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THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE IN THE BIBLE

by

BERNARD HARVEY MEHLMAN

Thesis submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the require-  
ments for the Degree of Master  
of Arts in Hebrew Letters and  
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Hebrew Union College-  
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Referee:  
Dr. Sheldon H. Blank

FOR MY PARENTS

Fannie Barban Mehlman  
and  
Joseph Isaac Mehlman

bearers of life

## DIGEST

The purview of this thesis has been the analysis of the attitude toward life reflected in biblical literature. In the course of examination of various books of the Hebrew Bible the writer was drawn to the fact that life in this world was the only life in which biblical man believed. He had no concept of life beyond the life he was living. His world was clearly defined; it had an almost geographic scope. The land of the light was the land of blessing. The land of darkness, Sheol, was the land of the curse. It was toward Sheol that all life was tending, and man struggled to escape these shades.

The ancient Hebrew affirmed his faith in this world. He lived his life in the 'here and now.' He developed, within his world, the view that life linked with blessing and morality was the type of life which had meaning. Biblical man saw purpose and meaning in his existence. The world was a place created for habitation and not for emptiness and ruin.

The investigation of the value placed upon life brought the writer into several ancillary, but, nonetheless, important, areas. Suicide and the death wish in the Bible reflect important attitudes toward life. Similarly, immortality and resurrection have been discussed but only insofar as they reflect biblical man's attitude toward life.

The conclusion of the findings of this thesis is that biblical man viewed life as a blessing, morality as an imperative, and purpose a sine qua non for meaningful existence.

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## PREFACE

Before beginning this paper, the writer wishes to draw the reader's attention to the title of this thesis. It bears the title: "The Affirmation of Life in the Bible." The Bible is a book of wide proportions. It was necessary for him, therefore, to limit his scope when approaching this subject.

In the examination of "The Affirmation of Life," the writer carefully went through all the books of the Torah and the Prophets. It was, however, in the books of the Hagiographa that the writer placed limits upon himself. In these books he chose certain verses which seemed pertinent to the thesis of his paper. In this respect, he acknowledges the limitations which were imposed upon his total work. It would seem just, therefore, to inform the reader that the title of this thesis which includes the word "Bible" has this limitation placed upon it.

B.H.M.

Cincinnati  
February 1963



## CHAPTER I

### Life-Torah-Blessing

The deuteronomic writer makes an exact connection between the concept of life, the value of the Torah and the Hebrew concept ברכה.<sup>1</sup> In his "Weltanschauung" the Israelite saw these three concepts linked together in an indissoluble covenant which affirmed life. The impact of this concept did not stop with the Book of Deuteronomy, but proceeded beyond and made an indelible mark on the writing of later prophets<sup>2</sup> and the psalmists.<sup>3</sup>

In the Bible the ordinances and commandments which are delineated in the Torah are viewed as life-giving. This is explicitly stated in the following instance:

See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then thou shalt live and multiply, and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest in to possess it.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of these laws then, is to enable man to live. In addition to promoting life, the laws have another function; these laws and ordinances are sources of blessing:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed; to love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and

to cleave unto Him; for that is thy life, and the length of thy days; that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.<sup>5</sup>

Here then the trilogy is complete: Life - Torah - Blessing.

This concept is linked with the total Israelite view of the universe. Biblical men saw life as a struggle between good and evil.<sup>6</sup> In their structuring of the universe they saw life, light and law, locking horns with death, darkness and chaos. Johannes Pederson discusses this very concept in his work: Israel: Its Life and Culture:

The important thing is to have sufficient blessing to be able to keep evil down. Thus the world must be upheld continually through the renewal of the blessing; in that manner the land of man, with its state of order, gains the upper hand over chaos. This the Israelites, like many other peoples, express through myths, telling how their god forced back chaos and superceded it with law and order.<sup>7</sup>

Torah which included in its annals ordinances and statutes, extended to man a way of living and an assurance of blessing:

All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers.<sup>8</sup>

In yet another sense the laws, statutes and ordinances represent a life-giving source. Frequently in the Book of Deuteronomy we find the concept of obedience to the law

linked with a reward:

Honor thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God commanded thee; that thy days may be long, and that it may go well with thee, upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.<sup>9</sup>

It is of interest to note, that whenever the reward is spelled out, the reward is life.<sup>10</sup>

The rewards which are extended to the obedient subject are all dependent upon the subject's acceptable conduct.

In return for such acceptable conduct he receives numerous rewards: blessing<sup>11</sup>; the Promised land<sup>12</sup>; fecundity<sup>13</sup>; long life<sup>14</sup>; prosperity<sup>15</sup>; continuity of progeny<sup>16</sup>; peace<sup>17</sup>; an everlasting covenant.<sup>18</sup>

These rewards are clear. At the heart of Israelite man's obedience to the statutes and ordinances, however, is an entire attitude towards life and giving. This attitude may be summed up in the expression: "The Hebraic Standard of Living." This "Standard of Living" is very unlike our modern economic conception which bears a similar name. "The Hebraic Standard of Living" means a standard of behavior by which the Israelite man believed life should be lived and could be preserved.

This conception is spoken of a number of times. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

But ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive everyone of you this day.<sup>19</sup>

The Torah, as teaching and guidance for living, was the thing

to which the people of Israel cleaved and it was this self-same Torah which enabled them to be alive.

Into the warp and woof of Israelite existence were woven the threads of ethical behavior, proper conduct and moral imperatives. These, then, became the substance of the type of life man was to lead. Into the foundation of this experience was poured the mortar for spiritual survival.

Israelite man learned that man does not endure by material sustenance alone. He felt the need for spiritual nourishment as well. Such nourishment, he believed, would give him fortitude for endurance. It was the spiritual Manna, the Torah, which sustained the early Israelite. It was in such a world view that he declared:

...that He might make thee know that  
man doth not live by bread alone, but  
by everything that proceedeth out of  
the mouth of the Lord doth man live.<sup>20</sup>

For the Israelite "...that which proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord..." was Torah, as the teaching.

The prophet Amos stated the very same thing in a negative way. Rebuking the Israelites, he tells them that they have become overconfident and smug. He says they feel secure because of their abundant material comforts. He reminds them, however, that there is something more important than their lavish living; he reminds them of the need for God's word:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord  
 God,  
 That I will send a famine in the land,  
 Not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for  
 water,  
 But of hearing the words of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

The words which "proceeded from the mouth of the Lord" gave the Israelite a framework in which to operate. It was with this background that he developed the specific elements of his unique "Standard of Living."

In Deuteronomy 16:20 ¶7X is specified as one of these standards:

Justice, justice shalt thou follow,  
 that thou mayest live, and inherit  
 the land which the Lord thy God  
 giveth thee.<sup>22</sup>

The word is frequently translated as "justice," but might be better rendered as "truth." This is certainly one of the Hebraic criteria for life.

Love of God and His teachings is another means by which Israelite man painted lines of meaning upon the canvas of life:

And the Lord thy God will circumcise  
 thy heart, and the heart of thy seed,  
 to love the Lord thy God with all thy  
 heart, and with all thy soul, that  
 thou mayest live.<sup>23</sup>

This was one of the great imperatives by which man must live.

In other sections of biblical literature we find values delineated. When Solomon assumed the realm upon the death of David, he pleaded an inability to assume the responsibility

of his station. In a moving speech he prays:

Give Thy servant therefore an understanding heart to judge Thy people,  
that I may discern between good and  
evil; for who is able to judge this  
Thy great people?<sup>24</sup>

Such a request from Solomon may seem somewhat strange. With further examination the request becomes more understandable. Solomon is requesting an understanding of *דעוּוּ* ; that is, an understanding to discern the Torah which is the life-giving teaching. As a reward for his concern, Solomon's modest request is expanded by God:

....And God said unto him: 'Because  
thou has asked this thing, and hast  
not asked for thyself long life;  
neither hast asked riches for thyself,  
nor hast asked the life of thine enemies;  
but hast asked for thyself understanding  
to discern ( *דעוּוּ* ) justice  
...<sup>25</sup>

The prophet Amos reiterates the importance of this value when he appeals to the people of Israel to adopt higher standards of ethical behavior:

Seek the Lord and Live<sup>26</sup>

and

Seek good, and not evil,  
that ye may live;  
And so the Lord, the God  
of hosts, will be with you,  
as ye say.<sup>27</sup>

What the prophet means by these statements is made more explicit in the verse which follows:

Hate the evil, and love the good,  
and establish ( מִשְׁפָּט ) justice  
in the gate.<sup>28</sup>

In Amos' view, seeking God meant turning from evil and doing good. If man did this, the prophet believed that מִשְׁפָּט would be established as one of the cornerstones for an improved society.

Another aspect of this "Hebraic Standard of Living" was righteousness. It was through man's righteousness that he lived. Righteousness was the vehicle of life. This thought is developed by the prophet Habakkuk:

<sup>29</sup>וְצַדִּיק בְּאֱמוּנָתוֹ יֵחִיָּהּ

Dr. Sheldon H. Blank discusses the meaning of the Hebrew root

אָמַן and cites this very verse in evaluation of the meaning of the word אֱמוּנָה. His translation of this verse lends greatly to our understanding of righteousness as a basis for ethical living:

By virtue of his righteousness  
the righteous shall live.<sup>30</sup>

Righteousness was another key ingredient in the "Hebraic Standard of Living."

In summary, then, "The Hebraic Standard of Living" was a mode of acceptable behavior. The laws which Israelite man had, and by which he was required to live, served one purpose. They were designed to direct man along the pathway of acceptable social behavior. This "Standard" set forth life-

giving statutes which included a) pursuit of -  $\text{p7x}$  (truth); b) love of deity; c) discernment of -  $\text{vswd}$  (justice); d) goodness and e) lawfulness.

Tracing the development of these standards of Hebraic living, we seek a connection between the laws and ordinances and their life-giving nature. In the prophet Ezekiel we find the clearest connection between Torah and life-giving teaching. He was the author of the statement which correlated the ordinances and statutes with the words "statutes of life":

...if the wicked restore the pledge,  
give back that which he had taken by  
robbery, walk in the statutes of life  
...<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, it was he who observed that the man who pursues these life-giving laws, is just:

...hath walked in My statutes, and hath  
kept Mine ordinances, to deal truly; he  
is just, he shall surely live, saith the  
Lord. God.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Ezekiel considered the man who lived in accordance with these life-giving statutes as a man who was living lawfully and right.<sup>33</sup>

In a typical fashion, however, the prophet Ezekiel adds a note of irony to his whole evaluation of the ordinances. In chapter twenty-five, verse thirteen, he alludes to ordinances by which man shall live. Then in the very same chapter, in verse twenty-five, he mentions statutes and ordinances by which people should not live. Such laws Ezekiel calls:



Statutes that were not good, and ordinances whereby they should not live.<sup>34</sup>

For Ezekiel, such laws might include a law requiring child sacrifice. In the face of these two types of statutes, Ezekiel made it clear that the positive value was to be found in adherence to laws which guaranteed life.

In summary, biblical man saw the world about him as the land of the light, the place where the sun shone, as the habitation of blessing. Beyond the arable land was the dark pale, called Sheol:

Sheol is the dark, cavernous abode of the departed...<sup>35</sup>

Sheol was enwrapped in darkness, it was the abode of the curse. For biblical man, life was a struggle against the forces of Sheol which constantly strove to gain a foothold in the land of the living.

Into the dense chaos which surrounded him, the biblical man cut a path which captured life and blessing from the shaded realm of death and the curse. It was in such a struggle that the Israelite pattern of acceptable behavior was born. As Johannes Pedersen has well shown, biblical man had the following view of life:

Life is an organism of values, a real substance.<sup>36</sup>

It was inevitable, then, that a "Hebraic Standard of Living" should unfold in the annals of Israel's history.

## CHAPTER I

Footnotes

1. Deuteronomy 30:15-16, 19-20.
2. Ezekiel 20:10-11; Isaiah 55:3.
3. Psalm 119:17; 133:3.
4. Deuteronomy 30:15-16. All translations are taken from the Jewish Publication Society translation of The Holy Scriptures - 1917, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. See also Ezekiel 20:10-11; 33:15.
5. Deuteronomy 30:19-20, 15-16.
6. Deuteronomy 30:15-16.
7. Pedersen, Johannes, Israel: Its Life and Culture I-II. 1926, translated by Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, London, pages 470-471.
8. Deuteronomy 8:1.
9. Deuteronomy 5:16; see also 4:1;40; 8:1; 11:8-9;21; 12:1; 16:20; 17:19-20.
10. Deuteronomy 4:1; 40; 5:16; 8:1; 11:8-9;21; 12:1; 16:20; 17:19-20.
11. Deuteronomy 7:12-16; 28:1-6; 30:16.
12. Deuteronomy 4:1; 8:1; 11:8-9; 21; 12:1; 16:20.
13. Deuteronomy 8:1; 30:16.
14. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 4:1; 40; 5:16; 8:1; 11:8-9; 21; 17:19-20; 32:47; I Kings 3:14.
15. Deuteronomy 4:40; 11:8-9; 30:16.
16. Deuteronomy 11:21; 17:19-20.
17. Malachi 2:5.
18. Isaiah 55:3.
19. Deuteronomy 4:4.
20. Deuteronomy 8:3b

21. Amos 8:11.
22. Deuteronomy 16:20.
23. Deuteronomy 30:6.
24. I Kings 3:9
25. I Kings 3:11.
26. Amos 5:6.
27. Amos 5:14.
28. Amos 5:15a.
29. Habakkuk 2:4.
30. Blank, Sheldon H. Prophetic Faith in Isaiah. 1958,  
Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, page 39.
31. Ezekiel 33:15.
32. Ezekiel 18:9.
33. Ezekiel 33:16.
34. Ezekiel 20:25.
35. S. L. Brown, The Book of Hosea: The Westminster Commentary.  
1932, Methuen and Company, London, pages 115-116.
36. Pedersen, Johannes, op. cit., page 152.

## CHAPTER II

### Life As The Summum Bonum

Biblical man lived under the influence of the great imperative for life:

I call heaven and earth to witness  
against you this day, that I have  
set before thee life and death, the  
blessing and the curse; therefore  
choose life, that thou mayest live,  
thou and thy seed.<sup>1</sup>

The world for biblical man was a place in which life abounded. He made no distinction between the animate and inanimate, everything was filled with life:

The world appears to primitive man neither inanimate nor empty but redundant with life; and life has individuality, in man and beast and plant, and in every phenomenon which confronts man --- the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the eerie and unknown clearing in the woods, the stone which suddenly hurts him when he stumbles while on a hunting trip. Any phenomenon may at any time face him not as 'IT' but as 'THOU.' In this confrontation, 'THOU' reveals its individuality, its qualities, its will. 'THOU' is not contemplated with intellectual detachment; it is experienced as life confronting life, involving every faculty of man in a reciprocal relationship. Thoughts, no less than acts and feelings, are subordinated to this experience.<sup>2</sup>

In such a world as this, biblical man strove to find meaning in the universe. He saw life and death as the blessing and the curse. In striving to chart a course for his life, he encountered many enemies. Among his formidable enemies,

was the desert, with its arid, parched surface. Similarly, the grave represented a place of darkness and emptiness which encroached upon the land of the living:

It is the contrast between life and death which determines the Israelitic conception of the universe. Therefore the enemy of the good country is not only the desert-land, but also the land of the grave. The land which lies in the sun, where men are moving and working, is the land of the life (Isaiah 38:11; 53: 8; Ezekiel 32:32) Below it extends the land of death, Sheol.

The dead dwell in the grave. There the corpse is laid; to die means the same as to go down into the grave (Psalm 16:10; 30:10; 55:24; Job 17:14). In the grave the dead remain, and there the survivors may look for them (Jeremiah 31:15).

But the individual grave is not an isolated world; it forms a whole with the graves of the kinsmen who make a common world and are closely united. Nor does the thought stop at this totality. Viewed from the world of light, all the deceased form a common realm, because they are essentially subjected to the same conditions.

This common realm the Israelites call Sheol, or the nether-world. Here the dead gather, lying on their beds of worms and corruption. Sheol is the deepest place in the universe, just as heaven is the highest (Isaiah 7:11; 57:9; Proverbs 9:18). There is room for many, and he who got down there, never returns. (II Samuel 12:23; Job 7:9; 10:21; 16:22).<sup>3</sup>

With such a metaphysic, biblical man endeavored to live. Indeed, he saw life not only as a blessing but as the only understandable and intelligible way of life. For him, life was vital, it was his foremost concern. It represented his sole and unique resistance against his enemy, Sheol, the nether-world.

It seems clear that biblical man conceived of this life as the only one he would ever have and, consequently, he held on to it tenaciously. This thought is expressed a number of times in biblical writings:

For the nether-world cannot praise  
Thee,  
Death cannot celebrate Thee;  
They that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth.  
The living, the living, he shall praise  
Thee,  
As I do this day...<sup>4</sup>

The Psalmist also viewed life as a singular, unique experience:

Lord, how long wilt Thou look on?  
Rescue my soul from their destructions,  
Mine only one from the lions.<sup>5</sup>

In Psalm twenty-two, we have the same thought expressed through parallelism:

Deliver my soul from the sword;  
Mine only one from the power of  
the dog.<sup>6</sup>

The expression..."mine only one"...can only be in a parallel relation to the word "...soul..."

Still, a further insight comes to us from the David story. After Uriah was slain in battle and Bath-Sheba bore David's child, a severe illness smote the child. During the period of the child's illness, David beseeches God, he fasts, and he sleeps on the ground.<sup>7</sup> David is so adamant in pursuing this course of abnegation that not even the elders can raise him from the ground nor induce him to eat a morsel of

bread.<sup>8</sup> When the child is declared dead, however, David's entire demeanor changes. He arises, cleanses his body and eats food.<sup>9</sup> His servants are somewhat amazed by their master's sudden change, and this is followed by a curious dialogue:

Then said his servants unto him; 'What thing is this that thou has done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread.' And he said: 'While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said: Who knoweth whether the Lord will not be gracious to me, that the child may live?  
But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast?  
Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him.  
But he will not return to me.<sup>10</sup>

What we learn from this short episode is that David's concern for the child was real so long as the babe was living. Once dead, the infant could not be brought back again, he was gone forever. For David, as for biblical man in general, the life he possessed was the only one he had and no man could ever return from Sheol.

Attitudes are not always expressed overtly. Many times we sense or find attitudes expressed through the lives people lived or in the expressions they uttered to others. Such is the case with a majority of the evidence which follows. How biblical man lived, what he expressed and how he carried out his verbal expressions indicate attitudes toward

life. The remainder of this chapter attempts to illustrate this point.

Three times in the biblical narrative we have stories about the patriarchs who requested that their wives lie.<sup>11</sup> Both Abraham and Isaac are fearful of losing their lives, and so they tell their wives to make known that they are sisters, and not wives, of these respective men. In order to stay alive, the righteous fathers of the Hebrews allow their wives, both of them Matriarchs of the faith, to lie. The reason is that their lives might be preserved. Life is the supreme good.

In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, there is a clear picture of the emphasis placed upon life.<sup>12</sup> In the ancient Near East there was the practice of sacrificing babies and young children to the gods. In this episode, Abraham's act of human sacrifice is interrupted by a divine messenger and the order is given that a ram be offered in the lad's stead.<sup>13</sup> The act of human sacrifice is suspended. By a divine charge, Israelite man is commanded to cease the slaughter of a human being. The implications of the story, that human life is considered of great import, seems clear.

In the rivalries of Jacob and Esau, we have another example of such an expression. In the story we are told of the growth and development of the twin sons. Esau becomes the bowman and hunter, while Jacob is a 'homebody,' the



apple of his mother's eye.

When Esau returned ravenously hungry from the fields, he found his younger brother Jacob stirring a pot of potage.

Esau pleads with Jacob:

'Let me swallow I pray thee, some of  
this red, red pottage; for I am  
faint.'<sup>14</sup>

What then ensued was a bargaining session in which Jacob exacted his brother's birthright as the price for his potage.

What Esau said was:

'Behold, I am at the point to die;  
and what profit shall the birth-  
right do to me?'<sup>15</sup>

In modern terms, Esau might be considered as invoking the current slogan: "Better Red than Dead." If I am dead, what good will my birthright do? Take it and let me live.

In this story as well, we have an affirmation of life. Life is the supreme good.

The story of Joseph and his brothers has the concept of life intimately intertwined within it. From the very beginning of the episode, we read that the objective of the descent to Egypt was to purchase corn in order to stave off the famine in Canaan:

And he said; 'Behold, I have heard that  
there is corn in Egypt. Get you down  
thither, and buy for us from thence;  
that we may live, and not die.'<sup>16</sup>

After returning to the aging Israel, their father, the sons related the demand of the vizier in Egypt. Fearful of

losing his youngest child, Benjamin, Israel at first refused to allow him to journey to Egypt. Faced with a lack of food and possible annihilation, he acceded to Judah's entreaty:

And Judah said unto Israel his father:  
'Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live, and not die, both we, and thou, and also our little ones.'<sup>17</sup>

Judah's entreaty was clearly based upon the deep-seated feeling that life should be maintained.

Joseph, vizier of Egypt's storehouses, was unable to contain himself at the sight of his brother Benjamin. He ordered the Hebrew men into his private quarters and there he revealed his identity and pleaded that his brothers feel no guilt for their having sold him into slavery:

And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life.<sup>18</sup>

Joseph viewed his incarceration in prison and attainment of station in Pharaoh's service as being the product of fate. The fate for which he was destined, however, was the preservation of life.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that in this story we have a deep concern for life as the greatest good. Life is to be maintained and risks are to be chanced because life is the greatest good.

Before leaving the Joseph story, we should also examine another incident which indicates a concern for life and its values. Shortly after the family episode was finished,

several Egyptian people appeared before Joseph. They worked the soil and gathered the harvests. They recognized that Joseph had sided them and saved their lives:

And they said: 'Thou has saved our lives.  
Let us find favour in the sight of my Lord,  
and we will be Pharaoh's bondmen.'<sup>20</sup>

Recognizing their debt to Joseph, the appointed vizier of the Pharaoh, they offered him their very freedom as an act of gratitude and thanksgiving to the "Preserver of Life."

This was not the last time that bondage was going to be viewed as more acceptable than death. The children of Israel, as they trekked across the desert, were to utter the same thought when life in the arid desert became intolerable:

Is not this the word that we spoke unto  
thee in Egypt, saying: 'Let us alone,  
that we may serve the Egyptians? For it  
were better for us to serve the Egyptians,  
than that we should die in the wilderness.'<sup>21</sup>

Again, biblical man declares that it is better to live than to risk the journey into freedom and possible death. Confronted with a choice, biblical man chose life.

In what is known as the finest example of King Solomon's wisdom, we find the attitude which states that life is of ultimate importance. When the two harlot women came before Solomon with their grievance, Solomon's solution was to cut the live child in half and give one portion to one mother and the other to the second. Upon hearing the decree, the true mother cried out;

Then spoke the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her heart yearned upon her son, and she said: 'Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it.'<sup>22</sup>

The woman realized the implications of the king's decree and was willing to yield her rights to her own child in order to save it. Again, life was the greatest good.

During the period of Assyrian expansion, when Hezekiah attempted an alliance with the Egyptian Pharaoh, Sennacherib sent Rabshakeh to speak to the people of Judah.<sup>23</sup> While speaking to them Rabshakeh urged the people to surrender to the Assyrian power. His argument is that the people of Judah would be saved alive if they capitulated, if not, they faced death:

until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive-trees and of honey, that ye may live, and not die; and hearken not unto Hezekiah, when he persuadeth you, saying: 'The Lord will deliver us.'<sup>24</sup>

Rabshakeh's plea claimed that remaining alive during an invasion is more important than independence. He boldly defied the Judean monarch and flouted the power of the Lord. His appeal was for life as the greatest value.

Rabshakeh's viewpoint was to be taken up by the prophet Jeremiah under similar conditions, but with a different opponent. Faced with annihilation by the hand of the Babylonian armies, Jeremiah urged the Hebrews to surrender to

the Chaldeans and live:

And I spoke to Zedekiah king of Judah according to all these words, saying: 'Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live.'<sup>25</sup>

The prophet insisted that capitulation was more desired than death at the hands of the Chaldeans. This was God's demand.<sup>26</sup> Surrender and live. Life is the summum bonum.

For biblical man, there was no evidence of a world beyond the one in which he lived. Sheol was his enemy. The realm of the nether-world was a dark, mysterious cavern, which, when once entered never allowed one to return to the world of the living. Death brought one to the portal of the forgotten:

I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind;  
I am like a useless vessel.<sup>27</sup>

Against this background, biblical man attempted to find meaning in life. In such a world, he affirmed life as the summum bonum.

## CHAPTER II

Footnotes

1. Deuteronomy 30:19, 15-16.
2. Frankfort, H. and H. A. et. al., The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man. 1946, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 37, page 6.
3. Pedersen, Johannes, op. cit., pages 460-461.
4. Isaiah 38:18-19.
5. Psalm 35:17.
6. Psalm 22:21; see also Isaiah 22:13 where such an attitude concerning life is similarly expressed in the words of a famous aphorism. See also, The Book of Ecclesiastes should also be considered here. It expresses an attitude toward this life as the only one, not unlike the passages under discussion here.
7. II Samuel 12:16.
8. II Samuel 12:17.
9. II Samuel 12:20.
10. II Samuel 12:21-23.
11. Genesis 12:13; 20:1ff; 26:9.
12. Genesis 22.
13. Genesis 22:12-13.
14. Genesis 25:30.
15. Genesis 25:32.
16. Genesis 42:2.
17. Genesis 43:8.
18. Genesis 45:5.
19. The concept of Preserving life will be discussed in Chapter Six.

- 20. Genesis 47:25.
- 21. Exodus 14:12.
- 22. I Kings 3:26.
- 23. II Kings 18:13 ff.
- 24. II Kings 18:32.
- 25. Jeremiah 27:12; 38:17 and 20 Jeremiah 21:8-10.
- 26. Jeremiah 38:2; 21:8-10; 38:20.
- 27. Psalm 31:13.

## CHAPTER III

### Suicide

Despite the findings in the preceding chapter, the reader of biblical literature may point to several dramatic instances in which seemingly contradictory points of view are to be found. In the source of the next two chapters of this thesis I will endeavor to cope with these contradictions. I have divided the material into two distinct headings which will serve as two separate chapters. The first will deal with suicide in the Bible, and the second will deal with the phenomenon of the death wish.

The affirmation of life as the greatest good has been illustrated in the foregoing chapter. In only five instances do we find a biblical man who gainsaid this attitude by his actions.

Samson was deceived by Delilah.<sup>1</sup> His secret revealed, he had been blinded and was languishing in a Gaza prison-house.<sup>2</sup> A broken man, Samson was led to a Philistine party, so that his conquerors could make sport of him.<sup>3</sup> Upon entering the party hall, Samson asked the lad who was leading him to direct him to the pillars of the house:

'...Suffer me that I may feel the  
pillars whereupon the house rest-  
eth, that I may lean upon them.'<sup>4</sup>

The boy complied, and Samson, standing at the pillars which supported the foundations of the building, implored God:

'...O Lord God, remember me, I pray



Thee, and strengthen me, I pray  
 Thee, only this once, O God,  
 that I may be this once avenged  
 of the Philistines for my two  
 eyes.<sup>5</sup>

Filled with fervor, revenge burning in his breast, Samson seized hold of the pillars and made the following suicidal plea:

'...Let me die with the Philistines  
 ...'<sup>6</sup>

Flexing his muscles, he pulled down the pillars, thereby causing the roof to tumble in upon him and the Philistines:

...And he bent with all his might;  
 and the house fell upon the lords,  
 and upon all the people that were  
 therein. So the dead that he slew  
 at his death were more than they  
 that he slew in his life.<sup>7</sup>

The end of Saul's life was a tragic one. The harassed King of Israel fought his last military battle on Mount Gilboa.<sup>8</sup> The enemy struck hard and furiously. Saul's sons were slain, and the enemy narrowed the distance between itself and the king:

And the battle went sore against Saul,  
 and the archers overtook him; and he  
 was in great anguish by reason of the  
 archers.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with defeat, humiliation, and imminent death, he ordered his armor bearer to kill him:

'...Draw thy sword, and thrust me  
 through therewith; lest these un-  
 circumcised come and thrust me  
 through, and make a mock of me.'<sup>10</sup>

His armor bearer feared slaying him; hence Saul committed suicide, such action being followed in turn by his armor bearer:

...Therefore Saul took his sword, and fell upon it.  
And when his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he likewise fell upon his sword, and died with him.<sup>11</sup>

Ahitophel, who had been an advisor to King David, ultimately joined the cause of Absalom.<sup>12</sup> As Absalom's advisor after the seizure of Jerusalem, he proposed to Absalom that he choose 12,000 men and pursue after David.<sup>13</sup> One of David's spies named Hushai<sup>14</sup> went to Absalom and dissuaded Absalom from acting immediately. Ahitophel realized that the delay tactic which Hushai had interposed would involve him and the rebellious band in acts of retribution from King David. He then left Absalom and returned home where he committed suicide:

And when Ahitophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and arose, and got him home, unto his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; and he died, and was buried in the sepulchre of his father.<sup>15</sup>

During the reign of Elah, king of Israel, the armed forces of Israel were engaged in a battle with the Philistines at Gibbethon.<sup>16</sup> Elah remained behind in Tirzah and was engaged in a drinking party at the house of Arza.<sup>17</sup> Zimri, the king's captain of the half-chariots,<sup>18</sup> conspired

against the king, assassinating him and usurping the throne.<sup>19</sup>

The news of the 'coup d'etat' reached the army at Gibbethon, and the men selected Omri as the new king.<sup>20</sup> Omri and the army returned to Tirzah and seized the city.<sup>21</sup>

Zimri entered the king's house and set fire to the palace:

And it came to pass, when Zimri saw that the city was taken, that he went into the castle of the king's house, and burnt the king's house over him with fire, and died.<sup>22</sup>

His death is the final suicide.

If life were the greatest good for biblical man, how does one account for the occurrence of five suicides? In discussing the subject 'Suicide' which is found in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, F. W. Young makes the following pertinent remarks:

The word "suicide" does not appear in the Bible, but there are several instances of the occurrence...

There are no specific biblical prohibitions of suicide, nor is the act as such condemned. Nevertheless, its rarity reflects not only deterring sociological conditions but also an implicit attitude which can be inferred from OT and the NT. God is Creator and Sovereign of all creation who alone has authority to give and take away (Job 1:21). The Sixth Commandment and the regulations regarding shedding human blood (Genesis 9:5-6) undoubtedly influenced the attitude.<sup>23</sup>

The infrequency of the act is most significant. In addition to the infrequency of suicide, there are the specific conditions under which the suicide act was practiced.

In the five incidents of suicide as recorded in the Bible (i.e., Samson, King Saul, Saul's armor bearer, Ahitophel and Zimri) we find something in common. In each case, the man faced imminent liquidation at the hands of his enemies. Consequently, he chose death by his own hand rather than by the hands of his enemies.

Perhaps one more element should be added. In all the cases recorded, the men had something else in common. Each man had come to the end of his hope. There was no longer a purpose in their lives, nor was there any hope for a return to their previous life which had meaning and purpose. Despair overtook them and, in its wake, all life was negated. These five men were convinced that life was "over anyway," and so they hastened the imminent moment.

## CHAPTER III

Footnotes

1. Judges 16:15-20
2. Judges 16:21
3. Judges 16:25
4. Judges 16:26
5. Judges 16:28
6. Judges 16:30
7. Judges 16:30
8. I Samuel 31
9. I Samuel 31:3
10. I Samuel 31:4
11. I Samuel 31:4-5
12. II Samuel 15:12
13. II Samuel 17:1-3
14. II Samuel 17:6ff.
15. II Samuel 17:23
16. I Kings 16:15
17. I Kings 16:9
18. I Kings 16:9
19. I Kings 16:10
20. I Kings 16:16
21. I Kings 16:17-18
22. I Kings 16:18
23. "Suicide," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,  
pages 453-454, Volume R-Z, Abingdon Press, New York  
and Nashville, 1962.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Death Wish

Despair seized the biblical personality who committed suicide. A similar sense of futility overtook the person who uttered the death wish. It is in the area of the death wish, however, that an interesting problem arises, for although the death wish is uttered by biblical man, it is carried into actuality in only two instances.<sup>1</sup> In both of these instances, the utterance was made under conditions which offered no hope for the individual. The conditions for these two pronouncements are identical to those cited in the cases of the biblical suicide.

The remaining cases of the death wish all fit into a second category. Although in each of these situations despair and futility are the background for the utterance, the words never become a reality. In the anguish and despondency of the moment, they utter words which are emotionally charged, but which have no real meaning. This latter and larger category could be sub-titled "Dramatic Language."

The presentation of the materials in this chapter will follow this general outline. I shall first deal with the executed death wish and then turn to the death wish as "Dramatic Language."

The life of Abimelech, the bastard son of Gideon, is related in the Book of Judges.<sup>2</sup> His death, however, is of

interest to us here. While he was attempting to burn down a tower in Thebez,<sup>3</sup> his skull was broken by a millstone thrown by a female inhabitant of the city:

And a certain woman cast an upper millstone upon Abimelech's head, and broke his skull.<sup>4</sup>

Aware of his imminent death, Abimelech cried out for his armor bearer demanding that he slay him:

'....Draw thy sword, and kill me, that men say not of me: A woman slew him.' And his young man thrust him through, and he died.<sup>5</sup>

Abimelech not only voices the desire to die, but also orders his armor bearer to carry out the act.

I have already discussed the case of Samson in Chapter Three. His experience, however, spans both the suicide and the death wish. He not only expresses a wish for death, but carries the plea into an actual act of suicide:

And Samson said: 'Let me die with the Philistines.' And he bent with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life.<sup>6</sup>

The second category of materials dealing with the death wish falls into the subdivision of "Dramatic Language." In each case, the emotional climax of a certain life situation results in a death-wish expression.

In the story of Jacob and Esau we see the struggle between the two sons overshadowed by the dominating personality of their mother, Rebekah. She cleverly manipulated her favored, younger son, Jacob, into an advantageous position.<sup>7</sup> Yet she is disturbed by something more. Esau married two Hittite women<sup>8</sup> and the marriages caused both Isaac and Rebekah great unhappiness.<sup>9</sup> Rebekah is filled with a fear that Jacob will marry one of the Canaanite women. She expressed her despair with this anguished plea to Isaac:

And Rebekah said to Isaac: 'I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these, of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?'<sup>10</sup>

Rebekah could not see her cherished values diminished by her son's marriage to a Canaanite woman. She saw in Jacob hope for the continuity of her husband's religion. Without Jacob there would be no continuity. A marriage with a Canaanite woman meant an alienation of her ideas, and this caused her such anxiety that she uttered this death wish.

A loss of purpose or goal was the cause for the Israelites utterance of a death wish when they were crossing the desert enroute to the Promised Land. The enslaved mass which left Egypt under the leadership of Moses had high hopes and aspirations. Moses's description of Canaan was of a place of great beauty and abundant wealth. The goal soon



vanished when the Israelites were confronted with the grim realities of the parched desert and the arduous journey. When food was lacking and the burden too great to bear they cried out:

'...Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, when they lacked water they wailed:

'...Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord!' And why have ye brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle?<sup>12</sup>

The people had lost confidence in their leadership, their goal, and God Himself. Having lost this driving spirit, they bewail their circumstances and pronounce the death wish. This view agrees with that of J. Coert Rylaarsdam who, commenting on Exodus 16:3, states:

Death by the hand of the Lord must refer to death from natural causes in contrast to the rigors of the desert. The people have lost faith in Yahweh's leadership and therefore denounce those who represent it.<sup>13</sup>

King David, upon hearing of the death of his renegade son, Absalom, utters a despair-filled cry:

'...O my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! would I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!'<sup>14</sup>

David's anguish is apparent. His words reflect the meaning-

lessness of his son's death. David viewed the whole incident that culminated in Absalom's death as purposeless. In such an emotional state his words took on great impact.

The authors of the prophet stories of Elijah and Jonah relate two experiences of men uttering the death wish. In both the life stories of Elijah and Jonah, the prophets lose all hope. They sink into despair at the futility of their mission and its accomplishments. In such a state of mind they beseech God to take their life:

(Elijah) But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom-tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.'<sup>15</sup>

(Jonah) Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.<sup>16</sup>

(Jonah) ....and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and requested for himself that he might die, and said: 'It is better for me to die than to live.'<sup>17</sup>

In the prophet Jeremiah and in the Book of Job, we have a death wish framed in the words of a curse:

(Jeremiah) 'Cursed be the day  
Wherein I was born;  
The day wherein my mother bore me,  
Let it not be blessed.'<sup>18</sup>

(Job) 'Let the day perish wherein I  
was born,  
And the night wherein it was said:  
'A man-child is brought forth.'  
Let that day be darkness;  
Let not God inquire after it  
from above,

Neither let the light shine  
upon it.<sup>19</sup>

Both the prophet and the man, Job, were overwhelmed with despair. Unable to curse God or King because of law and taboo, they turned upon themselves and dramatically uttered the words which cursed the day in which they were brought into the world of the living.

This subject of the curse is discussed at length by Dr. Sheldon H. Blank in his article entitled: "The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell and the Oath."<sup>20</sup> Dr. Blank gives special attention to the problem in the Book of Job in an article which appeared in Hebrew in the periodical, ידיעות, a publication of the Israel Exploration Society. The title of that article is: י'אבד יום" (איוב ג':ג') קללה מכוונת שלא,

<sup>21</sup> למקומה". In both these articles Dr. Blank makes a good case for the reason why Job and Jeremiah turn upon themselves in uttering their curses. He points out that a curse was forbidden by law against God, kings and parents. In despair and anguish, lacking any hope, these men turn inward, and pronounce the death wish-curse upon their own heads.

In summary, the death wish, like the suicide in biblical literature, is relatively infrequent. It is invoked upon rare occasions, at moments when despair has made a negation of life's values. In only two cases is this desperate cry carried beyond words and into action. In the majority

of instances, however, it represents an emotional outburst expressed through the literary vehicle of "Dramatic Language."

## CHAPTER IV

Footnotes

1. Judges 9:50-55; 16:30-31
2. Judges 9
3. Judges 9:52
4. Judges 9:53
5. Judges 9:54
6. Judges 16:30
7. Genesis 27:1-29
8. Genesis 26:34
9. Genesis 26:35
10. Genesis 27:46
11. Exodus 16:3
12. Numbers 20:3-4
13. "Exodus," The Interpreter's Bible, page 951, Volume 7  
Abingdon Press, New York and Nashville, 1952.
14. II Samuel 19:1
15. I Kings 19:4
16. Jonah 4:3
17. Jonah 4:8
18. Jeremiah 20:14
19. Job 3:3-4
20. Blank, Sheldon H., "The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath." in the Hebrew Union College Annual, Volume XXIII, Part One, 1950-1951, The Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, pages 85-87.
21. ש.ה. בלאנק, "יאבד יום" (איוב ג' ג') קללה מכוונת שלא למקומה. ידיעות-החברה לחקירת ארץ-ישראל ועתיקותיה, ע' 65-68, כרך י"ט, הוצאת החברה לחקירת ארץ-ישראל ועתיקותיה, ירושלים, 1955.

## CHAPTER V

### Corporate Immortality

In examining the material in the Bible dealing with life and death, we can see an interesting fact emerging. Biblical man did not have a concept of a future life. For him, there was no immortality, physical or spiritual. When man died he went to Sheol, the large, cavernous tomb whence no man ever returned. It was only in a later time, under different cultural influences, that the Hebrews developed a coherent or systematic view of life beyond death:

In time they came to accept the belief long cherished in Egypt and doubtless well known throughout Israel that death is not the end but the beginning. It is a portal through which man goes out into a larger life. This came so late in the Old Testament period that little can be said about it. One of our very few treatments of the theme speaks briefly of 'everlasting life' (Daniel 12:2); another summons: "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust" (Isaiah 26:19). And beyond that we cannot safely go without danger of reading in the ideas of later times.<sup>1</sup>

It seems unwarranted to attach any significance to a concept of everlasting life during biblical times.

We do encounter a number of incidents, primarily in the Elijah and Elisha narratives, which deal with what seem to be miraculous revivals of dead persons:

And he cried unto the Lord, and said:  
'O Lord my God, hast Thou also brought  
evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn,  
by slaying her son? And he stretched

himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the Lord, and said: 'O Lord my God I pray Thee, let this child's soul come back into him.' And the Lord hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived.<sup>2</sup>

In the Elisha narrative, a strikingly similar story is related.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this story, Elisha's dead bones also have miraculous rejuvenative powers:

And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.<sup>4</sup>

E. Jacob, writing in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, discussed the aforementioned incidents in the following manner:

The OT mentions several cases of persons' being restored to life by Elijah and Elisha--the son of the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:17-21), the son of the Shunammite (II Kings 4:18-37), and the body of an anonymous individual reanimated by contact with the bones of Elisha (II Kings 13:20-21). In these instances the resurrections are more akin to the cure of the very ill than to the final resurrection. They occur shortly after death, when the body has not yet been reduced to dust, and they only prolong life.<sup>5</sup>

This insight is very helpful in leading us to an understanding of these seemingly miraculous events. Included in this category should be a mention of the two stories of men who, according to the biblical tale, never die.<sup>6</sup> We can best understand these two stories as popular myths which were

attributed to especially popular folk heroes.

Yet another type of 'resurrection' should be mentioned before we examine a different aspect of this problem. In the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel, we read about the valley of dried bones. The prophet speaks in graphic terms about the skeletons' growing new flesh and taking on new life. What Ezekiel is making reference to here is the revival of the people of Israel. He is speaking of a national revival. He is not making reference to physical, individual resurrection of dead bodies.

Although no evidence can be found to substantiate either a concept for the world to come, for resurrection or for individual immortality, there is a type of immortality which is evident in the Bible. This type of immortality concerns itself with the continuity of progeny, families, and royal and priestly lines, as well as of worthy groups of people.

Rachel expresses grievous concern over the fact that she is childless. She sees in her barrenness the end of her line. Without children she felt that she would die:

And when Rachel saw that she bore  
Jacob no children, Rachel envied  
her sister; and she said unto Jacob:  
'Give me children, or else I die.'<sup>7</sup>

Only through children could she see the continuity of herself and her family. Through her children she would gain immortality.

Similarly, the promise to Abraham was one of immor-



talities. When God assures Abraham of ongoing issue, the latter has actually been given a type of immortality which passes on from generation to generation.<sup>8</sup>

This type of immortality is to be found among the royal line as well. When Nathan tells David not to build the Temple, he reveals to the monarch that he will live forever through his sons. He assures him that his seed will rule after him. Here, as with the patriarch Abraham, we witness a type of "corporate immortality":

When thy days are fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, that shall proceed out of thy body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever, ...And thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure forever before thee; thy throne shall be established for ever. According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David.<sup>9</sup>

Such was the view of the House of David, a house which was to have 'immortal life.' This view was one which the Israelite held toward the monarch in general:

When the king asks God for life, his wish is not exhausted by being granted a long life, but it means that the king desires to become a rich and a great soul, exuberantly full of strength, so that there is enough for him and his people. When the Israelites say: Live the King. (I Samuel 10:24; II Samuel 6:16; I Kings 1:25; 31:34; 39; II Kings 11:12), then it is this king of strength they are thinking of. The soul of the king must not sicken and shrink in weakness and

misery. "The king lives forever" they also say (I Kings 1:31; Dan. 2:4:3:9; 5:10; 6:7; 6:22). For life shows its strength in not perishing. The life of the king must be preserved through the generations of his sons.<sup>10</sup>

In the Book of Jeremiah, we have this thought expressed with reference to both the royal line and the Levites who minister unto God:

For thus saith the Lord: There shall not be cut off unto David a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel; neither shall there be cut off unto the priests the Levites a man before Me...<sup>11</sup>

The author of this chapter indicates that God has selected these two households in Israel to have continuity forever. These families will serve before Him and Israel eternally.

It can be deduced from this viewpoint that the author of this chapter believed that the People of Israel would also have this type of immortality. For if the function of the House of David and the House of Levi was to serve the Hebrews and their God, then certainly there must have been a share of corporate immortality reserved for the People of Israel as well.

A further note is necessary here. In Trito-Isaiah, the people of Israel themselves are selected for just such a corporate immortality as is implied in the Jeremiah passages. Trito-Isaiah establishes a covenant with the people of Israel in which He vows that His word will never cease, because it will forever be found upon the lips of the Children

of Israel:

And as for Me, this is My covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit that is upon thee, and My words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and forever.<sup>12</sup>

Jeremiah also indicates that the Rechabites, loyal to their founder, Jehonadab, the son of Rechab,<sup>13</sup> will receive their share of corporate immortality:

And unto the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said: Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Because ye have hearkened to the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according unto all that he commanded you; therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: There shall not be cut off unto Jonadab the son of Rechab a man to stand before Me for ever.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, then, on the basis of the evidence within the Bible, we have: 1) No developed concept of a world beyond this one. We may safely say that this concept entered Jewish thinking at a later date under new influence and cultural currents 2) There is no concept of miraculous resurrection in our biblical material. There may have been myths which dealt with certain personalities who were deathless, but it has not been substantiated that this concept ever rose above the stage of myths within the scriptural writings 3) Producing progeny seems to have held an important role in the mind of biblical man. We can safely

say that he believed that through his offspring he gained a type of immortality. (Through his children he too continued to live); 4) Finally, we see a concept of corporate immortality. Certain groups, families or lines were selected to have permanence.

Biblical man believed that such corporate entities would continue without end. In this, therefore, we begin to see a concept of eternality of life; for biblical man there is clearly no end to life, living and the life-giving substance.

## CHAPTER V

Footnotes

1. Irwin, William A., et. al., "God" in The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man, 1946, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 37, pages 263-264.
2. I Kings 17:20-22
3. II Kings 4:18-37; 8:1-6
4. II Kings 13:21
5. "Immortality," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, E-I, op. cit., pages 688-689.
6. Genesis 5:23-24; II Kings 2:1ff
7. Genesis 30:1
8. Genesis 15:5; 17:7-9; 22:17
9. II Samuel 7:12-13; 16-17  
The term 'forever,' as used in verse 16 and elsewhere in this thesis, does not indicate a concept of eternity. 'Forever' means the length of a man's full life. For a further reference, see "Time," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, R-Z, op. cit., pages 642-649.
10. Pedersen, Johannes, op. cit., pages 154-155
11. Jeremiah 33:17-18
12. Isaiah 59:21
13. II Kings 10:15
14. Jeremiah 35:18-19

## CHAPTER VI

### The Preservation of Life

One aspect of biblical man's attitude toward life is reflected in the concept 'Preservation of Life.' Although there is a small amount of material on the subject, it should be divided into two groups, the first dealing with Noah, Joseph and the apocalypse in Isaiah, and the second dealing with the Sixth Commandment and the law of the City of Refuge.

In the Noah legend, we have the story of the obliteration of all life. Yet, one man the symbol of good, is preserved.<sup>1</sup> The reason for Noah's unique reward is that he has been the "righteous and wholehearted"<sup>2</sup> man. Yet, as the story develops, Noah and his family and the animals that he brings into the ark are a saved remnant; they are the preservers of life. Despite the totality of evil which engulfed Noah's age, there could not be an end of all life and living. This small remnant outlived destroyed humanity in order to rebuild and recreate new life. For the biblical author Noah and his precious "cargo" are the preservers of life.

Under different conditions, Joseph viewed himself as a preserver of life:

And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life.<sup>3</sup>

Under conditions of extreme famine, when no crop could be grown in Canaan, the hungry Israelites went down to Egypt to

buy food from Pharaoh, who had abundant storehouses. There Jacob's sons found their young brother Joseph, who was now vizier. After a dramatic sequence of events he then reveals his identity to them. In revealing himself to his brothers, he evaluates his fate, not unlike Noah's, to be a preserver of life. It was through Joseph's status and influence that the family of Jacob gained favor and welcome in the palace and land of the Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup> It was because of Joseph, the preserver of life, that they were able to survive the famine and continue to live.

In the apocalyptic chapters of the prophet Isaiah, namely, chapters 24-27, we encounter another aspect of the "Preservers of Life" theme. In these chapters, the prophetic author is speaking of a cataclysmic day when God will empty the earth of its inhabitants and turn all life upside down:

Behold, the Lord maketh the earth empty  
and maketh it waste,  
And turneth it upside down, and scattereth  
abroad the inhabitants thereof.<sup>5</sup>

This day, on which God enters history and judges mankind, will be a day of disaster. Only several people will survive this cataclysm. These people are the righteous and faithful adherents of the word of God. These people, His people, will endure the day of doom. For God will bring them into a specially prepared chamber, and there He will protect them and keep them alive until the purpose of His wrath has been accomplished:

Come, my people, enter thou into  
 thy chambers, And shut thy doors  
 about thee;  
 Hide thyself for a little moment,  
 Until the indignation be over-  
 passed.  
 For, behold, the Lord cometh forth  
 out of His place  
 To visit upon the inhabitants of  
 the earth their iniquity;  
 The earth also shall disclose her  
 blood,  
 And shall no more cover her slain.<sup>6</sup>

This disaster is not unlike the disaster which befell the generation of Noah. The Noah legend came to explain the continuity of life after some great interruption of the cycle of life. Similarly the apocalyptic account attempts to explain what will happen at a future time when God will come to judge mankind. In this account, as in the Noah story, a remnant will be spared. The remnant will be a group of righteous men, and they will endure the floods of the apocalyptic day. They will be the bearers or preservers of life beyond this great and awesome day.

Once again the biblical author uses the theme of destruction in a very horrifying manner; yet he is unable to envision a day devoid of human life. He cannot escape the truism of an earlier Isaiah:

For thus saith the Lord that created  
 the heavens,  
 He is God;  
 That formed the earth and made it,  
 He established it,  
 He created it not a waste, He formed  
 it to be inhabited:  
 I am the Lord, and there is none else.<sup>7</sup>



Before moving to the second section of the subject, it might be helpful to draw upon one further example. Although this story does not contain all the elements we have above, it does bear the clear markings of these stories.

In the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Patriarch Abraham has a lengthy debate with God.<sup>8</sup> He argues with God on behalf of the cities and the inhabitants of those notoriously evil cities. Abraham's argument is that perhaps there are several "righteous" men in these towns:

'Peradventure there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; that so the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?'<sup>9</sup>

The story provides a striking parallel to the Noah legend and to the Isaiah episode; however, it lacks one vital element. In all three stories the wicked are condemned, and a select group of virtuous or righteous people are saved. In the Sodom and Gomorrah story, it is Abraham's relative Lot, in Isaiah the people referred to as God's people or 'My people,' and in the Noah episode it is Noah, his family and the cargo of life. In each story there is another type of life worth living. It is for this life that the saved remnants are preserved.

The difference between these stories is of course the fact that in the Noah and Isaiah accounts we have a total or universal annihilation of life, while in the Sodom and Gomorrah account the two cities are the limit of the destruction.

The elements of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, add a perspective to this material which is both interesting and pertinent.

The second group of biblical statements about the preservation of life is to be found in the legal writings. The first is the commandment from the Decalogue, which reads:

Thou shalt not murder.<sup>10</sup>

It is repeated in identical form in the Deuteronomic edition of the same Decalogue.<sup>11</sup>

This statement, part of the totality of the laws of Moses, which, according to the tradition were received on Sinai, is one of universal import for the Israelite. It demands of the people that they commit no murder. The purpose of the law is to preserve life, its aim is to prevent any man from spilling his fellow's blood. It set forth, as binding upon all Israelites, a high regard for the life of their fellowman. As such, it was a law to preserve life.

The laws concerning the City of Refuge serve a similar function. A City of Refuge was a place where a man who committed murder or manslaughter unintentionally might take

refuge and be protected by the law.<sup>12</sup> The law was so structured that, if a life could be preserved, it would provide for the preservation of that life.

While discussing the City of Refuge in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Professor Moshe Greenberg makes the following remark:

Thus, although there is no mention of the cities of refuge outside of the laws, it appears likely that the laws take their departure from a living custom of the early age.<sup>13</sup>

The origins of the City of Refuge may well go back to a more ancient time, perhaps even to the point of emergent civilization. It is clear, however, that the concept of such cities as preservers of individual life has a long history among ancient man. It was for the benefit of the community as a whole that life not be taken capriciously:

Ensuring the safety of the accidental homicide was in the vital interest of the whole community; "lest innocent blood be shed in your land... and so the guilt of innocent bloodshed be upon you" (Deut. 19:10).<sup>14</sup>

The law of the Bible then asserted the importance and sacredness of life. Indeed, these were built into the Bible for the preservation of life.

## CHAPTER VI

Footnotes

1. Genesis 6:9-9:28
2. Genesis 6:9
3. Genesis 45:5
4. Genesis 45:16-27
5. Isaiah 24:1
6. Isaiah 26:20-21
7. Isaiah 45:18
8. Genesis 18:23ff.
9. Genesis 18:24-25
10. Exodus 20:13
11. Deuteronomy 5:17
12. Deuteronomy 19:4-5; see also Joshua 20:1-9
13. "City of Refuge," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, op. cit., page 639
14. Ibid. page 638.

## CHAPTER VII

### Life Has Purpose

For biblical man, the whole world was "redundant" with life. He made no distinction between the animate and the inanimate, all was infused with life substance:

The close relation between the country and the life of the people is only possible because earth itself is alive. We know that the Israelites do not acknowledge the distinction between the psychic and the corporeal. Earth and stones are alive, imbued with a soul, and therefore able to receive mental subject-matter and bear the impress of it. The relation between the earth and its owner is not that the earth, like a dead mass, makes part of his psychic whole---an impossible thought. It is a covenant-relation, a psychic community, and the owner does not solely prevail in the relation. The earth has its nature which makes itself felt, and demands respect. The important thing is to deal with it accordingly and not to ill-treat it.<sup>1</sup>

In such a life-infused world the Israelite found himself, and strove to place meaning and order into the universe. The first step in this process was to arrive at an understanding of raw, natural life as it presented itself to his eyes:

Flesh is alive, so long as it is in a natural state (Lev. 13:14ff.; I Sam. 2:15) and this also holds good of water. When running water is called living, then it is not exactly the motion which justifies this appellation, but the fact that it is the nature of the water to be running. Time is living when it manifests itself through its contents, rain, sowing, harvest or whatever else it may be. "When this season comes alive" (Genesis 18:14; II Kings 4:16-17) therefore must mean:

When the season recurs in which we now find ourselves.

From all this it appears that the Israelite does not distinguish between a living and a lifeless nature. All is living which has its peculiarities and so also its functions. A stone is not merely a lump of material substance. It is, like all living things, an organism with peculiar forces of a certain mysterious capacity, only known to him who is familiar with it. Thus, like all other beings on the earth, the stone has the quality of soul, and so can be made familiar with other physical forces and filled with soul-substance. The earth is a living thing. It has its nature, with which man must make himself familiar when he wants to use it; he must respect its soul as it is, and not do violence to it while appropriating it.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it might be said that all that operates in the world is life.<sup>3</sup>

It was in the background of such a world outlook that biblical man lived out his existence. It was with these thoughts and sentiments that he approached the problem of life and death, blessing and curse. He viewed life as the struggle against death, the grave, chaos and the abundant natural enemies which sought to trip him and send him tumbling into Sheol:

The Israelite conception of the universe is an expression of the conflict between life and death, or, rather, the fight for life against death. The land of life lies in the centre, on all hands surrounded by the land of death. The wilderness lies outside the realm of death and the ocean below, but they send in their tentacles from all sides, and make the world a mixture of life and death, of light and darkness. But life must be

stronger. The great terror of the Israelite is that some day evil shall get the upper hand, and chaos come to prevail in the world of man. The important thing is to have sufficient blessing to be able to keep evil down. Thus the world must be upheld continually through the renewal of the blessing; in that manner the land of man, with its state of order, gains an upper hand over chaos. This the Israelites, like other peoples, express through myths, telling how their god forced back chaos and superceded it with law and order.<sup>4</sup>

In such a world, biblical man attempted to set order and blessing against the forces of chaos and the curse. Only an abundance of blessing could impel him to attain this end.

Vital to a concept of life is the promise of its continuity. It has been observed that biblical man resisted the idea of a total annihilation of life. He could not conceive of a universe without life. Noah, the preserver of life, is the example par excellence of this attitude. For at the end of the journey, Noah, that is, all mankind is promised:

While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.<sup>5</sup>

This promise is reenforced when God sets the rainbow in the heavens as a token between man and the deity denoting that destruction such as just transpired will never again recur:

that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.<sup>6</sup>

This was so important and impressive a thought that the prophet Isaiah makes reference to it later on. He used it in such a fashion that it stands out as an example of God's steadfastness and dependability. He long ago vowed never to destroy mankind, and He has been faithful to His word:

For this is as the waters of Noah  
unto Me;  
For as I have sworn that the waters  
of Noah  
Should no more go over the earth,  
So have I sworn that I would not be  
wroth with thee,<sup>7</sup>  
Nor rebuke thee.<sup>7</sup>

The prophetic author of Chapter 33 of the Book of Jeremiah, captures the same thought as that which has been expressed here differently. He indicates that day and night are so much a part of the order of the universe that they cannot be changed. Any person who thinks he can do so has not faced reality:

If ye can break My covenant with the day,  
And my covenant with the night,  
So that there should not be day and night  
in their season;  
Then may also My covenant be broken with  
David My servant,  
That he should not have a son to reign  
upon his throne;  
And with the Levites the priests,  
My ministers.  
As the host of heavens cannot be numbered,  
Neither the sand of the sea measured;  
So will I multiply the seed of David  
My servant,  
And the Levites that minister unto Me.<sup>8</sup>

Biblical man, it seems, was well assured that the world in which he was living had continuity:



When there is change there is cause;  
 and a cause as we have seen, is a will.  
 In Genesis, for instance, we read that  
 God made a covenant with the living  
 creatures, promising not only that the  
 flood would not recur but also that  
 "while earth remaineth, seedtime and  
 harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter,  
 day and night shall not cease. (Genesis  
 8:22). The order of time and the order of  
 the life of nature (which are one) are  
 freely granted by the God of the Old Testa-  
 ment in fullness of his power; and when  
 considered in their totality, as an estab-  
 lished order, they are elsewhere, too,  
 thought to be founded upon the willed or-  
 der of creation.<sup>9</sup>

In a world which did have continuity and stability,  
 biblical man was then able to search for purpose. In a world  
 where there was stability, blessing and life, there must also  
 be a purpose.

The master architect of Israel's mission was Second  
 Isaiah. He saw through the pattern of the universe a purpose.  
 He envisioned the world as a place throbbing with life, habi-  
 tation and purpose:

For thus saith the Lord that created  
 the heavens,  
 He is God;  
 That formed the earth and made it,  
 He established it,  
 He created it not a waste, He formed  
 it to be inhabited;  
 I am the Lord, and there is none else.<sup>10</sup>

Through the chaos and the void he saw a light. He interpreted  
 the purpose of life into the mission of the Hebrews. He  
 filled the vacant emptiness with a purposive meaning of crea-  
 tion and life:

Salvation is the goal God has set for mankind, the realization of the divine purpose. Creation is purposive. Out of chaos God created this world;<sup>11</sup>

God had set a purpose in the world and established a covenant which would last eternally. This covenant was one which would carry out God's purpose in the realm of the living.<sup>12</sup>

Pedersen summarized these findings when he said:

The fundamental contrast----i.e., between life and death----is identical with the contrast between law and chaos. That which is not according to the law is 'falsehood,' something which does not live; therefore chaos is nothingness. Creation consists in establishing lawfulness out of confusion, and for the Israelite this becomes; to create habitable land out of desert land, light out of darkness, a continent out of the ocean. Thus a land fit for habitation takes the place of chaos. (Isaiah 45:18).<sup>13</sup>

What Pedersen has captured here is the movement and direction of this thesis. By his words, we feel the pulsating movement which began with the distinction between chaos and creation, blessing and curse, life and the living, as opposed to death and Sheol. In the Israelite 'Weltanschauung' there was a movement, a driving force, which sought to find purpose in the world. Its aim was life. So ingrained in the psyche was this idea, that an Isaiah of future hope equated long life with the reward of the great future time:

There shall be no more thence an infant who dies at the age of a few days, nor an old man, that hath not filled his days; for the youngest shall die a hundred years old, and the one who misses (i.e. does not

attain) the age of 100 shall be (accounted)  
accursed.<sup>14</sup>

The meaning of the verse seems clear. At a future time, man's days will be lengthened upon the earth. Life will be more abundant. The person who dies at the age of one hundred years will be accounted as a cursed man. Astounding as it may seem, life linked with blessing, law and order, and God's great purpose will be at the zenith of man's future hope. For this is, indeed, God's decree unto man forever and ever:

Like the dew of Hermon,  
That cometh down upon the  
mountains of Zion;  
For there the Lord commanded the  
blessing,  
Even life forever.<sup>15</sup>

## CHAPTER VII

Footnotes

1. Pedersen, Johannes, op. cit., page 479
2. Ibid. page 155
3. Ibid. page 155
4. Ibid. pages 470-471
5. Genesis 8:22
6. Genesis 9:15
7. Isaiah 54:9
8. Jeremiah 33:20-22 20
9. Frankfort, H. and H. A., et. al., op. cit., page 23
10. Isaiah 45:18
11. Blank, Sheldon H., op. cit., page 151
12. Isaiah 42:6; 54:8-10
13. Pedersen, Johannes, op. cit., page 472
14. Isaiah 65:20 translation taken from -  
Blank, Sheldon H., Introductions and Notes to the Text of  
Isaiah. 1959, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of  
Religion, Cincinnati, page 83.
15. Psalm 133:3

## CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this thesis to examine biblical man's attitude toward life. In attempting to arrive at an objective conclusion, the writer was carried through various aspects of the concept of life as used in the Bible itself. In the course of the investigation of the theme, the idea of affirmation of life began to grow into a reality. The dominant view of the biblical writings is that life is both good and meaningful. Biblical man affirms life as a purposeful experience.

In the development of this theme, the writer has been carried through several stages of development. He began with a scrutiny of a polarity which he found in biblical writings. This polarity is best reflected in the deuteronomic verse which is also a formula:

...I have set before thee  
life and death,  
the blessing and the curse.<sup>1</sup>

On the plus side of the formula we find the affirmation, which is life linked with the blessing. On the minus side of the formula we find the negation, which is death and the curse.

In a world which was surrounded by the shades of the netherworld, the darkness of death, and the curse, man strove to find meaning in life. He saw life as a blessing. But more than that, he developed a code of behavior which enabled him to live even more nobly. This code was the Torah of morality, truth, justice, love of God, goodness and lawfulness.

It was the vehicle by which biblical man gauged the real value of life. Through his expression of the basic worth of life, he affirmed it as the greatest good.

For biblical man, this life and his own life substance were unique. For him they were the only life he knew and, therefore, they took on truly ultimate meaning. He lived his life as if it were the one and only life he had. He had no visions of a future day when he would live again or when he would live eternally. In death he saw the great adversary, it was covered by an eerie darkness and loomed before him as the denial of all that he possessed. In such a world life became the greatest good and adherence to the moral code became the sine qua non for a fruitful existence.

The casual reader of biblical literature might observe that there are expressions where life is negated and abused. He might maintain that life is treated cheaply and spent easily. This challenge seems to be real, only when the instances of negation of life are looked at as separate or isolated entities. When they are assembled in a coherent mass, they may be examined and understood in a different manner.

The word suicide never appears in the Hebrew Bible. In the totality of biblical literature five individuals commit suicide, and on only nine occasions do biblical personalities or groups utter words of total despair which may be interpreted

as death-wishes. These cases may be taken together and examined as a unit. A common denominator can be found, this common denominator is the reality of imminent destruction or total despair. In every case of suicide cited we find that the biblical person was overwhelmed with despair and realized that this doom was imminent. Rather than be killed by the foe he took his own life.

In every case of the uttered death wish there is a sense of complete despair on the part of biblical man. However, in only two instances do biblical men carry out their death wish. The remaining examples of the uttered death wish fall into the category of "Dramatic Language." The words express a futility with the life situation but they do not lead the speaker to end his life. They remain desperate cries or curses, not actual forces which lead to death.

These exceptions are few, and the infrequency of their expression indicate the limited nature of their use. The overwhelming attitude towards life as the summum bonum stands unmarred by these examples to the contrary.

Biblical man viewed this life as the only one he had. He had no concept of 'עולם הבא' or of resurrection. He did, however, have a view of immortality which affirmed the continuity of life. Special groups or chosen individuals were selected for perpetual life through their progeny. This concept of corporate immortality was yet another way by which biblical man affirmed life. Through this concept he affirmed his trust in the continuity of life even beyond his own time and place. The life which he thus envisioned, however, was a life in the land of the living. It was never a

life beyond this world.

In this world, then, the preservation of life was of foremost importance. Biblical man viewed the world in which he lived as a place in which all men must work to preserve life. Within the law he saw the concept of life's preservation operating. That man should not kill became a moral imperative. In the life of several biblical heroes whom we encounter, the concept of preservation of life was an operative factor. Joseph was a 'מחיה, a "preserver of life."<sup>2</sup> In the legend of Noah there emerges the same value. Noah and the Ark are symbols which were used to explain the continuity of life after a greater disaster. Noah's role is that of the preserver of life. This concept was carried over into the prophetic message of an apocalyptic Isaiah who returned to this same theme when he described the cataclysmic judgment day. God would preserve a small, worthy, and righteous remnant of mankind in order that they continue life. Biblical man could not imagine a world which was devoid of life; such a world was an anomaly to him. The earth was synonymous with the pulsating throb of life, the life of man.

Finally, life for biblical man was linked with purpose. All that was and that man experienced was charged with meaning and purpose. God had not created a world for nought; He made it to be an inhabited place, a place wherein men struggled and accomplished. The world was not a vale



of emptiness and frustrated hopes. Despair was not the inexorable fate of man. Life had a purpose, life was filled with blessing, and man could overcome despair and vanity by living the life of blessing.

The object of the research has been fulfilled. The development of the main thought of the thesis has been expressed. Biblical man viewed life as a blessing, morality an imperative and purpose a sine qua non for meaningful existence. In his trek across time, biblical man walked the path well marked by hope. He was surrounded by the brute chaos which was stark and ultimate; yet he affirmed life and his living experience. The Bible attests to these affirmations.

CONCLUSION

Footnotes

1. Deuteronomy 30:19
2. Genesis 45:5

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