# Some Personifications of Death in the Old Testament

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The figure of death is personified under various guises in the OT. This paper sets out to identify and examine some of these in the context of the OT itself, with attention given to comparative ancient near eastern mythology. Death is personified under the following headings: Death the Hunter; The First-Born of Death; Death the King of Terrors; Death the Shepherd; Powers of Death; Death the Robber. /1

## Death the Hunter

In Ecclesiastes 7.26 and 9.12 Death is personified in the form of a hunter; in the first by inference and in the second directly.

> And I find more bitter than Death, that woman whose heart is hunting-nets and dragnets; he who pleases God escapes from her, but the sinner is seized by her.

ḥerem, "net" is a dragnet designed to catch large quantities of fish. /2 māṣôd is a hunting-net. In Job 19.16 it is the net which Yahweh closes round the harried Job. The woman in Ecclesiastes 7.26 is the ʾiššāh zārāh, the "foreign woman" who also appears in Proverbs 2.5 and 7. It is against the wiles of this woman that the strong admonitions of the wisdom teacher are directed. In Proverbs she is closely linked with death and the underworld. Her house sinks down to death and her paths lead to the shades (2.18). Those who visit her never regain the paths of life. Her own feet go down to Death and Sheol (5.5) and her house is a very anteroom to the halls of death (7.27). The wisdom teacher is saying that any association with this woman leads to social and moral death. In Ecc 7.26 she is "more bitter than Death". They are both hunters. Death, however, is a swift and merciful killer. The woman causes a man to endure a living

death.

> For a man does not even know his time;
> like fish taken in a net and like birds
> captured in a bird-snare, like them men
> are taken in an evil time. (9.12)

ʿittô, "his time", is to be understood as the time of death. rāʿāh, "bad", should be deleted after net. pah is specifically a snare for catching birds. Death, the Hunter, comes with unpredictable and devastating suddenness, snaring humans like unwary fish or birds

A similar figure is found in Proverbs 13.14 where the teachings of the sage are compared to a wellspring of life, offering escape from the "snares of death". In 14.27 it is the "fear of Yahweh" that provides escape from Death's snares. The man who amasses wealth by deceit and sharp practice falls helpless victim to the traps of the grim huntsman in Prov. 21.6.

This image of Death as a hunter, fisherman or bird-catcher has been linked with Mot, the Canaanite god of the underworld. /3 Mot appears chiefly as a sluggish but rapacious monster waiting for his prey to come to him. I believe that the imagery is Egyptian in origin.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead represents the doom of death as a net that traps its victims and drags them down to the underworld. In chapter 153A the deceased says:

> .....do not take me in this net which
> is the one in which you take the "tired ones";
> do not trap me in the snare which is yours
> in which you trap the "wandering ones"

The "tired ones" and the "wandering ones" are the dead. Here the net itself is personified. The deceased had to know the names of the parts of the net to obtain power over it and escape. Thus he would pass from being potential prey to predator.

> .....I (the deceased)have come as a
> fisher with the net, my netting needles in
> my hand; I have come out, I go about, my prey
> is in my net.

Sheol they are set" after vir em, "he herds them". Death is the grim shepherd dragooning his helpless flock to the underworld.

## Powers of Death's Kingdom.

### Death's Messengers.

Proverbs 16.14a asserts that,

> The wrath of a king (is) Death's two messngers.

In Ugaritic mythology, Ball has two messengers, Gpn-w-Ugr, "Vine-and-Field." They are always mentioned together and, from their names, would seem to assist Baal in his function as a fertility god. In the Baal Epic, these messengers are sent by Baal to the underworld to refuse the tribute that Mot, the god of death, has demanded. Soon they return bringing terrifying word of Mot's fearful appetite which Baal cannot hope to escape. Without further ado Ball sends "Vine-and-Field" with a message of submission. By a clever ruse, Baal creates what is really a clone and sends it to the underworld. Mot and "Vine-and-Field" are successfully deceived and Mot, presumably, sends the two messengers to the father of the gods, El, who live at the confluence of two rivers, to inform him of Baal's fate. /10 It has been suggested that these two emissaries are another pair who belong to Mot since they are unnamed in Baal 1* ii 16f. /11 But there is no good reason to suppose that they are other than "Vine-and-Field", now servants without a master, who accept Mot's commission to bear the tragic news to El. Their euphemistic reference to the underworld as a "pleasant place" seems tinged with an almost hysterical relief at their own escape.

The Ugaritic text is not the clearest. But it is not unreasonable to conjecture that the two messengers in the Ugaritic text may allow one to propose a dual in the Hebrew. This would reflect the persistence of the Canaanite myth of Mot(Death) sending two messengers to

El with their calamitous news. A single messenger has been proposed, a "herald of death". /12 Two objections may be raised to this. The first is that the word in the Masoretic text is a masculine plural construct and in an unvocalized text could be construed as a dual without difficulty. In the second place, "herald of death" does not take into account the persistence of the myth which endowed the ire of an absolute monarch with death-dealing power. The word-play in hamat-melek mal>akê māwet must also be noted

## Death and Sheol

These powers of Death's kingdom are paired in Canticles 8.6; Hosea 13.14; Isaiah 28.15a,18a; Job 27.15 and 28.23.

The Song of Songs (Canticles) is a sophisticated and courtly poetic celebration of erotic love. Towards the end of the book, embedded in lush and exotic imagery, 8.6b is a sharp reminder of the overwhelming power of love. It may even comment obliquely on the destructive nature of uncontrollable passion.

> For Love is powerful as Death
> Passion unrelenting as Sheol

Love and Death exercize similar force. In the face of love as in the face of death, resistance is futile. Passion, qin ah, is relentless as Sheol which devours its victims indiscriminately. It may be that Death and Sheol are used here with superlative intent - love is very strong, passion untiringly cruel. But the evocative force of reference to the powers of death's kingdom should not be underestimated.

Hosea 13.14 mentions Death and Sheol again as a pair:

> Shall I ransom them from the hand of Sheol,
> shall I redeem them from Death?
> Where are your plagues, Death?
> Where is your pestilence, Sheol?
> Pity is hidden from my eyes.

153B has a similar theme of the dead escaping from the nets of fishers and fowlers. /4

Two Psalms, 18.6 and 116.3 provide further evidence for the personification of death as a hunter.

> The cords of Sheol were wound about me,
> the snare of Death confronted me.

hebel, "rope", is a snare made from a cord, possibly deriving from the Akkadian eblu, "a line of rope". /5 Sheol and Death are powers emanating from the underworld, represented as hunters lurking with their implements to trap their unwary prey. The Annunaki gods of the Mesopotamian underworld apparently possessed a net which drew people to death:

> sapar $^{d}$a-nun-na-ki ilāni ig-du-ti
> The net of the Annunaki (gods) drags down. /6

Ps. 116.3, with the emendation of mĕṣârê, "distresses" to mĕṣōdê, "nets" provides a similar image:

> The cords of death bound me,
> the hunting-nets of Sheol gripped me.

The use of these figures is to indicate the considerable anguish expressed by the Psalmist.

Finally, in Job 18. 8-10, Bildad, one of Job's "comforters", warns of the fate of the recalcitrant wicked in terms of darkness and death. Death and his minions set traps, gins and nets to bring about his destruction. It is clear that the man is the prey of Death the Hunter, a conclusion reinforced by the next two personifications of Death to be considered. The author of Job uses the mythical figure of Death the Hunter to provide vivid highlights in the description of the fate of the wicked.

## The First-Born of Death.

The phrase appears in Job 18.13:

> Sickness ravages his skin,
> the First-Born of Death devours his limbs.

The Masoretic text is unsatisfactory as it stands. It is perhaps best to change baddê, "the limbs", to dĕway, "sickness", and read "sickness ravages his skin". The confused first half of the verse is interpreted in the light of the much clearer second. Death's First-Born ravages the skin of the wicked man and then devours his limbs.

Death's First-Born has been identified with Mot, the Canaanite god of death and of the underworld. In the Ugaritic texts, Mot is described as the "son/darling of El", the chief god of the pantheon of Ugaritic. It has also been suggested that Mot, in his role of ruler of the nether world, might legitimately assume the title, "first born" of El. /7 However, the Ugaritic texts provide no direct evidence that Mot was regarded as El's first-born. "Darling of El" rather than suggesting primacy of birth or genuine paternal affection should be interpreted as a euphemism for a feared and repulsive deity. Mot is not portrayed as a hunter. He lies with the gaping maw ready to devour those who come within his reach.

Mesopotamian mythology provides a closer identification. Namtar is the god of plague and pestilence. He is also the sukallu irṣiti,"vizier of the underworld", and $^{i}$ilitti $^{d}$ereškigal, "offspring of Ereshkigal", the queen of the underworld. /8 In Mesopotamian religion the first-born of any god was, if male,the vizier of his parent. As Namtar was both son of Ereshkigal and vizier of the underworld he was, in all probability, her first-born. The First-Born of Death is Namtar, the Babylonian god of plague who destroys the body of the wicked with plague and wasting sickness.

## Death the King of Terrors

Job 18.14 goes on to describe Death as melek ballahot, "king of terrors."

> He (the wicked) is taken from his secure refuge and they (BH) march him before the king of terrors

BH is to be followed in placing lišĕ-ôl šattû, "for

The grammar and sense of this verse in the Hebrew text are quite complex. Both the LXX and Vg render the first two phrases as statements rather than questions. However, the key to their correct interpretation lies in the context of the whole chapter which is one of utter divine condemnation of Israel and in the last phrase of the verse "pity is hidden from my eyes." Yahweh asks Death and Sheol to bring out their plagues and pestilences. A Canaanite background to this verse may be sought in Resheph, the god of pestilential fever. He appears with dbr, "plague", in Habakkuk 3.5. He was worshipped at Ebla where Dabir may also be mentioned as a patron god of the city. /13 The prophet uses these figures to underscore his dreadful message that Yahweh is prepared to give Samaria over to destruction and that the powers of the underworld do their work at his behest.

These same twin forces appear as partners in an agreement concluded in Isa 28.15a and invalidated in 18a:

> For you said, "We have made a covenant with Death, and we have concluded a pact with Sheol (15a)." But your covenant with Death will be invalidated, and your pact with Sheol will be void (18a).

hōzeh, "seer", in this context must mean some kind of agreement. This is borne out by the LXX diathēkēn and the Vg pactum, both meaning "covenant". It is not possible simply to reduce this verse to satirical language put into the mouths of the rulers by the prophets. That is to say, that they themselves describe their treaty with a neighbouring power as no more worthwhile than a "covenant with Death". Nor need one propose some secret rite connected with chthonic powers to secure immortality for the said rulers. /14 Two ideas are conveyed by the verse: one is the fact of a treaty with a neighbouring country; the other is a consultation of the powers of the underworld to determine or ensure the worth of that treaty by necromancy and sacrifice. This was by no means an uncommon practice in popular Israelite religion. /15 The "covenant with Death" may

have been made with Mot himself. J.H. Tigay has drawn attention to names compounded with māwet found in Hebrew inscriptions. /16

Job 28.23 refers to Sheol this time, linked with another power from the kingdom of Death, Abaddon. This verse comes from a poem which asks the question where is wisdom to be found. Unsuccessful in his quest in the land of the living, the seeker after wisdom proceeds to question Deep and Sea, tĕhôm and yām, themselves figures of cosmic mythology. They respond negatively and the seeker journeys through the depths of the cosmic ocean to consult the powers of the underworld, Abaddon, "destruction" and Death. Even with their vast stores of arcane knowledge unavailable to the living, Abaddon and Death have heard only wisdom's merest whisper.

## Death the Robber

Like "Death the Shepherd", this personification of death is found once only in the OT in Jeremiah 9.20:

> For Death has come up through our windows,
> he has entered our fortification;
> to cut off the child from the street,
> the young men from the squares.

Death, at the end of a long and full life, was accepted with wistful resignation in the OT. But the death which came early and tragically was dreaded. This is Death, the Robber, snatching the breath of life from people before their allotted span, plundering the children and young men, the future of the race. In Exod 12.23, Yahweh is accompanied on his mission of death to the first-born in Egypt by the "destroyer", hammašhît. This figure appears to be a demon whose function was to enter the houses and slay the first-born. When Yahweh saw the blood smeared on the doorposts and lintels of the Hebrews he did not allow the demon to enter them. Here we have the image of a death-dealing demon capable of entering houses. /17

There is a non sequitur in this verse. If the children and young men are already in the streets and squares, why is Death represented as coming in through the windows and into the palaces?

This may be resolved in one of two ways:

1. ki alah mawet may qualify both parts of the verse, "for Death has come up (from the underworld) to enter our palaces and to cut off the child....."

2. The interpretation may be that Death seizes the children and the young men so that they may neither play in the streets, nor lounge in the city squares.

The latter seems more satisfactory.

We have reflected here a popular superstition that Death could climb through windows to seize his prey. This verse has been linked to the description of the building of Baal's palace in the Ugaritic texts. /18 Baal is initially reluctant to allow the construction god, Kothar-wa-Hasis, to put a window in his new palace. Two reasons for this have been advanced: one that Mot, the god of death will enter and steal his daughters; /19 the other that Mot will come and seize tribute from Baal that is due to him. /20 However, the text, broken as it is, undoubtedly points out that Baal is, in fact, afraid of Yam,"Sea", who represents the chaotic and destructive aspect of the cosmic ocean. This ocean is held back only by Baal's power. A window might allow "Sea" to pour into the inhabited cosmos or it might permit Baal's gentle daughters, "Mist and Showers", to escape uncontrolled, or perhaps be overpowered or stolen away by "Sea". /21 Thus Yam, not Mot, is the one who is feared.

I would not go so far as to say that Mot is Baal's ally. /22 Rather, it seems that Baal, with the false bravado supplied by an excess of food and wine, boasts that the unpredictable and monstrous Mot will aid him put down any usurpers - an unwise boast as it turns out. /23 It is not possible to elucidate Jer 9.20 from the Ugaritic texts. Perhaps it is best simply

to indicate a popular and understandable superstition that Death slips through windows to steal away the breath of life. Mesopotamian mythology, however, provides a multiplicity of demons and disaffected spirits who roam the streets by night, slipping through windows and doors in search of their prey. The concept of the mashit, "destroyer", referred to above, shows that death-dealing demons were not alien to Hebrew thought.

In Ancient Egypt, Death was envisaged as a robber who overpowered people, bound them securely and did not free them until they had crossed into the underworld. He snatched them away, often before their time. /24 Death, the unrelenting robber, preyed not only on the aged, but on the child at its mother's breast. /25

In Jer. 9.20, the prophet employs the vivid picture of Death,the Robber, as Yahweh's agent in punishing an apostate people. The idea behind the figure may be that of an epidemic which preys upon the young

From the foregoing it may be concluded that the preponderance of the personifications of Death is found in the Wisdom Literature. There we are able to assume that they carry little or no mythological significance and, thus, cannot be regarded as providing any authentic information about beliefs concerning death, the underworld and the fate of the dead in the OT. The personifications are employed as literary imagery. The origins of that imagery may be sought in the comparative mythology of Canaan, Egypt and Mesopotamia. However,by the time the material surfaces in the Wisdom Literature, the mythology is moribund and functions chiefly in a literary context. At the same time, one cannot completely dismiss the disquietude that reference in literature to death and its attendant imagery evokes in any society.

Prophecy. however, appears to reflect superstitions and practices which were relatively widespread. Hosea indicated a common belief, by no means confined to ancient Israel. that various sicknesses were harbingers of death. Isaiah 28.15a,18a betrays the common practice of necromancy to obtain aid and insight for the chthonic

powers. Finally, Jeremiah 9.20 provides evidence for the popular superstition that Death and his minions entered houses through a window to rob unwary humans of life.

## Notes

1. M. Wakeman (God's Battle with the Monster, Leiden:Brill, 1973) refers to, but does not enlarge on some of these personifications of Death.
2. G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.) Theological Dictionary of the OT, Vol 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1986), 199-203
3. W. McKane, Proverbs, (London:SCM, 1970),455
4. P. Barguet, Le Livre des Morts des Anciens Egyptiennes (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1968), 219-222, vignettes, text and commentary
5. Botterweck and Ringgren, op.cit. Vol 4 (1980) 172
6. K. Tallqvist, Sumerische-Akkadische Namen der Totenwelt (Helsinki: Studia Orientalia iv, 1934) 150
7. N.C. Habel, The Book of Job (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 281-288
8. Tallqvist, op.cit. 12-15, 88
9. J. B. Pritchard (ed.), Ancient Near Eastern Texts(Princeton: Univ. Press,1974) 110
10. J.C.L. Gibson, Canaanite Myths and Legends (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978) 69-74
11. M. Dahood, Proverbs and North-West Semitic Philology (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1963) 36
12. McKane , op.cit. 488
13. G. Pettinato, The Archives of Ebla (New York: Doubleday, 1981) 248 $^{d}$da-bi-ir dingir-ebla$^{ki}$ ; see also W.J. Fulco, The Canaanite God Resep (New Haven: American Oriental Series 8, 1976) passim
14. R.E. Clements, Isaiah: The New Century Bible Commentary (London: Morgan & Scott,1980) 229-232
15. J.B. Burns, "Necromancy and the Spirit of the Dead in the OT", Transactions of Glasgow University Oriental Society 26 (1978) 1-14
16. J.H. Tigay, You Shall Have No Other Gods(Harvard Semitic Studies, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 67
17. Professor John van Seeters (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) kindly pointed this out to me in a verbal communication
18. Gibson, op.cit. 57-66
19. U. Cassuto, "The Palace of Baal," JBL 61 (1942) 51-56

20. M.D. Coogan, Stories from Ancient Canaan (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 81-82

21 I am indebted to Professor Jack M. Sasson (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) for drawing my attention to an interesting parallel to my conjecture that Baal's daughters might be stolen by sea. In the Ancient Egyptian "Tale of the Two Brothers," the younger brother, Bata, has a wife fashioned for him by the god Knum. She is radiantly beautiful. Bata warns her not to go out of doors lest she is stolen away by the sea. A trans. may be found in : M. Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature Vol ii: The New Kingdom (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1976) 207

22. W. McKane, Jeremiah, International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 210-212

23 Gibson, CML, 65-66, 68-69

24 C.E. Sander-Hansen, Der Begriff des Todes bei den Agyptern (Copenhagen: 1942) 17, Notes 1-11, 28

25. J. Zandee, Death as an enemy (Leiden, Brill, 1960), Studies in the History of Religions V 85-86

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