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BIBLICAL MAN AND KOHELET: A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE

by

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of the requirements for the Degree of
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A DIGEST OF: BIBLICAL MAN AND KOHELET: A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE

The biblical theme investigated by this thesis is "death and dying". It is the contention of this author that there is remarkable biblical consistency on this theme. Numerous sub-themes such as the following run consistently throughout the Bible: awareness of mortality, introspection concerning impermanence, possibility of afterlife, value of living. What is especially striking about this biblical consistency is that even the very late book Kohelet maintains quite strictly the attitudes of much earlier writers.

This thesis is comprised of four basic parts. The Introduction -- "Why a Study of Death?" -- describes the author's very personal reasons for dealing with the subject of "death and dying". The essay itself contains two chapters: "The Responses of Biblical Man to Death," "Kohelet: A Matter of Death and Life". The final section of this thesis is a compilation of biblical passages dealing with "death and dying". It is thematically organized and it is hoped that this format will facilitate further analysis of "death and dying" in the future as well as serving as a source for passages to be used to supplement Jewish religious practices and rites.

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INTRODUCTION

Why a Study of Death and Dying?

This thesis represents a personal response to a challenging book -- On Death and Dying -- in which Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has recorded the results of several years of research on the terminally-ill. Basing her observations on interviews with dying patients and their families, she demonstrates the existence of 5 general stages through some or all of which individuals pass between the moment they realize they are dying and the moment of death. The book's most profound challenge stems from its insistence that members of the "helping professions" (doctors, nurses, social workers, clergy) should have a vital human effect on both the dying patients and their families. Dr. Kubler-Ross states this point as follows:

If, we, as members of the helping professions, can help the patient and his family to get "in tune" to each other's needs and come to an acceptance of an unavoidable reality together, we can help to avoid much unnecessary agony and suffering on the part of the dying and even more so on the part of the family that is left behind.¹

As a rabbinical student approaching ordination, I recognize that Dr. Kubler-Ross is addressing me with this challenge. Fulfilling the commandment of visiting the sick (בקר חולים) is one of the rabbi's greatest responsibilities today. Although I know that human sen-

sitivity is the basic tool necessary for fulfilling this responsibility, I have persistently asked myself: is there a unique rabbinic role that I can play -- are there basic Jewish insights which a rabbi can bring in- to such encounters? Such a role can be artificial how- ever. The last thing I want to happen is to pre-package a visiting-the-sick routine (מנהג בקור חולים) so structured that I would be more concerned with "playing a role" than with understanding the patient and his family. Dr. Kubler-Ross warns of this danger:

What amazed me, however, was the number of clergy who felt quite comfortable using a prayer book or a chapter out of the Bible as the sole communication ~~between~~ them and the patients, thus avoiding listening to their needs and being exposed to questions they might be unable or unwilling to answer.²

I was about to give up the pursuit of any such rabbinic role for fear of artificiality. But then I ran across Dr. Kubler-Ross describing the following situation.

In one of my last visits to her, she looked once more at me and finally asked me something that I was never asked before, namely, to read her a chapter from the Bible. She was quite weak by then and just put her head back, telling me which pages to read, which ones to omit.

I did not enjoy this assignment as I found it somewhat peculiar and beyond the usual things I was asked to do.... I recall the dreaded thought that some of my colleagues might come in and laugh at my new role, and I was relieved that nobody entered her room during this session.³

I fully understand her feelings of embarrassment and peculiarity while reading the Bible. For her, such an activity was extremely artificial. For a doctor this is understandable. But is it understandable for a rabbi? I think not! I don't want to feel embarrassed or "somewhat peculiar" reading the Bible if I'm asked to do so. From this self-awareness I dare to generalize as follows: I believe that the rabbi does have a unique role to play if he is called upon to play it. It is a role in which he should feel comfortable. Being able to read or refer to the Bible without discomfort in the presence of a dying patient is only one aspect of the necessary rabbinic role. But it is also a beginning point for building a relevant Jewish understanding of death and dying. Therefore I have worked on this study in an attempt to understand and coherently order ^{numerous} ~~the~~ biblical passages on death and dying. I hope that I will have the sensitivity to utilize this rudimentary understanding in a way beneficial to both the patient and his family.

The term "biblical man" is employed often within this thesis. It is ~~assumed~~ that as Bible readers, we can infer normative attitudes from various biblical passages. I am aware of the high probability that the Bible is a construct of various editors who imposed their principles upon texts and traditions to which they had access. It is possible that this thesis will mostly reflect the principles of those editors. Nevertheless my in-

tention is to "understand and coherently order" the various biblical passages dealing with death and dying. Whether these passages reflect the ideas of a few editors or the biblical personalities themselves, such understanding and order is still possible. I leave to future study the task of periodizing the numerous references to death, or trying to distinguish what may be imposed on the more authentic records of the past. That which is taken as normative and thus attributed to "biblical man" is that which occurs with regularity and clarity in the biblical text as we have it.

Many of us think of death and dying as someone else's problem. Our media expose us to the misery of millions unknown to us. We find it nearly impossible to identify with such misery. Even the most gruesome pictures and descriptions have only immediate shock effect on us. We have become insulated from and unconditioned to the deep feelings which accompany death and dying. Most of us are scared-stiff of the moment when we will have to confront these feelings. Therefore it is my hope that the following representation of the biblical material will be beneficial to the healthy as well as the terminally-ill as they attempt to deal with the reality of death.

D.R.G.

Cincinnati, May, 1972

Chapter I

The Responses of Biblical Man to Death

Mortality

The 16th chapter of the Book of Numbers contains the account of Korah, a Levite, who rebels against the authority of Moses and Aaron. The day following the beginning of the insurrection, Moses instructed Korah and his closest fellow-revolutionaries, Dathan and Abiram, to appear "before the Lord" with their firepans filled with burning incense. Moses had designed a test to demonstrate the validity of his own authority. He stated the following conditions:

...if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the Lord who sent me. But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth wide and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord.

These conditions, which Moses set down, serve as an excellent beginning for an understanding of the various biblical references to death. Moses set down an irrefutable truth. Death was accepted as "the common fate of all mankind" (וּפְקֻדָּה כָּל הָאָדָם). It was normal and inevitable. Additional references to death as the "common fate of all mankind" are included in Appendix I under the sub-heading "Mortality".

Death by Disease

The Bible abounds in accounts of death. In many cases these accounts are quite graphic. Biblical man's awareness that disease is responsible for death is well documented. The account of the death of Judah's king Asa found in 2 Chronicles bears this out:

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became gravely affected with gangrene in his feet; he did not seek guidance of the Lord but resorted to physicians. He rested with his forefathers, in the forty-first year of his reign and was buried in the tomb....⁵

Similarly, we find disease bringing on the death of Joram, a later king of Judah. "It continued for some time, and towards the end of the second year the disease caused his bowels to prolapse, and the painful ulceration brought on his death."⁶ What appears to be a severe coronary attack is described in the account where Abigail tells her surly and inhospitable husband Nabal of her need to restrain the anointed David from killing him. "In the morning when Nabal became sober, his wife related these events to him and he suffered a coronary seizure [וימת לבו בקרבו]⁷ becoming like a stone. Ten days later the Lord struck Nabal and he died." (1 Sam. 25.37-38 -- My translation)

Thus to recapitulate, we have descriptions of the following fatal diseases in the Bible: gangrene, prolapse of the bowels complicated by severe ulcerations, and coronary seizure. Furthermore, a general reference describes the

fatal effect of what might be construed as polluted or poisonous water (וַהֲמִים וָעִים). The chemist-ecologist-prophet Elisha is called upon to purify these waters.

The people of the city said to Elisha, 'You can see how pleasantly our city is situated, but the water is polluted and the country is troubled with miscarriages.' He said, 'Fetch me a new bowl and put some salt in it.' When they had fetched it, he went out to the spring and throwing the salt into it, he said, 'This is the word of the Lord: "I purify this water. It shall cause no more death or miscarriage."' The water has remained pure till this day, in fulfillment of Elisha's word.

Death through War and Assassination

Death in war and by means of assassination are both commonplace and graphically described in the Bible. The following is the account of the death of Israel's king Ahab:

But one man drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel where the breastplate joins the plates of the armour. So he said to his driver, 'Wheel around and take me out of the line; I am wounded.' When the day's fighting reached its height, the king was facing the Aramaeans propped up in his chariot, and the blood from his wound flowed down upon the floor of the chariot; and in the evening he died. (1 K. 22.34-35 --NEB)

The assassination accounts are classicly representative of the violent reality of the biblical period. In 2 Kings we read of the death of Ben-hadad king of Aram at the hands of his servant Hazael: "But the next day he took

a blanket and , after dipping it in water, laid it over the king's face and he died; and Hazael succeeded him." (2 K. 8.15 -- NEB) And who can forget the deception of Yael, wife of Hever the Kenite:

May Yael be most blessed of women,
the wife of Hever the Kenite,
may she be the most blessed of
tent-dwelling women.
He asked for water; she gave him milk;
She brought him curd in a bowl fit for
a king.
Her left hand reached out for a
tent-peg, and her right hand for a
workman's mallet.
Then she struck Sisera down;
She utterly destroyed his head by
shattering and piercing through his
temple.
He sank at her feet and lay still.
He sank at her feet; where he sank
he fell dead. (Judg. 5.24-27 --My translation)

For further references see Appendix I under the sub-heading "Death through War and Assassination".

Suicide

Three cases of suicide should be mentioned also. In 1 Samuel 31.4 it is reported that Saul's armour-bearer refused to slay his wounded king upon the king's orders. Thus Saul found it necessary to fall upon his own sword. A similar account is told of the judge Abimelech:

As he approached the entrance to the castle to set fire to it, a woman threw a millstone down on his head and fractured his skull. He called hurriedly

to his young armour-bearer and said,
 'Draw your sword and dispatch me, or
 men will say of me: A woman killed him.'
 So the young man ran him through and
 he died. (Judg. 9.52-54 -- NEB)

And in 2 Samuel 17.23 (NEB) we read the following account
 of David's traitorous counsellor Ahitophel: "When Ahito-
 phel saw that his advice had not been taken he saddled his
 ass, went straight home to his own city, gave his last
 instructions to his household, and hanged himself."⁸

Biblical descriptions of death utilize images of "Dung,
 Blood, Carcasses, Human Flesh, etc." and can be found under
 that sub-heading in Appendix I.

Man's Impermanence

Even though he could not be sure how, where, or
 when, biblical man knew that he was going to die and
 lamented his impermanence. He knew that disease could kill,
 that men could kill, and he sensed strongly that God might
 kill (as evidenced in the Korah account). Even while ex-
 perienicing his vulnerabililty to death, he was dreaming
 dreams of eternity. He sensed a certain permanence in
 nature: "While the earth lasts seedtime and harvest,
 cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall
 never cease." (Gen. 8.22 -- NEB) He longed to partici-
 pate in that permanence more than his few years on earth
 would permit. He wanted to cast off death and share in the
 seemingly unending natural process. "May he live while
 the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all

generations! May he be like rain that falls on the mown
 grass, like showers that water the earth!" (Ps. 72.5-6 --RSV)⁹
 Biblical man knew however that man does not have the en-
 durance of nature and, as described in the Book of Job,
 he is destined to degenerate not regenerate.

If a tree is cut down, there is hope that
 it will sprout again and fresh shoots
 will not fail.

Though its roots grow old in the earth,
 and its stump is dying in the ground,
 if it scents water it may break into
 bud and make a new growth like a young
 plant.

But a man dies, and he disappears;
 man comes to his end, and where is
 he? (Job 14.7-10 -- NEB)

Biblical man sensed a certain futility and worthlessness in
 his existence. He lamented his lack of time on earth and
 a record of his lament runs throughout the Bible:

Man is like a breath, his days are like
 a passing shadow. (Ps. 144.4 -- RSV)

Men of low estate are but a breath, men
 of high estate are a delusion; in the
 balances they go up; they are togeth-
 er lighter than a breath. (Ps. 62.9 --RSV)

We are aliens before thee and settlers,
 as were all our fathers; our days on
 earth are like a shadow, we have no
 abiding place. (1Ch. 29.15 --RSV)

My days are swifter than a weaver's shut-
 tle, and come to their end without
 hope. "Remember that my life is a
 breath; my eye will never again see
 good. The eye of him who sees me
 will behold me no more; while thy
 eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.
 (Job 7.6-10 --RSV)

My days are swifter than a runner;
they flee away, they see no good.
(Job 9.25 --RSV)

For my days pass away like smoke, and
my bones burn like a furnace. My
heart is smitten like grass, and
withered; I forget to eat my bread.
(Ps. 102.3-5 --RSV)

We must all die, we are like water
spilt on the ground which cannot be
gathered up again. (2 Sam. 14.14 --RSV)

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty
is like the flower of the field. The
grass withers, the flower fades, when
the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
sure the people is grass. (Is. 40.6-7 -- RSV)

Because of his awareness of death, biblical man compared his life to things of little or no substance such as breath, shadows, smoke, water, grass, flowers and delusion. Due to his impermanence he saw himself as an alien within the natural order.

Sheol

The insecurity of this sense of impermanence, futility and worthlessness gave rise to a wide range of thoughts and meditations about a place called Sheol. Through an investigation of the various descriptions of Sheol we can learn a great deal more about biblical man's attitudes concerning death.

One of the most crucial passages for our understanding of Sheol is found in the 6th Psalm.

Oh Lord, don't rebuke me with your anger,
nor chasten me with your rage.

Favor me, Oh Lord, for I am weak;
 heal me, Oh Lord, for I am utterly
 dismayed.
 I am absolutely terrified, but you
 Oh Lord -- how long?
 Turn, Oh Lord, rescue my life,
 save me out of your steadfast love.
 For in death there is no memory of you;
 in Sheol who will praise you?
 I am wearied by my groaning.
 I flood my bed with tears every night;
 I drench my couch with my weeping.
 My eye is wasted away from grief,
 it has grown weak because of all my
 tormentors.
 Turn away from me all you evildoers;
 for the Lord has heard the sound of
 my crying.
 The Lord has heard my supplication;
 the Lord has accepted my prayer.
 All of my enemies will be greatly
 ashamed and dismayed.
 They will **turn** back, and be put to
 shame in a moment. (Ps.6 -- My translation)

We read here an individual's agonized cry for help.
 He is miserable with the condition of his life. He
 pleads to be spared rebuke and punishment. He bitterly
 asks: "ואת יהוה עד-מתי" "...but you, Oh Lord -- how long?"
 How long must I endure such weakness and terror. Save
 me, he cries, for if you don't I cannot last -- עד-מתי .
 How long can I endure? My tears drench my bed every night
 as I think about death and Sheol. Please hear me and
 save me, God. Death and Sheol have become his nightly
 tormentors while he is suspended among his bedtime thoughts.
 At the brink of sleep he imagines the absolute nothing-
 ness of death -- where all communication ends, מִי בְּשֵׁאוֹל
 לֹא יִדְבָּר -- even communication with God. Sheol imagery
 reflects a kind of bedtime thinking. Three other bib-

lical references to Sheol utilize a derivative of the verbal root *yr*, meaning "to lay, spread".

If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, again I
find thee. (Ps. 139.8-9 --NEB)

If I look for Sheol as my house,
if I spread my couch in darkness,
if I say to the pit, 'You are my
father,' and to the worm, 'My mother,'
or 'My sister,' where then is my hope?
(Job 17.13-15 --RSV)

Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,
the sound of you harps;
maggots are the bed beneath you,
and worms are your covering. (Is. 14.11 -- RSV)

I'm sure all would agree that lying on one's bed is physically disorienting. This is especially true if one's eyes are closed. All day long we have assumed a somewhat vertical posture whether sitting or standing. Our eyes have been on a horizontal plane. But in bed our bodies become horizontal; our bed suspends us as if we were floating on water. If we lie on our backs and open our eyes, we stare vertically into the darkness and imagine the depth below us. This sense of floating above the depths or within the depths is archetypically expressed in dreams of falling deeper and deeper and deeper into a place unknown and feared. Biblical descriptions of Sheol also reflect this archetypal pattern of feelings:

Deeper than Sheol -- what can you know?
(Job 11.8 -- RSV)

"I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
 and thou didst hear my voice.
 For thou didst hear my voice.
 For thou didst cast me into the deep,
 into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood was round about me;
 all thy waves and thy billows passed over me.
 Then I said, 'I am cast out from thy pre-
 sence; how shall I again look upon thy
 holy temple?'
 The waters closed in over me, the deep
 was round about me; weeds were wrapped
 about my head
 at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land whose bars
 closed upon me for ever;
 yet thou didst bring up my life from the
 Pit, O Lord my God.
 When my soul fainted within me, I
 remembered the Lord; and my prayer
 came to thee into thy holy temple...."
 (Jon. 2.2-7 --RSV)

"For the waves of death encompassed me,
 the torrents of perdition assailed me;
 the cords of Sheol entangled me,
 the snares of death confronted me...."
 (2 Sam. 22.5-6 -- RSV)

The shades below tremble, the waters and
 their inhabitants. Sheol is naked be-
 fore God, and Abaddon has no covering.
 (Job 26.5-6--RSV)

This last reference includes the term "Abaddon". It
 literally means "a place of destruction or ruin" and
 is used only twice more in Scriptures in relation to
 Sheol (Prov. 15.11; 27.20). Abaddon can be understood
 as a part of Sheol, a part for the lost or ruined dead.
 The 88th Psalm contains bedtime-Sheol-thinking unsur-
 passed in the Bible for its depth of imagery.

O Lord, my God, I call for help by day;

I cry out in the night before thee.
 Let my prayer come before thee,
 incline thy ear to my cry!

For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
 I am reckoned among those who go
 down to the Pit;
 I am a man who has no strength,
 like one forsaken among the dead,
 like the slain that lie in the grave,
 like those whom thou dost
 remember no more,
 for they are cut off from thy hand.
 Thou hast put me in the depths of
 the Pit,
 in the regions dark and deep.
 Thy wrath lies heavy upon me,
 and thou dost overwhelm me
 with all thy waves. (Ps. 88.1-7 --RSV)

These references to Sheol lead to several conclusions:
 lying on one's bed is conducive to thoughts of death,
 darkness heightens the possibility of such thoughts,
 thoughts of death involve thoughts of Sheol, thoughts of
 Sheol involve a sense of helplessness described through
 images of depth and falling as well as water with its cor-
 responding sensations of floating, sinking and drowning .
 Other imagery used to describe Sheol can be found in Ap-
 pendix I under the sub-heading "Sheol".

Afterlife

As we have shown, biblical man had the tendency to
 imagine Sheol as some form of existence after death. This
 tendency appears to have been born out of his fear of
 death. Sheol had mental-reality for biblical man. He
 thought about it. But how convinced was he of Sheol's
 extra-mental reality? In other words, did biblical man
 really believe that there was a place Sheol, and that in

it he would continue to exist after death? There is sufficient evidence to indicate that biblical man either skeptically allowed for the existence of Sheol as a mere depository for an eternally captive non-conscious trace of each individual or he did not allow for Sheol at all.

The following three passages lead to the "depository" notion:

As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he
who goes down to Sheol does not come up;
he returns no more to his house, nor
does his place know him any more.
(Job 7.9-10 -- RSV)

Remember, O Lord, what the measure of
life is, for what vanity thou hast
created all the sons of men!
What man can live and never see death?
Who can deliver his soul from the power
of Sheol? (Ps. 89.47-48 -- RSV)

Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol,
that thou wouldest conceal me until
thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest
appoint me a set time, and remember me!
If a man die, shall he live again?
All the days of my service I would wait,
till my release should come. (Job 14.13-14 --RSV)

The second type of evidence implicitly rejects the possibility of Sheol as it explicitly accepts death as the final stage of man's existence.

They say, "A deadly thing has fastened
upon him;
he will not rise again from where he
lies." (Ps. 41.9 --RSV)¹⁰

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.
(Ps. 115.17 -- RSV)

For now I shall lie in the earth;
thou wilt seek me, but I shall
not be. (Job 7.21 --RSV)¹¹

One dies in full prosperity, being wholly
at ease and secure, his body full of fat,
and the marrow of his bones moist.
Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of good.
They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them. (Job 21.23-26 -- RSV)

Because of biblical man's serious doubts or denial
of Sheol's reality, we must conclude that he did not
found a belief in an afterlife upon Sheol's existence.
If there is a biblical belief in afterlife it would have to
be based on more definitive and widespread evidence. But
no such evidence exists. There are passages which hint of
an afterlife. Saul in his encounter with the witch of
Endor has some experience with a ghost-like Samuel:

The woman answered, 'I see a ghostly
form coming up from the earth.' 'What
is it like?' he asked; she answered,
'Like an old man coming up, wrapped in
a cloak.' Then Saul knew it was Samuel,
and he bowed low with his face to the
ground, and prostrated himself. Sam-
uel said to Saul, 'Why have you dis-
turbed me and brought me up?' (1 Sam. 28.13-15 -- NEB)

Such consultation with the dead is discouraged as futile
in the Book of Isaiah:

But men will say to you,
'Seek guidance of ghosts and familiar
spirits who squeak and gibber;
a nation may surely seek guidance of
its gods, of the dead on behalf of
the living, for an oracle or a
message?'
They will surely say some such thing as
this; but what they say is futile.
(Is. 8.19-20 -- NEB)

Hannah in her prayer of thanksgiving for the birth of Samuel says: "The Lord kills and he gives life, he sends down to Sheol, he can bring up again. The Lord makes a man poor, he makes him rich, he brings down and he raises up." (1 Sam. 2.6-7 --NEB)¹² Shade-like existences are described on occasion also:

Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come,
it rouses the shades to greet you,
all who were leaders of the earth;
it raises from their thrones
all who were kings of the nations.
(Is. 14.9 -- RSV)

The shades below tremble,
the waters and their inhabitants.
Sheol is naked before God,
and Abaddon has no covering.
(Job 26.5-6 -- RSV)

O Lord our God,
other lords besides thee have ruled
over us,
but thy name alone we acknowledge.
They are dead, they will not live;
they are shades, they will not arise;
to that end thou hast visited them
with destruction
and wiped out all remembrance of them.
(Is. 26.5-6 -- RSV)

Most probably the following passage refers to the restoration of the nation of Israel. And yet because of its graphic personification of the exiled nation of Israel, there is a slight possibility that Ezekiel was reflecting a notion of individual afterlife involving resurrection.

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and
he brought me out by the Spirit of the
Lord, and set me down in the midst of the
valley; it was full of bones. And he

led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O lord God, thou knowest." Again he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."
(Ez. 37.1-6 -- RSV)

If not in Ezekiel, in Isaiah in what is thought to be one of the latest strata, an explicit reference to resurrection is made: "But thy dead live, their bodies will rise again. They that sleep in the earth will awake and shout for joy; for thy dew is a dew of sparkling light, and the earth will bring those long dead to birth again. (Is. 26. 19 -- NEB) There are also hints of an afterlife and resurrection in the apocalyptic 12th chapter of the Book of Daniel: "...many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake, some to everlasting life and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence." (Dan. 12.2 -- NEB) "But go your way to the end and rest, and you shall arise to your destiny at the end of the age." (Dan. 12.13 -- NEB)

Like the idea of Sheol, ideas of ghosts, shades, and rising from the dead occupied the minds of biblical man. And yet there is not enough evidence to conclude that biblical man was at all convinced of an afterlife. What he seems to have accepted was the finality of death and

no matter what he imagined or dreamed, he could not deny death's finality.

Burial

It has been shown that biblical man was unable to find any substantial comfort or support by believing in an afterlife. What he did find to be of some comfort and support was the practice of burial. Burial procedures helped in two ways: (a) it temporarily protected the corpse, (b) it gave some form of honor to the deceased. Disallowing a corpse burial was one of biblical man's harshest punishments. It was a curse which subjected the corpse to physical defilement and was intended to desecrate the memory of the deceased. Such a curse was uttered over the kings of Israel Baasha and Ahab, and more generally over the people of Judah by Jeremiah.

Any one belonging to Baasha who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the field the birds of the air shall eat. (1 K. 16.4 --RSV)

Any one belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.
(1 K. 21.24 --RSV)

They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth. (Jer. 16.4 -- RSV)

Note also the following two passages dealing with the punishment of Jeroboam as announced by the prophet Ahijah and carried out many years later by king Josiah.

You have outdone all your predecessors in wickedness; you have provoked me to anger by making for yourself other gods and images of cast metal; and you have turned your back on me. For this I will bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam and I will destroy them all, every mother's son, whether still under the protection of the family or not, and I will sweep away the house of Jeroboam in Israel, as a man sweeps up dung until none is left. Those of that house who die in the city shall be food for the dogs, and those who die in the country shall be food for the birds. It is the words of the Lord. (1 K. 14.9-11 -- NEB)

When Josiah set eyes on the graves which were there on the hill, he sent and took the bones from them and burnt them on the altar to desecrate it; thus fulfilling the word of the Lord announced by the man of God when Jeroboam stood by the altar at the feast. But when he caught sight of the grave of the man of God who had foretold these things, he asked, 'What is that monument I see there?' The people of the city answered, 'The grave of the man of God who came from Judah and foretold all that you have done to the altar at Bethel.' 'Leave it alone,' he said; 'let no one disturb his bones' So they spared his bones and also those of the prophet who came from Samaria.
(2 K. 23.16-18 -- NEB)

Here is a case of the disinterment of Jeroboam's bones and their being burned upon the altar at Bethel. The action was intended to desecrate Jeroboam's remains, his memory, and the altar. If disallowing burial or disinterment is considered a curse, then burial should be considered a blessing. And it would appear from numerous references

that biblical man derived great comfort from knowing he was guaranteed this blessing and honor.

May you be blessed by the Lord, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord, and buried him! (2 Sam. 2.5 -- RSV)

In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates. King Josiah went to meet him; and Pharaoh Neco slew him at Megiddo when he saw him. And his servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb.
(2 K. 23.29 -- RSV)

So Hezekiah rested with his forefathers and was buried in the uppermost of the graves of David's sons; all Judah and the people of Jerusalem paid him honour when he died, and he was succeeded by his son Manasseh. (2 Ch. 32.33 --NEB)

As a matter of fact, there is strong evidence that in the face of death, burial became the most important assurance that biblical man could be given.

When the time of his death drew near, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him: 'If I may now claim this favour from you, put your hand under my thigh and swear by the Lord that you will deal loyally and truly with me and not bury me in Egypt. When I die like my forefathers, you shall carry me from Egypt and bury me in their grave.' He answered, 'I will do as you say'; but Jacob said, 'Swear it.' So he swore the oath, and Israel sank down over the end of the bed.
(Gen. 47.29-31 -- JPS Torah)

He said to his brothers, 'I am dying; but God will not fail to come to your aid and take you from here to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' He made the sons of Israel take

an oath, saying, 'When God thus comes to your aid, you must take my bones with you from here.' So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. He was embalmed and laid in a coffin in Egypt.

(Gen. 50.24-26 -- JPS Torah)

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, because Joseph had exacted an oath from the Israelites: 'Some day', he said, 'God will show his care for you,' and then as you go, you must take my bones with you.'

(Ex. 13.19 -- JPS Torah)

He [Asa] rested with his forefathers, in the forty-first year of his reign, and was buried in the tomb which he had bought for himself in the city of David, being laid on a bier which had been heaped with all kinds of spices skillfully compounded; and they kindled a great fire in his honour.

(2 Ch. 16.13-14 -- NEB)

Two criteria for "proper" burial can be derived from Scripture. These two criteria involve the ideas of personal territory and family. They are specified in the following two accounts:

After these things, Joshua son of Nun the servant of the Lord died; he was a hundred and ten years old. They buried him within the border of his own patrimony in Timnath-serah in the hill-country of Ephraim to the north of Mount Gaash. (Josh. 24.29 -- NEB)

David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa; and he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in

the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father; and they did all that the king commanded. (2 Sam. 21.12-14 -- RSV)

In addition to burial, the practice of lighting fires for the deceased seems to have been an optional rite. It was noted above in the account of king Asa's funeral. And another mention is made regarding the funeral of king Joram in 2 Chronicles 21.19.

Another means of showing respect to the deceased is stipulated in the Book of Ruth where Boaz marries the widow Ruth for several reasons including the perpetuation of the name of her deceased husband:

This was the form of attestation in Israel. So the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself' and pulled off his sandal. Then Boaz declared to the elders and all the people, 'You are witnesses today that I have acquired from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Mahlon and Chilion; and further, that I have myself acquired Ruth the Moabitess, wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the deceased with his patrimony, so that his name may not be missing among his kindred and at the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.'

(Ruth 4.8-10 -- NEB)

Like burial, the idea of preservation of the name of the deceased by means of both offspring and memorial was very important to biblical man as he attempted to confront death:

My enemies say of me in malice:

"When will he die, and his name perish?"

(Ps. 41.5 -- RSV)

His roots dry up beneath,
 and his branches wither above.
 His memory perishes from the earth,
 and he has no name in the street.
 He is thrust from light into darkness,
 and driven out of the world.
 He has no offspring or descendant
 among his people,
 and no survivor where he used to live.
 (Job 18.16-19 --RSV)

Responses to Thoughts of Death

Biblical man was terribly afraid of death. He attempted to assuage his fears by escaping into fantasies and dreams of a deep, dark place -- Sheol. But this was no more than a fantasy, and thus he is compelled to accept the fact that death is the final event of man's existence.

Burial rites gave him some comfort. They did at least relieve his fears of a grotesque wasting away of his body. And biblical man was comforted by the thought of the honor accorded the individual through burial. Burial however did not provide biblical man with any deeply felt support as he lived from day to day. Death hung over him at every moment. He knew it. It depressed him for he didn't understand why there had to be death. And yet remarkably he controlled his depression. He refused to succumb to despair. There is only one case of suicide in the Bible where one does succumb. That is the case of Ahitophel. Saul was already fatally wounded by the Philistines when he chose to kill himself. Similar is the case of Abimelech who had been wounded by a woman. Neither Saul nor Abimelech chose to die out of despair. Rather they chose one form of death

as preferable to another. Choosing death at their own hands gave them a certain kind of honor. There is only Ahitophel's despair which leads to suicide. In all other cases biblical man chose to live. And a conscious choice it was. In the following 3 passages, one from each -- Torah, Prophets and Writings, we see that biblical man realized that to live in the deepest way meant to choose to live not merely to exist.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life -- if you and your offspring would live....(Deut. 30.19 -- JPS Torah)

You shall say further to this people, These are the words of the Lord: I offer you now a choice between the way of life and the way of death. Whoever remains in this city shall die by sword, by famine, or by pestilence, but whoever goes out to surrender to the Chaldeans, who are now besieging you shall survive; he shall take home his life, and nothing more. (Jer. 21.8-9 --NEB)

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"
(Job 2.9-10 -- RSV)

Each of these passages speaks of choosing a way of life and thereby rejecting a direction which would lead to death. In particular, Jeremiah and Job recognize that choosing life still brings with it pain. Jeremiah tells the people "choose life", although this choice involves ~~surrender to their enemies and humiliation.~~ At least

they will be spared death. Job rebukes his wife for her hazardous advice by saying: do you think that life should be all good? Life involves suffering also. And one must be willing to endure the pain to experience the good.

Biblical man did not find an answer to the question -- why must man experience pain and death? He did however learn that pain and death are tolerable --even acceptable if one chooses to live one's life to its fullest extent. He realized that life is worth the pain if man chooses to transcend that pain and seek value!

Chapter II

Kohelet: A Matter of Death and Life

Who wrote Kohelet? Where and when did he live? Even though these questions may never be answered with certainty, still we can be assured that the author was in the mainstream of biblical thought concerning death and how the fact of death affects the living. In Kohelet's twelve chapter autobiography he demonstrates his awareness of the inevitability of death, he speaks incredulously about afterlife. He despairs in the face of death and despises life for its apparent valuelessness. But in the end, by means of an understanding of the nature of the world and his relation to God, he reconciles himself with life.

We are Vulnerable

Although Kohelet is less descriptive than much of Bible about types of death, there is no doubt that he lived with the knowledge that all men must die, and that some must suffer "seemingly" untimely deaths. He makes no graphic references to specific causes of death such as disease, war, etc. Rather he deals with death on a more abstract level. Then from this more abstract level he derives personal lessons from death. Take for instance the following passage in Kohelet 3.19-20 which utilizes the dust imagery first seen in Genesis 3.19.

For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same life-breath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go

to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. (All quotations from Kohelet in this chapter are from JPS Megillot except where specified other.)

Kohelet explicitly reduces man's status. From their sharing the destiny of death, Kohelet concludes that the quality of life for man and beast are identical. The lesson Kohelet seems to derive from this abstract reduction of man's status would appear to be the following: man should see himself as vulnerable and adopt a sense of humility in the face of death. Kohelet emphasizes the lesson of man's vulnerability and humility when he says: "Another grave evil is this: He must depart just as he came. As he came out of his mother's womb, so must he depart at last, naked as he came. He can take nothing of his wealth to carry with him." (Koh. 5.14) The ideas of nakedness and dependence on one's mother also seem to be directed at reducing man's image of himself. Furthermore Kohelet describes man's powerlessness when the moment of death comes: "No man has authority over the lifebreath - to hold back the lifebreath; there is no authority over the day of death."

(Koh. 8.8) Once again Kohelet suggests the need for a man to think of his vulnerability. He speaks of a certain number of days which are allotted to man -- מספר ימי-חיו אשר

נתקלו האלהים (Koh. 5.17) -- and notes how many individuals are plucked out of life "without warning."

"And a man cannot even know his time. As fishes are enmeshed in a fatal net, and as birds are trapped in a snare,

so men are caught at the time of calamity, when it comes upon them without warning."(Koh. 9.12) All of these passages teach how inevitable and possibly sudden death is, no matter what kind of life a man has led.

For the same fate is in store for all:
for the righteous, and for the wicked;
for the good and pure, and for the im-
pure; for him who sacrifices, and for
him who does not; for him who is pleas-
ing, and for him who is displeasing;
and for him who swears, and for him who
shuns oaths. That is the sad thing
about all that goes on under the sun:
that the same fate is in store for all.
(Not only that, but men's hearts are
full of sadness, and their minds of
madness, while they live; and then -
to the dead!)(Koh. 9.2-3)

Finally he urges men to take death seriously for it is everyone's ultimate end -- באשר הוא סוף כל אדם

This reference to the "end" of one's existence gives a clue to Kohelet's concept of an afterlife. At best he leaves the possibility of an afterlife as an unanswered question "... for who can enable him to see what will happen afterward?" Or less equivocally he states there just is no afterlife.

Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness!(Koh. 11.8)

...for even the memory of them has died. Their loves, their hates, their jealousies have long since perished; and they have no more share till the end of time in all that goes on under the sun.
(Koh. 9.5b-6)

Kohelet's one reference to Sheol, being similar to his general references to afterlife, strongly questions the possibility of Sheol possessing any significant reality.

Whatever it is in your power to do, do
with all your might. For there is no
action, no reflecting, no learning,
no wisdom in Sheol where you are going.
(Koh. 9.10)

Here, Sheol is described as a place totally unlike the existence which man experiences in life. It is depicted as a non-physical, non-rational place. Kohelet envisions a place where possibly a trace of man resides, but a trace which is totally unaware of its being or its relation to that which it was before. Sheol is a place where individuality is lost. Sheol is totally unlike and detached from life. It is an "inevitable nothingness."

In dealing with death and afterlife abstractly, Kohelet seems to be teaching one basic lesson. In general, he refuses to give man room for illusions or unnecessary self-confidence. And in particular he seems to be urging man to renounce any feeling of invulnerability and adopt the more realistic and humble attitude that he is indeed vulnerable.

A Futile Search for Meaning

Despite this rather harsh realization, Kohelet still saw man as having a unique quality and potential. Motivated by his own feelings of impermanence, he began a search

for a way to make his limited lifespan most meaningful.

I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine and to grasp folly, while letting my mind direct with wisdom - to the end that I might learn which of the two was better for men to practice in their few days of life under heaven. (Koh. 2.3)

In beginning this search Kohelet ventured two assumptions about man. First, that truth is within his reach and secondly, that once found, truth necessarily enhances the value of one's life. Kohelet was saying: Despite my vulnerability to death, I do have the ability to very fully understand the meaning of existence, and with such understanding improve my limited time on earth. This self-confidence is striking in the forty or so statements he makes concerning his search of truth including the following: ... ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולחזר. "I set my mind to study and to probe..." (1.13); ... דברתי אני עם לבי. "I said to myself" (1.16); ... ידעתי. "and I learned" (1.17); ... ופניתי בלבי. "I ventured" (2.3); ... חרתי בלבי. "Then my thoughts turned to..." (2.11); ראיתי את הענין. "I have observed the business" (3.10); ושבתי אני. "I further observed" (4.1); סבתי אני ולבי לדעת. "I put my mind to studying, exploring, and seeking wisdom and solution..." (7.25); ... וארא. "For all this I noted, and I ascertained...." (9.1).

Despite the intensity of his investigation and his confidence that he could find the truth his assumptions

were to be stripped of their validity. From the very data which these assumptions enable him to gather, Kohelet begins to lose his self-confidence. First he doubts and then explicitly renounces the assumption that man can find truth:

All this I tested with wisdom. I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me. [The secret of] what happens is elusive and deep, deep down; who can discover it?(Koh. 7.23-24)

For I have set my mind to learn wisdom and to observe the business that goes on in the world - even to the extent of going without sleep day and night - and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them, he would not guess them.(Koh. 8.16-17)

And the assumption that truth once found will necessarily lead man to find value is explicitly renounced as follows:

Who can possibly know what is best for a man to do in life - the few days of his fleeting life? For who can tell him what the future holds for him under the sun?(Koh. 6.12)

Kohelet's search for meaning left him with הבל. And what is הבל? It is a sense of futility. It is the dead-end of frustration. Literally הבל means "vapor or breath". It is intangible, hardly seen, momentary and yet it is something. הבל lacks substance and appears to be absolutely inconsequential. On thirty different occasions

that is how Kohelet labelled his findings - חבל -
 unsubstantial and inconsequential. Take for instance his
 conclusions concerning the value of "wisdom".

So I reflected: "The fate of the fool
 is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?" And I
 came to the conclusion that that too was
 futile, because the wise man, just like
 the fool, is not remembered forever;
 for, as the succeeding days roll by,
 both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man
 dies, just like the fool! And so I
 loathed life. For I was distressed by
 all that goes on under the sun, because
 everything is futile and pursuit of
 wind. (Koh. 2.15-17)

Or consider some of Kohelet's concluding statements about
 the value of wealth:

So, too, I loathed all the wealth that
 I was gaining under the sun. For I
 shall leave it to the man who will suc-
 ceed me - and who knows whether he will
 be wise or foolish? - and he will con-
 trol all the wealth that I gained by
 toil and wisdom under the sun. That too
 is futile. (Koh. 2.18-19)

A lover of money never has his fill of
 money, nor a lover of wealth his fill
 of income. That too is futile. As
 his substance increases, so do those
 who consume it; what, then, does the suc-
 cess of its owner amount to, but feast-
 ing his eyes? (Koh. 5.9-10)

Other subjects which Kohelet labels as חבל are: "gather-
 ing and amassing" (2.26), "toiling and worrying" (2.22-23,
 4.4-7), "mirth" (2.1), "authority" (4.15-16), "pursuit
 of desires" (6.9), "levity" (7.6), "excessive talking"
 (6.11), "dreaming" (5.6), and "seeking justice" (8.14).

In each case Kohelet labels occupation in such activities as leading to, if not being **הבל** - lacking substance and value.

A fairly common theme in these thirty "**הבל**" references is death's association with the valuelessness of human activity. In 2.15-17, in his judgment on wisdom's "futility", Kohelet equates the wise man and the fool because of the shared destiny - death. He disregards any inherent value in wisdom and this would seem a failing in his conclusion. But nevertheless he finds a causal relationship between death and the futility of wisdom. Similarly in 2.18-19 Kohelet judges the accumulation and utilization of wealth as **הבל**. He does so not because of any inherent flaws in wealth, but rather because he feels that when one dies he will have to leave that wealth to those who would possibly not appreciate it. This same criticism is leveled against the acquisition of wealth in 2.21. In a passage quoted above (3.19-20) Kohelet questions man's significance reducing him to the status of a beast. He reasons as follows: because they both are doomed to die, they both amount to nothing **כי הכל הבל**. In dealing with the ascension of young leaders Kohelet speaks of their authority as inconsequential when it is seen how temporary such authority really is.

However,⁷ I reflected about all the living who walk under the sun with that youthful successor who steps into his place. Unnumbered are the multitudes of all those who preceded them; and later generations will not acclaim him

either. For that too is futile and pursuit of wind. (Koh. 4.15-16)

And as a final illustration of Kohelet's intimate association of death with הכל (i.e. the futility of man's activities) consider that verses 1.2 and 12.8 are identical except for the definite article before "Kohelet". In the Hebrew they appear -- הכל הבלים אמר קהלת הכל הבל -- which is translated in the JPS Megillot as: "utter futility - said Kohelet - All is futile". The words הכל הבלים of these identical verses can be taken as the original opening and closing verses of the autobiography. The two words אמר קהלת are transitional. They introduce the first person narrative through identification of the narrator. In terms of autobiographical style this would seem a feasible assumption in that they are direct quotes. And in terms of placement within the present book, 12.9-14 seems to be the afterword of an editor beginning with the words: -- ויותר שהיה קהלת חכם "A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage ..." This use of the third person would not be the normal autobiographical style and similarly 1.1 -- דברי קהלת בן-דוד מלך ירושלים could be taken as an editor's title or brief introduction to the book. Thus we have 1.2 through 12.8 as Kohelet's work. The first reference to "utter futility" is a general statement which is then developed through the book until in 12.1-8 a summary is made as follows:

So appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth, before those days of sorrow come and those years arrive of which you will say, "I have no plea-

sure in them"; before sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds come back again after the rain:

When the guards of the house become
shaky,
And the men of valor are bent,
And the maids that grind, grown few,
are idle,
And the ladies that peer through the
windows grow dim,
And the doors to the street are shut --
With the noise of the hand mill growing
fainter,
And the song of the bird growing feeble,
And all the strains of music dying down,
When one is afraid of heights
And there is terror on the road.
For the almond tree may blossom,
The grasshopper be burdened,
And the caper bush may bud again;
But man sets out for his eternal abode,
With mourners all around in the street. --
Before the silver cord snaps
And the golden bowl crashes,
The jar is shattered at the spring,
And the dust returns to the ground
As it was,
And the lifebreath returns to God
Who bestowed it.
Utter futility - said Koheleth -
All is futile!

There is no doubt that this imagery is describing the reality of old age, dying and death. And such development leads Koheleth to the final summation: Life is utterly futile, lacking substance, and inconsequential because of the reality of death.

Such a self-negating conclusion depressed Koheleth and drove him to express his bitterness toward life:

And so I loathed life. For I was distressed by all that goes on under the sun, because everything is futile and pursuit of the wind. (Koh. 2.17)

For what does a man get for all the toiling and worrying he does under the sun? All his days his thoughts are grief and heartache, and even at night his mind has no respite. That too is futile! (Koh. 2.22-23)

So what is the good of his toiling for the wind? Besides all his days he eats in darkness, with much vexation and grief and anger. (Koh. 5.15-16)

A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth. (Koh. 7.1)

Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun. (Koh. 4.2-3)

Kohelet's sense of absolute worthlessness at this stage of his life was overwhelming. He had begun his search for truth with an awareness of his vulnerability to death. Yet that awareness did not critically affect him. He still assumed that he possessed the ability to find truth and give his short life increased meaning. He soon was humbled in his recognition that such truth was unattainable and therefore inapplicable. And now he reached the depths of human despair due to his evaluation that all human activity is essentially valueless. Although suffering this despair, he never contemplated ending his own life.

An Affirmation of Life

Kohelet chose to live. Rollo May in his book Man's

Search for Himself says:

The basic step in achieving inward freedom is "choosing one's self." This strange-sounding phrase of Kierkegaard's means to affirm one's responsibility for one's self and one's existence. It is the attitude which is opposite to blind momentum or routine existence: it is an attitude of aliveness and decisiveness; it means that one recognizes that he exists in his particular spot in the universe, and he accepts the responsibility for this existence. This is what Nietzsche meant by the "will to live" -- not simply the instinct for self-preservation, but the will to accept the fact that one is one's self, and to accept responsibility for fulfilling one's own destiny, which in turn implies accepting the fact that one must make his basic choices himself.¹³

As will be demonstrated further on, it is doubtful whether Kohelet would have described himself as possessing an "inward freedom". Kohelet doesn't explicitly discuss such freedom. But he does speak of affirming "one's responsibility for one's self and one's existence." Kohelet speaks of responsibility in the Rollo May sense -- i.e. man's willingness to actively contribute to the making of one's destiny by making choices. The Book of Kohelet is constantly speaking of choices: wisdom or folly (2.3, 2.13, etc.), abundant wealth or modest standards (5.9-11), solitude or companionship (4.9-12), feasting or mourning (7.2), vexation or revelry (7.3), etc.

It is true that Kohelet emerges from his investigation of truth with the frustrating recognition that

the apparent "best" choices need not benefit man by bringing about a longer life or happiness. Kohelet observed that there seemed to be no ostensible advantage to choosing righteousness over wickedness (3.17) or wisdom over folly (2.14) in terms of extending one's life. And yet he urges the choices of righteousness and wisdom for just this reason:

אל תרשע הרבה ואל-תהי סכל למה תמות בלא

תך --"Don't overdo wickedness and don't be a fool, or you may die before your time." Kohelet had a strong will to live and he saw an important relationship between intelligent choices and length of life. And yet he guarded carefully against stating that long life and happiness were necessarily dependent on wisdom and righteousness. He stipulated a very important qualification based on his observations. The qualification was basically this: the universe is too complexly determined for man to be assured that his actions will necessarily lead to hoped for results.

Kohelet sensed this determinism strongly. He had come to realize that the changes he perceived in nature were all part of an eternal, continuing process. He sensed a determinism in nature:

One generation goes, another comes,
But the earth remains the same forever.
The sun rises, and the sun sets --
And glides back to where it rises.
Southward blowing,
Turning northward,
Ever turning blows the wind;
On its rounds the wind returns.
All streams flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is never full;
To the place from which they flow

The streams flow back again.
 All such things are wearisome:
 No man can ever state them;
 The eye never has enough of seeing,
 Nor the ear enough of hearing.
 Only that shall happen
 Which has happened,
 Only that occur
 Which has occurred;
 There is nothing new
 Beneath the sun! (Koh. 1.4-10)

Kohelet saw man as part of this process and thus unable to break out of his unique but determined place: "Whatever happens, it was designated long ago and it was known that it would happen; as for man, he cannot contend with what is stronger than he." (Koh. 6.10) Kohelet attributes the determinism in the universe to God. He sees God as the cause of all things, and he sees man as absolutely dependent on the plans of God.

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and
 drink your wine in joy; for your action
 was long ago approved by God. (Koh. 9.7)

Also, whenever a man is given riches
 and property by God, and is also permitted by Him to enjoy them and to take
 his portion and get pleasure for his
 gains -- that is a gift of God. (Koh. 5.18)

It was noted above that Kohelet learned of his inability to find truth. He found that his understanding was inherently limited. The fact frustrated and humbled him. Now given this profound universal determinism, Kohelet senses added limitations and deeper humility. He expresses this humility vis-a-vis God as follows:
 "Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat

be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few." (Koh. 5.1) Note also the striking parallel passage in Psalms 115.16 which reads: הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַיִם לַיהוָה
 --"The heavens belong to God but the earth he gave to man." (My translation)

Kohelet's sense of humility and limitation helped him come to grips with his life. In the first place the humility came only after he learned that his understanding was fallible. Admitting his fallibility was a beginning point. Then he recognized how determined his existence was. In his third chapter Kohelet speaks of the determined world as it affects man. He utilizes a series of 14 pairs of human activities: birth-death, planting-uprooting, slaying-healing, tearing down-building up, weeping-laughing, wailing-dancing, throwing stones-gathering stones, embracing-shunning embracing, seeking-losing, keeping-discarding, ripping-sewing, silence-speaking, loving-hating, war-peace. He speaks of each activity having its time: -- לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ חחת השמים

"A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:" (Koh. 3.1) These fourteen pairs of events are meant to imply much more than their literal meanings. What Kohelet has done is the following: he has attempted to give his hearers a feeling for every human possibility that they might understand that everything is essentially determined.

But still he sensed that he had some freedom of choice. In other words even though he realized he was truly limited, he still sensed that he could in some way influence the quality of his life. We know that he committed himself to try. Now let us try to understand what motivated him to try. I believe we can infer Kohelet's motivation, even the basis of his will to live from the following passage:

Even if a man should beget a hundred children and live many years -- no matter how many the days of his years may come to, if his gullet is not sated through his wealth, I say: The stillbirth, though it was not even accorded a burial, is more fortunate than he. (Koh. 6.3)

Here Kohelet makes a judgment on the value of life for an individual who had wealth but did not enjoy it. Such an individual Kohelet feels would have been better off never born. And the value of his existence Kohelet considers less than the absolute valuelessness of the still-born. In other words, Kohelet bases his affirmation of life on man's ability to enjoy the pleasures which he is determined to experience.

To the man, namely, who pleases Him
He has given the wisdom and shrewdness
to enjoy himself; and to him who displeases,
He has given the urge to gather
and amass -- only for handing on to one
who is pleasing to God. That too is futile
and pursuit of wind. (Koh. 2.26)

Kohelet regards the ability to enjoy one's pleasures as

a gift of God. But it is safe to assume that all men have that gift, they only have to realize it. Thus Kohelet urges continually to take advantage of what one has:

There is nothing worth-while for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means. And even that, I noted, comes from God. (Koh. 2.24)

I saw that there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterward? (Koh. 3.22)

Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given him; for that is his portion. (Koh. 5.17)

I therefore praised enjoyment. For the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself. That much can accompany him, in exchange for his wealth, through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun. (Koh. 8.15)

As well as urging man to enjoy pleasures as they come, Kohelet stresses the importance of learning from pain. In his 7th chapter, he emphasizes this point; טוב כעס משחוק טוב כעס משחוק -- "Grief is better than laughter, for sadness is good for the heart." (Koh. 7.3 -- My translation) And he elaborates on the subject of pain as follows:

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart. (Koh. 7.2)

It is better to listen to a wise man's reproof than to listen to the praise of fools. (Koh. 7.5)

So in a time of good fortune enjoy the good fortune; and in a time of misfortune, reflect: The one no less than the other was God's doing.... (Koh. 7.14)

Kohelet is also realistic in his recognition that much of pleasure comes in one's youth. So he urges young men to not waste their youth: "So appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth, before those days of sorrow come and those years arrive of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them';.... (Koh. 12.1)

Thus Kohelet chose life despite its highly determined nature for he came to understand that he actually did have some influence over his destiny. He was able to transcend the frustrations and limitations of the universe in which he was determined to live. For now he knew that he had the potential to enjoy pleasure and learn from pain. And he believed that actualizing that potential was the challenge of life. He pursued that challenge. The following passage from Man's Search For Himself can accurately be applied to Kohelet's deepest pursuit -- not of the wind, but of life.

When one has consciously chosen to live... his responsibility for himself takes on a new meaning. He accepts responsibility for his own life not as something with which he has been saddled, a burden forced upon him; but as a something he has chosen himself.¹⁴

An Afterword

[The Book Kohelet is in the mainstream of biblical thinking on death and dying. Like the preceding generations of biblical men,] the author of Kohelet was very much aware of death; [it was a preoccupation.] His judgments were influenced strongly by thoughts of death. His feelings of futility (הבל) were analogous to the helplessness of biblical man when he dreamed of Sheol. Kohelet knew his vulnerability and he despaired. (Like biblical man,) Kohelet entertained the possibility of an afterlife, but he gained no assurance from this notion. He knew that Sheol had no significance for man.

[Similar to biblical man] Kohelet refused to ^{fall} wallow into despair about his impermanence. And so Kohelet sought truth. But this quest proved frustrating as he found his wisdom unable to ^{solve} [fathom] the secrets of the universe. However, he did emerge from his search for truth with humility before God and His determined universe. This determinism did not paralyze him. On the contrary, he came to realize that man does have freedom. It is the freedom of the mind to choose how to respond to the determined events of life.

[As biblical man,] Kohelet found that he had the potential to make choices which could enhance his life. It was with Kohelet's recognition of this potential that he found a way to cope with his own limitations, particularly death. [The active choice of living became his strength, his "raison d'etre" and his salvation.] *By means*

APPENDIX I

The following biblical passages are organized under the following topical sub-headings: Mortality; Death through War and Assassination; Dung, Blood, Carcasses, Human Flesh, etc.; Sheol (underworld); Relationship of Life and Death with Conduct.

Mortality

But the Lord said, 'My life-giving spirit shall not remain in man for ever; he for his part is mortal flesh; he shall live for a hundred and twenty years.' (Gen. 6.3-4 -- JPS Torah)

I intend to bring the waters of the flood over the earth to destroy every human being under heaven that has the spirit of life; everything on earth shall perish. (Gen. 6.17 -- JPS Torah)

'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, however evil his inclinations may be from his youth upwards. I will never again kill every living creature, as I have just done.' (Gen. 8.21 -- JPS Torah)

Esau replied, 'I am at death's door; what use is my birthright to me?' (Gen. 25.31-32 -- JPS Torah)

When Isaac grew old and his eyes became so dim that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, 'My son', and he answered, 'Here I am.' Isaac said, 'Listen now: I am old and I do not know when I may die. Then make me a savoury dish of the kind I like, and bring it to me to eat so that I may give you my blessing before I die.' (Gen. 27.1-4 -- JPS Torah)

When Rachel found that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister and said to Jacob, 'Give me sons, or I shall die.' (Gen. 30.1 -- JPS Torah)

He said, 'I will go to my grave mourning for my son.' (Gen. 37.35 -- JPS Torah)

But Jacob said, 'My son shall not go with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he comes to any harm on the journey, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to the grave.' (Gen. 42.38 -- JPS Torah)

Now, my lord, when I return to my father without the boy - and remember, his life is bound up with the boy's - what will happen is this: he will see that the boy is not with us and will die, and your servants will have brought down our father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave.(Gen. 44.30-32 -- JPS Torah)

Israel said, 'It is enough. Joseph my son is still alive; I will go and see him before I die.'(Gen. 45.28 -- JPS Torah)

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I myself will bring you back again without fail; and Joseph shall close your eyes.(Gen. 46.4 -- JPS Torah)

Israel said to Joseph, 'I have seen your face again, and you are still alive. Now I am ready to die.'(Gen. 46.30 -- JPS Torah)

Pharaoh asked Jacob his age, and he answered, 'The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty; hard years they have been and few, not equal to the years that my fathers lived in their time.'(Gen.47.8-9 -- JPS Torah)

He gave them his last charge and said, 'I shall soon be gathered to my father's kin; bury me with my forefathers in the cave on the plot of land which belonged to Ephron the Hittite.(Gen. 49.29 -- JPS Torah)

"Leave us alone; let us be slaves to the Egyptians"? We would rather be slaves to the Egyptians than die here in the wilderness.(Ex. 14.12 -- JPS Torah)

The Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said, 'If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat round the fleshpots and had plenty of bread to eat! But you have brought us out into this wilderness to let this whole assembly starve to death.'(Ex. 16.2-3 -- JPS Torah)

'Speak to us yourself,' they said to Moses, 'and we will listen; but if God speaks to us we shall die.'(Ex. 20.19 -- JPS Torah)

You shall meet your end among the heathen, and your enemies' land shall swallow you up.(Lev.26.38 -- JPS Torah)

Let her not be like something still-born, whose flesh is half eaten away when it comes from the womb.(Num.12.12 --- JPS Torah)

Your life will hang continually in suspense, fear will beset you night and day, and you will find no security all your life long. Every morning you will say, 'Would God it were evening!', and every evening, 'Would God it were morning!'.(Deut. 28.66-67 -- JPS Torah)

The Lord said to Moses, 'You are about to die like your forefathers.(Deut. 31.16 -- JPS Torah)

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was not dimmed nor had his vigour failed. (Deut. 34.7 -- JPS Torah)

At the age of a hundred and ten Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, and they buried him within the border of his own property in Timnath-heres north of Mount Gaash in the hill-country of Ephraim.(Jud.2.8-9 -- RSV)

But as soon as the judge was dead, they would relapse into deeper corruption than their forefathers and give their allegiance to other gods, worshipping them and bowing down before them.(Jud. 2.19 -- RSV)

Gideon son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in his father's grave at Ophrah-of-the-Abiezrites.(Jud. 8.32 -- RSV)

When I saw that we were not to look for help from you, I took my life in my hands and marched against the Ammonites, and the Lord delivered them into my power.(Jud. 12.3 -- RSV)

She so pestered him with these words day after day, pressing him hard and wearying him to death, that he told her his secret. 'No razor has touched my head.'(Jud. 16.16-17 -- RSV)

As the Lord lives, your life upon it, there is only a step between me and death.(1 Sam. 20.3 -- RSV)

And he said to me, 'Stand beside me and slay me; for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers.' (2 Sam. 1.9 -- RSV)

In life and in death they were not divided.(2 Sam. 1.23 -- RSV)

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers....(2 Sam. 7.12 -- RSV)

"What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?"(2 Sam. 9.8 -- RSV)

"As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be."(2 Sam. 15.21 -- RSV)

Otherwise it will come to pass, when my lord the king sleeps with his fathers, that I and my son Solomon will be counted offenders.(1 K. 1.21 -- RSV)

When David's time to die drew near, he charged Solomon his son, saying, "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man...."(1 K. 2.1-2 -- RSV)

Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace.(1 K. 2.6 -- RSV)

And he laid the body in his own grave; and they mourned over him, saying, "Alas, my brother!" And after he had buried him, he said to his sons, "When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones.(1 K. 13.30-31 -- RSV)

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers."(1 K. 19.4 -- RSV)

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm.(2 K. 4.32-34 -- RSV)

So Joram slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David; and Ahaziah his son reigned in his stead.(2 K 8.24 -- RSV)

....they brought them back to Jabesh and buried their bones under the oak-tree there....(1 Ch. 10.12 -- NEB)

David was now an old man, weighed down with years, and he appointed Solomon his son king over Israel.(1 Ch. 23.1 -- NEB)

He died in ripe old age, full of years, wealth, and honor....(1 Ch. 29.28 -- NEB)

...and behold, joy and gladness,
slaying oxen and killing sheep;
eating flesh and drinking wine.

"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."

The Lord of hosts has revealed
himself in my ears:

"Surely this iniquity will not be
forgiven you
till you die."

says the Lord God of hosts.(Is. 22.13-14 -- RSV)

...who brings princes to nought,
and makes the rulers of the earth
as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely
sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root
in the earth,

when he blows upon them, and they
wither,
and the tempest carries them off
like stubble.(Is. 40.23-24 -- RSV)

"I, I am he that comforts you;
who are you that you are afraid
of man who dies,
of the son of man who is made
like grass....(Is. 51.12 -- RSV)

Why did I come forth from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?(Jer. 20.18 -- RSV)

Why dost thou make men like the fish of the sea,
like gliding creatures that obey no ruler?
They haul them up with hooks, one and all,
they catch them in nets
and drag them in their trawls;
then they make merry and rejoice....(Hab. 1.14-15 -- NEB)

What man is there who desires life,
and covets many days, that he may enjoy good?(Ps. 34.12 -- RSV)

"Lord, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is!
Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreadths,
and my life time is as nothing in thy sight.
Surely everyman stands as a mere breath!
Surely man goes about as a shadow!(Ps. 39.4-6 -- RSV)

"Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and give ear to my cry;
hold not thy peace at my tears!
For I am thy passing guest,
a sojourner, like all my fathers.
Look away from me, that I may know gladness,
before I depart and be no more!"(Ps. 39.12-13 -- RSV)

Truly no man can ransom himself,
or give to God the price of his life,
for the ransom of his life is costly,
and can never suffice,
that he should continue to live on for ever,
and never see the Pit.
Yea, he shall see that even the wise die,
the fool and the stupid alike must perish
and leave their wealth to others.
Their graves are their homes for ever,
their dwelling places to all generations,
though they named lands their own. Man cannot
abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish.
This is the fate of those who have foolish confidence,
the end of those who are pleased with their portion.
Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
Death shall be their shepherd;
straight to the grave they descend,

and their form shall waste away;
 Sheol shall be their home.
 But God will ransom my soul from
 the power of Sheol,
 for he will receive me.
 Be not afraid when one becomes rich,
 when the glory of his house increases.
 For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
 his glory will not go down after him.
 Though, while he lives, he counts himself happy,
 and though a man gets praise when he does well for himself,
 he will go to the generation of his fathers
 who will never more see the light.
 Man cannot abide in his pomp,
 he is like the beasts that
 perish. (Ps. 49.7-20 -- RSV)

Prolong the life of the king;
 may his years endure to all generations!
 May he be enthroned for ever before God;
 bid steadfast love and faithfulness
 watch over him! (Ps. 61.6-7 -- RSV)

Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
 forsake me not when my strength is spent. (Ps. 71.9 -- RSV)

So he made their days vanish like a breath,
 and their years in terror. (Ps. 78.33 -- RSV)

I say, "You are gods,
 sons of the Most High, all of you;
 nevertheless, you shall die like men,
 and fall like any prince." (Ps. 82.6-7 -- RSV)

O my God, make them like whirling dust,
 like chaff before the wind. (Ps. 83.13 -- RSV)
 Thou turnest man back to the dust,
 and sayest, "Turn back, O children of men!"
 For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is
 past, or as a watch in the night. (Ps. 90.3-4)

Thou dost sweep men away; they are
 like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning:
 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
 in the evening it fades and withers. (Ps. 90.5-6 -- RSV)

For all our days pass away under thy wrath,
 our years come to an end like a sigh.
 The years of our life are threescore and ten,
 or even by reason of strength fourscore;
 yet their span is but toil and trouble;
 they are soon gone, and we fly away.
 Who considers the power of thy anger,
 and thy wrath according to the fear of thee?

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.(Ps.90-9-12 -- RSV)

For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.(Ps. 103.14-16 -- RSV)

And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."(Job 1.21 -- RSV)

Let the day perish wherein I was born,
and the night which said,
'A man-child is conceived.'(Job 3.3 -- RSV)

"Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?
Why did the knees receive me?
Or why the breasts, that I should suck?
For then I should have lain down and been quiet;
I should have slept; then I should
have been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth
who rebuilt ruins for themselves,
or with princes who had gold, who filled their
houses with silver.(Job 3.11-15 -- RSV)

...how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed before the moth.
Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish for ever without any regarding it.
If their tent-cord is plucked up within them,
do they not die, and that without wisdom?(Job 4.19-21 -- RSV)

You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in
its season.(Job 5.26 -- RSV)

"Has not man a hard service upon earth,
and are not his days like the days of a hireling?
Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like a hireling who looks for his wages,
so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the
night is long and I am full of tossing till the dawn."
(Job. 7.1-4 -- RSV)

...so that I would choose strangling
and death rather than my bones.
I loathe my life; I would not live for ever.
Let me alone, for my days are a breath. (Job 7.15-16 -- RSV)

...for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing,
for our days on earth are a shadow.(Job 8.9 -- RSV)

Remember that thou hast made me of clay;
and wilt thou turn me to dust again? Didst thou
not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?
Thou didst clothe me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
Thou has granted me life and steadfast love;
and thy care has preserved my spirit.
Yet these things thou didst hide in thy heart;
I know that this was thy purpose.(Job 10.9-13 -- RSV)

My spirit is broken, my days are extinct....(Job 17.1 --RSV)

His bones are full of youthful vigor, but it will lie
down with him in the dust.(Job 20.11 -- RSV)

Yea, I know that thou wilt bring me to death,
and to the house appointed for all living.(Job 30.23 -- RSV)

In a moment they die;
at midnight the people are shaken and pass away,
and the mighty are taken away by no human hand.(Job 34.20 -- RSV)

"The godless in heart cherish anger;
they do not cry for help when he binds them.
They die in youth and their life ends in shame!"(Job 36.13-14 -- RSV)

May the Lord keep faith with you, as you have kept faith
with the dead with me; and may he grant each of you
security in the home of a new husband.(Ruth 1.8-9 -- NEB)

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.
(Ruth 1.17 -- NEB)

They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'Long live the king!'
(Dan. 3.9 -- NEB)

At the end of the appointed time, I, Nebuchadnezzar,
raised my eyes to heaven and I returned to my right mind.
I blessed the Most High, praising and glorifying the
Ever-living One:

His sovereignty is never-ending
and his rule endures through all generations;
all dwellers upon earth count for nothing
and he deals as he wishes with the host of heaven;
no one may lay hand upon him and ask him what he does.
(Dan. 4.34-35 -- NEB)

These chief ministers and satraps watched for an oppor-
tunity to approach the king, and said to him, 'Long
live King Darius!'(Dan. 6.6 -- NEB)

Death through War and Assassination

Joshua said, 'Alas, 'O Lord God, why didst thou bring this people across the Jordan only to hand us over to the Amorites to be destroyed?' (Josh. 7.6-7 -- NEB)

The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell flat on his face on the ground. (1 Sam. 17.49 -- NEB)

Then he ran to the Philistine and stood over him, and grasping his sword, he drew it out of the scabbard, dispatched him and cut off his head. (1 Sam. 17.51 -- NEB)

The battle went hard for Saul, for some archers came upon him and he was wounded in the belly by the archers. So he said to his armour-bearer, 'Draw your sword and run me through, so that these uncircumcised brutes may not come and taunt me and make sport of me.' But the armour-bearer refused, he dared not; whereupon Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. (1 Sam. 31.3-6 -- NEB)

So when Judah came to the watch-tower in the wilderness and looked towards the enemy horde, there they were all lying dead upon the ground; none had escaped. (2 Ch. 20.24 -- NEB)

The men of Judah captured another ten thousand men alive, brought them to the top of a cliff and hurled them over so that they were all dashed to pieces. (2 Ch. 25.12 -- NEB)

For the enemy has pursued me;
he has crushed my life to the ground;
he has made me sit in darkness
like those long dead.
Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is appalled. (Ps. 143.3-4 -- RSV)

Dung, Blood, Carcasses, Human Flesh, etc.

The Lord will put you into my power this day; I will kill you and cut your head off and leave your carcass and the carcasses of the Philistines to the birds and the wild beasts; all the world shall know that there is a God in Israel. (1 Sam. 17.46 -- NEB)

So Joab struck him with it in the body, and shed his bowels to the ground, without striking a second blow; and he died. (2 Sam. 20.10 -- RSV)

And as he went away a lion met him on the road and killed him. (1 K. 13.24 -- RSV)

'Thus says the Lord: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood..."'
(1 K. 21.19 -- RSV)

And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria and the dogs licked up his blood, and the harlots washed themselves in it(1K. 22.38 -- RSV)

He said, 'Throw her down.' So they threw her down; and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled on her. But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. 'In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel.'(2K. 9.33-37 -- RSV)

... and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets.(Is. 5.25 -- RSV)

The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away.(Is. 10.18 -- RSV)

And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away.(Jer. 7.33 -- RSV)

At that time, says the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its princes, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs; and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped; and they shall not be gathered or buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family in all the places where I have driven them, says the Lord of hosts.(Jer. 8. 1-3 -- RSV)

'The dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none shall gather them.'(Jer. 9.22 -- RSV)

Both great and small shall die in this land; they shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them or cut himself or make himself bald for them.(Jer. 16.6 -- RSV)

The bodies of the slain that you have put there, it is they that are the meat. The city is indeed the stew-pot, but I will take you out of it.(Ez. 11.7 -- NEB)

But now they shall abandon their wanton disloyalty and
remove the corpses of their kings far from me, and I
will dwell among them for ever. (Ez. 43.9 -- NEB)

The dead are past counting, their bodies lie in heaps,
corpses innumerable, men stumbling over corpses. (Nah. 3.3 ---
NEB)

I will bring dire distress upon men;
they shall walk like blind men for their sin against
the Lord.
Their blood shall be spilt like dust
and their bowels like dung; (Zeph. 1.17 -- NEB)

O God, break the teeth in their
mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young
lions, O Lord!
Let them vanish like water that runs
away;
like grass let them be trodden
down and wither.
Let them be like the snail which
dissolves into slime,
like the untimely birth that never
sees the sun. (Ps. 58.6-8 -- RSV)

There in the streets young men and old
lie on the ground.
My virgins and my young men have fallen
by sword and by famine;
thou hast slain them in the day of thy anger,
slaughtered them without pity. (Lam. 2.21 -- NEB)

He has wasted away my flesh and my skin
and broken all my bones;
he has built up walls around me,
behind and before,
and has cast me into a place of darkness
like a man long dead. (Lam. 3.4-6 -- NEB)

he will perish for every like his own
dung;
those who have seen him will say,
'Where is he?'
He will fly away like a dream, and
not be found;
he will be chased away like a vision
of the night. (Job 20.7-8 -- RSV)

Sheol (underworld)

For fire is kindled by my anger,
it burns to the depths of Sheol;

it devours earth and its harvest
and sets fire to the very roots of the mountains.
(Deut. 32.22 -- JPS Torah)

Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
and opened its mouth beyond measure,
and the nobility of Jerusalem and
her multitude go down, her throng and he
who exults in her. (Is. 5.14 -- RSV)

"Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as
Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not
ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." (Is. 7.11-12 -- RSV)

But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the depths of the Pit. (Is. 14.15 -- RSV)

...but you are cast out, away from your sepulchre,
like a loathed untimely birth, clothed with the slain,
those pierced by the sword, who go down to the
stones of the Pit, like a dead body trodden under foot.
(Is. 14.19 -- RSV)

O lord our God, other lords besides thee have ruled
over us, but thy name alone we acknowledge.
They are dead, they will not live; they are shades,
they will not arise; to that end thou hast visited them
with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them.
(Is. 26.13-14 -- RSV)

Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with
death, and with Sheol we have an agreement...."
(Is 28.15 -- RSV)

Then your covenant with death will be annulled,
and your agreement with Sheol will not stand;
when the overwhelming scourge passes through
you will be beaten down by it. (Is 28.18 -- RSV)

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been
sick and had recovered from his sickness:

I said, in the noontide of my days I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of
my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord in the
land of the living; I shall look upon man no more
among the inhabitants of the world. My dwelling is
plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent;
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;
he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night thou
dost bring me to an end; I cry for help until morning;
like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night
thou dost bring me to an end. Like a swallow or a
crane I clamor, I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary
with looking upward. O lord, I am oppressed; be thou

my security! But what can I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. All my sleep has fled because of the bitterness of my soul.

O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me to health and make me live!

Lo, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but thou hast held back my life from the pit of destruction, for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.

For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks thee, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children thy faithfulness. The Lord will save me, and we will sing to stringed instruments all the days of our life, at the house of the Lord. (Is. 38.9-20 -- RSV)

For these are the words of the Lord God: When I make you a desolate city, like a city where no man can live, when I bring up the primeval ocean against you and the great waters cover you, I will thrust you down with those that descend to the abyss, to the dead of all the ages. I will make you dwell in the underworld as in places long desolate, with those that go down to the abyss. So you will never again be inhabited or take your place in the land of the living. I will bring you to a fearful end, and you shall be no more; men may look for you but will never find you again. This is the very word of the Lord God. (Ez. 26.19-21 -- NEB)

who will draw their swords against your fine wisdom and lay your pride in the dust, sending you down to the pit to die a death of disgrace on the high seas. (Ez. 28.7-8 -- NEB)

Nor shall the strongest of them, well watered though they be, stand erect in their full height; for all have been given over to death, to the world below, to share the common doom and go down to the abyss. (Ez. 31.14 -- NEB)

Man, raise a lament, you and the daughters of the nations, over the hordes of Egypt and her nobles, whom I will bring down to the world below with those that go down to the abyss.

Are you better favoured than others?
Go down and be laid to rest with the strengthless dead.
(Ez. 32.18-19 -- NEB)

When the pangs of his birth came over his mother, he showed himself a senseless child; for at the proper time he could not present himself at the mouth of the womb.

Shall I redeem him from Sheol?
 Shall I ransom him from death?
 Oh, for your plagues, O death! Oh, for your sting, Sheol!
 I will put compassion out of my sight. (Hos. 13.13-14 --
 NEB)

If they dig down to Sheol,
 thence shall my hand take them; (Am. 9.2 -- NEB)

Though he opens his mouth as wide as Sheol
 and is insatiable as Death,
 gathering in all the nations,
 making all peoples his own harvest, (Hab. 2.5 -- NEB)

To thee, O Lord, I call;
 my rock, be not deaf to me,
 lest, if thou be silent to me,
 I become like those who go down to the Pit. (Ps. 28.1 --
 RSV)

O Lord, thou hast brought up my
 soul from Sheol,
 restored me to life from among
 those gone down to the Pit. (Ps. 30.3 -- RSV)

What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
 Will the dust praise thee?
 Will it tell of thy faithfulness? (Ps. 30.9 -- RSV)

Let me not be put to shame, O
 Lord,
 for I call on thee;
 let the wicked be put to shame,
 let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. (Ps. 31.17 -- RSV)

He drew me up from the desolate
 pit,
 out of the miry bog,
 and set my feet upon a rock,
 making my steps secure.
 He put a new song in my mouth,
 a song of praise to our God.
 Many will see and fear,
 and put their trust in the Lord. (Ps. 40.2-3 -- RSV)

Save me, O God!
 For the waters have come
 up to my neck.
 I sink in deep mire,
 where there is not foothold;
 I have come into deep waters,
 and the flood sweeps over me.
 I am weary with my crying;
 my throat is parched.
 My eyes grow dim
 with waiting for my God. (Ps. 69,1-3 -- RSV)

... rescue me
 from sinking in the mire:
 let me be delivered from my
 enemies
 and from the deep waters
 Let not the flood sweep over me,
 or the deep swallow me up,
 or the pit close its mouth over me. (Ps. 69.14-15 -- RSV)

Thou who hast made me see many
 sore troubles
 wilt revive me again;
 from the depths of the earth
 thou wilt bring me up again. (Ps. 71.20 -- RSV)

For great is thy steadfast love
 toward me;
 thou hast delivered my soul from
 the depths of Sheol. (Ps. 86.13 -- RSV)

... who heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the Pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast
 love and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good as long
 as you live
 so that your youth is renewed
 like the eagle's ... (Ps. 103.4-5 -- RSV)

Because he inclined his ear to me,
 therefore I will call on him as
 long as I live.
 The snares of death encompassed
 me;
 The pangs of Sheol laid hold on
 me;
 I suffered distress and anguish. (Ps. 116.2-3 -- RSV)

As a rock which one cleaves and
 shatters on the land,
 so shall their bones be strewn at
 the mouth of Sheol. (Ps. 141.7 -- RSV)

Her feet go down to death;
 her steps follow the path to
 Sheol;
 she does not take heed to the path
 of life;
 her ways wander, and she does
 not know it. (Prov. 5.5-6 -- RSV)

Her house is the way to Sheol,
 going down to the chambers of
 death. (Prov. 7.27 -- RSV)

Do not withhold discipline from a
 child;
 if you beat him with a rod, he will
 not die.
 If you beat him with the rod
 you will save his life from Sheol ... (Prov. 23.13-14 -- RSV)

Sheol, the barren womb,
 the earth ever thirsty for water,
 and the fire which never says,
 "Enough." (Prov. 30.16 -- RSV)

Are not the days of my life few?
 Let me alone, that I may find a
 little comfort
 before I go whence I shall not return,
 to the land of gloom and deep
 darkness,
 the land of gloom and chaos,
 where light is as darkness. (Job 10.20-22 -- RSV)

They spend their days in prosperity,
 and in peace they go down to
 Sheol. (Job 21.13 -- RSV)

His soul draws near the Pit,
 and his life to those who bring
 death. (Job 33.22 -- RSV)

Have the gates of death been
 revealed to you,
 or have you seen the gates of deep
 darkness? (Job 38.17 -- RSV)

Relationship of Life and Death with Conduct

So also when they approach the altar to minister, to
 burn a food-offering to the Lord, they shall wash their
 hands and feet, lest they die. (Ex. 30.20 -- JPS Torah)

You shall keep the sabbath, because it is a holy day
 for you. If anyone profanes it he must be put to
 death. (Ex. 31.14 -- JPS Torah)

This is a rule for all time from generation to genera-
 tion wherever you live: you shall not eat any fat or
 any blood. (Lev. 3.17 -- JPS Torah)

If a person touches anything unclean, such as the dead
 body of an unclean animal, whether wild or domestic,
 or of an unclean reptile, or if he touches anything
 unclean in a man, whatever that uncleanness may be,
 and it is concealed by him although he is aware of it,
 he shall incur guilt. (Lev. 5.2-4 -- JPS Torah)

Every person who eats any of the blood shall be cut off from his father's kin. (Lev. 7.27 -- JPS Torah)

Fire came out from before the Lord and destroyed them; and so they died in the presence of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when he said: Among those who approach me, I must be treated as holy; in the presence of all the people I must be given honour.' Aaron was dumbfounded. (Lev. 10. 2-4 -- JPS Torah)

Tell your brother Aaron that he must not enter the sanctuary within the Veil, in front of the cover over the Ark, except at the appointed time, on pain of death; (Lev. 16.2 -- JPS Torah)

If any Israelite or alien settled in Israel eats any blood, I will set my face against the eater and cut him off from his people, because the life of a creature is the blood. (Lev. 17.10-11 -- JPS Torah)

You shall not gash yourselves in mourning for the dead; you shall not tattoo yourselves. I am the Lord. (Lev. 19.28 -- JPS Torah)

A priest shall not render himself unclean for the death of any of his kin except for a near blood-relation. (Lev. 21.1 -- JPS Torah)

When one man strikes another and kills him, he shall be put to death. (Lev. 24.17 -- JPS Torah)

During the whole term of his vow he shall not go near a corpse, not even when his father or mother, brother or sister, dies; he shall not make himself ritually unclean for them, because the Nazirite vow to his God is on his head. (Num. 6.7-8 -- JPS Torah)

Now, Israel, listen to the statutes and laws which I am teaching you, and obey them; then you will live. (Deut. 4.1 -- JPS Torah)

... but you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today. (Deut. 4.4-5 --- JPS Torah)

I summon heaven and earth to witness against you this day: you will soon vanish from the land which you are to occupy after crossing the Jordan. You will not live long in it; you will be swept away. (Deut. 4.26 -- JPS Torah)

You shall not commit murder. (Deut. 5.17 -- JPS Torah)

But you must strictly refrain from eating the blood, because the blood is the life; you must not eat the life with the flesh. You must not eat it, you must pour it out on the ground like water. (Deut. 12.23-24 -- JPS Torah)

Sentence of death shall be carried out on the testimony of two or of three witnesses; no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness. The first stones shall be thrown by the witnesses and then all the people shall follow; thus you shall rid yourselves of this wickedness.(Deut.17.6-7 -- JPS Torah)

Then the officers shall address the army in these words: 'Any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it shall go back to his house; or he may die in battle and another man dedicate it. Any man who has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use it shall go back home; or he may die in battle and another man use it. Any man who has pledged himself to take a woman in marriage and has not taken her shall go back home; or he may die in battle and another man take her.'(Deut. 20.5-8 -- JPS Torah)

Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children for their fathers; a man shall be put to death only for his own sin.(Deut. 24.16 -- JPS Torah)

For I know how defiant and stubborn you are; even during my lifetime you have defied the Lord; how much more, then, will you do so when I am dead?(Deut. 31.27 -- JPS Torah)

Whoever rebels against your authority, and fails to carry out all your orders, shall be put to death.(Josh. 1.18 -- NEB)

As I held your life precious today, so may the Lord hold mine precious and deliver me from every distress. (1 Sam. 26.24 -- NEB)

... and he shall sacrifice upon you the priests of the high places who burn incense upon you, and men's bones shall be burned upon you.(1 K. 13.2 -- RSV)

In those days Hezeki'ah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amos came to him, and said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order; for you shall die, you shall not recover.' Then Hezeki'ah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the Lord, saying, 'Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in thy sight.' And Hezeki'ah wept bitterly.(2 K. 20. 1-3 -- RSV)

You have violated my sanctity before my people with handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. You bring death to those who should not die, and life to those who should not live, by lying to this people of mine who listen to lies.(Ez. 13.19 -- NEB)

Every living soul belongs to me; father and son alike are mine. The soul that sins shall die.(Ez. 18.4 -- NEB)

It is the soul that sins, and no other, that shall die; a son shall not share a father's guilt, nor a father his son's. The righteous man shall reap the fruit of his own righteousness, and the wicked man the fruit of his own wickedness.(Ez. 18.20 -- NEB)

Have I any desire, says the Lord God, for the death of a wicked man? Would I not rather that he should mend his ways and live?(Ez. 18.23 -- NEB)

Every man is stupid and without knowledge;
every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols;
for his images are false,
and there is no breath in them
They are worthless, a work of delusion;
at the time of their punishment
they shall perish.(Jer.51.17-18 -- RSV)

The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.(Ps. 34.22 -- RSV)

Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright,
for there is posterity for the man of peace.
But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.(Ps. 37. 37-38 -- RSV)

For thou hast delivered my soul from death,
yea, my feet from falling,
that I may walk before God
in the light of life.(Ps. 56.13 -- RSV)

Our God is a God of salvation;
and to God, the Lord,
belongs
escape from death.(Ps. 68.20 -- RSV)

I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.(Ps. 118.17 -- RSV)

I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget thy law.(Ps. 119.109 -- RSV)

Such are the ways of all who get
 gain by violence;
 it takes away the life of its
 possessors.(Prov. 1.19 -- RSV)

For the simple are killed by their
 turning away,
 and the complacency of fools
 destroys them;(Prov. 1.32 -- RSV)

For he who finds me finds life
 and obtains favor from the Lord;
 but he who misses me injures
 himself;
 all who hate me love death.(Prov. 8.35-36 -- RSV)

The lips of the righteous feed many
 but fools die for lack of sense.(Prov. 10.21 -- RSV)

The fear of the Lord prolongs life,
 but the years of the wicked will be
 short.(Prov. 10.27 -- RSV)

When the wicked dies, his hope
 perishes,
 and the expectation of the godless
 comes to nought.(Prov. 11.7 -- RSV)

He who guards his mouth preserves
 his life;
 he who opens wide his lips comes
 to ruin.(Prov. 13.3 -- RSV)

The teaching of the wise is a
 fountain of life,
 that one may avoid the snares of
 death.(Prov.13.14 -- RSV)

The fear of the Lord is a fountain
 of life,
 that one may avoid the snares of
 death.(Prov. 14.27 -- RSV)

A tranquil mind gives life to the
 flesh,
 but passion makes the bones rot.(Prov. 14.30 -- RSV)

A hoary head is a crown of glory;
 it is gained in a righteous life.(Prov. 16.31 -- RSV)

Grandchildren are the crown of the
 aged,
 and the glory of sons is their
 fathers.(Prov. 17.6 -- RSV)

Death and life are in the power of
the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its
fruits.(Prov. 18.21 -- RSV)

He who keeps the commandment
keeps his life;
he who despises the word will die.(Prov. 19.16 -- RSV)

A man who wanders from the way
of understanding
will rest in the assembly of the
dead.(Prov. 21.16 -- RSV)

The desire of the sluggard kills him,
for his hands refuse to labor.(Prov. 21.25 --RSV)

A false witness will perish,
but the word of a man who
hears will endure.(Prov. 21.28 -- RSV)

If a man is burdened with the
blood of another,
let him be a fugitive until death;
let no one help him.(Prov. 28.17 -- RSV)

Two things I ask of thee;
deny them not to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and
lying;
give me neither poverty nor
riches;
feed me with the food that is
needful for me,
lest I be full, and deny thee,
and say, "Who is the Lord?"
or lest I be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.(Prov. 30.7-9 -- RSV)

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your
arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel
as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most
vehement flame.(Song of Sol. 8.6 -- RSV)

Surely vexation kills the fool,
and jealousy slays the simple.(Job 5.2 -- RSV)

NOTES

- 1 Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, On Death and Dying (New York, 1969), p. 142.
- 2 *ibid*, p. 254.
- 3 *ibid*, p. 80.
- 4 Nu. 16.29-30, as translated in The Torah, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962 (hereafter referred to as JPS Torah). Translations to follow in this essay are either from the JPS Torah or from the Revised Standard Version, New York 1952 (RSV), or from The New English Bible, Oxford 1971 (NEB), or from The Five Megilloth and Jonah, JPS 1969 (JPS Megilloth), or they are my own. In Chapter II: "Kohelet: A Matter of Death and Life"-- all biblical references noted as "Koh." are taken from the JPS Megilloth.
- 5 2 Ch. 16.12-14 -- NEB. This translation was chosen on account of its choice of the word "gangrene" to emphasize the fatal connotation of the Hebrew -- ויחלא ... ברגליו עד למעלה חליו.
- 6 2 Ch. 21.19 -- NEB. This translation was chosen because of its emphasis on the fatal nature of the disease represented by the Hebrew as: יצאו מעיו עם חליו. The English translation "prolapse of the bowels" is extremely literal for יצאו מעיו, and the idea of "painful ulceration" [חחלאים רעים] bringing on death is certainly the probable account of complications of a "prolapsed bowel".
- 7 2 K. 2.19-22 -- NEB. As indicated in the text translating ויהמים רעים (vs. 19) as polluted water and coupling it with death -- מות (vs. 21) is the reason for choosing this translation.
- 8 This translation is chosen because of its rendering ויחנק loosely as "he hanged himself" as opposed to "he strangled himself". The idea of strangling oneself with one's hands implied is difficult to accept as possible.
- 9 This translation is chosen for its utilization of the jussive sense of the future which implies a longing on man's part: "May he live while the sun endures...." "May he be like rain...." In verse 5 וייראה is emended to read ויארית.
- 10 The Hebrew of 41.9b reads: ואשר שכב לא יוסיף לקום which can be literally translated: "...and whoever lies [dead] will not rise."

11 The explicit power of ^{עוֹלָם} -- the denial of existence -- is extremely convincing evidence ^{that the} writer of Job in particular denied any afterlife.

12 Although Hannah is not thanking God for the resurrection of her son, but only for his birth, there is little reason to read in the idea of resurrection. However, the close association of the word ^{מֵיָוֶם} with ^{מֵיָוֶם} by means of the "vav consecutive" does lead one to entertain the possibility of a temporal connection between causing death and bringing to life (i.e. resurrection). "God brings down to Sheol and then he brings up." (with the emphasis on then).

13 May, Rollo, Man's Search For Himself (New York, 1953), p. 144.

14 *ibid*, p. 148.

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