

## THE IMPACT OF DEATH ('THE KING OF TERRORS') ON HUMAN DIGNITY IN JOB 18:14<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The reference to death as the 'king of terrors' in Job 18:14 is interpreted against the background of the Ugaritic mythology, the terrifying fate of the wicked and other Old Testament references to death as a violent challenge to life and human dignity. It is argued that the Old Testament does consider God to be stronger than death without developing a pronounced theology of life after death. In contrast to the modern denial of the reality and inevitability of death one should face the challenge of accepting one's death while maintaining human dignity.*

**Keywords:** Baal Myth, Death, Job 18:14, Human Dignity

### Introduction

Heidegger depicts a human being as "being towards death/*Sein zum Tode*" (Pratt 2007:392). Thus death becomes the (inevitable?) goal of life. In response to Heidegger, John Hick (1976:100) makes the following comment that links death and human dignity: "If we can deliberately confront and accept our own coming death we shall preserve our dignity in face of it". In this contribution I will attempt to describe the Israelite and early Jewish perspectives on death – with special attention to Job 18:14 – to challenge 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers of the Bible to reflect on their dignity in the face of death.

### Death in the Ancient Near East and in Ugarit

In Egypt death was perceived to be inescapable and a part of the cosmic order, while the length of human life was determined by the gods. It is striking how Egyptian religion was focused on the hope of a life beyond death – quite contrary to the situation in Mesopotamia (Ringgren 1997:187-188). Collins (2002:357) is of the opinion that the widespread Egyptian belief in immortality left "no verifiable trace in the Hebrew Bible".

There seems to be a surprising absence of any deity directly associated with death in the Mesopotamian mythologies (Healey 1999:601). On the other hand, there are frequent references to personified death juxtaposed with a heroic figure that is in conflict with death or who descends into the underworld (Smith 1990:72-73).

One looks in vain for any reference to Mot as a deity in the Ugaritic pantheon or in cultic texts and personal names. There is no indication that Mot was venerated as a deity and that offerings or sacrifices were made to him (Healy 1999:598-599).<sup>2</sup> This does not imply that Mot was absent from Ugaritic mythology. The Baal Cycle (*KTU* 1.4-1.6)

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<sup>2</sup> Collins (2002:358) presupposes that Mot as adversary of Baal is portrayed as a god – an indication that the divine status of Mot is a contentious matter.

describes Mot as the major protagonist of Baal and 'Mot' is also a dwelling place resembling the underworld that is found at the base of two mountains. Mot's abode is described as a watery pit, characterized by decay and mud (KTU 1.4 viii).

According to the Baal Cycle one should not get too close to Mot since it had a insatiable appetite and could devour you – this representation of death is similar to Job 18:13 (KTU 1.5 ii:2-4):

*A lip to the earth, a lip to the heavens,  
...a tongue to the stars,  
Baal must enter his stomach,  
Go down into his mouth*

A similar terrifying description of death is found when the Baal Cycle warns its audience not to go too near death (KTU 1.4 viii:17-20):

*lest he makes you like a lamb in his mouth,  
And like a kid you be crushed in the crushing of his jaws*

Mot as opposition to Baal might indicate an agricultural role in which Mot is perceived as a demon (not a god) associated with the terrifying destruction of life (Healey 1999:599-00). This possible link between Mot and agriculture seems to be corroborated by the manner in which Anat avenges the murder of Baal by Mot. Imagery related to agriculture is used in the description of the violent demise of Mot at the hand of Anat (KTU 1.6 ii:30-35):

*She seized Mot,  
With a sword she split him,  
With a sieve she winnowed him,  
With mill-stones she ground him,  
In the field she scattered him.*

### Death in Old Testament

The Old Testament entails a range of different perceptions of death and one should be careful not to generalize. On the one hand, death is seen as the termination of biological life; while on the other hand, death is used in a figurative manner to describe aspects that impacts negatively on the quality of life.

#### *Death as the end of biological life*

A theme found throughout the Old Testament is the 'universality of death' and human mortality is accepted as a given (Bailey 1979; Lewis 2007:66):

- Numbers 16:29 – Moses says: *If these men die a natural death* [lit. death of all humans] *and experience only what usually happens to men* [lit fate of all humans], *then the Lord has not sent me.*

29 אִם־כָּמוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם יָמָתוּן אֱלֹהִים וּפָקַדְתָּ כָּל־הָאָדָם יִפְקַד עֲלֵיהֶם  
לֹא יִהְיֶה שְׁלֵהֶנִי:

- Psalm 89:48 – Part of a prayer appeal to the faithfulness of God: *What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of grave* [Sheol]?

Death as the end to biological or physical life results in the return of the body to the earth – from where it came (Gen 3:19) as well as a return of the spirit to God as the One who is the

source of breath (Eccl 12:7). Only Enoch and Elijah escaped death as the final end of physical life (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 1:11).

The loss of life could also be seen as capital punishment for serious transgressions of the Torah that endangered the lives of both individuals as well as the community: murder (Ex 21:12); blasphemy (Lev 24:16); fornication (Deut 22:20-21); violations of the Sabbath (Ex 35:2); kidnapping (Ex 21:16); assaulting one's parents (Ex 21:15); bestiality (Lev 20:15-16) etc (Bellis 2000:330).

In a few cases the finality of death as the end of life is qualified by referring to death by means of the metaphor of sleep – as if one could awake from death as if from sleep (Psalm 13:3[4]). This seems to suggest an understanding of death that implies some life or existence beyond death and in the Old Testament only two late post-exilic texts point in the direction of some form of resurrection by the dead (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). The enigmatic vision of how the valley with the dry bones was resuscitated by the Spirit of God might also suggest the possibility of an existence of life beyond death (Ezek 37:1-14).

### ***Death as a place***

Although we do not find any elaborate description of death as a place (Sheol) in the Old Testament that is comparable with Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, several characteristic elements can be identified (Lewis 1992:102):

- One goes down to this netherworld (Job 7:9; Isa 57:9).
- *Sheol* is often associated with water images (Jonah 2:3-6).
- The gates of *Sheol* are mentioned in different contexts (Job 38:17; Ps 9:24[13]).
- Darkness is characteristic of the netherworld (Job 17:13).
- *Sheol* is also linked to the grave (Gen 37:35).

The dead seem to inhabit death as a place (Sheol) of shadows, darkness and silence (Ps 94:17; Prov 2:18). This is a place where God is not present (Ps 88:5[6]; Isa 38:18) but where the power of God can still reach (Ps 139:7-8).

### ***Death as a personified power***

The presence of death as a personified power can be gleaned from different descriptions in prophetic, wisdom and cultic texts where mythological allusions are possible but not to be taken for granted (Lewis 1992:101-105; Healey 1999:601):

- Hosea 13:14 – *O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction?*
- Proverbs 1:12 – As part of a reference to the lethal intention of sinners: *Let's swallow them alive, like the grave [Sheol], and whole, like those who go down to the pit;*
- Proverbs 27:20 – *Death and Destruction [Sheol and Abaddon] are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man.*
- Psalm 141:7 – In a cultic prayer about the deliverance of the wicked: *So our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave [Sheol].*

*Death as a possible Canaanite demon or deity called Mot*

The prophetic allusions to the insatiable appetite of death seem similar to the references to Mot in the Baal Cycle of Ugarit (Healey 1999:601):

- Habakkuk 2:5 – Babylon is described as: *Because he is greedy as the grave [Sheol], and as death [Moth] never satisfied...*

Possibly the same idea is reflected in Isaiah 5:14 as part of the woes and judgments pronounced on Israel who was about to go into the exile: *Therefore the grave [Sheol] enlarges its appetite, and opens its mouth without limit, into will it descend their nobles and masses...*

It is very difficult to determine where death as personification ends and where Mot as a Canaanite (?) demon or deity starts. Perhaps one has to maintain an open mind about each individual example and not generalize in one way or the other.

**Death as a Topic in Job**

The theme of death is already found in the prose prologue to the book of Job (1:15-19;2:9), as well as the epilogue where it is stated that Job died old and full of days (42:17).

According to Terrien (1978:40-65) Job's attitude towards death incorporated three stages and including both fascination and fear (Lategan 2009:126-127):

- From hatred of life to love of death (3:1-10;11-19).
- Longing for death as alternative or escape from his present affliction (6:8-13).
- Eventually Job's attitude towards death is motivated more by fear and loathing, and less by the initial fascination of death (7:1-21).

Since humankind's days are numbered, death seems to be for Job the natural and inevitable end to life (7:16;14:5). An interesting distinction is made between a 'good death' (21:23) and a 'bad death' (21:25) and the latter describes the predicament of Job:

- 21:23 *One man dies in full vigor, completely secure and at ease...*
- 21:25 *Another man dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good.*

In the dialogue with the four friends, examples of a 'good' and 'bad' death can be distinguished. Zophar has a negative view of death as a place of dust (20:11), while Elihu emphasizes that all of humankind will perish and 'return to dust' (34:15).

In the Bildad speeches premature 'bad' death is the fate of the wicked (18:5-21) and in the following section more attention will be paid to the striking reference to death as the 'king of terrors' (18:14).

**Death as 'King of Terrors' in Job 18:14**

Job 18:14 forms part of the vivid description of "the misfortune of a 'wealthy evildoer'" in Job 18 as a whole (Van der Lugt 1995:209). Similar to the rest of the second cycle of the speeches of the three friends the second speech by Bildad focuses on the fate of the wicked.

This second response by Bildad starts with a pointed critique of Job in 18:2-4 arguing that creation has an order that Job seems to want to disrupt (Magdalene 2007:213).

The criticism of Job is followed in verses 5 to 21 (demarcated by the reference to 'place' in verses 4 and 21) by an extended discussion of the "judgment that is prepared for the wicked in the moral universe of God's design" (Balentine 2006:269).

Several sections can be distinguished in 18:5-21: in the first half (verses 5-13) Bildad provides a vivid description of the tent of the wicked as the 'domain of death' (Habel 1985:286). Four different perspectives are developed on what the wicked entails (Balentine 2006:274-275):

- According to verses 5-6 the wicked lives without light since its lamp is extinguished, as well as the flame of its fire. This probably alludes to a lack of joy and goodness (Proverbs 13:9; 20:20; 24:20).
- In verse 7 the steps of the wicked are restricted or cramped – referring to a lack of vigor (according to Prov 4:12 the steps of one who is supported by God are full of strength and vitality).
- Six different synonyms in verses 8-10 describe how the wicked lives a life entangled by numerous traps such as snares, pits, ropes etc. It is clear that there is no opportunity for the wicked to escape.
- Verses 11-13 describe how different manifestations of death relentlessly pursue the wicked like a "pack of hunting predators" – at first the chase is described in verse 11; then the cornering of the prey in verse 12; with the eventual devouring of the prey in verse 13 (Newsome 1996:469).

Since 18:11-13 immediately precede verse 14 special attention will be given to them to the extent that it provides a background to the death as the 'king of terrors' in verse 14:

<sup>11</sup> Terrors frighten them on every side, and chase them at their heels.

סביב בעתהו בלחות וְהַפִּיצָהוּ לְהַגְלִיז:

Bildad uses the term 'terrors' to refer to everything that can afflict a person or cause terror (metonymy of effect?). Hartley (1988:278) suggests that the term, 'terrors', describes the frame of mind when 'death' arouses 'the deepest feelings of dread' in the wicked. A psychological interpretation of the 'terrors' does not seem to be warranted and Newsom (1996:469) suggests that it alludes to servants of personified Death.

<sup>12</sup> Their strength is consumed by hunger, and calamity is ready for their stumbling.

וְהִירָקֵב אִנּוּ וְאִיד נָכוֹן לְצַלְעוֹ:

'Hunger and calamity', similar to the 'terrors' in verse 11, seem to be agents of death (Clines 1989:416; Newsom 1996:469). It is also possible that 'hunger' and 'calamity' are personifications or mythological images of death (Habel 1985:281; vd Lugt 1995:211). Bailey (1979) describes death as a metaphor for those things that detract from life as Yahweh intended it and as a power that opposes the created order – hunger and calamity can therefore indeed be interpreted as agents of death.

<sup>13</sup> By disease their skin is consumed, the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs.

יֵאָכֵל בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ יֵאָכֵל בְּדֵי יָבֵיב | בְּכֹר מוֹת:

It is unusual to repeat the same two words in parallel lines and this gave rise to several text emendations – none that is relevant for this discussion (Hartley 1988:277) In the parallel construction the consuming effect of a skin disease is related to the dismembering effect the 'the firstborn of Death' has.

Burns (1987:362-364) and Newsom (1996:469) consider this as an allusion to the plague as the personified firstborn (Namtar) of Death (Erishkigal, queen of the underworld) in Mesopotamian mythology and not with the Canaanite demon or god (Mot) of the underworld.

There is not only a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death, but also an ‘ugly’ or violent death that I would like to argue is most detrimental to human dignity. The ‘ugly’ death is described in verse 14 and constitutes the climax of the pursuit of:

<sup>14</sup> They are torn from the tent in which they trusted, and are brought to the king of terrors.

14 וְיָתֵק מֵאֶהָלָוּ מִבֵּטְחוֹ וְהִצְעֵדְהוּ לְמֶלֶךְ בְּלֹהוֹת־

The tent is the centre of the security as well as the dwelling place for the wicked and this is now taken away when the wicked is marched to meet the ‘king of terrors’ (Hartley 1988:279). It is difficult to decide whether death is a personified and voracious demon or deity Mot or depicted as the king of the netherworld (Newsom 1996:469). Clines (1989:419) lists the different renditions of ‘death’ as the ‘king of terrors’: Nergal in Babylonia; Hades among the Greeks or Pluto the *rex tremendum* for the Romans (Dhorme 1967:266). It seems as if death “is the ultimate enemy to whom all must eventually surrender” – not only the wicked, but also by implication Job himself (Alden 1993:197).

Bildad uses *merismus* in 18:16-20 as a striking rhetorical device to express “totality by naming paired opposites” (Newsom 1996:470):

- Roots and branches – figurative references to ancestors and descendents or to the “failure of possessions and progeny” of the wicked in verse 16.
- No memory remains of the wicked anywhere: from the earth (farmlands?) to the land (grazing lands) in verse 17.
- The wicked is driven from the light (the world of the living) to the darkness (death) according to verse 18.
- The wicked is depicted as one without any offspring or descendents in verse 19.
- The fate of the wicked is appalling and horrifying for everyone: from the west to the east according to verse 20.

In the concluding verse 21 the term ‘place’ refers back to verse 4 to form an *inclusio* to frame the description of the fate of the wicked and by implication, also the fate of Job.

In verses 15 to 21 death seems to be a process of prolonged agony during which there is a systematic stripping of human dignity. The irony of this section is that although it forms part of a description of what happens to the wicked, Job has already suffered most, if not all, of the calamities described in the section (Wharton 1999:84). Job seems to be equated with the wicked due to the similarities of his suffering and the fate suffered by the wicked. Clines (1989:425) refers to Bildad as ‘a retributionist dogmatician’ who attempts to use the fate of the wicked to persuade Job to repent as a sinner, while Job, despite being the most blameless person on earth, has already suffered the fate of the wicked.

But there might be further irony involved since the correspondence established between Job and the wicked by Bildad, also indicates how inadequate his own version of orthodox wisdom was! In his rhetorical analysis of the speeches of Job, Course (1994:107 & 109) has suggested that Job 18 resembles a ‘disputation speech’ in which the fate of the wicked discussed in verses 5-21 is in fact ‘directed against Job’ and ironically amounts to a defense of the inadequate doctrine of retribution which was the status quo for Bildad.

According to Bildad’s simplistic retributionist theology there must be a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked (Clines 1989:424). However, with Job this clear distinction has become blurred when the righteous suffers like the wicked, demonstrating the inadequacy of the doctrine of retribution.

It is striking that God is only referred to as the last word of the second speech by Bildad – the fate of the wicked or evil person is the fate of one who does not know God (18:21). Balentine (2006:282) makes the telling grammatical observation that verse 21 “depicts God as a noun without a verb, an entity that engages in no action.” Despite the similarities between the fate of the wicked and the suffering of Job, one can hardly describe Job as someone who does not know God since the prose introduction describes Job as “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1).

### **Conclusion**

The whole second speech by Bildad in Job 18 is dominated by the concept ‘place’ or the ‘habitation motif’ (vd Lugt 1995:215). Concepts like ‘tent’ and ‘place’ are used by Bildad as “metaphors for the existence of the ‘one who knows not God’” – obviously the wicked and possibly also Job (Newsom 1996:470).

Death, especially in its most dramatic manifestation as the ‘king of terrors’ (18:14), entails the total destruction of the ‘place’ of the wicked and potentially of Job. The description of the destruction of the ‘place’ of the wicked and Job involve several elements that are clearly detrimental to human dignity – with the onslaught by violent death constituting the climax:

- Lack of joy and goodness (vv 5-6).
- Restricted strength and vitality (v 7).
- Living a life from which there is no escape (vv 8-10).
- Being relentlessly pursued by hunger, calamity, disease and eventually death (vv 11-13).
- Destruction of habitation and a safe place, as well as the climactic confrontation with death as the terrifying monarch of the netherworld (vv 14-15).
- Death leads to lack of possessions and no progeny (vv 16 & 19).
- Death causes the perishing of the memory and name of the deceased (v 17).
- Death entails to be driven towards darkness as the abode of the dead (v 18).
- Death is the appalling and horrific fate that is apparent to everyone (v 20).

In Southern Africa the pandemic prevalence of HIV/AIDS causes hundreds of thousands of human beings each year to face the ‘*firstborn of death*’ slowly consuming them; to experience being relentlessly stripped of their human dignity and eventually to be brought before the ‘*king of terrors*’... death. Amongst the thousands dying each year one will probably find an equal distribution of righteous and wicked persons, all meeting up with the same fate ... death!

How can one respond to the overwhelming and terrifying presence of death in a place such as South Africa? The Old Testament offers little consolation by means of any assurance of a life after death – perhaps in Daniel 12:2. One might be consoled and regain some human dignity by being reminded that the Old Testament places victory over death squarely in the hands of God. One striking example of God’s victory over death is found in Isaiah 25:8 that forms part of an eschatological feast during which God swallows the swallower – Mot or Death – ironically using metaphors referred to in Job 18:

*He will swallow up death for ever.*

*The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;*

*He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth...*

I close with the well known poem by John Donne (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, 1624*) in which he relates the death of fellow human beings with our common humanity and common dignity:

*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind;*

*And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*



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