:31)	David: would I have died..	?

Others?