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.
SOCIETY FOR OLD TESTAMENT STUDY

MONOGRAPHS

Series Editor: Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, Örebro School of Theology, Sweden

The SOTS Monograph series seeks to showcase the best of modern biblical studies. All published books will have the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament as their focal point. There will also be scope for volumes that take an interdisciplinary approach, such as studies which look at the biblical texts from a comparative perspective, in dialogue with ancient Near Eastern studies or modern literary theory. Similarly, volumes which explore the reception history of a particular text or set of texts will be encouraged.

Editorial Board:

John Goldingay, Fuller Theological Seminary
Anselm Hagedorn, Humboldt University of Berlin
Charlotte Hempel, University of Birmingham
William Tooman, University of St Andrews
Rebecca Watson, Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge
Peter Williams, Warden at Tyndale House in Cambridge

Recent Titles in the Series:

Marriage by Capture in the Book of Judges: An Anthropological Approach KATHERINE E. SOUTHWOOD

YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges: An Object – Relations Analysis DERYN GUEST

Sennacherib’s Campaign against Judah: A Source Analysis of Isaiah 36-37 DAN’EL Kahn


Royal Illness and Kingship Ideology in the Hebrew Bible ISABEL CRANZ

Divine Aggression in Psalms and Inscriptions: Vengeful Gods and Loyal Kings COLLIN CORNELL

Life, Land, and Elijah in the Book of Kings DANIEL J. D. STULAC
The Death Wish in the Hebrew Bible
Rhetorical Strategies for Survival

HANNE LØLAND LEVINSON
University of Minnesota
For Bernie, my husband
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Death Wish as Negotiation Strategy</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Death Wish in Despair and Anger</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wishing Away One’s Birth</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Death Wishes as Wishful Thinking</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wishing for Death or Fighting for Life?</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Bibliography                                145  
* Author Index                                157  
* Index of Scripture and Other Sources        161  
* Index of Hebrew Words and Phrases           169  
* Subject Index                               171  

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
www.cambridge.org
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, 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

---

Preface

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
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
Preface

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. 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.

I want to start out by thanking my good friend and former colleague Liv Ingeborg Lied (MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society). Liv Ingeborg was the first to read through my entire book manuscript in its early stages, after which she proclaimed: “It is a book; now you just have to finish it!” She flew all the way from Oslo to Minnesota in early summer, 2018, to walk and talk with me about my writing, and during her visit, I came to believe that I did have a book. I am forever grateful to you, Liv Ingeborg.

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
Acknowledgments

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

provided summaries of literature relevant to my writing, photocopied countless pages, corrected both my English and German, and assisted in compiling the bibliography, and author and Scripture indexes for this book. Thank you, Max. I am also thankful to Cassidy Mossity for spending her pandemic summer working hard on my subject index and Hebrew index, and to Collin Cornell (Sewanee, The University of the South) for embedding all the indexes into the manuscript for the electronic version of this book. Sarah Schectman and Alexa and Andrew Hatesohl have worked tirelessly and professionally to format and copy edit my manuscript for submission. The manuscript would not look like it does (or read the way it does) if it were not for them.

Additional thanks go to Helge Salvesen (Oslo) for reading and commenting on my section on suicide. Your continuing support means a lot, Helge. Thank you to the staff at the Luther Theological Seminary’s Library for always being helpful and friendly when I spend a day in your reference room and stacks. I can always trust that I will find the resources I need in your library. I am grateful for Kirsten Jamsen (director of the Center for Writing at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities) for reading and commenting on my work, and thus helping me to become a better writer. Thank you for cheering me on as the book came closer and closer to becoming a reality, Kirsten. Thank you to Beatrice Rehl (Publisher, Religious Studies at Cambridge University Press) and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (editor of the Society for Old Testament Study Monographs series and professor at the Örebro School of Theology) for being interested in my book, taking it on, and bringing it to publication. I am also grateful for the comments and suggestions in the reader’s report solicited by Cambridge University Press; this feedback helped me to sharpen the manuscript.

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
Acknowledgments

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; or 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

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

xvii
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  Ecclesiastes  Mal  Malachi
(or Qob)  (or Qoheleth)

New Testament

Matt  Matthew  1–2 Thess  1–2 Thessalonians
Mark  Mark  1–2 Tim  1–2 Timothy
John  John  Philm  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

xviii
List of Abbreviations

AzTh  Arbeiten zur Theologie
BHS  Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
Bib  Biblica
BibOr  Biblica et Orientalia
BibInt  Biblical Interpretation
BibInt  Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS  Bible and Literature Series
BRev  Bible Review
BW  Bible and Women
BWA(N)T  Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament
BZ  Biblische Zeitschrift
BZAW  Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ  Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CC  Continental Commentaries
CM  Cuneiform Monographs
CTJ  Calvin Theological Journal
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
HAR  Hebrew Annual Review
HS  Hebrew Studies

xix
List of Abbreviations

HThKAT Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament

HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

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

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature


JPS Jewish Publication Society of America Version

JQR Jewish Quarterly Review

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

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 Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text

NKJV New King James Version

NLT New Living Translation

NovT Novum Testamentum

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

OBO Orbis Biblical et Orientalis

OBT Overtures to Biblical Theology

OTL Old Testament Library

xx
List of Abbreviations

QR Quarterly Review
RBS Resources for Biblical Study
SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SemeiaSt Semeia Studies
SHBC Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SJOT Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
Syr Syriac
TGST Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia
Trad Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought
VT Vetus Testamentum
VTSup Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
Vulg Vulgate
WBC Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZB Die Zürcher Bibel

xxi