

## THE DEATH WISH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

This is the first book to systematically investigate the texts in the Hebrew Bible in which a character expresses a wish to die. Contrary to previous scholarship on these texts that assumed these death wishes were simply a desire to escape suffering, Hanne Løland Levinson employs narrative criticism and conversation analysis, together with diachronic methods, to carefully read each death-wish text in its literary context. She demonstrates that death wishes embody powerful, multi-faceted rhetorical strategies. Grouping the death-wish texts into four main rhetorical strategies of negotiation, expression of despair and anger, longing to undo one's existence, and wishing for a different reality, Løland Levinson portrays the complex reasons why characters in the Hebrew Bible wish for death. She concludes that the death wishes navigate the tension between longing for death and fighting for survival – a tension that many live with also today as they attempt to claim agency and autonomy in life.

Hanne Løland Levinson is Associate Professor in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her first book, *Silent or Salient Gender?* (2008), received the John Templeton Award for Theological Promise. Her research interests include gender, metaphor, narrative analysis, and death in the Hebrew Bible. She co-founded the Society of Biblical Literature program unit on Metaphor Theory and the Hebrew Bible.

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# The Death Wish in the Hebrew Bible

Rhetorical Strategies for Survival

HANNE LØLAND LEVINSON

*University of Minnesota*



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For Bernie, my husband

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## PREFACE

The ideas, interests, and work that have now resulted in this book started more than a decade ago with my doctoral defense in Oslo in 2007. I was asked to give two lectures as part of my doctoral exam: one on a topic of my choice and one on a topic assigned to me by my committee. My lecture of choice was entitled “‘My Life Draws Near to the Kingdom of Death’: Lament in the Old Testament and Today.” In addition to my interest in lament theology, I had for a long time been intrigued by questions related to death and dying, suffering and trauma. Over the years since my defense, I developed an additional interest in the academic field of death studies. My focus on death (and everything related to it) is partly due to my own experience of being diagnosed with cancer, going through months of treatment and uncertainty, and the fear of dying before reaching the age of thirty-two. This focus is also connected to my general belief that life’s darkest sides, whether due to physical illness, mental illness, social context, abuse, or other situations, have to be acknowledged and voiced.

As I prepared my doctoral defense lecture and subsequently revised it for publication,<sup>1</sup> I became mindful of the multiple texts in the Hebrew Bible where a character expresses a wish to die. I read the stories of Moses, Elijah, Job, and Rachel and saw characters at their most desperate, begging for help, questioning their lives’ worth, and sometimes asking God to end it all. When I began searching out more of these death-wish texts, I expected to find a similar pattern: that the characters asking to die were experiencing times of hopelessness, pain, and suffering. I viewed these texts as laments that

<sup>1</sup> Hanne Løland, “‘Mitt liv er kommet nær dødsriket’: Klage i Det gamle testamentet og i dag (‘My Life Draws Near to the Kingdom of Death’: Lament in the Old Testament and Today),” *Halvårsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 25 (2008a): 36–47.

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expressed the longing for a way out. I wanted to study these texts to learn more about the struggle and desperation that drives humans to long, even pray, for death. I was interested in these questions not only to better understand the biblical material but also to inform our contemporary reflection on death, death wishes, and suicide. As I read more of these texts, though, and worked my way deeper into the material, I started to question the driving force behind some of the death wishes. The biblical characters began to remind me of Livia Soprano, the mother of the mafia boss Tony Soprano, from the television series *The Sopranos*. She is often portrayed saying, “Let me die” or “Oh I wish the Lord would take me now.” From the context of the television series, it is obvious that Livia Soprano does not in fact wish to die. She utters her death wishes as a strategy to achieve certain goals in life. I started wondering whether there might be similar rhetorical strategies operating in the biblical material, a question that took my work in a new direction.

As I continued to research and study these texts, it slowly became clear to me that the death-wish texts are not simply laments (although we can certainly find traces of lament in some of them). Instead, many characters who utter death wishes actually want not death but a change of life situation. The death wish-texts and, therefore, this book are not so much about death as they are about communication and rhetorical strategy. My book is about what the characters say and how they say it. It is about how the characters’ speech is introduced, how this speech is received, and how the characters are responded to, both in words and action, and it is about what these characters achieve with their speech. *The Death Wish in the Hebrew Bible* is therefore also about agency, autonomy, negotiating power differences, and gaining control of one’s life situation all of which are also crucial in times of suffering and despair.

I gave my first papers born out of my work on the death-wish texts at the international Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Rome in the summer of 2009 and at a symposium called “Before I Die: Symposium on Sickness, Suffering, and Death” that I organized at the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society in Oslo in the fall of the same year. Since then, my research and the writing of this book have taken place in many different places around the world, following me wherever I have lived and worked. My travels have given me the opportunity to present parts of this



## Preface

work in various forms and contexts, and to learn from the conversations that have followed.

There have been some major changes in my own life in the last decade while I have been writing this book. It is hard to pinpoint exactly how these changes have impacted my work, but I firmly believe that a person's thinking and scholarship never take place in a vacuum, and thus it is worthwhile for me to situate my work within these life changes. Since 2007 (all while holding a position as associate professor at the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society), I have been a visiting scholar (for longer and shorter time periods) at the Luther Theological Seminary in Minnesota, the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Duke University in North Carolina, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Since 2013, I have been teaching at the University of Minnesota, in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies. All these contexts—with their different research focuses and traditions, their faculty and students, their history, and their resources—have contributed to or challenged my way of thinking. During the past decade, I have also converted from Lutheranism to Judaism and found a new home in the synagogue. The last official act I performed in the Church of Norway was officiating at my grandmother's funeral in 2010. (This is one of several funerals I have officiated at, and these experiences have also contributed to my focus on death and dying.) I have married the man I fell in love with more than two decades ago, and I have moved from Norway to Minnesota. Six years ago, I gave birth to our son and became a mother. Suddenly, all the work I did on birth and breastfeeding for my first book (*Silent or Salient Gender? The Interpretation of Gendered God-Language in the Hebrew Bible Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46, and 49*) was informed by new experiences.

My first book was about gender and god-language. This book is about death and communication, but a careful reader will probably recognize the same way of asking questions and reasoning in both my first book and in this one. I am methodologically eclectic in this book. At times, I enter into lengthy discussions about source criticism, at other times other questions come to the fore. I try to employ the methods that will help me to answer my questions. My eclecticism continues in the choice of works and readings with which I engage. There are clearly conventions about what kind of works it is appropriate to include in academic biblical studies, and I am sure

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I break these conventions at times. For me, anyone who engages with a biblical text provides a reading of the text and thus serves as an interesting communication partner.

Finally, changing academic homes, moving from a department of theology to a department of Classical and Near Eastern studies (CNES), has closed some doors and opened others. The context of a large public university and the CNES department has broadened the horizons of my work and given me opportunities to teach and learn from a large and diverse student population. I do miss the theological discourse, though, and a part of me will always identify as a theologian, even though I will be the first to admit it is odd to be a theologian of Lutheran affiliation when you are Jewish. (For me, being a theologian is not about a particular religious affiliation, and it is certainly not about promoting any religious lessons in my teaching or writing. Rather, it is about my academic training and identity and my interest in connecting my work to contemporary life.) All this said, when I work with texts, I am a Bible scholar and a *reader*, not a theologian or a historian; I approach the biblical texts first and foremost as literature.

I am writing this Preface in the fall of 2020. We are in the middle of a pandemic, living in a world where checking the daily death rates in the news has become commonplace, and where doctors and public health officials are worried about the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health and, in particular, suicide rates.<sup>2</sup> We are also living in a world where social and racial inequity have come to the forefront in horrifying ways, particularly here in Minnesota this past spring. My hope in all of this is that (if and when we return to “normal”) no one will be able to say again that they did not know of the inequality and suffering in the world. My book is not about the pandemic, nor is it about suicide or death and dying in general. It is about the death wishes in the Hebrew Bible and how these death wishes navigate the tension between longing for death and fighting for survival, a tension many live with every day of their lives.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Mark É. Czeisler et al., “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic United States, June 24–30, 2020,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (August 14, 2020): 1049–57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>. See also Leo Sher, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Suicide Rates,” *QJM* (June 30, 2020): 1–6, doi:10.1093/qjmed/hcaa202.

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In the summer of 2018, I also joined the Faculty Success Program (FSP), a virtual boot camp run by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD) that focuses on how to thrive in academia in a sane, sustainable, realistic, and even enjoyable way. I want to thank the NCFDD for running the Faculty Success Program, and Jane Blocker (the associate dean for arts and humanities) and the dean’s office at the University of Minnesota for encouraging and financially supporting my participation in this program. I am especially grateful for the people in my FSP group: Vanessa Lopes Muñoz (Colorado College), Alicia E. Ellis (Colby College), and Jenn McArthur (Ryerson University). It was not enough to have a book in the making; I needed to finish it as well. Vanessa, Alicia, and Jenn, with your help and support (and the FSP program), I believed I could do it, and I did!

I am grateful for the Twin Cities Bible Colloquium (yes, there is such a thing) led by J. Blake Couey (Gustavus Adolphus College) and Elaine James (at the time at St. Catherine University, now at Princeton Theological Seminary). In this group of colleagues and friends, I had opportunities to participate in stimulating discussions, present work in progress, and receive thoughtful and constructive feedback. A special thank-you goes to my good friend Elaine James for reading sections of this book manuscript and other parts of my work, for always believing in me, and for all her support. I miss our

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lunches and happy hours, Elaine. Blake, you deserve a big thank-you as well for suggesting the subtitle for this book.

In 2015, I was invited to give a workshop on the topic of this book to PhD students in a joint doctoral program at the Universities of Bern, Basel, and Zürich and to scholars working on the Swiss National Research Foundation Project entitled “Gender and Death.” It was an honor to be invited, and the visit was very inspiring for the continuation of my work. I am grateful to Silvia Schroer (University of Bern) for the invitation, and to Sara Kipfer (previously University of Bern, now University of Heidelberg) for facilitating the visit and for sharing scholarly interests.

Yairah Amit (Tel Aviv University) deserves a big thank-you for giving me this advice in 2012 over lunch in Jerusalem: “You cannot write a book about death wishes in the Hebrew Bible without including Job and Jeremiah.” (This was at a time when I had considered limiting my text material to the narratives in the Pentateuch and the former prophets. Of course, after she said it like that, this was no longer an option.) Thank you for your sound advice, Yairah.

I am grateful to the organizers of the different sessions of the Society of Biblical Literature meetings where I have been able to present papers on this work over the years (Rome 2009; Atlanta 2010; and San Antonio 2016). My thanks go also to Stellenbosch University, Duke University, and the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society for inviting me to speak on my project on death wishes at various times. These invitations have confirmed for me the importance of my work and inspired me to continue.

I started this book project while I was an associate professor at the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society, and I am very thankful for the support and freedom I received from that institution, not only to pursue my research interests but also to rearrange my teaching calendar so I could maintain a long-distance relationship and then take a sabbatical so I could get married in the United States (and of course work on my book). Thank you Vidar L. Haanes (rector) for all your kindness and flexibility.

I am grateful for the way the University of Minnesota has supported my work by granting me several “Imagine Fund Grants,” an initiative of the executive vice-president and provost, to fund research and editorial assistance on this book project. This brings me to Maximillian Beyendorff, my undergraduate research assistant, who has been of invaluable help to me for several years. Max has

### *Acknowledgments*

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Finally, I want to thank my immediate family: my husband, Bernie (Bernard M. Levinson), and our son, Joseph (Joseph Eliezer). Joseph gave me very thoughtful advice last fall when he had just started kindergarten, advice we could all take to heart. I tried to explain to him that I was struggling with a certain chapter in this book and, therefore, had skipped it altogether. Joseph looked at me very seriously and said, "Mamma, you have to do the difficult parts first, or you might not do them at all." Joseph, you are a gift and a blessing. May your kindness, humor, imagination, and love for books always sustain you. Bernie, there are not enough words to thank you for all that you are and do for me: from making coffee for

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me every morning, to taking Joseph on an extra-long weekend trip to friends one town over so I can immerse myself in my writing, for overseeing all the work with my indexes, and for always encouraging me to be myself and trust my own voice. The list could go on and on. Mostly, I am grateful for having you in my life and for the life we share. I dedicate this book to you.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### General

ch(s).	chapter(s)
ed(s).	editor(s); edited by; <i>or</i> edition
esp.	especially
lit.	literally
n(n).	notes(s)
P	Priestly source / writer of one portion of the Pentateuch
p(p).	page(s)
repr.	reprint; reprinted
rev.	revised
trans.	translator; translated by
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

### Primary Sources: Ancient Texts

#### Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Song ( <i>or</i> Cant)	Song of Songs ( <i>or</i> Canticles)
Exod	Exodus	Isa	Isaiah
Lev	Leviticus	Jer	Jeremiah
Num	Numbers	Lam	Lamentations
Deut	Deuteronomy	Ezek	Ezekiel
Josh	Joshua	Dan	Daniel
Judg	Judges	Hos	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kgs	1–2 Kings	Obad	Obadiah
1–2 Chr	1–2 Chronicles	Jonah	Jonah

*List of Abbreviations*

Ezra	Ezra	Mic	Micah
Neh	Nehemiah	Nah	Nahum
Esth	Esther	Hab	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph	Zephaniah
Ps	Psalms	Hag	Haggai
Prov	Proverbs	Zech	Zechariah
Eccl (or Qoh)	Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth)	Mal	Malachi

**New Testament**

Matt	Matthew	1–2 Thess	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Phlm	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb	Hebrews
Rom	Romans	Jas	James
1–2 Cor	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet	1–2 Peter
Gal	Galatians	1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Eph	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil	Philippians	Rev	Revelation
Col	Colossians		

Deuterocanonical Works and Septuagint

2 Macc	2 Maccabees
4 Macc	4 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Tob	Tobit

**Periodicals, Reference Works, and Serials**

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
ArBib	The Aramaic Bible
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library



*List of Abbreviations*

AzTh	Arbeiten zur Theologie
BDB	<i>The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic.</i> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
<i>BRev</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
BW	Bible and Women
BWA(N)T	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
CM	Cuneiform Monographs
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.</i> Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert (of Jordan)
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
EIN	Einheitsübersetzung Bibel
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English translations versification in contrast to MT versification
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>

*List of Abbreviations*

HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IECOT	International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
ISV	International Standard Version
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
Joüon	Joüon, Paul. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . Translated and revised by Takamitsu Muraoka. 2 vols. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991
JPS	Jewish Publication Society of America Version
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KHC	Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament
KJV	King James Version
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LUT	Lutherbibel
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCB	New Century Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library

*List of Abbreviations*

<i>QR</i>	<i>Quarterly Review</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
Syr	Syriac
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, et al. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 16 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2018
TGST	Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia
<i>Trad</i>	<i>Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
Vulg	Vulgate
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZB	Die Zürcher Bibel