

Good death and bad death in ancient Israel according to biblical lore

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Abstract

In the view of the ancient Israelites, as expressed in the Hebrew Bible, death is good or at least acceptable (1) after a long life, (2) when a person dies in peace, (3) when there is continuity in the relation with the ancestors and the heirs, and (4) when one will be buried in one's own land. Death is experienced as bad when (1) it is premature, (2) violent, especially when it is shameful (e.g., when a man is killed by a woman), (3) when a person does not have an heir, and (4) when one does not receive a proper burial. It is remarkable that in the literature of ancient Israel common elements like the cult of the dead and the belief in retribution after death, are not explicitly mentioned and therefore do not function as a comfort for death. Also, from a theological point of view emphasis is placed on this life. A positive attitude towards martyrdom is missing. This results in a way of coping with death which has many 'modern' elements or which may help modern people to face death.

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Introduction

This paper presents a survey of the way the people of ancient Israel reacted to death as something to fear but in some respects also as something to be welcomed. One may be surprised to find this historical study in a collection of articles on concepts of death in different cultures of our time: are the ancient views not superseded by modern insights based on the progress of medical science? It should not be forgotten, however, that the problem of coping with death unites people of all times and also that many ideas in western society have their roots via Christianity in the world of ancient Israel. An important aspect of the view on death concerns the conceptions of afterlife and the relation of the living with the dead. In the way people are looking for comfort in the idea of an afterlife or, instead, in concentrating on this life, there appear to be some interesting parallels between ancient and modern thought.

Distinctive ideas of ancient Israel concerning death and the dead

Within the ancient Near East the culture of Israel, as it is preserved in the writings of the Hebrew Bible or—as it usually called: Old Testament, takes a special place when it comes to the views concerning death and afterlife (see the surveys of Wächter, 1967; Bailey, 1979; Bremer, Van den Hout, & Peters, 1994; Wenning, Healey, Van den Toorn, & Podella, 1997; Tollet, 2000; Hasenfratz, Dietrich, Vollenweider, & Stemberger, 2001). Compared to, for instance, ancient Egypt the texts of Israelite religion are remarkably silent about conceptions—be it positive or negative—of life after death. And unlike, for instance, the Hittites and the peoples of Mesopotamia, the Israelites did not seem to be familiar with a cult of dead, in which the deceased ancestors are venerated and believed to have divine power to help or harm the living. The idea of a resurrection of the dead and of retribution of one's deeds after death, as is well known in the New Testament, makes its first clear appearance in Judaism at the end of the second century BC. Before that time the ancient Israelites had other ways of coping with death.

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There is reason to assume, however, that this picture derived from the Hebrew Bible does not completely cover the historical reality. It probably expresses the ideas of a particular segment of the ancient Israel society in a particular period, namely the years shortly after the Babylonian exile (587 BC), when an important part of the Hebrew Bible was preserved or written down in the form we know it. When it comes to the evidence of the material remains the burial customs of the Israelites do not seem to have been clearly different from those of their neighbours (Bloch-Smith, 1992; Wenning, 2000). Within the Hebrew bible one comes across a number of—usually indirect—indications of a folk religion that has much in common with the condemned heathen practises found among the Canaanites. This includes the widespread cult of the dead, which is clearly rejected in a number of legal texts but more or less taken for granted in many stories as a kind of ‘hidden heritage’ (Van der Toorn, 1996). Many of the ancient Israelites must have shared the ancient Near East common ideas about some sort of a divine state of the dead. Because of their threat to pure monotheism they were suppressed in the literary sources, but we have to take into account the possibility that they influenced the feelings about a good or a bad death (Spronk, 1986; Xella, 1995; Day, 1996, 2000).

Death and the relation to God

In the Hebrew Bible most things are seen and described in their relation to (the belief in) the God of Israel. The story of the first sin introduces death as something which marks the difference between God and man. By achieving knowledge Adam and Eve have become close to God, but He does not let them conquer death:

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. (Genesis 3:22; quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989)

In this way the divinely installed order is preserved. Death helps man to remember that God created man from the soil.

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

Man cannot escape death. In the Hebrew Bible we only find two exceptions to this rule. In Genesis 5:25 we hear of Enoch living very close to God: he ‘walked with God’. Unlike the other men of old mentioned in

this chapter it is not reported of Enoch that he died at a certain age. Instead ‘God took him’. This suggests that the close relation with God continued even though Enoch was no longer among the living. Nothing is told about the way this should be pictured. The Hebrew Bible keeps to the strict separation between the human and the divine sphere. More details about the way a human being can be ‘taken’ by God are given in the story of the ascension of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2). Before the eyes of his servant Elishah he is taken away to heaven by a ‘chariot of fire’ drawn by ‘horses of fire’. We are not informed, again, about what precisely happened with Elijah hereafter. The emphasis in the story of his remarkable ‘passing away’ is on the apparent special relation with God. It is the ultimate confirmation of his pious life: on this special occasion death as the symbol of the broken bond between God and man disappears.

The fate of Enoch and Elijah was believed to be extraordinary. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of the biblical view on life and death that in certain ways a close relation between mortal man and God lets the strict separation between life and death fade away. This is beautifully illustrated in Psalm 73. The poet finds comfort with regard to the many unresolved questions about justice and injustice in human life by looking at the relation with God. From a close relation to God one gets a new perspective on life and death:

Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honor.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than
you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion
forever.
Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you. (Psalm
73:23–27)

It is interesting to note that the poet uses an expression (here translated with ‘you will receive me’) which also returns in both the story of Enoch and of Elijah indicating the action of God taking them to heaven. Whereas Enoch and Elijah seem to escape death, Psalm 73 points to the belief that the pious is rescued by God from a miserable state after death. The poet remains reluctant in describing the situation. He only speaks of ‘afterward’. It is more important for him to find an answer to the problems of life. He finds his inspiration to hold on in this life because of this belief that the benefits of the close relation to God will prove to be stronger than the present distress.

The negative counterpart of this view is that life in which one does not experience the presence God can be regarded as being already in the power of death. A good example of this is Psalm 88. In utter despair the poet describes himself as residing in the realm of death. Being dead is a simile for life that apparently does not deserve to be called life.

O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night,
I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol [= the world of the dead, KS].
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep. (Psalm 88:1–6)

Such texts indicate that one has to be careful with using our modern western ideas about life and death when describing these ancient views. The old answers will not simply fit to the new questions. Modern man is accustomed to a sharp distinction between life and death, based on medical grounds. As a matter of speech one can say: 'he has one foot in the grave', indicating that this person is near death or very old, but not actually dead yet. In ancient Israelite thought death can be regarded as a reality even though one may still be alive. Our exclamation 'that is no life!', indicating a miserable state of being, is taken literally in the Hebrew Bible. Because the 'escape' of retribution in some sort of afterlife is missing or at least not used, this puts extra emphasis on the question of quality in this life.

As a rule death is regarded as an enemy and as such not given much thought. It is simply taken for granted as an inescapable part of life and part of the order established by God:

Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from the Lord. (Sirach 11:14)

God brings death, but He is certainly not a god of death like, for instance, the Canaanite god Mot residing in the netherworld. Once dead, man is no longer in his presence.

For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise? (Psalm 6:5)

In life the God of Israel does not want to be associated with death. A dead body is considered as central cause of impurity. According to Numbers 19:11

anyone who has touched a corpse is impure for seven days. For priests standing closer to God the rules are even stronger. In Leviticus 21 we read that a normal priest is not allowed to touch a dead person other than close relatives. A high priest should not come close to any dead person. The prophetic interdiction of mourning practices (see the discussion below) can be seen within the same framework: too much attention for death and the dead detracts from the correct veneration of the God of Israel.

A more positive attitude towards death as such is only found with those who experience life as problematic, like Job. Death would be a deliverance, giving peace and making all persons equal:

There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.
There the prisoners are at ease together;
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.
The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.
Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,
who long for death, but it does not come,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;
who rejoice exceedingly,
and are glad when they find the grave? (Job 3:17–22)

When death finally arrives, the tone has changed. Job is cured now from his diseases and has enjoyed a long and happy life together with his family. His death is not a problem:

After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days. (Job 42:16–17)

Is this death good or bad? The text does not explicitly tell us. It only reports the reader that eventually Job's life turned out to be good. By stating this together with the reference to his death, it suggests that a fulfilled life makes death acceptable. This positive ending of Job's life was already predicted by his friend Elifaz:

You shall know that your tent is safe,
you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.
You shall know that your descendants will be many,
and your offspring like the grass of the earth.
You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season. (Job 5:24–26)

As the comparison with the harvest shows, death can be regarded and accepted as natural. This is confirmed by other biblical stories about some people's death. Next to the criteria of a long life and of seeing one's offspring we will also find there some elements referring to death

itself, namely whether it was peaceful or not and on what place it occurred.

The story of the good death of Abraham

From the Bible we know Abraham as the man who was summoned by God to leave his homeland and family and to whom was given the promise of land and of many descendants (Genesis 12:1–2). After a long struggle to get his own place in the land to which God directed him and after many trials and tribulations concerning his sons Ishmael and Isaac it is told that at the end of his life he gets six more sons. Then Abraham dies:

This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah. After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi. (Genesis 25:7–11)

We have here the best example in the Hebrew Bible of what one could call a good death. This was already announced and interpreted as a gift of God, because He had given him this promise:

You shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. (Genesis 15:15)

The first element of the good death is the 'good old age'. It is regarded as a blessing of God (cf. Psalm 91:16; Isaiah 53:10; 65:20; Zechariah 8:4). The old age can be called good because the promises given to Abraham were fulfilled during his own lifetime.

In later Jewish and Jewish-Christian writings we read of Abraham being in heaven. According to a parable told by Jesus Abraham receives a man who is poor in life, but fortunate in his death 'in his bosom':

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores. And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried. And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. (Luke 16:19–23)

According to this belief the injustice of undeserved suffering is compensated in life after death. It also solves the problem of just people passing away relatively young. In the book of Wisdom (first century BC) this problem is solved by pointing to the blessings the righteous await after death. Fulfilment of life is not to be sought in the number of years, as with Abraham. Quality ('understanding' and 'a blameless life') comes before quantity:

But the righteous, though they die early, will be at rest. For old age is not honored for length of time, or measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age. There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls. (Wisdom 4:7–11)

In a number of writings that can be dated in the second century BC we find attested a belief in a life after death, in which God brings to justice all human beings. Even death by torture can be placed in a positive light, as is demonstrated in 2 Maccabees 7, the story of a mother and her seven sons losing their life but keeping their faith in the confrontation with a very cruel heathen king. In the last words of one of the sons against the executioner we find it clearly formulated:

One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life! (2 Maccabees 7:14)

With exception of the late text (second century BC) Daniel 12 there is no explicit reference in the Hebrew Bible of this kind of comfort of a belief in retribution in the hereafter. Fulfilment must be found in this life.

One does not speak euphemistically of death as resting in peace, but one does hope to die in peace, as was promised to Abraham. The last king of Judah awaits a similar end, which was not at all self-evident in a period of threat by the Babylonian empire. The prophet Jeremiah lets him know:

Yet hear the word of the LORD, O King Zedekiah of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you: You shall not die by the sword; you shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your ancestors, the earlier kings who preceded you, so they shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, 'Alas, lord!' For I have spoken the word, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 34:4–5)

In order to find rest after death it is important that the deceased receives a proper funeral, just like his predecessors. This includes the traditional mourning

rites. In general, mourning lasted seven days. The deceased was lamented with cries. Prominent persons were honored with special mourning songs. Grief was also expressed through one's clothing. The clothes were torn, sandals and the headdress were taken off, and one put on a sackcloth. Someone mourning stopped washing and anointing oneself. Instead, he or she rolled in ashes and dust. It was also put on the head. One let the hair hang down, tore it out or cut part of the hair and beard. The mourner beat himself or even cut himself with a knife. During the period of mourning one fasted, although there sometimes were also funeral meals. The precise meaning and background of these rites is disputed. They can be interpreted as attempts to bring about a ritual communion between the living and the dead. The mourner tries to give something of his bodily strength, represented by the hair and the flesh or food to support it, to transfer a part of the vitality of the living to the deceased (Van der Toorn, 1996, p. 210). One can also see these mourning customs as a means of sympathetic identification of the living with the dead: the living express their communion with the dead by acting as if they were dead themselves as having descended into the netherworld as the land of the dust and as if their bodies are also decaying (Spronk, 1986, pp. 244–247). Be this as it may, it is clear that the fate of the dead is regarded as pitiful.

Some of these mourning customs are probably originally related to the cult of the dead, which was based on the belief that the dead and the living could mutually support each other. These ideas may have persisted in folk religion, as can be derived from attested practices of necromancy. In the Hebrew Bible, however, the world of the dead and the world of the living are strictly separated. Comfort for the mourning has to be found in this life. This can be clearly demonstrated with the story of David, Bathseba and their grief concerning their first born son. Because of their adulterous relationship this boy is doomed to die. God strikes him with a deadly disease. David mourns as if the child was already dead, but not as an act of despair. Apparently he hopes for a turning of the fate. When it not arrives, he stops mourning. Together with Bathseba he finds comfort in the conception and birth of a new son.

And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife (Bathseba, KS) bare unto David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth; but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not

hearken unto our voice; how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead? But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead; therefore David said unto his servants, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead. Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshiped; then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? Thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me. And David comforted Bathseba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her; and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: and the LORD loved him. (2 Samuel 12:15–24)

Burial is often described as 'going to the ancestors' or being 'gathered to his people'. The connection with the generations, both the preceding and the following, is an important element of the good death. The common way to be related to one's ancestors is by being buried in the family tomb and by being named together in the genealogy. Also the relation to future generations and the certainty that the family line is not broken is an important comfort for the dying. This is illustrated by the remark of Jacob (here named Israel) after he is reunited with Joseph, be it that Joseph was not his only son but his favourite:

I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive. (Genesis 46:30)

Another important element, which can be found with all three patriarchs, is the combination of dying in peace and having offspring. The history of the patriarchs repeats itself when it comes to the difficulties between their sons: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. As we read in Genesis 25:9, Isaac and Ishmael came together again to bury their father. The same is said of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 35:29 and of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50:13. Comparing these reports of the death and burial of the patriarchs one can also note a final criterion for a good death: one must be buried in one's own land. With regard to Abraham it was emphasised that the tomb for him and his wife was properly acquired. Isaac and Jacob are buried there as well. To do so, the sons of Jacob have to make a long journey from Egypt. One can refer in this connection also to the last wish of the 80 years old

Barzillai in response to David's offer to stay at the royal court:

Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother. (2 Samuel 19:37)

To sum up, what makes death good or at least acceptable is: (1) having lived a long life; (2) dying in peace; (3) continuity in the relation with ancestors and heirs; (4) being properly buried in one's own land.

The story of the bad death of Absalom

After we have listed the elements which make death more or less acceptable we can now simply turn them around to describe the ancient Israelite idea of a bad death. Over against the story of the good death of Abraham we can put the sad story of how Absalom, one of the sons of David, came to his end. He had violently taken the throne of his father, but was not able to keep it due to bad advisors. The army of Absalom is defeated by the forces that had stayed loyal to David. At his flight Absalom is killed by the general of his father's army. This is a clear example of a premature death, which is underlined by the fact that when a messenger reports of the outcome of the battle both he and the king speak of Absalom as a young man:

The king said to the Cushite, 'Is it well with the young man Absalom?' The Cushite answered, 'May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man'. The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' (2 Samuel 18:32–33)

In the wisdom literature and in the Psalms dying young is regarded as a punishment of God:

The godless in heart cherish anger;
they do not cry for help when he binds them.
They die in their youth,
and their life ends in shame. (Job 36:13–14)

But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit;
the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days.
But I will trust in you. (Psalm 55:23)

The fear of the LORD prolongs life,
but the years of the wicked will be short. (Proverbs 10:27)

When the pious king Hezekiah is assailed by a deathly disease he cries out to God that death comes too early. He describes himself as being part already of the world of the dead, sounding like the spirits of the dead in necromancy (cf. Isaiah 8:19):

In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.

...

Like a swallow or a crane I clamor, I moan like a dove.
My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my security! (Isaiah 38:10, 14)

Absalom died by the sword; a violent death. From the story of the end of King Saul in the battle against the Philistines we learn that it is felt to be even worse when death comes from the hand of a despised person, in this case the heathen ('uncircumcised') enemy. Saul prefers to be killed by his servant. Eventually he escapes from a shameful death in suicide, which is a rare phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible and more associated with despair than with honor:

The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them. Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, 'Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me'. But his armor-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. (1 Samuel 31:3–4; see on suicide also the story of Abimelech referred to below and the article of Kottek in [Tollet, 2000](#))

We are also informed that Absalom died with no surviving heir. According to 2 Samuel 18:18 he had erected a monument for himself, because he had 'no son to keep my name in remembrance'. For the reader who is acquainted with the book of Genesis this is an ominous piece of information. It recalls the intentions of the builders of the tower of Babel 'to make themselves a name' (Genesis 11:4). God had prevented this by confusing their language. Instead, He made a new beginning with Abram, promising to make his name great (Genesis 12:2). The provisions by Absalom to preserve his name can be interpreted as an act of pride and as one of the reasons for his coming downfall.

This brings us to the fourth criterion for death being either good or bad: the proper burial in one's own grave, which is the normal place where someone's name is kept in remembrance. We hear nothing of a burial of Absalom or of David taking away the shame of being left unburied, like he did with Saul and Jonathan as he brought up their bones from the town where the Philistines had hung their corpses and buried them in

the tomb of his father Kish (2 Samuel 21:13–14). Only your worst enemy deserves to be deprived of this care after death:

I will bring evil upon the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free in Israel, and will consume the house of Jeroboam, just as one burns up dung until it is all gone. Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat; and anyone who dies in the open country, the birds of the air shall eat; for the LORD has spoken. (1 Kings 14:10–11; cf. also Deuteronomy 16:4)

Judges, kings and the question of a heroic death

Modern people are accustomed to the idea of heroic death as a good death. It is part of the Greek tradition (Socrates). One could also see the death of Jesus Christ, as it is described in the New Testament, within this framework. Within Christianity and the Islam the martyrs who died for their faith are greatly honored and believed to be rewarded in the afterlife. The ancient Israelites were not familiar with this idea. This can be illustrated by a survey of the stories in which one would have expected to find it: about the ancient Israelite heroes called judges, followed by the history of the kings.

As could be expected from one of the most violent parts of the Hebrew Bible the book of Judges contains many reports of people being killed in different ways. The stories told here form a bridge between the history of the conquest and taking of the Promised Land under Joshua and the beginning of kingship with the anointment of Saul. One notices a gradual decline from the successful undertakings under the unquestioned leadership of Joshua towards the bloody fights between the different tribes as described at the end of the book. The repeated remark in the final chapters that ‘there was no king in Israel’ prepares the reader for the new phenomenon in Israelite history of a king as a bringer and guarantee of order and peace. This story line is illustrated by the different references to the way the leading characters come to their end. All elements which make death either good or bad, as they were described above, return within this context.

The book begins with a reference to the death of Joshua. This was described at the end of the previous book, in Joshua 24:29. He died at the ripe age of 110 years. He was buried in his own newly inherited property after God had given peace to Israel with nothing to fear from its enemies (Joshua 23:1). We know nothing of Joshua’s descendants, but he himself spoke in his final address to this people of ‘me and my house’ (Joshua 24:15), indicating that his own family line would

continue. So Joshua died in all respects a good death. The enemies of Israel, on the contrary, still awaited—just as in the book of Joshua—death by the hand of the Israelites. In the book of Judges we receive more details about the way they lose their life indicating how they passed away in shame and dishonour.

The first bad death of which the book of Judges reports concerns Adonibezek, king of Jerusalem (Judges 1:6–7). After he is defeated in battle by the tribe of Judah he flees but is caught. Then they cut off his thumbs and big toes and bring him to Jerusalem. There he dies. It is not clear whether he was executed or died from his injuries or lived for some time in prison. So much is certain that he was humiliated and did not die in peace in his own land; a bad death.

The second story about the—again, shameful—death of an enemy is found in Judges 3. The Israelites are groaning under the yoke of king Eglon of Moab. He is described as ‘a very fat man’. The Israelite judge Ehud succeeds in passing the arms control of his court by taking a short sword and carrying it under his cloths at his right side. The Moabite soldiers only checked the usual left side, because that is the place for a right-hander to keep his weapon. After being allowed a private audience Ehud

reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon’s belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them. After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, ‘He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber’. So they waited until they were embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor. (Judges 3:21–25)

The third in this horrible row is Sisera, the general of a Canaanite army. After defeat by the Israelites he flees and is offered shelter in the tent by a woman named Jael. Like a mother she covers him with a blanket and gives him milk to drink. But when he is lying fast asleep from weariness Jael takes a tent peg and a hammer in her hand, goes softly to him and drives the peg into his temple, ‘until it went down into the ground’ (Judges 4:21). A shameful death, by the hand of woman who treated him as a child but murdered him as if he was an animal. The following song of victory describes his mother waiting in vain (Judges 5:28). Her son died on foreign ground.

The next enemies to die a violent death are the Midianite captains Oreb and Zeeb. According to Judges

7:25 they are captured on their flight and beheaded. Their heads are brought to the leader of the Israelites, judge Gideon. When he takes prisoner two other Midianite opponents he orders his son to kill them. Apparently he wants to avenge in this way the murder on his brothers. The murderers escape this humiliating death by the hand of a youngster because Gideon's son does not have the nerve to do so.

Gideon himself dies a good death:

So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they lifted up their heads no more. So the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon. Jerubbaal son of Joash went to live in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (Judges 8:28–32)

This report contains all elements which make death acceptable: peace, offspring, a good old age, a decent burial in his own land. The prospects were promising. His successor was named Abimelech, which means 'father is king', indicating that Gideon hoped to be remembered as the founder of a dynasty. The story, however, takes a different turn. The good death of Gideon marks the end of an era. From now on a bad death will no longer be restricted to the enemy. The first to experience this is Gideon's son Abimelech. He was no worthy successor of his father. To secure his status he had butchered nearly all his brothers—a violent, premature, bad death for these prominent Israelites (Judges 9:5). He himself suffers the humiliation of being nearly killed by a woman, during the attack of an Israelite town which refused to acknowledge his authority:

a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, and crushed his skull. Immediately he called to the young man who carried his armor and said to him, 'Draw your sword and kill me, so people will not say about me, 'A woman killed him''. So the young man thrust him through, and he died. (Judges 9:53–54)

The final blow may have been given by a man, the woman is responsible for this shameful death. Abimelech suffers the fate that was reserved earlier for enemies like Sisera: to be killed by a woman using her own 'weapon'.

The next story of a bad death is the history of the judge Jephthah and his daughter. Now, for the first time, we come across something which seems to come close to what could be called a heroic death. The heroine gives her life for the good cause. However, in the way it is

described here, her death can hardly be interpreted as positive. The story tells how Jephthah is responsible for the death of his beloved daughter, his only child. He has to offer her due to a rash vow made to God:

If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering. (Judges 11:30–31)

When after his safe return his daughter appears to be the first to greet him he feels obliged to 'do with her according to the vow he had made' (Judges 11:39). The reader is saved the details, but is reminded of the fact that the girl died without leaving offspring. So with her Jephthah also lost one of the means to cope with death. The emphasis in this story is clearly not on the death of the obedient daughter, but on her father who is punished for his pride: he thought that he could negotiate with God—as he did earlier with the Israelites and Ammonites—to secure his own well-being.

In the period of Jephthah as a judge also a civil war took place in which a number of Israelite tribes fought against the tribe of Ephraim. They killed 42,000 of their fellow countrymen (Judges 12:6). The death of Jephthah is reported in Judges 12:7. Like the next three judges we only hear of the number of years in which he worked as a judge in Israel and of a burial in the own land. Of two of these following judges it is told that they have numerous offspring. This underlines the sadness of Jephthah's fate and also functions as an introduction to the now following story of Samson, the son of two people who had given up hope to have children.

The story of the death of Samson is well known. Within the context of the book of Judges it can be compared to what happened to Sisera and Abimelech: it was caused by a woman. Like Jael Delilah nursed Samson as a mother as she lets him 'fall asleep on her lap' before she lets someone shave off the seven locks of his head (Judges 16:19). As with Abimelech the final blow is not given by the woman. Samson kills himself and with him many of his enemies. This end and also the following burial can be regarded as 'extenuating circumstances' of this violent death:

Then Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines.' He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. (Judges 16:30–31)

One could call this a heroic death, but within the context of the book of Judges this is not to the point.

Samson dies in the way he has lived. He never planned his actions and only reacted to the circumstances. He never acted on behalf of his people, but only to defend or in the end to avenge himself. In the end we hear of a proper burial, but nothing of some kind of veneration. Two examples of a bad death in the final chapters of the book of Judges serve to illustrate the dire straits in which the Israelites had come without good leadership. Chapter 19 reports of the brutal rape and murder of a young woman and the next chapter of the merciless killing of thousands of Benjaminite men as a reaction to this crime.

It may have become clear that in the book of Judges the stories about the way people die tell it all about the deteriorating situation of Israel. A new beginning was made with king Saul, but as his death described above shows, this was hardly an improvement. He died on the battlefield, together with his son Jonathan. In a song mourning over their death David honors them as great warriors (2 Samuel 1), but here nor in any other text about kings and heroes of ancient Israel death is in one way or another positively interpreted within the sphere of martyrdom. There is no lack of candidates. For instance, the pious and much praised king Josiah died young in a brave battle against the powerful army of the Egyptians. But in 2 Kings 23:29–30 this is reported without further comment. In the parallel story in 2 Chronicles 35:22 his untimely death is explained as a misunderstanding between him and God. The exception to the rule is found in the book of the prophet Isaiah, in which we hear of a mysterious ‘Servant of the Lord’ whose suffering and death was for the benefit of his people (Isaiah 53). In the New Testament this text is used for the interpretation of the death of Jesus Christ.

Typical for the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Israelite ideas in this matter is the report of the death of the greatest king of Israel. David dies in an old age, after having ruled for 40 years, leaving an heir on the throne and he is buried in his own city (1 Kings 2:10–11; cf. 1 Chronicles 29:28). Death is not a menace to David. He can accept it as normal:

‘I am about to go the way of all the earth’. (1 Kings 2:2)

The Hebrew bible testifies that it is a precious gift of God when man can look at his own death in this way. Modern therapists will be happy achieving the same result with terminal patients having to accept their situation.

Conclusion

Is this survey of ancient Israelite ideas according to the Hebrew Bible about death relevant to our under-

standing of modern approaches to this subject? One may note many correspondences. The ancient Israelites seem to react to death in a ‘modern’ way, especially in their sober accepting death as a reality. Depending on the situation of the person involved, death can be regarded as a menace but also as an acceptable natural fact. Characteristic of the ancient Israelite view on death is that it not sees death in the first place as the door to a life after death, but primarily as the conclusion of this life. It is the quality of life before death and not the menace or comfort of some sort of afterlife which is deciding for seeing death as good or bad.

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