1

INTRODUCTION

Point of Departure

"Life sucks, I wish I had never been born!" the teenager moans when she comes home after a long day at school. "If we are not there soon, I will die," the eight-year-old in the back seat states after two hours on the road. "Oh, this chocolate cake is simply to die for!" we overhear in the coffee shop. Three everyday statements, all of them including a reference to death or dying. Still, none of us really expect the kid in the back seat of the car to die or the woman in the coffee shop to give up her life for a piece of chocolate cake (though with chocolate cake you can never really know for sure). The teenager might dread her life some days, but other days she is jumping up and down with excitement and pure joy, wishing the moment would last forever. The examples might be banal, but they illustrate how references to death and dying are part of our everyday conversations, often in contexts that have nothing to do with death. This invites the question: If the context is not about dying, why the reference to death? And if they do not want to die, what are these speakers doing?[1] "If you leave, I will kill myself." "I cannot take this pain anymore; I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up again." The references to death have a different character in these statements. The person in pain, having suffered a severe illness for a long time, would prefer to die rather than to keep living with pain. Death is longed for. She wishes the pain would cease, but if it does not, she wishes for her life to come to an end. The abusive boyfriend uses death as a threat to try to prevent his girlfriend from leaving him.

[1] I am deliberately choosing to refer to what these speakers are "doing" rather than "saying" due to my understanding of speech as action. See discussion under "Reflections on Methodology."

Our forms of speech and ways of thinking often feel far removed from those of the ancient Israelites, and utterances made by biblical characters can be alien, if not entirely incomprehensible, to us. At other times, the utterances of characters in the Hebrew Bible seem astonishingly familiar and contemporary, and we can recognize ourselves in what is being said: "Enough! Now, YHWH, take my life," Elijah says (1 Kgs 19:4). "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you!" David cries (2 Sam 19:1 [18:33 ET]). Rachel is desperate to conceive, and she says to Jacob, "Give me sons; if not, I will die!" (Gen 30:1).[2]

When I started searching for what I label "death-wish texts" in the Hebrew Bible, I read the death wishes of Job, Jeremiah, and Elijah, and my initial understanding of the material was confirmed.[3] In these texts the death wish is an expression of pain and desperation and a real longing for death. This use of death wishes has been recognized in previous research. "It is only in extreme misery that a man can long for death," Hans Walter Wolff writes in his study, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*.[4] Wolff seems to understand all death wishes in the Hebrew Bible as wishes to escape suffering, and this reading is understandable. If someone says they want to die or that they long for death, it is reasonable to assume that they want to escape suffering, escape life. However, as I worked my way deeper into the biblical material and read more and more death-wish texts, I started to question the driving force behind some of the death wishes. I stopped taking death-wish utterances at face value. Many of the biblical characters seemed to utter death wishes with no real longing for death, but rather with the goal of achieving something in life. One example that we will look at closely is Moses, who says to God, "If this is the way you are going to treat me, then kill me now" (Num 11:15). Moses does not want to die; rather, he wants God to treat him differently and change the situation he is in. Moses, Rachel, Jonah, the people wandering in the desert, and Job all utter some kind of a death wish; they do not all want to die. I had to question both my own initial understanding and previous research on these texts.

[2] All translations in this study are my own, unless otherwise noted.
[3] For more on the background for this book, see the Preface.
[4] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974; repr., Mifflintown: Sigler, 1996), 112–13.

What Is a Death-Wish Text? Reflections on the Textual Material

I define a death-wish text as a text in which a literary character utters, in one form or another, a wish to die. This definition does not take into account whether the motivation or goal of the wish really is death. It is the motivation—the rhetorical function of the death wish in its context—and the outcome of the death wish that is the focus of my study. Of course, literary characters have no wishes, motivations, or will of their own; they (often) do not even have an existence outside of the text. What we can study is the literary construction of the characters and what the narrator reveals as the driving force of the death wish. We can also examine the rhetorical function of the death wish in the text in question. I will return later to the question of how this will be done.

Unfortunately, there is no death-wish genre in the Hebrew Bible, no formal type that we can identify, but the texts still have some characteristics in common. Death wishes are always formulated in direct speech. They are generally addressed to someone in the second person, although sometimes they appear in third-person descriptions.[5] The addressee may be human[6] or divine,[7] and death wishes are often formulated as conditional sentences.[8] Biblical death wishes range from explicit appeals to die or to be killed to more indirect death wishes, questioning one's life's worth. Examples of the explicit appeal to be killed include the prophet Jonah, who addresses God and says, "And now, YHWH, take my life from me, because my death is better than my life" (Jonah 4:3),[9] and King Saul, who addresses his armor bearer, saying, "Draw your sword and thrust me through with it" (1 Sam 31:4). The armor bearer refuses, though, and Saul ends up killing himself, one example of suicide in the Hebrew Bible.[10] An example of the more indirect death wish appears in the story of Rebecca, who is not happy with Esau having married

[5] See, for example, 1 Kgs 19:4 and Jonah 4:8.
[6] Gen 27:46; 30:1; Exod 16:3; Num 14:4; 20:3; 2 Sam 19:1 (18:33 ET); Job 6:8–9; 7:15.
[7] Exod 16:3; 32:32; Num 11:15; 1 Kgs 19:4; Jonah 4:3, 8, 9; Job 10:18–19; 14:13. The addressee is unclear in Jer 15:15; 20:14–18; and Job 3:3–26, see discussion in Chapter 4.
[8] See Chapter 2.
[9] Whether the rhetorical function of the death wish is to achieve death is another matter and will be discussed in Chapter 3.
[10] The suicide stories are not part of the textual material of this study; see more below in this section.

Hittite women; she says to Isaac, "If Jacob takes a wife from among the Hittite women, such as these, … what will my life be to me?" (Gen 27:46). There is clearly a difference between asking God to kill you and questioning whether your life is worth living due to potential Hittite daughters-in-law, but both utterances fall within the category of a death-wish utterance. The fact that the death wishes are always formulated in direct speech makes it important to look into how the death wishes play out in the conversation or dialogue of the narratives, and thus my readings are informed by conversation analysis.[11]

I have identified seventeen texts that include a death wish. They are distributed over eight books and across different literary genres and are uttered by nine different characters: Rebekah, Rachel, the Israelites (collectively), Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Job.[12] The fact that death wishes occur in such a wide range of texts and in so many literary corpora seems to indicate that it is a standard literary motif and rhetorical strategy in the Hebrew Bible. This breadth might also indicate the death wish's importance as an existential motif. Most of the death wishes occur in narratives: in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and Jonah.[13] The remaining death wishes are found in poetic texts but are limited to Job and Jeremiah. In these seventeen occurrences, I have only included texts in which characters express that they themselves want to die. In other words, the material is limited to characters who utter a death wish for themselves. The Hebrew Bible also contains death wishes for "the other"; these are most often death wishes for the enemy, as in the book of Psalms.[14] Psalm 55:5, for example, reads, "Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol." But we also find Job's wife saying to Job, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Death wishes for others are certainly interesting, but they introduce a very different discourse than death wishes for oneself and are therefore not included here.[15]

[11] See discussion under "Reflections on Methodology."

[12] Death wishes are uttered in Gen 27:46; 30:1; Exod 16:3; 32:32; Num 11:15; 14:2; 20:3; 2 Sam 19:1 (18:33 ET); 1 Kgs 19:4; Jer 15:15; 20:14–18; Jonah 4:3–9 (three utterances); Job 3:3–26; 6:8–9; 7:15; 10:18–19; 14:13.

[13] Ten out of seventeen.

[14] Pss 55:15; 58:7–8; 104:35; 139.

[15] I am also not including any discussion of oaths in this study, even though some oaths do include death as a possible outcome and thus offer an indirect death wish. One interesting example is Jezebel's oath in 1 Kgs 19 (a text that will be discussed in Chapter 2): "So may the gods do to me and more also, if by this time tomorrow I have not made your life like the life of one of them" (1 Kgs 19:2). However, an analysis of

Two main questions in this study are what triggers each death wish and how the death wishes function in their literary contexts. I have identified four different rhetorical uses of death wishes in the Hebrew Bible, and thus I organize them into four categories: (1) as part of a negotiation strategy, where the petitioner is bargaining with God or with a human being to achieve his or her goal; (2) as a genuine lament and longing for death; or (3) more radically, as a wish to eradicate one's whole existence and never to have been born at all; and (4) finally as an expression of wishful thinking, grumbling, or even mourning, always in a wish that cannot be fulfilled.

Suicide or voluntary death can be seen as a strong and definitive expression of a death wish—a death wish acted out—and could therefore be seen as a fifth category.[16] But the suicide stories in the Hebrew Bible also open up a very different discourse than do the death wishes mentioned above. For one, the suicide stories always end in death, whereas none of the characters wishing to die in the death-wish texts actually die (as a consequence of their death wish that is). (There is one exception: Samson, in Judg 16, utters a death wish to God, and he dies by killing himself.) The dialogue that is so important in the death-wish texts is also missing from many of the suicide texts. For this reason, and also for more practical considerations of material and the length of this book, I do not include a thorough discussion of the suicide texts. However, some of the death-wish texts do invite the question of whether the character is suicidal. As a result, I will include a brief discussion of suicide and voluntary death at the end of Chapter 4 in connection with the death wishes of Jeremiah and Job.

Reflections on the Research Context

The death-wish texts in the Hebrew Bible have been noted in previous research, but they have never been given a systematic treatment in a larger study. I see two main reasons for this. The first is a practical one: the distribution of the death wishes across many

oath texts would introduce too many other questions to this study that would not inform the larger focus of the study.

[16] A suicide story (or suicide text) is a narrative in which a character takes their own life or is assisted in doing so. Suicide or voluntary-death stories in the Hebrew Bible appear in Judg 9:52–54; 16:28–31; 1 Sam 31:1–13 (two characters commit suicide in this narrative); 2 Sam 1:1–16; 17:23; 1 Kgs 16:18–19; 1 Chr 10:4.

literary genres and in multiple biblical books means that they are easily overlooked. The second, more significant reason is that scholars have often had a reductive understanding of the death-wish motif and have taken a "one size fits all" approach to it. This understanding simply does not explain the multitude of rhetorical uses of the death wishes. A few works on death wishes are worth mentioning here.[17]

David Daube wrote what has become the classic work on death wishes in the Hebrew Bible, an article published in 1962 called "Death as a Release in the Bible." This small study gathered textual material from the Hebrew Bible alongside some relevant comparative material. Daube made several interesting observations in the study, and it remains an important reference for all research on death-wish texts. At the beginning of the article Daube writes, "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."[18] He adds, "It may be useful at the outset to state that we distinguish this feeling from mere resignation."[19] In other words, Daube is trying to go beyond seeing the death wishes as expressions of "mere" psychological tiredness. The longed-for death must represent something more. The article's title, "Death as a Release in the Bible," is somewhat puzzling given that Daube states explicitly that few, if any, texts in the Bible actually construct death as a release. The title reflects Daube's investigation of whether death as a release is a concept in the biblical material and, if not, how else death is understood. Daube finds that death as a release first occurs in the biblical tradition in the book of Tobit,[20] and he sees the death Tobit longs for as the first occurrence in Jewish literature of death as a "release where a man is in hopeless misery."[21] It is not always clear,

[17] Of course, death wishes have been discussed elsewhere in previous research, but these discussions have mostly been as part of works on other subject matter. Research on lament often includes discussions of death wishes, as does research on prayer. I draw on work in both these fields. Ludwig Wächter, *Der Tod im Alten Testament*, AzTh 2.8 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967) also includes a brief chapter on death wishes—chapter 4, "Lebensüberdruss und Todeswunsch," 80–89.

[18] David Daube, "Death as a Release in the Bible," *NovT* 5 (1962): 82–104; 82; repr. in *Biblical Law and Literature*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of David Daube*, ed. Calum Carmichael (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 513–30; 513.

[19] Daube, "Death as a Release," 82.

[20] He also finds this notion in connection with the death of Socrates. Although both these literary characters see death as "a release," the texts they are part of reflect very different notions of death.

[21] Daube, "Death as a Release," 98–99.

though, how this "release" is different from another category that Daube identifies in the Hebrew Bible, namely, "death as escape from burdens." I also find this latter category problematic. Clearly, we do have characters in the Hebrew Bible who want to die to escape burdens, but this seems to become the default category for Daube. He introduces the category by saying, "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."[22] He includes a total of seventeen texts in this category.[23] Seeing escape from burdens as the driving force in all these texts does not do justice to the rhetorical diversity of the material, which I aim to show in this study. All in all, Daube identifies four categories or views of death in the Hebrew Bible.

1. Death seen as escape from threat.[24]
2. Death as union, that is, union in death.[25]
3. Death as escape from burdens.[26]
4. Death as good.[27]

The other reason why death wishes have not received a systematic treatment in biblical studies is, as already mentioned, the distribution of the death-wish texts across different literary genres and in multiple biblical books. This has as a consequence that most scholars comment on the one death wish at hand or the few occurrences in a single book or textual corpus and not on the entirety of the textual material. As a result, they miss out on both the larger consistency of the death-wish motif and on its varied rhetorical function. There are

[22] Ibid., 94.
[23] See Note 26 for a list of the texts.
[24] Here, most, if not all, of the Hebrew Bible's suicide stories are discussed. Daube, "Death as a Release," 83–90. Texts discussed are Judg 9:54; 1 Sam 31:4; 2 Sam 1:9; 17:23; 1 Kgs 16:18; 1 Chr 10:4; 2 Macc 14:24; 4 Macc 17:1–24; Matt 27:3; John 8:22; Acts 16:27.
[25] Daube, "Death as a Release," 90–94. He includes Gen 37:35; 2 Sam 1:23; 13:23; 15:21; Ruth 1:17; Matt 26:35; Mark 14:31; Luke 22:33; John 11:16; 13:37.
[26] Daube, "Death as a Release," 94–103. Texts discussed are Gen 27:46; 30:1; Exod 14:12; 16:31; Num 11:14–15; 14:2; 20:3; Judg 16:16; 2 Sam 19:1; 1 Kgs 19:4; Jer 22:10; Jonah 4; Job 3; 14:13; Tob 3:6, 15 (Sarah is discussed, but no verse is cited); Sir 41:1–4; Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34.
[27] Daube, "Death as a Release," 103–4. The only examples in the Hebrew Bible in which Daube finds an understanding of death being good in and of itself, even to the extent that "not being is definitively better than being" (103), are in Ecclesiastes. Texts discussed are Eccl 4:1; 6:3; 7:1, 8; 2 Cor 5:1–10; Phil 1:23.

some exceptions to this. At times, often in a commentary, an author connects a death wish studied in its literary context to the larger picture, including other death wishes in the discussion. These overviews cannot, of course, do full justice to the material, but there has been some movement in the right direction. Jack Sasson starts out on a promising overview and categorization of the death-wish texts in his Jonah commentary,[28] noting that "Hebrew literature cites very few occasions on which individuals ask God to shorten their lives.[29] The examples we do have, however, are interesting in that each suits different aspects of Jonah's own request."[30] Like Daube, Sasson delineates four categories of death wish in the Hebrew Bible: death wishes can be made (1) as part of a testimonial (Tobit and Sarah); (2) in grievance (Job, Jeremiah); (3) in depression (Elijah); or (4) in frustration (Moses and Rachel).[31] The categories seem to me a bit arbitrary, and the last three are in danger of being speculations about the characters' feelings or psychological state of mind. The categories do not take into account the actual function of the death wishes in their literary contexts, which is necessary for a more accurate understanding of them.

The approach that comes closest to what I aim to do in this book is an article by Christian Frevel, "Dann wär' ich nicht mehr da: Der Todeswunsch Ijobs als Element der Klagerhetorik." He searches for "die Pragmatik des Todeswunsches,"[32] or as I would formulate it, the rhetorical function of the death wish. The title of my concluding chapter, "Wishing for Death or Fighting for Life?," is also inspired

[28] Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*, AB 24B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 283–84. Sasson refers to Daube as well: "Daube (1962) has compiled and lightly discussed the evidence" (283).

[29] I find Sasson's choice of formulation here, using "shorten their lives" instead of explicitly saying they seek to end their lives, surprising. This is a downplaying of the seriousness in the death wish. He probably intends it, though, as a contrast to the other texts he has just mentioned, where characters appeal for "longer, healthier, or renewed lives." Sasson, *Jonah*, 283.

[30] Sasson, *Jonah*, 283.

[31] Tobit: Tob 3:6. Sarah: Tob 3:15. Job: Job 3:3–26; 6:8–9; 7:15; 10:18–19; 14:13. Jeremiah: Jer 15:15; 20:14–18. Elijah: 1 Kgs 19:4. Moses: Exod 32:32; Num 11:15. Rachel: Gen 30:1.

[32] Christian Frevel, "Dann wär' ich nicht mehr da: Der Todeswunsch Ijobs als Element der Klagerhetorik" [Then I would no longer be there: Job's death wish as an element of lament rhetoric], in *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt: Theologische, religionsgeschichtliche, archäologische und ikonographische Aspekte*, ed. Angelika Berlejung and Bernd Janowski, FAT 64 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 25–41; 25.

by Frevel's work. In the penultimate sentence in his article he writes, "Der 'Todeswunsch' ist so rhetorisches Mittel im *Kampf um das Leben* und die Wiederherstellung der Gerechtigkeit."[33] Frevel sees the death wish in Job's first speech as a rhetorical means in his fight for life.[34]

I take an eclectic approach to the scholars and other readers with whom I am in dialogue. I might quote Ramban and Rashi alongside Martin Noth, Jeffery Stackert, and Pamela Tamarkin Reis in one and the same discussion (and do so in Chapter 2), but I am of course aware of the fundamental differences in their approaches and contexts. For me, though, their readings of the texts are exactly that: readings, and they are all interesting as suggestions or examples of how these texts can be read. The same goes for the biblical commentaries that I quote. I aim to be in dialogue with the standard academic commentaries to each text I study, but I might also refer to a reading in a commentary series or a book aimed at a more general audience or at clergy, if I find an interesting reading proposed there.

Reflections on Methodology

Are the characters in each of my texts using their death wishes rhetorically, as a tool in the search for death or the fight for life? Since characters do not have desires or wishes of their own, we are limited to asking about the narrator's aim and strategy for the character's death wish. Thus, the questions I pursue can be formulated as follows: What is the rhetorical function of the death wish, and what is the outcome in its context?

All the death wishes in the Hebrew Bible are speech utterances, formulated in direct speech,[35] mostly voiced in a conversation and,

[33] "The 'death wish' is such a rhetorical device in the *struggle for life* and the restoration of justice." Frevel, "Dann wär' ich nicht mehr da," 40 (italics in original).

[34] One more article needs to be mentioned here, basically due to the work's title: Devora K. Wohlgelernter, "Death Wishes in the Hebrew Bible," *Trad* 19 (1982): 131–40. The focus of the article is "The debilitating contemplating of death characteristic of a depressed state of mind," and she discusses Jonah and Job. Wohlgelernter, "Death Wishes," 131. The article should be used with care, though: Wohlgelernter is a scholar of mathematics, not of the Bible or comparable fields, and the article is not informed by biblical scholarship. In my opinion, the article also labels the biblical characters too hastily and very negatively.

[35] Cynthia Miller notes, "Traditionally, reported speech has been divided into two categories, direct speech (*oratio recta*) and indirect speech (*oratio obliqua*)." Cynthia L. Miller, "Discourse Functions of Quotative Frames in Biblical Hebrew Narrative,"

more often than not, embedded in narrative. The best approach to studying death wishes is therefore a close study of these utterances in their conversational and narrative contexts. Methodologically, this means that my work is informed by conversation analysis and narrative analysis. I also draw on various traditional historical-critical approaches, when they prove helpful for my readings. These methods, perhaps with the exception of conversation analysis, are well established in biblical scholarship and do not need any further introduction in this context. What is important is to draw attention to the fact that I do not work within one methodological framework in this book, but rather draw on insights from several methods.[36] I also combine approaches that are usually used synchronically with methods that are clearly diachronic.

I read the textual material as literature and in most cases as narrative (due to the nature of the material). I do not provide a full narrative analysis of each text, including plot, characters, time and space, etc., since what I am interested in is the character's death wish and the dialogue it is a part of. At times, it is more relevant to comment on features in the narrative other than the speech, at which point I will do so. I also start by establishing the narrative's frame (where it begins and where it ends) and structure, before entering into a closer reading of the death wish and the dialogue it is a part of. Although narrative analysis is often done synchronically, I cannot let go of my training in historical-critical methods and my curiosity about the diachronic development of the texts. So when it is helpful for our readings I will ask questions about the texts' sources, textual variants, dating, and the like.[37] I hope that the end result is still held together by the focus on death wishes. I have long since given up on the idea of establishing the "original text" and see all text variants again as readings. That being said, some textual variants are clearly older than others; some texts are deliberate modifications of a former text, and some texts are just not very accurate translations. I do not

in *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Covers*, ed. Walter R. Bodine, SemeiaSt 27 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1995), 155–82; 155.

[36] Even though conversation analysis informs every one of my text readings, I do not perform any full-fledged conversation analyses of texts. Rather, I build on select insights from this method to help with my interpretation of the death wishes.

[37] I am of course not the only one to combine narrative analysis with historical-critical approaches. See, among others, Yairah Amit's reflections on narrative analysis and biblical criticism in *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 22–33.