Images of Death in the Song of Hezekiah and the Conceptual World of the Ancient Near East

The Role of the Comparison in Interpretation of Biblical Texts

Associate Professor Dr. Hanne Løland Levinson

Maja Leonora Skålvold

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"Do they not compose a picture of death,
The commoner and the noble,
Once they are near to their fate?"

(Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh)

In loving memory of Kjetil Svendsen (1959-2013)
who's journey to the stars made all this a little more real.

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0. ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature*
ANE	The Ancient Near East
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BDB	The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon
BeO	Biblica Et Orientalia.
BETS	*Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgardensia
Bib	*Biblica*
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CC	Continental Commentaries
COS	*Context of Scripture*
CSR	Contributions to the Study of Religion.
CurBS	*Currents in research Biblical Studies*
DBI	*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*
DTI	*Dictionary of Theological Interpretation*
FAT	Forchungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HALOT	The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
HB	The Hebrew Bible
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
JPS	Jewish Publishing Society translation
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LXX	The Septuagint
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	*New International Version*
NRSV	*New Revised Standard Version*
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology

OBV	Old Babylonian Version (of Gilgamesh)
OTL	Old Testament Library
OWC	Oxford World Classics
RHAW	Rutlegde History of the Ancient World
RRBS	Recent Research in Biblical Studies
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBV	Standard Babylonian Version (of Gilgamesh)
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
Vg.	*The Vulgate*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	World Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaf*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation and Background

My first encounter with extrabiblical ancient texts in relation to the Bible, was when I started as a theology student, and our textbook on Old Testament exegesis mentioned some of the extrabiblical flood stories from the ANE in relation to the Noah story. I was surprised to learn that the biblical story was not as unique as I had thought, but also amazed. All of a sudden this old book we read in church was connected to something beyond itself. For me, that became a testimony to the universality and validity of the biblical texts, and their relevance for people in different cultures.

Academic theology may be unique in its systematic way of organising its thoughts, so that these are available for critical discourse in academia, normative guidance for the church and honest interaction with society and culture as such,[1] but theology is not, and has never been, unique in attempting to understand the big questions of God, life and the world. In systematic theology there is an ongoing debate about the sources and normative basis of theology, and the role of human experience, reason, philosophy and art in our pursuit for theological truth. The same issue may be raised in relation to studying the Bible. What is, for example, the role of the socio-historical, literary and contemporary contexts of the texts we interpret? And what may be gained, theologically, from relating the texts of the Bible to various extrabiblical material?

In terms of history, the historical context easily finds its place: Extrabiblical texts from the ANE provide new sources to the characters and events of the Bible and analogies to further the reconstruction of history. This allows for the conceptual world view of the biblical writers to be filled out, and the development of religious history to be charted. These texts also help us find indications of influence and polemic between the biblical writers and their surroundings. Scholars who work with literary approaches have found extrabiblical material useful for linguistic purposes, as well as in forming a better understanding of the Bible's figurative imagery, use of metaphor, style of rhetoric, forms and genres. Since Gadamer, scholars of hermeneutics have been keenly aware of the role of the reader's prejudices and pre-knowledge in interpretation, and in recent years

[1] Academy, church and society being the three spheres of theology as identified by David Tracy. Jan Olav Henriksen, "David Tracy" in *Moderne Teologi: Tradisjon og Nytenkning hos det 20. Århundrets Teologer* (ed. Ståle Kristiansen and Svein Rise; Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2008), 538-546, 540.

critics oriented towards deconstructionist theory have demonstrated just how much the reader's context matters as a premise for the readers judgements about a text, and in reader-response theory how the text only comes into true existence when encountered by a reader.

But extrabiblical material is more than context. As Erhard Gerstenberger comments, there is great value in juxtaposing texts from different cultures in order to "compare life situations, genre profiles, intentions, social conditions and so forth, and to come to valid conclusions, using the insights gained on one side as leads to discover inherent traits in the other."[2] And as Gerstenberger rightly stresses, comparison is "applicable to texts from cultures other than those of the ANE, be they ancient or modern."[3] This is certainly relevant to readings that aim at understanding the texts better so as to allow them to play a role in the theological endeavour. I pose that such a dialectic process of discovering inherent traits of the biblical texts must be at the core of theological work with the Bible. In this thesis, I will bring the conceptual worlds of two ANE cultures into dialogue with a text from the HB, and ask how the former can contribute to the interpretation of the imagery in the latter.

1.2 Topic and Research Question

I have chosen to focus on death, because it is a topic which is fundamentally human and central to all cultures and religions. Jan Assmann considers death to be the "origin and center of culture", and argues that human foreknowledge of our own death is what sets us apart from other living beings.[4] With different emphases in different times and different places, death runs through all human attempts at self-understanding, and is the great unknown. As my starting point, I have chosen a text from the Hebrew Bible in which the nature of death is one of the main topics, namely the Song of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20). In this text, the contrast of life and death fuels the central motion of the poem, and the images of death are rich and varied. The Song is introduced as a writing by the

[2] Erhard S. Gersteneberger "The Lyrical Literature," in *The Hebrew Bible And Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. Knight and Tucker; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 409-444, 431.

[3] Gersteneberger "Lyrical Literature," 431.

[4] Jan Assmann, *Death ans Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, (trans. D. Lorton; Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1, 7.

king at the time of his recovery from a fatal illness and is a first person account of a close encounter with death. Through varied imagery the song contrasts life and death as it reflects upon the singer's movement from being close to death to being close to life. These images, and conceptions they derive from, will be the focus of this thesis, as I ask: *When interpreting Isa 38:9-20, what does comparison with extrabiblical texts and conceptions add to our interpretation of the images used to depict and contrast life and death? And what is the added value of comparison with extrabiblical material when interpreting a biblical text for theological purposes?*

The first of these questions pertains to the interpretation of the Song of Hezekiah, and aims at understanding the conceptions of death that lie behind the imagery used to depict life and death in this Song. By "conception" I mean the sum of a person's or culture's ideas, images and beliefs about a particular subject,[5] which is the referent of thoughts expressed in language.[6] I use "imagery" as a term for all descriptive expressions of what something is, whether it is figurative, abstract or literal, direct or indirect. While the conception is the idea of death in a given culture, the image is the language used to express this idea. The conceptions of a culture (or a person) are never fully accessible to a reader, nor are they identical to the images expressed in text as the nature of language and imagery reaches beyond the conscious choices of the writer. A presentation of a cultural conception demands generalisation and selection, and is therefore always a construct created by the person who presents the conception. Similarly, a presentation of an image of death demands interpretation and expansion. Recognising the constructed nature of my own work, I will examine the imagery of the Song of Hezekiah with conceptions found elsewhere in the HB and in texts from two ANE cultures: Egyptian and Mesopotamian. My aim is not historical, literary or current, but to gain hermeneutical insights into the text in question.

The second question posed above concerns the theological merit of the methodological tools I have used to interpret the Song of Hezekiah, and aims to discover how extrabiblical texts may further theological interpretation. I will not go into questions of

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[5] Based on http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conception 2013-05-11.

[6] In the words of linguist Kathleen Callow concepions are "a mental correlate of words which is not language specific", they are "not so much what we think about; they are what we think with". Daniel J. Treier, "Concept," *DBI*, 130.

canon or the authority of scripture, nor will I go into the theological implications of the interpretation of the Song of Hezekiah. Rather, I will attempt to clarify what it is to interpret the Bible for a theological purpose, and to discern what comparison as method brings to this process.

1.3 Method

Throughout the last two centuries biblical scholars have sought the historical origin of the biblical texts. In the last several decades, however, a growing scepticism of the reach of historical knowledge has opened the field up to other approaches. Scholars have shown interest in the literary and aesthetic qualities of the texts, their social ramifications throughout history and in the present, and structuralist approaches have attempted to understand the text as a world of its own. With the scepticism of history has come a reevaluation of the traditional privilege given to historical knowledge, and other forms of knowledge have begun to play an equally important role. In this thesis I will speak of hermeneutical knowledge as the insight into texts, gained through careful interpretation in the hermeneutical process, and of theologically constructed knowledge, or imagined knowledge, as the product of systematic theological work.

The majority of this thesis consists of the production of hermeneutical knowledge, specifically that gained through the method of comparison. My main source for this is an article by Brent Strawn in the anthology *Method Matters*.[7] The basic approach in comparative methodology is to juxtapose two or more distinct subjects in order to identify similarities and differences between them, and thus "reveal aspects of the subjects that may not have been as easily seen if each was located in isolation."[8]

Historically, the use of comparison as a method in the study of religion traces back to Friedrich Max Müller's lectures at the Royal Institution of London in 1870. Here he argued that comparison should be used to study all religions in order to deduce uniform

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[7] Brent A. Strawn, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory and the Image of God," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor or David L. Petersen* (ed. LeMon and Richards; SBLRBS 56; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 117-142.

[8] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 117.

patterns of universal validity.[9] Since Müller, the comparative study of the Bible has become a field of its own. In the face of a growing amount of material, and faced with the requirement of increasing specialisation in Assyriology and Egyptology, biblical scholars have narrowed their focus from all religions to religions or texts in geographical and historical proximity. Ideological tendencies, where scholars have overemphasized either similarities or differences between the religion of Israel and its cognate cultures, have prompted the development of a more clearly articulated understanding of the method, its conditions, use and limitations.

William Hallo defined the method as aiming "to silhouette the biblical text against its wider literary and cultural environment and thus to arrive at a proper assessment of the extent to which the biblical evidence reflects that environment or, on the contrary, is distinctive and innovative over against it."[10] Hallo included both a vertical (diachronic) and a horizontal (or synchronic) dimension in his contextual approach, so that both historical and literary concerns may be addressed, in what he deemed to be a scientific approach. In terms of defining the context, Hallo keeps historical and geographical proximity as the primary criteria. In this, Hallo's approach is a useful model for those working with history, though it needs more clearly defined parameters in order to yield definitive answers. For these, Strawn turns to Jonathan Smith's work on comparative religion. While Smith is sincerely aware of the limitations of his own method, and its lack of framework for analysing the data collected, he introduces some distinctions which are very useful. For one, he introduces the distinction used in biology between that which is genetically related, *homologous*, and that which is similar, but doesn't have a common ancestor, *analogous*. Secondly, and in my opinion more importantly, Smith premises that comparison is not identity. "Comparison requires postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end".[11]

[9] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 118.

[10] Quoted in Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 121.

[11] Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison A Magic Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells* (ed. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40; Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 126.

Smith speaks of a "discourse of 'difference'",[12] and with this he in fact speaks to the core of the comparative method. This method is, as Strawn frequently underlines, a deeply hermeneutic process where the differences are what furthers the interpretation.[13]

The last scholar Strawn devotes attention to is Earl Miner and his work on comparative poetics. According to Strawn, Miner criticises comparative approaches for failing to conduct *real* comparison by focusing the work too narrowly to gain anything from the gap between the two texts.[14] Instead, Miner advocates genuinely intercultural comparison guided by a proper understanding of the historical and linguistic characteristics of each of the compared subjects. Such understanding helps the interpreter avoid relativism, and enables her to treat the texts with integrity.

Strawn puts forth four conclusions of his own, which he employs in his own work. Firstly, he understands comparison as a *hermeneutical enterprise*, where the interpreter plays a vital and active role. Already in choosing what material to compare, the interpreter is active and has an influence on the results gained. This also means that the process of comparing data, and the result, is *a construction* held by the interpreter. This can be useful, but it requires the interpreter to be open about her purpose, as this in fact the "raison d'être and significance" for the interpretive project.[15] Strawn supports *intercultural* comparisons as an ideal, because this helps avoid overfocus on homologues elements such as linguistic developments, as these tend to reveal to little of the difference between the compared elements. Finally, Strawn considers the "dialectic of similarity and difference" to be crucial for the comparative inquiry.[16] This speaks again to the fact that a comparative approach is a hermeneutical process, which does not yield definitive answers, but is part of a continuing dialogue.

Such a hermeneutical view of the comparative method, works well for my purpose of gaining insight into the text of the Song of Hezekiah. Due to the constraints of this thesis,

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[12] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, 1990), 42; Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 126.

[13] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 126.

[14] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 128.

[15] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 129.

[16] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 135.

I will unfortunately not be able to refer how the comparison furthers the understanding of the extrabiblical material. While the comparison will go both ways, my focus will be on gathering insights into the Song, not into the cultures I compare it with.

1.4 Material

I have chosen to look at two cultures, ancient Egypt and the Assyro-Babylonian culture of Mesopotamia. I will read the Song in the context of the HB, so that this comes to represent a third culture, and thus is a comparable third element. Comparing culture to culture rather than only text to text, enables me to come operate within the dynamic space between image and conception. The source material relating to death is very comprehensive in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, and some delimitation is therefore necessary. Outside the HB, I have chosen to look only at texts from the late bronze to the middle iron age,[17] as these predate the Persian and Hellenistic empires which stretched across the entire levant, possibly reducing the cultural dissections in the region. Also, this period is known to be one where questions about death were of particular popular interest in the ANE region.[18]

As I have yet to master akkadian or hieroglyphic egyptian, I have used anthologies and translated volumes to find and interpret texts outside the HB. My choices are therefore guided by the selection of texts presented here, as well as by the use of texts in secondary literature. Due to the need of some generalisation, I have focused on texts containing imagery and conceptions which are representative of their cultures over time, though I recognise the importance of reading diverse texts together to form a nuanced picture of what is in fact representative. Furthermore, I have privileged texts that speak directly of death as part of the human experience, and which relay the general human experience or expectation. This means that I will not deal with texts that

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[17] Based on the archeological periods in Palestine this gives us 1500-600 BCE, i.e. Middle Babylonian Period to Neo-Babylonian Period in Mesopotamia , and New Kingdom to Late Period in Egypt. Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody: Hendriksons, 2005), xxxii-xxxiii.

[18] Thorkild Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 228, cf. Hays who finds support for this in his own research. Christopher B. Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and First Isaiah* (FAT 79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 34, 56.

merely relate to the divine realm,[19] or with human experiences that are clearly unique exceptions.[20] I present the three cultures and the relevant material in each of them more thoroughly in ch. 4.

1.5 Structure

This thesis has three main parts. Ch. 2 is devoted to understanding the Song of Hezekiah as we know it today. This chapter provides historical an literary background on the Song, my own translation, a structural analysis, and a survey of the imagery used to contrast life and death. Ch. 3 begins with a thorough presentation of the relevant texts and conceptions of death in the three cultures. Then follows the comparison, which is structured around thematic groupings of the Song's imagery, and has subchapters on time, place and condition, and ends with a summary of my findings. In ch. 4 I briefly discuss what this approach for gaining hermeneutical knowledge of biblical texts can contribute to the theological process of establishing constructed or imagined knowledge. I have also provided a brief afterword as a ch. 5, in which I reflect upon the practical significance of the findings and discussions of this thesis.

[19] In some cases the stories of divine characters are clearly representative also for the human sphere. These texts can therefore be employed.

[20] E.g. characters like Enoch in the HB and Atrahasis (Utnapishtim) in Mesopotamia. Exceptional is also the Egyptian Amarna period, with its monotheism and strict recognition of only the realm of the living.

2. ISAIAH 38

2.1 Context, Redaction and Date

Isaiah 38 tells the story of the illness and recovery of King Hezekiah of Judah and includes a writing (מכתב) by the king at the time of his recovery (38:9-20). This piece of poetic writing is known as the Song of Hezekiah.

Isaiah 38 is part of a lager pericope (Isa 36-39), which narrates the interactions of Isaiah and King Hezekiah during three large events: The Assyrian invasion of Palestine under Sennacherib,[21] the illness and recovery of Hezekiah, and the visit of Babylonian envoys which is followed by a prophecy predicting the exile to Babylon. These texts are paralleled in the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kgs 18:12-20:19) and to a lesser extent in the Chronistic History (2 Chr 32:1-26). Scholars have paid much attention to the origin and redaction of these parallel texts. However, while there is now wide acceptance that the texts are integral to their current contexts,[22] and that the version in 2 Chr is younger than the other two, there is no general agreement about which context these texts were originally written for. The majority opinion is that 2 Kgs is the more probable first context,[23] while others, like Ackroyd and Seitz, argue that the texts were first located in Isa.[24] The hypothesis[25] that these texts are based on an earlier collection of legends concerning Isaiah has been supported by, among others among others, Blenkinsopp, Wildberger and Seitz, though these scholars still hold that the legends were first adopted for Isa or 2 Kgs respectively, and later transposed from one setting to the other.[26] Pearson, who assumes that the collection of legends served as source for 2 Kgs and Isa independently, has even attempted to reconstruct such a common textual

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[21] This story seems to refer to two separate events, and consist of several layers of redaction. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 263, Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 364. Cf.

[22] William A. M. Beuken, *Isaiah: Part II* (trans. Brian Doyle; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 335.

[23] So, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 461, Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCBC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 288, Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39* (trans. R. A. Wilson; OTL, London: SMC, 1980), 367, Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39* (FOTL 16; ed. Rolf P. Knierim and Gene M. Tucker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 482, Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 363, 559, Hugh G. M. Williamson, "Hezekiah and the Temple" in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. Michael V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 47-52, 52.

[24] Peter R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 36-39: Structure and Function," in *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. J. P. M. Van der Ploeg O. P.* (ed. W. C. Delsman et al.; AOAT 211; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982), 3-21. Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 187.

[25] Put forward by A. Jepsen, so Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 361.

[26] Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 461, Childs, *Isaiah,* 261, 265. Seitz, *Zion*, 116. Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 361.

vorlage,[27] but this might be pushing the current evidence too far.[28] Unlike the narrative material in the pericope, the Song of Hezekiah is found only in Isa. As it is the Song which is the topic of this thesis, I will not go further into the general relationship between the narratives of Isa 36-39 and their parallels, and instead focus to the Song.

Because the Song of Hezekiah is unique to Isa, it should be seen as secondary to the narrative.[29] This does not preclude the possibility of Isa as the original context for the pericope, as the Song might have been incorporated after the redactor of 2 Kgs had copied the material.[30] However, it does seem more likely that the Song was added during the incorporation of material into Isa as the text would have been more susceptible to change during such a relocation. In terms of origin, the Song may have been written for its present context in Isaiah, or it could have originated independently and later been incorporated into the narrative.[31] Without ancient witnesses it is impossible to definitively prove either option,[32] but as I will argue below, there is a close literary affinity between the Song of Hezekiah and the Book of Isaiah as a unified work, which may be indicative of an origin related to a late redaction of Isa.

In the long-running debates on the redactional history of the Book of Isaiah, many attempts have been made to determine how the different parts of the book came into being.[33] Most relevant for the Song of Hezekiah and Isa 38 is the work on how Isa 36-39 function in the literary structure of the Book of Isaiah. These chapters represent a

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[27] Raymond F. Pearson, *The Kings- Isaiah and Kings- Jeremiah recensions* (BZAW 252; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997).

[28] Wildberger, some 15 years earlier, states that "there is no way that one can reestablish a fictional "original text," reconstructed on the basis of the study of the two texts in their present form, to be used as the original, on which comments can be made." Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 363.

[29] So also Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 452. The secondary nature of the Song is also supported by the way it interrupts the flow of the narrative, separating Isa 38:21-22 from the rest of it.

[30] It is unlikely that a redactor would have omitted a song from a source. Songs are a common feature in Hebrew narrative and are a well-known feature in the Deutronomistic History, e.g. Deut 32:1-43, 1 Sam 2:1-10 and 2 Sam 22:1-51.

[31] Barré argues that the superscription indicates that the Song belonged to a previous collection of poems, and sees this as the reason for the poor flow from narrative to song and back. Michael L. Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me: A Study of the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20)* (CBQMS 39; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2005), 48.

[32] So also Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 454.

[33] For surveys see Marvin A. Sweeney, "The Book of Isaiah in Recent Research," *CurBS* 1 (1993): 141-162 and idem, "Reevaluating Isaiah 1-39 in Recent Critical Research," *CurBS* 4 (1996): 79-113; repr. in *Recent Research on the Major Prophets* (ed. Alan J. Hauser; RRBS 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008): 93-117.

stylistic break in the book, and have therefore long been considered an addition to the Isaian text. But as Melugin notes in his study on the formation of Isa 40-55: "The closest thing to a setting for chs. 40ff. is the prophecy of Isaiah to Hezekiah in chapter 39 concerning the exile to Babylon."[34] As the primary context for the later parts of the book, the prophecy predicting the exile is pivotal for connecting the later material with the earlier.[35] Melugin's observation also suggests that Isa 36-39 should be read in light of what follows, and the pericope is thus set in a context of hope, quite far from its context in 2 Kgs, where the pericope ends in the short delay of the awaiting catastrophe that is the fall of Judah.

Ackroyd develops this idea of a bridge function for Isa 36-39 further, pointing to strong connections between Isa 36-39 and Isa 1-12.[36] He sees an especially close tie between Isa 36-39 and Isa 6-9, noting formal features such as the historical note, which begins both pericopes, literary features such as the contrast between Ahaz and Hezekaih, amplified by the use of the same locations (water conduit in 7:3 and 36:2), the mention of the steps[37] of Ahaz (38:8), theological features such as the phrase קִנְאַת יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה־זֹּאת, "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (9:6 and 37:32, NRSV), and the theme of אוֹת, a sign given to the house of David (7:11, 14, and 37:30, 38:8, 22). Ackroyd also suggests that Isa 38 should be read as a comment on the deliverance of Jerusalem in 36-37 and the foretelling of the exile in 39.[38] If so, the Song of Hezekiah is the highlight of this comment, spelling out the destruction and salvation that lies ahead. Hezekiah, or the first person of the Song, should then be read as a type for the city of Jerusalem, pressed and delivered, and for the whole people, exiled and delivered. This reading

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[34] Roy F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55* (BZAW 141; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976), 177.

[35] As I am not able to go into a further discussion of the terms First, Second and Third Isaiah here, I avoid using them altogether. For an overview of the discussion up to 1995, see: Marvin E. Tate, "The Book of Isaiah in Recent Study," in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts* (ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House; JSOTSup 235; Shefffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 22-55.

[36] Peter R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 36-39: Structure and Function," in *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. J. P. M. Van der Ploeg O. P.* (ed. W. C. Delsman et al.; AOAT 211; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982), 3-21.

[37] NRSV and JPS both translate "dial of Ahaz". There is no way of determining for sure how הַמַּעֲלוֹת is to be translated, but "step" is a more direct translation and it allows for the consideration of both the steps in a staircase (so LXX) and those on a sundial.

[38] Peter R. Ackroyd, "An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile," *SJT* 27 (1974): 328-352, 345.

makes Isa 38 central to the entire Book of Isaiah, forming a bridge connecting chapters 1-39 with 40-55 (or 40-65).

Young, however, questions the validity of these literary connections between Isa 36-39 and Isa 40-55, claiming that the "connections between Isa 38-39 and Deutero-Isaiah are tenuous at best, being limited primarily to the theme of exile".[39] Young, intent on proving the priority of 2 Kgs as original context for the pericope, overlooks the fact that the Song of Hezekiah is what distinguishes the Isaiah version of the pericope, and in doing so, he misses a central point: The Song, with its strong emphasis on restoration and healing, corresponds much better with the message and context of Isa, than with that of 2 Kgs. As Williamson writes: "Whereas the Deuteronomic History is reticent about speaking of such restoration, it is entirely suitable within the book of Isaiah."[40] Furthermore, in her article on Isa 38:21, Hoffer finds support for her metaphorical interpretation of healing as restoration in a wide range of Isaian texts, including 1:6, 30:26, 53 and 61:1,[41] and Watts notes that the Song characterises Hezekiah in line with the the ideal presented to the returning exiles, as "dependent on Yhaweh".[42]

In my opinion, the literary connections between Isa 36-39, especially Isa 38 and the Song of Hezekiah, and the rest of the prophetic book, show a close affinity between the Song and the Book of Isaiah as a unified work. This indicates that the Song has played a role in the later stages of the book's development, either as a bridge written to interpret older passages and link them to new ones, or as an existing text brought in to do the same.

Dating poetry is always difficult, as poetic texts have so few references to concrete, datable events or institutions. Beuken considers an exilic origin for the Song of Hezekiah, posing that the "redaction clearly had the exiles in mind here since Hezekiah's healing was a symbol for them of their own hopes and expectations".[43] Clements

[39] Robert Andrew Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition* (VTSup 155; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 135.

[40] Hugh G. M. Williamson, "Hezekiah and the Temple" in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. Michael V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 47-52, 49.

[41] Vicki Hoffer, "An Exegesis of Isaiah 38:21," *JSOT* 56 (1992): 69-84, 75.

[42] James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (JSOTSup 139; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

[43] Beuken, *Isaiah: Part II*, 394.

suggests that the author who placed the Song in its current context intended to modify the impression of God's continued care of Jerusalem (as seen in chs. 36-37) in order to underline the importance of royal piety, and therefore dates the chapter to the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE) or Zedekiah (598-587).[44] A date between the first deportations in 597 BCE and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE could be supported if chapter 38 and 39 originated together, as the judgment oracle in Isa 39:6-7 reflects deportation, but not the destruction of the temple.[45] On the other hand, the same argument can be used to advocate a later date, as a later redactor would be more inclined to see the events of the exile as one large event, rather than an incremental development. Williamson regards the Song as post-exilic, remarking that since the post-exilic community had to bear the loss of the monarchy, the new temple became all the more important in theology and identity "as a focus for the community's present cohesion and future hopes, which they had formerly vested primarily in their kings. But included among these hopes was, paradoxically the expectation that one day the temple would again see the descendants of Hezekiah included in its congregation."[46]

While I am hesitant to make definitive claims regarding the date and origin of the Song of Hezekiah, I follow Williamson's argument, and consider the Song to have been edited into its current position in post-exilic time, presumably after the restoration of the Jerusalem temple. However, in terms of content, its origin may have been considerably earlier, from the time of the first temple, throughout the exilic period, and into the post-exilic Persian period. Based on the many difficulties in the textual transmission of the Song, and the fact that scribes and translators seem to have struggled with it from early on, I consider the Song to have originated as writing, rather than as an oral tradition. This would explain the high frequency of difficult words and the use of literary devices such as extended similes and word play,[47] which are not as easily communicated in oral transmissions, as well as the distinctive superscription.[48] A written origin makes an older tradition less likely, and I would therefore suggest an open dating between the first deportations under Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 BCE and the second return of

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[44] Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 289

[45] Beuken, *Isaiah: Part II*, 336.

[46] Williamson, "Hezekiah," 52.

[47] Unlike parallelisms, structure, and rhythm, which help the performer of a poem remember its content.

[48] See 2.3 and 2.4 for more on this.

deportees under king Artaxerxes I in 458 BCE. The Song's focus on the temple worship suggests a setting either among persons in exile with intimate knowledge of the temple cult, or in a cultic environment near the first or second temple.

This review of the context, redaction and date offers little certainty as to the setting in which the Song originated, but it does point to some key considerations which are relevant when working with this text: First and foremost, the time frame indicated places the Song's origin in a period where the events of the exile and the fall of the monarchy would have been prominent in the cultural memory and mindset of the Hebrews, perhaps representing the ultimate crisis of their near-history. Furthermore, a date during Neo-Babylonian or Persian rule in the Palestinian region underlines the multi-cultural context in which the Song may have originated. This opens up the possibility of genetic relations between the imagery of the Song and the imagery of the cultures I will compare it to in ch. 3, and thus warrants a caution. My approach in the comparison is strictly hermeneutic, and is not suitable for discovering homologous similarities in the material. Rather, my findings in ch. 3 should be considered merely analogous until, or unless, a historical connection can be proved.

2.2 Narrative and Song

Before looking more closely at the Song itself, it is useful to look at Isa 38 in further detail, specifically how the narrative and the Song interact. Though most commentators note that the insertion of the Song is inelegant, and that it disturbs the flow of the narrative, it is a mistake to conclude that the two have little or nothing to do with each other.[49]

The chapter begins with a loose connection to the preceding narratives of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in chs. 36-37: "In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death." (38:1, NRSV). This begins the narrative, where the prophet Isaiah comes to the king with the message that Hezekiah should set his affairs in order, for he is about to die. The king turns to the wall in prayer, asking God to remember how he has walked

[49] *Pace* de Boer who considers the Song to be merely "a poetical interlude". P. A. H. de Boer, "Notes on the Text and Meaning of Isaiah XXXVIII 9-20" in *Notes on Hebrew Grammar and Etymology* (ed. Gerard J. Thierry; OtSt 9; Leiden: Brill, 1951), 170-186, 185.

before God "in faithfulness with a whole heart" and has "done what is good in your sight." (38:3, NRSV). Immediately Isaiah receives a new prophecy from God: He is to go back to Hezekiah and proclaim that the king will live for fifteen more years, and that the city will be delivered from the king of Assyria. The Lord provides a sign that he will do as he has promised: The shadow on the steps of Ahaz will retreat ten steps. The sign is reported, but we hear nothing of Hezekiah's healing, before v. 9 introduces a "writing by Hezekiah, King of Judah, at the time of his illness and his survival from illness."[50] Then follows a song[51] in the voice of a first person singular until v. 21, where Isaiah returns to order the treatment of the king with figs, and Hezekiah asks for a sign that he may go up to the temple.

Watts holds that the Song does not further the plot of the narrative, as no one reacts or comments upon it outside the Song itself.[52] However, within the narrative, the Song functions as an "interior monologue"[53] where the "personal feelings and introspective struggles"[54] of the character is expressed. This has a significant impact on characterization and on how the narrative reads. The same effect is present in other insert songs in HB narratives, for example the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), and the Song of Jonah (Jonah 2:2-10). Hezekiah is shown to bust out in song, before the healing was even effectuated, displays piety and trust in God in the face of mortal danger. These qualities are exemplary for the monarch's subjects, and play an important role in the larger context of the Assyrian crisis.

With regards to the Song, the narrative sets the stage. As readers we already know that this is a song by a man who has been confronted with death, and we are therefore unsurprised to meet death in the very first line. The narrative also provides us with knowledge of how the story turns out, and we await a turning point in the Song. This foreknowledge may somewhat lessen the depth of the lament in vv. 10-14, but the very concrete image of the king turned to the wall in prayer may also strengthen the weight

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[50] Where nothing else is stated, the translations are my own.
[51] For genre, see 2.3.
[52] Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 119.
[53] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, (BLS 9; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 38.
[54] Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 130.

of the lament. Furthermore, the narrative anchors the Song in the larger periscope, and allows the Song to comment on the perspectives of the pericope and of the Book of Isa as a whole. It is only in the narrative context of Isa 38 that the Song may be read typologically, with the singer as a type for Jerusalem, as it is God's reply to Hezekiah that mentions both the king and the city together.

Most importantly, the Song and the narrative should be read as commenting upon each other. As Watts notes, these parts of the text each have a different perspective on Hezekiah's healing. While the narrative emphasizes the piety of the king (he prays, and he recounts his faithfulness before God), the Song does not repeat this motive. Rather, the singer needs to be forgiven to regain his life (v. 17), and there is no mention of piety as a motivation for the reprieve.[55] These discrepancies could be used as arguments in establishing the likely redaction of the text, but the chapter can also be read as it stands, with two parts modifying and nuancing each other. The Song heightens the stakes of the narrative by showing just how much Hezekiah stands to lose, by portraying his despair in death and how he values life.

2.3 Form and Genre

I have up to this point referred to the Song of Hezekiah as precisely a *song.* The text is poetic, as shown by poetic features such as parallelisms and rhetorical questions, the lack of sequential verbs, and the frequent use of simile and metaphor, and not least by the fixed colometry the Song follows.[56] Colometry is the meter, or sound-pattern with which the Song is built up. The smallest communicational unit in a poem is a colon, a poetic line. If a colon stands alone, it is called a monocolon, while several cola strung together form what is called a bicolon (two cola) or a tricolon (three cola). The Song is built up with a characteristic colometry with cola of respectively three and two stressed syllables strung together as bicola, in a 3+2 rhythm. Important structural points in the song (the beginning, middle and end) break the pattern, to draw attention to the overall structure.[57] As the colometry brings attention to certain parts of the song, we should

[55] Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 121.

[56] As shown by Joachim Begrich, *Der Psalm des Hiskia: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Jesaja 38 10-20* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), 51-52.

[57] Barré, *Saved*, 31.

read it by its poetic lines, rather than the verse structure that has been imposed later. I have divided the lines accordingly in the translation below.

The headline in v. 9 calls the text a מִכְתָּב, best translated "writing".[58] William Hallo notes the similarity with Sumarian letters to the deity. Assuming the dating suggested above, these letters were prominent long before the Song of Hezekiah came to be, and the parallel is therefore not entirely relevant in assessing the genre. Unlike the Letter Prayer of King Sin-Iddinam to Nin-Isina,[59] with which Hallo compares, the Song has no elaborate address to the deity or pronounced prayer. Furthermore it ends in thanksgiving rather than praise, and does not argue that the petitioner is worthy of salvation. The resemblance to the letter to the deity would have improved if one were to read the prayer in the narrative (v. 2-3) with the Song, but the Song's stylistic features and structure makes this unnatural. This, together with the fact that insert songs or psalms are quite common in HB narrative, makes it unlikely that we need to look to other cultures to identify the genre of the Song.

Within the corpus of the HB the most obvious parallels are the aforementioned Songs of Moses, Hannah, and Jonah, all of which are best understood in light of the genres of psalms. The Song of Hezekiah could either be classified as an individual lament with a confession of hope of recovery, or a thanksgiving reflection upon the previous trials.[60] Neither option fits perfectly, but the clear past tense of the first line ("I said", v. 9) indicates that the Song is a retrospect, and the description of the singer's salvation (v. 17) is followed by a clear anticipation of further prosperity and a vow of praise. I therefore agree with those who follow Begrich, that this Song should be categorised as a song of thanksgiving.[61]

2.4 Text and Translation

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[58] Cf. 2.4.

[59] "Letter Prayer of King Sin-Iddinam to Nin-Isina" trans. William H. Hallo (*COS* 1.164:533-534).

[60] Bellinger, *Psalmody and Prophecy*, 79. Watts*, Psalm and Story*, 120-121.

[61] Begrich, *Der Psalm*, 17. So also Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 393, Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 404*,* Sweeney*, Isaiah 1-39,* 495; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (WBC 25; Waco: World Books, 1987), 58, among others.

Isaiah 38:9-20 offers several difficulties when it comes to establishing the best possible Hebrew text, and a coherent translation. In the following translation I have attempted to follow the MT as far as possible, but several adjustments are necessary in order to make the text comprehensible. All deviations from the MT are presented in footnotes. In amending the text I have attempted to bring forth a text which is a coherent whole, and which is in keeping with the language and conceptions known from the HB. I have tried to retain literary features of the Song such as colometry, parallelisms and overall structure, and also to be faithful to the evidence from the ancient versions. Among these I tend to prefer the Qumran text, as the LXX and other translations often show signs of trying to cope with a poorly understood vorlage.

Particular attention must be paid to vv. 16-17a, which Wildberger famously calls "an exegete's nightmare" because of their severely corrupted and incoherent text.[62] Some translations attempt to render the text as it stands, e.g. the NRSV reads v. 16 as: "O Lord, by these things people live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me to health and make me live!" But the "things people live by" has no referent within the text or context, and thus seems out of place. The JPS reads the same verse thus: "My Lord, for all that and despite it My life-breath is revived; You have restored me to health and revived me." While this makes more sense in the context, at least if v. 15 is to be read as an accusatory statement against God, the sudden change from accusation to praise without an interceding prayer is surprising. In v. 17a the NSRV and JPS both assume a causality between suffering and restoration, which seems foreign in HB lament and wisdom. They translate "Surely it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness" (NRSV) and "Truly, it was for my own good That I had such great bitterness" (JPS).[63] The LXX has a quite different take on this verse, rendering it: "εἵλου γάρ μου τὴν ψυχήν, ἵνα μὴ ἀπόληται" (For you chose my soul, so that it would not be destroyed).[64] The most notable recent advancement in working with these verses, comes from Michael L. Barré.

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[62] Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39,* 411.

[63] Begrich displays the possible pietistic influence behind such a translation when he quotes a hymn by Paul Gerhard in his exposition of this verse. Begrich, *Der Psalm*, 59.

[64] The LXX is less helpful in v. 16, as it shows clear signs of belief in resurrection, and should be considered as amended by Christian writers: "κύριε, περὶ αὐτῆς γὰρ ἀνηγγέλη σοι, καὶ ἐξήγειράς μου τὴν πνοήν, καὶ παρακληθεὶς ἔζησα. εἵλου γάρ μου τὴν ψυχήν, ἵνα μὴ ἀπόληται" (Lord, for concerning that [my soul/the sorrow of my soul/the taking away of the sorrows of my soul] they reported to you. And you revived my breath, and comforted I lived.)

Working with a strong loyalty to the poetic features of the text, he attempts to reconstruct the offending lines by tracing the developing corruption with the help of the versions and historical linguistics.[65] From this, Barré brings forwards the following reconstructed text: "אֲדֹנָי עלי הַמַּחַיה כָּל לב הַמַּחַיה רוחַ תַּחֲלִימני והַחַיני הַנחל שָׁלום מַר־לי מאד וְאַתָּה חָשַׂכְתָּ נַפְשִׁי מִשַּׁחַת כָּלִי כִּי הִשְׁלַכְתָּ אַחֲרֵי גֵוְךָ כָּל־חֲטָאָי",[66] which I follow in stead of the MT for my translation of these verses.

I have generally tried to give a concordant translation. When the Song uses multivalent Hebrew terms, I have allowed for English correlates which incorporates the same multivalency. All discussion is given in notes.

9
A writing[67] by Hezekiah, King of Judah,
at the time of his illness and his survival from illness.

10
I said to my self:[68]
In the middle of my days,[69] I must go,[70]

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[65] Michael L. Barré, "Restoring the "Lost" Prayer in the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:16-17b)," *JBL* 114 (1995): 385-399.

[66] Barré, "Restoring," 398-399.

[67] The Hebrew מִכְתָּב should be taken as a noun of the stem כתב (to write). No need to amend as suggested by BHS. See discussion of genre above.

[68] For אמר as "say to one self" or "think to one self", see HALOT, 66.

[69] Hays amends the vocalisation of דמי to דְמֵי, translating "on account of the guilt of my days". Hays, *Death*, 337. This suggestion brings the perspective of sin as the cause of death more strongly to the foreground than the rest of the song allows for. It also hinders parallelism with 10d. Barré amends the text by omitting the yod in בדמי as dittography, and assumes דמ as nominal form of דממ (to wail), translating it as an attendant circumstance: "in (the act of) mourning for my days". Barré, *Saved,* 57. Barré goes on to amend 10d to keep the cola parallel (see below). The amendment of 10d is less likely, and the MT should therefore be kept in both places. Beuken holds that the דמי can be translated in accordance with the more frequent meaning of quiet or rest if seen as referring to "the period in a person's life which is free of turbulence", while Blenkinsopp and Wildberger follow the theory that דמי is a hapax for half or middle and translate "in the prime of my life", cf. Ps 102:25. Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 380. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 479. Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 438. Whether one reads middle or quiet, the sense of an untimely death remains. I translate middle as this is more immediate to a modern reader.

[70] I read 10b-10d as a tricola of the rhythmic patter 3+3+2, structurally identical to that of v. 20.

within[71] the gates of Sheol I am made to miss[72]
the rest of my years.

11
I said:
I will not see Yah Yah,[73]
in the land of life.[74]
I will not look upon humans again,
with those who inhabit transitoriness.[75]

12
My life span[76] is pulled up and removed from me,
like a shepherd's tent.
My life[77] is shortened[78] like a woven cloth;

---

[71] Oswalt translates "I must go into the gates of Sheol", and thus retains a locative sense of בְּ in connection with the verb, but he ends up breaking the colometry of the tricola. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 679. I have chosen to keep the colometry, and the location of Sheol is thus connected with the loss of the rest of the singer's years.

[72] Barré, Blenkinsopp, Beuken and Hays all translate פֻּקַּדְתִּי as consigned, following the Akkadian *paqādu*, cf. HALOT, 957, "to be summoned". This is problematic, as it implies that the singer lives out the remainder of his years in Sheol. Barré therefore amends 10d in accordance with 1QIsa[a], to read וְמַר שְׁנוֹתָי, "bitterly weeping for my years". Barré, *The Lord Has Saved*, 57-59. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 479. Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 380. Hays, *Death*, 337. However, the pu'al is taken as "caused to miss", cf. the niphal "missed", "lacking", the sentence makes sense as it stands. So BDB, 823. I break the line here to keep the colometry, cf. above.

[73] There is no problem with amending this to יהוה as suggested by BHS, but it is unnecessary and the current form nicely mirrors the living who are described as חַי חַי in v. 19.

[74] Following Barré in translating הַחַיִּים "life", interpreting the plural feminin as an abstract, rather than "the living things", thus indicating that the parallelism of the bicolon is not synonymus, but rather complementary. Michael L. Barré, "'ṛṣ (h)ḥyym - 'The Land of the Living'?" *JSOT* 41 (1998), 37-59, 48.

[75] BHS's amendment of חָדֶל (cessation) to חֶלֶד (world). I find Barré's suggestion that LXX and Vg, which render "έκ τῆσ συγγεωείας μου" (from my kin) and "habitatorem quievit" (inhabitant of quiet), "misunderstood the term" improbable. הלד is, as Barré himself demonstrates, the lectio simplor. Barré, *The Lord*, 65-66. The MT is also supported by 1QIsa[a], and should be kept. The root חדל means to cease, and Dahood therefore took it to be a term for the netherworld. Mitchell Dahood, "חָדֶל, "Cessation" in Isaiah 38:11", *Bib* 52 (1971), 215-216, 215. Hays supports Dahood's position and suggests an A-B-B-A-pattern (dead-living-living-dead). Hays, *Death*, 340. But as the two verbs of sight are synonymous, an A-B-A-B is preferable here and חָדֶל should refer to the domain of the living. Beuken reads חָדֶל as a hapax from חדל, used in wordplay with חדל to signify the place where things will cease, "the land of transitoriness". Beuken, *Isaiah II,* 380. This is a good reading as it accounts well for the versions, and allows for the poetic parallelism in the A-B-A-pattern.

[76] Beuken and Childs translate "dwelling place" from akkadian *dūru*, "ring" or "city wall". Beuken, *Isaiah II,* 378. Childs, *Isaiah,* 279. So also HALOT 217. With Hays, *Death*, 338, however, I translate "lifespan", cf. HALOT 217-219. Barré, *Saved*, 78-80 and Watts, *Isaiah 28-66,* 54-5 translate "generation" cf. LXX: συγγεία, "kin" and Vg. Generatio "generation." I pose that the meaning is the same.

[77] I have transposed the phrase חַיַּי in order to make its function as object in both sentences more clear to the English reader.

[78] The exact translation of the hapax פקד is uncertain. This is probably a technical term within weaving, referring either to shortening, shrinking or rolling together. Barré, *Saved,* 95-105.

he cuts it[79] from the thrum.

From day to night you finish[80] me.
[13] I lie down[81] until morning.
Like a lion thus he crushes
all my bones.
(From day to night you finish me.)[82]

14
Like a swallow[83] thus I shall chirp;
like a dove I shall moan.
My eyes are weary [of looking][84] at the height of the Lord.[85]
I am oppressed.[86] Pledge security for me![87]

15
What shall I declare and say for myself,[88]
since[89] he has done [this][90]?
Will I limp[91] all my years

---

[79] Barré amends the suffix to 3msg, and lets it refer to the "woven cloth" in an asyndetic relative clause where the suffix is object to an inpersonal verb. This is unnecessarily complicated. With the same amendment, the verb may be read with God subject, and the suffix as object, referring back to "my life" which is object is both sentences.

[80] Here in the sense of "complete plans with," as in Ps 57:2 and Job 23:14, cf. HALOT 1535: "deliver up". This is clearly part of the accusatory context, and thus the destructive «you finish me» convays the right meaning.

[81] The verb here is correct, and need not be amended to שִׁוַּעְתִּי (I cry out), as suggested by BHS. The image of the birds in the following verse indicate that the singer cannot cry out, only moan or chirp (see further discussion below). With Beuken, I suggest that שוה be read in BDB's meaning II: "lie down" as in Ps 57:4, cf. BDB, 1001.

[82] BHS suggest that this line should be omitted as dittography. Omission is preferable as the colometry would then be kept. However, a break in colometry might also be indicative of the upcoming break between vv. 14 and 15. Barré, "Restoring," 386 n. 8.

[83] The exact type of bird is uncertain as most bird names are onomatopoetic in Biblical Hebrew. DBI, 92.

[84] I use [brackets] to indicate words that are implicit to the Hebrew, but helpful to the translation.

[85] Constructus with אֲדֹנָי , cf. LXX "ἐις τὸ ὕψος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πρὸς τὸν κύριον". The hight referred could be the temple, or it could refer to the epitaph of "the highest one" in v. 16.

[86] Beuken reads the 3fsg as abstract, Beuken, *Isaiah II,* 381*.* Barré amends to a nominal form, so that the direct translation reads "there is oppression for me". Barré, *Saved,* 130-131*.* This option parallels v. 17, and is preferable.

[87] Both terms in this line are technical legal terms, עשק signifying extortion, and ערב terming the action of securing the debt of another. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39,* 495.

[88] Continues the theme of the singer as unable to utter words, see exposition below.

[89] The וְ should be read as introducing a circumstantial clause. (BDB 253, meaning 2k).

[90] The verb has no direct object in the text but should be assumed to refer to the suffering described thus far.

[91] Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 382, keeps the MT, explaining the verb דדה with the help of its use in the Talmud to describe birds jumping with their wings bound so they cannot fly. For the interrogative, Barré, "Restoring," 398 and Watt, *Isaiah 34-66*, 54.

because of the bitterness of my life?[92]

16
Lord, the highest one, giving life[93] to every heart;
giving life to [every][94] spirit!
Restore my strength,[95] give me life, [17] make me inherit[96] peace!
The bitterness for me is exceeding.

And you attached[97] my life [to you],
[withholding it] from the pit of destruction.[98]
For you have cast behind your back
all my sins.

18
For Sheol does not thank you;
Death [does not] praise you.
Those going down to the grave[99] do not hope
for your faithfulness.

19
The living, the living, he praises you,
like I do today.
A father makes known to [his] sons
your faithfulness.

20

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[92] I translate נַפְשִׁי "my life" rather than "my soul" (NRSV, JPS) to keep with HB conceptions of life and death, cf. Ch 3.

[93] Taking הַמַּחַיה as hiphil participle masculine singular of חיה, cf. Isa 57:15. Barré*, Saved*, 158.

[94] Understood from the parallelism in the bicola. Barré, "Restoring," 391 n. 30.

[95] Taking חלם as "be strong", cf. Job 37:4. HALOT, 320.

[96] This phrase is that of Barré's reconstruction which has the least support in ancient versions, but his amendment makes more sense in the context than a causal connection between suffering and restoration as we have seen suggested above. The context provides no other indications of a view of suffering as beneficial for the singer.

[97] The MT is the more difficult reading and should be kept. As with חָדֶל in v. 11, חָשַׁקְתָּ is a wordplay that invokes both the verbal meaning of חשק (attach to) and the similar sounding חשׂך (withhold), so that attaching here comes to be the means of withholding. Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 382.

[98] The root שׁחת means "a dug pit" (cf. Ps 7:16; 93:13 and Prov 26:27), and often denotes the grave. It also holds the separate meaning "to spoil" or "destruct", as in Gen 6:12-13 where God destroys (שׁחת) the flesh that has been corrupted (שׁחת). When construct with בְּלִי, "destruction" or "defect" the destructive sense is emphasised.

[99] The term בוֹר can also be translated pit, cistern or well.

YHWH [acts] to my rescue;[100]
and we will play my stringed instruments all the days of our lives,
by[101] the house of YHWH.

2.5 Exposition

The perspective in the Song of Hezekiah is that of a person who has been close to death, but now looks back and reflects upon the experience and what was indeed at stake. With the translation given above, the Song should be considered as consisting of four main parts, with a turning point in v. 15. Here the tone changes from the descriptive "I said" to the interrogative "what shall I say?" At this point, we are in the most desperate point of the singer's experience, where words are lost, and all he has is a desperate prayer.[102] The prayer in turn, changes his situation, and his words return in the form of praise and thanksgiving. This movement - from lament, to silence, to praise - binds the Song together, and is parallel to another structural movement, from the description of what is lost - to the prayer to regain it - and finally to the description of what is gained as the singer is rescued.[103]

9: Superscription
- 10-14: Reflection upon past condition: "I said:"
  - 10-12: Past situation: What is death?
  - 13-14: Lament: Crushed to silence, yet praying
- 15-19: Refection upon changed condition: "What shall I say?"

[100] In line with Isa 37:35 ("I will defend this city to save it" (NRSV), directly "to its saving"), the לְ should be translated in terms of purpose, cf. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 606, article 36.2.3d. The sentence is thus nominal and should be read in the present tense. To retain the causal sense of the hiphil, I have chosen "acts" rather than "is" as the implicit copula, but the meaning remains the same. The other options are taking the infinitive as emphatic, or temporal, but these options ignore the parallel to Isa 37:35. Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 212, 610.

[101] The preposition עַל seems surprising in this context, as one might expect a locative בְּ. Barré points out that the preposition is repeated from 15d which has a similar structural function in ending a section of the song. He suggests that the preposition should be taken as referring to the courtyard before the temple where the people would gather, cf. 1 Kgs 8:64 (parr. 2 Chron 7:7). Barré, *The Lord*, 203. If this is the case one might as well translate the term "in".

[102] I use the term "he" to describe the singer because this is the gender of Hezekiah to whom the Song is attributed. However, the Song transcends the character of Hezekiah and as readers we should not limit ourselves to understanding the singer as male.

[103] Both of these movements are chiastic in nature, contrasting two different sounds and two different situations: Sound - Silence - Sound; Situation - Prayer - Situation.

15-17: Petition: Praying from silence, yet being heard

18-19: New situation: What is life?

20: Coda: "We will sing!"

The superscription places the Song in the narrative of Hezekiah's illness and recovery, as discussed above. It also repeats the key information that the proposed author of the Song was ill and survived that illness. Already it is clear, from the use of the חיה, meaning "to live" or "to survive" to describe Hezekiah's recovery, that we are encountering a reflection upon an experience of *nearly dying*.

The Song itself opens with the personal pronoun, first person singular, emphasising the individual nature of the Song. The perfective "I said" puts all that which follows in the past, regardless of tense.[104] The singer is looking back at his *previous* situation. The summary of the coda, on the other hand, reflects upon the *present* and the *future* situation. God, who is referred to as YHWH only in this verse, has become the singer's salvation, and the singer now encourages worship, playing instruments by the house of YHWH, presumably the temple.

The very first reflection on the past situation speaks of his proximity to death.[105] Going away "in the middle of my days" clearly point to an untimely death, especially as the singer goes on to lament the loss of his remaining years.[106] It is the prematurity of death which constitutes the greatest problem for the singer, not the fact of his impending death in and of itself. But the prospect of death brings about reflection upon what death really is, and this is what the next lines of the Song describe. Four metaphors are used to describe different, but similar aspects of dying: Departure, loss of relationships, loss of home and the cutting of woven cloth from the thrum. When dying is described by the singer as walking away, going to Sheol, this speaks to a transition from life to death which can be understood both physically and substantially. Sheol is the realm of the dead, here pictured concretely as a city with gates. It is clear that nothing from life continues in Sheol, neither his years nor his relationships: All his connections, both to

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[104] So also Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 121.

[105] Kaiser sees the suffering as *leading* to death, Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 404. I pose that the impending death *is* the suffering.

[106] The concern for the length of life is shared with the narrative. Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 121.

God and humans, are lost in death, and he will be isolated.[107] The metaphors of the shepherd's tent being removed and the cloth being cut from the thrum, show that the singer is not responsible for his own premature death. Rather, it is God who is the subject of these actions. This becomes clear in verses 12-13, where God is accused of finishing the singer, crushing his bones like a lion. These images are typical of lament,[108] and speak to the general experience of being oppressed by God, not to the particular circumstances of the singer's condition or impending death.

The fact that God is behind his suffering, is the real crisis for the singer, and also forms the turning point of the Song. The singer is weary and oppressed, and compares himself to birds chirping and moaning (צפף and הגה). The first of these verbs is used to describe the voices of ghosts in other parts of the book of Isaiah (8:19, 10:14, 29:4), and the other to describe growls or inadequate speech (8:19, 33:18, 59:3).[109] The bird metaphor continues with the question of whether or not he must limp (דדה) all his years. This term is used of birds having had their wings tied and thus being forced to jump along the ground.[110] In this deep crisis, the singer attempts to turn his attention to God, but words are hard to come by. Like the chirping birds, he does not know how to speak up in his own defence, and is left with a plea to God, who gives life to every heart and spirit, and who seems ready to take his life.

The plea, or prayer, reveals the singer's understanding of what he needs in order to live: "Restore me to strength, give me life, make me inherit peace!" This restoration, or healing, constitutes a sharp contrast to the suffering the singer has been through at God's hand, but it is this suffering that serves to motivate the prayer.[111] God should help because the singer's bitterness is too great for him to carry. And what he asks is true life, a peace (שָׁלוֹם) that is completeness and wholeness and health.[112]

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[107] ".... death means the end of association with the believers God". Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 485.

[108] Ps 22:14; 50:10, Job 10:16, Lam 3:4. Hays, *Death*, 341.

[109] Blenkinsopp, 485. Hays, *Death*, 341. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 60.

[110] Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 382.

[111] *Pace* Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 121, who claims God's only motivation is the preservation of a worshiper. Much like Job who accuses God of having forgotten the fragility of human life, and calls for God to remember so that he will help (Job 7:1ff.; 14; 30:24-26, cf. Ps 103:13-14), the singer here implores God to recognise that his bitterness is simply too much for him to bear.

[112] So also Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 60.

With the report of God holding the singer's life back from the pit of destruction, apparently a synonym for the realm of the dead to where he was heading, the singer informs us of this rescue entails: It is the act of forgiving all the singer's sins and re-establishing the relationship between God and the singer.[113] This is what is necessary for the new situation to spring forth, where the living singer does what the dead cannot: He praises God with his sons and the community of the living. This image of life as community and praise contrasts strongly with the image of death as isolation and silence, just as the house of YHWH contrasts with the realm of the dead.

The conclusion of v. 20 should therefore be read as reflecting the genuine meaning of life, which the singer now lives. Significantly, the verbs here change from singular to plural. No longer alone, and no longer silent, the singer now praises God in the temple, with his community.

2.6 Imagery

As we have seen in the exposition above, the contrast of life and death is key to the very structure of the Song of Hezekiah. A wealth of images are used in this, some concrete and others figurative. For the comparative analysis in ch. 3, these images need to be identified and clustered into more manageable groups. Life and death are semantic opposites, and looking at one complements our understanding of the other. I have therefore gathered the imagery in sentences that may be predicated to the sentence "death is" or "life is". Some of the Song's imagery speaks particularly of premature death and cannot be transferred to a general understanding of life and death. The table below should therefore be taken as showing the understanding of what "death is" in the particular situation of the Song. I have omitted the images of finishing and crushing in vv. 12-13, as I take these to speak to the experience of suffering at the hands of God rather than the understanding of life and death.[114]

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[113] Note how salvation is both an act of association (attachment) and forgiveness. Beuken, *Isaiah II*, 401.

[114] See also the translation notes for my interpretation of terms used.

	Death is...	Life is...
Time	- To lose the remainder of one's years in life (v. 11) and to have one's lifespan pulled up and cut short (v. 12). - To come to an end and to have the measured time of life shrunk (v. 12).	- Given by God (v. 16). - To be attached to (v. 17) and rescued by God (v. 20). - To play stringed instruments all the days of their lives (v. 20).
Place	- To go away (v. 11). - To be within the gates of Sheol (v. 11) and not in the land of life (v. 12). - To be in Sheol, to go down to the grave (18).	- To be in the land of life (v. 12). - To be withheld from the pit of destruction (v. 17). - To be in the house of YHWH (v. 20)
Condition	- To be separated from the living, and not to see other people or God (v. 12). - To be like birds: chirping (literally or figuratively) and limping (v. 14). - To not praise God or hope for his faithfulness (v. 18).	- To look upon other people and God (v. 12). - To have strength, life and peace (v. 16-17). - To praise God and make his faithfulness known to new generations (v. 19). - To play stringed instruments all the days of their lives in the house of YHWH (v. 20).

As shown by the table, the images cluster around three aspects of life and death. Firstly, the timing of death. This applies to the images focused on the prematurity of death as not being saved by YHWH, the references to loss of days and years, to things being cut short, and the lament over dying before ones time. I have also chosen to group the images of dying at the hand of God here, as they relate to the lament over an early death. The second cluster consists of images of location. Among the images that belong to this

group are those of dying as going away and changing location from the land of life to being inside the gates of Sheol. Also, the loss of being in the house of YHWH belongs here. The rest of the images all refer to the condition of the dead or dying. Here belong the images of death as a loss of strength, health and peace, the descriptions of how the dead cannot praise God, and the images of death as a separation from other humans and from God.

2.7 Summary

The Song of Hezekiah is a song that reflects the experience of surviving what seemed to be certain death. The Song's historical and theological significance is diverse, but the core of its poetic movement and its imagery is the movement from death to life. The song sends a strong message of what constitutes the meaning of life, and as this is portrayed in contrast to death, the Song offers a rich imagery of life and death. This imagery can be clustered into three groups, time, space and condition, as they concern different aspects of the death and life contrast. In the next chapter each of these groups will be discussed in the HB context, and in comparison to images of the same aspects of the life death contrast in the ANE. This will give a better understanding of the conceptions these images hold.

3. IMAGES OF DEATH

3.1 Introductory Remarks

In this chapter I will go through the thematic groups of the life and death imagery from the Song of Hezekiah, analysing the imagery in light of the conceptual world of the HB and comparing it with the conceptions of ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia. At the end of the chapter I will draw some conclusions as to what the comparison has added to the interpretation of the Song.

Before proceeding to the comparison, it is useful to present the relevant sources of each culture, and the conceptions of death that are prominent in them.[115] I will present the conceptions of death in the cultures with the help of four distinctions that Jan Assmann uses in the introduction to his *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*.[116] These distinctions ask how a culture understands different aspects of death, namely: 1) The horizon of accomplishment. To what extent does this horizon extend beyond death? Is death the ultimate deadline for rewards and punishments, or is the afterlife more important in this respect? 2) The relation between life and death. Are life and death interconnected, or are they two unconnected states that just happen to follow each other? In other words, to what extent does death influence life? 3) The contact between the world of the dead and the world of the living. To what extent is there communication or, in Assmann's words, "border traffic" between the world of the dead and that of the living? 4) The representation of death in culture. Was death accepted and presented as natural in the cultural images, or rejected and clothed in counterimages with a purpose of changing or conquering death?

3.2 Death in the Hebrew Bible

As the Hebrew Bible is both the cultural context of the origin of the Song of Hezekiah, as well as the literary framework within which it is still interpreted, I will treat the HB as I treat the other cultures in this introduction.[117]

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[115] I will not give a general introduction to the history or religious beliefs of the cultures discussed. For more on this, see Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East. C. 3000-3300 BC. Volume Two* (RHAW; London: Routledge, 1995).

[116] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 9-20.

[117] I assume the reader to be familiar with the textual history of the HB and its distinctive character as a canonical collection of texts.

While death is not a central topic in the HB, it is by no means taboo. Key texts on this theme include narratives describing the deaths, burials or losses of principal characters,[118] texts of law, prophecy and wisdom which speak of life and death in an ethical or didactic framework, often as part of an emphatic rhetoric,[119] and psalms where the threat of death is a prominent figure in both praise and lament. Unlike the later NT tradition,[120] the texts of the HB generally show a high acceptance of death as the natural end to life. Humans, like animals, are created from the dust of the earth (עָפָר אֲדָמָה, Gen 2:7), and made alive with the breath of life (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים, Gen 2:7).[121] While the origin of death is not addressed in the HB,[122] finitude is one of the things that separate humanity from God.[123] God is the sovereign ruler over life and death, free to revoke the spirit that was given and let the living being return to the dust from which it was made.[124] The dead "leave the divinely established order of creation and return to the chaotic situation they were taken from,"[125] and death can therefore be seen as a kind of anticreation.

The postmortem existence[126] in the underworld, Sheol (שְׁאוֹל), is described in terms of dust, darkness, and silence.[127] Death is equal for all, and there is no reward or

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[118] Sarah (Gen 23), Abraham (Gen 25:7-8), Rachel (Gen 35:8) and Jacob (Gen 49). Also note how kings are evaluated in burial notations, e.g. Ahaz (2 kgs 16:20, 2 Chr 28:27), Joshua (2 Kgs 23:30, 2 Chr 35:24).

[119] Emphatically, to illustrate the cosmic scales of a situation, power, or quality.

[120] In the NT overcoming death is a primary motivation for faith. Mark 9:1p, Joh 8:51, Acts 2:24, Rom 6:1-11, Hebr 2:14-15, Rev 20-21.

[121] Parallel to נֶפֶשׁ חַיִּים (soul/life force) in Gen 1:30 and רוּחַ חַיִּים (spirit/breath of life) in Gen 6:17.

[122] While Paul speaks of the Adam story as an etiology of death (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22), this has little root in the texts of Gen 2-3, which see humans as created mortal. So also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 387-388, and Sir Lloyd R. Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 38.

[123] Ps 103:14: "For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust." (NRSV). Cf. Job 7:7 and Job 38:4.

[124] Gen 3:19, Ps 104:29, Qoh 12:7.

[125] Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 44.

[126] I distinguish between the terms "postmortem existence" and "afterlife" as the latter indicates a lifelike existence, while the other is a neutral term for any existence after death.

[127] Domenic Rudman, "The Use of Water Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol" *ZAW* 113 (2001), 240-244, 241. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (BeO; Roma: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 85-98.

punishment beyond the grave.[128] This is reflected in several wisdom texts,[129] and in Isa 14:3-23, where the king of Babylon is taunted with his prospects in death. The mighty king will become just as weak as all the others who dwell in the underworld, covered by worms and maggots, all power and grandeur lost. As accomplishments are reserved for life, the goal of the people of the HB is a long and happy life, and what we might call a "good death", at a good old age (בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן, like Abraham in Gen 25:8) satisfied and full of days (שְׂבַע יָמִים, like David in 1 Chr 23:1 and Job in Job 42:17).[130] Since God is perceived as Lord over life and death, a long life is typically seen as a blessing or reward for a God-fearing life, and premature death as divine punishment.[131]

The relation between life and death is somewhat fluid in the HB, and may texts portray death as a force which permeates life. In Ps 88 the singer describes himself as if he were already dead, while obviously still alive. This seeming contradiction is better understood if we look at life and death, not as two sides of a coin, but as opposing ends of a scale. They are not mutually exclusive; rather, you can be closer to life or closer to death. In this sense, death represents an antipower of God's creation,[132] often personified as a force which threatens life.[133] This may be understood figuratively, with death representing any form of destruction, or as an allusion to (or inheritance of) the chthonic deities of neighbouring peoples.[134] In these texts, death is clearly an enemy of the living and their God. Despite the acceptance of death as the natural end of life, death is not a friend.[135]

The understanding of death as permeating life, does not represent boarder traffic in Assman's scheme of distinctions. Death as a force is not equal to *the dead*, who are

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[128] A notable exception is Dan 12, where resurrection with judgment and reward is clearly portrayed. As my criteria for texts treated are those which are *representative* of the textual corpus, I will not treat these here.

[129] Qoh 1:4; 2:4, Job 21:24-26.

[130] Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God of the Living*, 385.

[131] In 2 Chron 32:24-26 Hezekiah's illness is interpreted as a punishment which is lifted due to displays of piety. The Book of Job debates the validity of this notion.

[132] ""Death," then, tends to be used to describe the various conditions which detract from the full potential which Yahweh intended for his creatures;" Baily, *Biblical Perspectives*, 40.

[133] Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 99.

[134] Notably Mot in the Ugaritic pantheon.

[135] *Pace* Johnston, *Shades,* 27, who lists "friend" among the descriptions of death in the HB. In all his examples sleep stands for a *neutral* state that ends suffering, not a *positive* or friendly state.

perceived as being passive, silent and weak in Sheol, cut off from both God and the living. The dead are sometimes referred to as rephaim (רְפָאִים), "shades" (JPS, NRSV) or "spirits of the dead" (NIV). The term probably shares etymology with the *rpum* of Ugaritt, deriving from the root רפא ("to heal"). Such an etymology suggests a past where the dead were considered powerful to aid the living, presumably as semi-divine ancestral patrons.[136] This conception is no longer present in the text of the HB as we know it, except perhaps in the matter of necromancy,[137] which is deemed unsuitable as it diverts from the trust in God, and disturbs the dead. This opposition to contact with the dead is reflected in the impurity connected with touching the dead (Num 19:11).[138] These prohibitions against contact with the dead, influence how death is portrayed in this culture. The dead are not addressed, nor are they a subject of concern. Death is primarily presented as the inevitable human predicament, a cause for mourning and crying out to God, yet a phenomenon outside the reach of human influence.

3.3 Death in Ancient Egypt

Egypt has a long, comprehensive, and well-documented history of mortuary activity, with evidence reaching as far back as the fourth millennium BCE.[139] Much of our information comes from archaeological evidence, but in terms of texts we have historical or commemorative inscriptions, hymns to royalty and gods, poems, narratives, didactic literature, and ritual spells used in the mortuary cult.[140] As in other cultures, the material largely represents the practises of the elite.[141] When it comes to death, some conceptions vary over time and between cult centres, while others stretch across long periods. In the following, I will focus on the latter. Of particular interest to us is the Book of Going Forth by Day (or Book of the Dead), which is a development of the earlier Coffin

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[136] Hays, *Death*, 168. Johnston, *Shades*, 142. Another exception may be the action of feeding the dead, which is restricted (Deut 26:14), but not prohibited. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup 123; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 130.

[137] Note the prohibitions against this (Deut 18:10f, Is 8:19) and the narrative of 1 Sam 28.

[138] Tromp notes that this was not always so (cf. Josef kissing the corpse of his father, Gen 50:1), and consideres whether the uncleanliness of the dead may have been a tool to combat necromancy. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 207-209.

[139] John H. Taylor, *Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 13.

[140] Janet Richards, *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 25.

[141] Richards, *Society and Death,* 66. Such overrepresentation is also relevant in the HB and Mesopotamia as writing as such was limited to a small elite group, though the distance between elite and populus was less extreme.

Texts, and came to be a canonical collection of spells for the mortuary cult from the time of the New Kingdom to the 26th Dynasty in the Late Period.[142] In tombs from the New Kingdom and later, one also finds so-called "Books of the Netherworld,"[143] which describe the journey the deceased is to embark on.[144] One other group of texts stands out in their portrayal of death, namely sceptical or pessimistic texts that question the validity of the established conceptions of other texts and traditions.[145]

Assmann interprets Egyptian culture as a culture that feared death exceedingly, and sees the mortuary culture as counterimages aimed at *overcoming* death.[146] Death was not accepted, and the mortuary cult aimed at correcting its effects, so that the deceased could "enjoy eternal life in the Duat, the afterlife inhabited by gods and the dead."[147] This was largely envisioned through two major myths of restoration, that of the sun god, Re, who was renewed every night during his journey through the underworld, and that of the god Osiris, who, after having been slain by his brother, was restored by his wife so that he could claim the throne of the underworld. Following the pattern of Osiris, the deceased had to be physically and socially restored before they could continue their postmortem existence. Osiris' body was cut up, and his wife Isis searched the land for him, and put him back together. This is mirrored in the ancient Egyptian embalming process, where the limbs were reconnected with each other when the embalming fluid replaced the blood, and took over its connective role.[148] Spells name all the parts of the body, and at the end of the process, the preserved heart is returned to the body cavity, symbolising the return of a person's inner being to the body, as well as its biological continuity.[149]

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[142] Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7, 15.

[143] These "books" were painted on the walls of the tomb, illustrated with elaborate wallpaintings. This makes them poorly suited for quotations, and I will therefore limit my self to referring the content.

[144] Assmann suggests that the use of these books in the mortuary cult was a secondary setting, and that their true *Sitz-im-Leben* was the sun cult. Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 394. This theory adds to, rather than defers from, their role in understanding death in ancient Egypt.

[145] It is in the nature of these texts to deviate from what is representative, but their voice and argument nonetheless inform our understanding of Egyptian conceptions.

[146] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 17-19.

[147] Kaisa Szpakowska, "Religion in Society: Pharaonic" in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* (ed. Alan B. Lloyd; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1:524.

[148] The blood is seen as binding the limbs together, making them *alive*. Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 28.

[149] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 30.

The social connectedness of the deceased must also be restored. This was done through the mourning over the loss the deceased, and through son's reestablishment of the father-son relationship. When the father continued to guide the son, and the son kept the name of the father alive by being guided by it, this provided life for both. This interconnectedness is the very essence of social life,[150] and the tomb is the site where this connection continued after death. The tomb provided an eternal home for the deceased where family members could visit and provide offerings, and in some cases bring letters to the deceased, asking for help and guidance.[151] This "border traffic" was strictly regulated and managed with the help of set rituals, so as to keep the living safe from unfriendly ghosts of the dead.[152]

In entering the grave, the deceased was imagined to have descended into the underworld, [153]where the deceased was to be resurrected like Osiris. This was not an entrance into death, but rather an exit into new life, as in the Book of Going Forth by Day: "Grant that this Osiris Ani may come forth among those multitudes which are outside; and let him be established like a dweller […] And behold Osiris, Osiris Ani, shall come forth by day to do whatever he pleaseth upon the earth among the living ones."[154] The underworld, called the Duat, was not an considered a safe place, as spells are needed to ensure the safety of ones heart,[155] of passage over the watery abyss, [156] and to avoid being burned by fire.[157] The goal was to reach the hall of Osiris, where the deceased would be judged worthy or unworthy of entry. This scene of judgement is portrayed in spell 125 of the Book of Going Forth by Day. Here the deceased had to confess his or her innocence while his or her heart was weighed against a feather of *maat*, the Egyptian concept of truth and justice that guided gods and humans alike. The

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[150] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 56.

[151] Richards, *Society and Death*, 62.

[152] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 15.

[153] Henk Milde, ""Going out into the Day" Ancient Egyptian Beiliefs and Practices concerning Death" in *Hidden Futures: Death and Immortality in Acient Egypt, Anatolia, the Classical, Biblical ans Arab-Islamic World* (ed. J. M. Bremer, Th. P. J. van den Hout, R. Peters; Amsterdam: Amsterdan University Press, 1994), 15-35, 21.

[154] "Chapter II" (Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* [2nd ed.; London: Ruthledge & Keagan Paul, 1974], 1:49-50). The term "Osiris Ani" refers to the deceased.

[155] "Chapter XXIXa" (Budge, *Book of the Dead*, 2:144).

[156] "Chapter IV" (Budge, *Book of the Dead*, 1:52).

[157] "Chapter LXIIIa" (Budge, *Book of the Dead*, 2:209).

negative confessions of spell 125 mirror the instructions given in didactic literature and idealised in autobiographical tomb inscriptions,[158] underlining the close connection between acts in the antemortem life and consequences in the postmortem.[159] The stakes were high: If the deceased was found to be unrighteous, his or her heart would be devoured by the monster Ammut and the person would be lost forever. But if the deceased was found worthy, he or she could enter the realm of Osiris, and join in the afterlife activities of the gods, living and labouring in the Fields of Offerings.

The second metaphor of postmortem restoration, the renewal of Re in the morning sunrise, may be seen as a continuation of the journey through the underworld.[160] In the Book of Going Forth by Day, the deceased moves to the Field of Rushes, which is the location of the gate through which "the god Rā doth emerge when he setteth out upon his journey over the pillars of Shu towards the door of the lord of the East, wherefrom Rā cometh forth."[161] The image of rising with Re, who journeys across the sky in his bark during the day, and through the underworld at night, became the dominant image in the later books of the netherworld. Knowledge of this journey, and of the service to the sun god, came to hold significant value as it enabled the deceased not only to continue life in the underworld, but to rise with the sun as an immortal priest in the service of Re.[162]

All this indicate that the very purpose of *life* was to ensure, not only a positive afterlife, but an eventual *resurrection*. The horizon of accomplishment belongs to the postmortem sphere. So much is focused on combating death, preparing one's own death, caring for deceased family members, and gaining esoteric knowledge, that death becomes a major part of life.

3.4 Death in Ancient Mesopotamia

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[158] Miriam Lichtheim, "From the Book of the Dead" in *Ancient Egyptian Literature II* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2006; Kindle edition), n.p.

[159] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 382.

[160] Milde, "Going out into the Day", 26. These are most likely two separate conceptions which have been merged in texts and picture.

[161] "Chapter CXLIX" (Budge, *Book of the Dead*, 3:487). Ra and Re are two names for the same god.

[162] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 395.

Ancient Mesopotamia had no authoritative collection of texts, nor an excessive mortuary cult. Understanding death here, is therefore a matter of piecing together elements from the textual inheritance of the region.[163] Our primary textual sources are clay tablets found in or near temples, private homes, or ancient libraries such as that of King Assurbanipal in Nineveh which was destroyed in 612 BCE.[164] Many texts are found in different versions, at different times, and at different sites.[165] As some versions have been badly damaged, and some have variations that make it impossible to grasp the full story, it is necessary to read different versions together to gain the full meaning of a text.[166] When it comes to death, poetic prayers, laments and hymns formulate the human experience, and so does epics and myths. Didactic and ritual texts inform us of thought and behaviour, and historical writing can display value judgments on good and bad deaths.[167]

The most important text for studying death in ancient Mesopotamia is Gilgamesh. This composite hero epic tells the story of Gilgamesh, praised king of Uruk, who is unlike any other. The gods fashion a friend for him, Enkidu, and the two go off on great adventures, defying the gods. In punishment for slaying the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu is killed. Filled with grief, Gilgamesh begins to fear his own death, and goes of in a journey that Jacobsen as either a *flight from death*, or a *quest for immortality*.[168] Having first sought immortality in the fame of his spectacular deeds, Gilgamesh now looks for a way to defy nature and live forever. On his way he meets an alewife, who explains to him that "When the gods created mankind, They appointed death for mankind, Kept eternal life in their own hands."[169] She thus rebuts against Gilgamesh's plans, advising him to enjoy life while he can in stead. Gilgamesh fails to attain immortality, and in the end, the only

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[163] Jarrold S. Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia" in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (ed. Hiroshi Obayashi; CSR 33; New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 20.

[164] Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3rd ed; Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), 8-9.

[165] Most relevant in this context is Gilgamesh, which exists in many versions. In the following I will distinguish between the Standard Babylonian Version (SBV) and the Old Babylonian Version (OBV) as in Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgames, and Others* (2nd ed.; OWC; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; repr. 2008), 136.

[166] Dalley, *Myths*, XVI.

[167] For a survay of sources and types, see Foster, *Before the Muses,* 8-10, 37-44.

[168] Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 216.

[169] "Gilgamesh, OBV" (Dalley, *Myths,* 150).

things left standing, are the walls of Uruk, which he built , and which are praised for their beauty and endurance in both the beginning and the end of the epic, as an inclusio of the whole epic.[170] This is what Cooper calls "metaphorical immortality", the remembrance and legacy of accomplishments in life,[171] a clear indication that the horizon of accomplishment belongs to life, not to death.

Scholars agree that natural death for all of humankind is likely established for humans at the end of Atrahasis, the Mesopotamian creation and flood story, although the section in question has a lacuna, which obscures the meaning.[172] In the beginning of the epic, humans are created from clay mixed with the blood and ghost (*eṭemmu*) of a god. Not yet subject to natural death, they overpopulate the world making a lot of noise that disturbs the gods.[173] The gods therefore decide to eradicate humankind though drought and flood. When Atrahsis and his kind survive, the gods mellow, and decide to regulate the population through natural death. As humans are created from the blood and ghost of immortal gods, however, the dead do not simply disappear. As Yamauchi neatly sums up: "In death, the body (*pagru*) became a corpse (*shalamtu*) and the person gave up his breath (*zaîqu*) and became a ghost (*eṭemmu*)."[174] The term *eṭemmu* is only used of humans when dead, and should therefore not be mistaken for an immortal soul. Rather, death is to be understood as *transformation* rather than *continuation*; what continues after death is not the same as what was before. In this respect the gap between life and death is significant.

The underworld is often spoken of in euphemism, rather than by its proper names: Arullû, dIrkalla or Ganzer.[175] In addition to ghosts, demons and gods also reside in the underworld. While the gods seem bound to their throne,[176] demons and ghosts may

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[170] Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 208. This inclusio is particular to the SBV text.

[171] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind", 22.

[172] "Atrahasis" (Dalley, *Myths,* 34). So Dalley, *Myths*, 8; Foster, *Before the Muses*, 253; Lambert, "Theology of Death" in *Death in Mesopotamia: Papers Read at the XXVIe Recontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. Bendt Alster; Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology vol. 8; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 53-66, 58.

[173] W. G. Lambert, "Theology of Death", 58.

[174] Edwin Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and Afterlife in the Ancient Near East" in *Life in the Face of Death* (ed. R. N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 21-50, 30.

[175] Hays, *Death*, 48. See 3.6 for more details.

[176] In "Nergal and Ereshkigal" (Dalley, *Myths,* 165), the gods are dependent on messengers and special permissions to move between heaven and earth.

ascend to the earth to haunt or aid the living. This "border traffic" is controlled by rituals and incantations, and in the case of ghosts by keeping them well provided for. It was the duty of the heir to ensure that the deceased was properly buried, with communal mourning and a proper grave.[177] Non-burial was considered a curse, and often used as a threat in treaties and a weapon in war.[178] After burial the ghost needed to be cared for, and this was done through the *kipsu* rite. This rite was repeated at regular intervals, and functioned as a meal that provided the ghost with food and water, both inaccessible in the underworld, as well as maintaining the deceased's relation to the family.[179] When the ghost was well cared for, one could not only count on it refraining from haunting the living, one could also count on its help, interceding with the gods and guiding the living through necromancy.[180] Thus the relationship between the dead and the living was one of mutual dependence and gain.[181]

Unlike ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia had no elaborate counterworld to offset the negative aspects of death. The impression left by the texts, is that death is an unavoidable part of being human. The imagery used to describe death is direct and takes its referents in the concrete experience of decaying bodies and underground graves, and shows a very negative view of death. This is countered only through being remembered and cared for in death, through the *kipsu* rite, and through lasting deeds like Gilgamesh's walls of Uruk. Another, likely parallel, approach is that of the alewife Siduru, who advices Gilgamesh: "[…] let your stomach be full, Day and night enjoy yourself in every way, […] Appreciate the child who holds your hand, Let your wife enjoy herself in your lap."[182]

3.5 Comparison: Time

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[177] Hays, *Death*, 41.

[178] "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon" (trans. Albrecht Goetze, *An Anthology*, 221): "May Ninurta […] fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures to feed upon. […] May Zarpanitu […] eradicate your offspring and descendants from the land."

[179] Aaron Skait, "The Ancestor Cult and Succession in Mesopotamia" in *Death in Mesopotamia: Papers Read at the XXVI[e] Recontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. Bendt Alster; Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology vol. 8; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 123-128, 123.

[180] Cooper notes that this helps explain the ambivalent feelings towards the dead. Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind", 29.

[181] Skait, "The Ancestor Cult and Succession in Mesopotamia", 127.

[182] "Gilhamesh OBV" (Dalley, *Myths,* 150).

Time is the very first thing the singer of the Song of Hezekiah addresses. In opening tricolon (10b-d), the singer laments that he must go away in the middle of his days (בִּדְמִי יָמַי), and that he will be forced to miss (פקד) the rest of his years (יֶתֶר שְׁנוֹתָי). The tricolon is chiastic with the gates of Sheol at its centre, signifying the passage from life to death. In death, the singer loses the remainder of what he seems to perceive as a set number of days and years in life, as his death comes sooner than expected.[183] In the Hebrew Bible, days and years signify the passage of time in a variety of contexts. Most frequently, however, the terms are used in formulas summing up a person's lifespan: "Thus all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred thirty years; and he died." (Gen 5:5 NRSV).[184] These notations are always given in past tense, which reflects that the number of days are not predetermined. The measure of what is too soon to die, is therefore not the number of years, but the things that constitutes a full life: Childhood, youth, maturity, and old age.[185] A premature death, wether from war, famine, illness or murder, is always a break from the expected order of things, and often seen as a punishment from God (2 Sam 12:14, Jer 11:22; Prov 2:18, cf. Ezek 4:5). This may explain the need for forgiveness in the Song's v. 17.

Premature death is a concern across the ANE. Even the man who argues for the great value of the afterlife in the Egyptian Dispute between a Man and his *Ba*, shows concern for those who die young. Of a family, eaten by a crocodile, he says: "I do not weep for that mother, for whom there is no return from the West [...] I grieve for her children broken in the egg, who have seen the face of the crocodile before they have lived."[186] A long and full life, having children and reaching old age, is seen as a blessing and clearly valued. Immortality - living forever - on the other hand, is viewed differently in the cultures. In Egypt, a happy afterlife is seen as gaining immortality. This is reflected in the practice of preserving the body and building tombs and mortuary chapels that could last forever. Immortality can also be gained by producing works, especially as a scribe, that

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[183] Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39*, 457.

[184] Note that the duration of life decreases significantly after the flood story. Possibly Gen 4:16 can be seen as God imposing new limit to the human life

[185] J. Gordon Harris, "Old Age" (*ABD* V:11).

[186] "The Dispute Between a Man and his *Ba*" transl. Nili Shupak *COS* 3.146:321-325, 323. In this text, the man argues with his *ba*, the personality aspect of his soul, about whether life or death is preferable.

will last beyond a person's death.[187] In Mesopotamia, immortality in life is clearly rejected in the Gilgamesh epic.[188] Even through immense effort, Gilgamesh is unable to attain immortality. As the Ut-napishtim[189] says: "[Death is inevitable (?)] at some time, both for Gilgamesh and for a fool." Similarly, there is no escape from death for anyone in the HB,[190] and the image of playing instruments "all the days of our lives" (v. 20) must be taken as all the days before death. While death may be inevitable, the manner of dying, matters. In all the tree cultures, a peaceful death at an old age was considered a blessing. In the word of an Egyptian prayer, the ideal was: "A good burial after revered old age, After old age has come."[191]

The singer's approaching death is far from peaceful, as we see in the similes of v. 12. Here, the singer speaks of his lifespan (דּוֹר) being pulled up and removed from him, like a shepherd's tent. The implicit reference to the transient life of nomad shepherds, evokes the transience of life. The verbs נסע (pulled up) and גלה (removed) both indicate force, and the violent removal of the tent against the owner's wishes.[192] The second simile emphasises and clarifies the contents of the first.[193] Whereas the simile of the tent connotes a transience of moving on to the next camp, the simile of the woven cloth speaks clearly of a final end. Just as the cloth will not be attached to the thrum again, the tent will never be erected again. Unlike the Egyptians who viewed death as the potential beginning of a new life, death is here the final end of life. The singer's only hope is divine rescue *before* he dies.

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[187] "The Immortality of Writers" (Lichtheim, *AEL II,* n.p.):"Man decays, his corpse is dust, All his kin have perished; But a book makes him remembered."

[188] When texts uses expressions like "I shall grant you many days, endless life [...] long days, endless years" these should be therefore understood as hyperbe. "The Oracles concerning Esarhaddon" (transl. Robert D. Biggs, in Pritchard, *Antology*, 398-399).

[189] The hero of the Mesopotamian flood story, exceptionally made immoral by the gods as a reward.

[190] Enoch and Elijah are clearly exceptions and their fate is unaccesible to anyone else.

[191] "The Prayers of Paheri in his Tomb at El-Kab" (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literarure II*, n.p.).

[192] A similar expression if found in Job 4:21: "Their tent-cord is plucked up (נסע) within them, and they die devoid of wisdom." (NRSV). Note how the violent nature of death is here combined with a reflection upon death as cancelling out wisdom gained in life.

[193] This by means of diaphor: The two similes have the same tenor (the singer's lifespan/life), while the vehicles are different. Their juxtaposition allows the reader to modify the meaning of both through the connotations each simile raises. J. Cheryl Exum, "Extended Simile and Poetic Technique in Isaiah," in *Beyond Form Criticism* (ed. Paul R. House; SBTS 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 349-372, 356.

In the Song of Hezekiah, God clearly has influence over the duration of a human life, as God is able to effect such a rescue (v. 16-17; 20). The same is evident in the HB conception that of God as the ruler over life and death, as in 1 Sam 2:6 "The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up." (NRSV). A similar power must be understood among Mesopotamian gods, as the duration of life is a common topic in prayers and inscriptions.[194]

3.6 Comparison: Place

The first indication that death entails a locative change in the Song of Hezekiah, is the use of the verb הלך (to walk, go) in v. 10. This is followed by the locative prepositions בְּ (within, in) in vv. 10 and 11, respectively modifying the gates of Sheol and the land of the living. Verbs of motion are also used in vv. 17 and 18, namely קשח (to attach, here: in order to withhold from) and ירד (to go down, descend), here in connection with explicit locations, namely שַׁחַת בְּלִי (pit of destruction) and בוֹר (pit, grave). This tells us that death is imagined as a transition from the land of the living to Sheol, the pit of destruction, and the grave.

The aspect of locative change in death is present in both Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Mesopotamia, the ghost of the deceased is thought to journey across the river Hubur, and pass several gatekeepers, before reaching the underworld abode of the dead, and more figuratively, death is seen something that takes people away: "It [death] has driven me out of my house […] separated me from my husband [...] set my feet into my terrain-of-no-return."[195] In Egypt the dead are said to "go west,"[196] symbolically relevant as the horizon of the setting sun and the place of the barren desert, and also the preferred area for burial grounds.[197] In the Books of the Netherworld, the afterlife is itself a journey where the deceased aims to join the sun god on his bark and be reborn with the morning

[194] A 10th century Egyptian inscription, reads: "May I see the children of their children, While I remain on earth!" "Statue Inscription of Djedkhonsefankh" (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2006; Kindle edition), n.p.). Cf. 6th century Mesopotamian text, "Nebuchadnezzar II to Marduk" (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 843): "May I reach old age and enjoy venerable years therein."

[195] "An Assyrian Elegy" trans. William W. Hallo (*COS* 1.199:421).

[196] "The Prayers of Paheri in his Tomb at El-Kab" (Lichtheim, *AEL II*, n.p.): "You take your place in the lord-of-life, You come to the earth in the tomb of the west." The term "lord-of-life" refers to the coffin.

[197] Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife", 22.

sun.[198] In the HB, no such journey is witnessed, and it is therefore possible that the verbs of motion should be read as signifying *departure* rather than *journey*. In the Song, death is departure from the land of life (אֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים),[199] and entails a loss of relation to both God and fellow humans. As Barré has demonstrated, "land of life" is a complex term, carrying further nuances than merely the world of human life.[200] If death represents the antipower of God's creation, then the power of God can be equated with the power of life. This power is particularly present in the places where God's presence dwells: In the Jerusalem temple and, by extension, the promised land.[201] In the contrast between the beginning and end of the Song, the contrast between losing the land of life in death (vv. 10-11) and gaining a place in the house of YHWH in life (בֵּית יהוה, v. 20) emerges. It is in the temple the singer sees God, the giver of life (הַמַּחֲיֵה, v. 16), together with those who inhabit transitoriness (יוֹשְׁבֵי חָדֶל, v. 11), that is to say, the living.

This abstract sense of departure as loss of life, does not rule out a locative understanding of going to Sheol. שְׁאוֹל is the most common term for the underworld in the HB, and while its etymology is uncertain,[202] its use in context and parallelism reveals much of what the term entails. It the Song, is equal to שַׁחַת בְּלִי (pit of destruction) and בוֹר (pit, grave), as the place where the singer is delivered from.[203] According to Tromp, the pit of destruction refers to the fate of the body in the tomb.[204] בוֹר is primarily used of cisterns for collecting rain water, but may also be used of a dungeon and of the underworld.[205] The allusions, however, are clear: The pit is an underground hole,[206] where one is trapped and threatened by water. The locational aspects of Sheol are,

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[198] Milde, "Going out into the Day, 34.

[199] The expression can therefore not refer to an afterlife, at least not in this context.

[200] Barré, "The Land of the Living?", 37-59.

[201] Barré mentions Ps 142:6 (promised land), Ps 27:13; 52:7; 56:14, Isa 38:11 and Isa 53:8 (temple). Barré, "'The Land of the Living'?".

[202] Neither of the two most commonly suggested roots, שאל ("to ask", presuming the practice of necromancy) and שאה ("to lie desolate", presuming a shadowy non-life), has generated any consensus. Hays, *Death*, 176. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 78.

[203] R. Laird Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts," *BETS* 4 (1961), 129-135, 133.

[204] Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 70.

[205] Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 67.

[206] Baily notes that the necromancer might dig a hole for the spirit of the dead to ascend from. Baily, *Perspectives*, 32.

across the HB, linked to the darkness under the earth where nothing lives, and everything decays.[207] Some aspects of this imagery have parallels in Mesopotamia, though here the descriptions are more vivid. Enkidu fears going down to the "dark house," where "those who enter cannot leave," and the residents "are deprived of light, Where dust is their food, and clay their bread [...] and they see no light"[208] In another text, which has been added to the Gilgamesh SBV, Enkidu's ghost ascends and speaks to Gilgamesh. He says that the dead "[sit is a crevice (?)] full of dust" where bread and water are scarce.[209] These images of dust and clay, all serve as euphemisms for death, as when Gilgamesh speaks of Enkidu's illness and death, saying: "My friend whom I love has turned to clay."[210]

This gloominess is less present in Egyptian descriptions of the underworld, though not absent: ""O, Atum, what does it mean that I go to the desert, the Land of Silence, which has no water, has no air, and which is greatly deep, dark, and lacking?" "Life in it is contentment." "But there is no sexual pleasure in it." "It is in exchange for water and air and sexual pleasure that I have given you spiritual blessedness, contentment in exchange for bread and beer" - so says Atum."[211] On the whole, however, the Egyptian underworld is much more like the world of the living, based on the Egyptian agricultural environment near the river Nile.[212] The Duat, while cosmographically located under the earth, is more a mirror of, or a counterworld to, our own. In Hebrew and Mesopotamian cosmography, on the other hand, the world is classically seen as a "three tier cosmos": The heavens above,[213] the earth in the middle and the underworld below are all encircled by the primordial waters of chaos.[214] This model helps explain the frequent

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[207] Barré goes so far as to translate שַׁחַת בְּלִי "the pit of annihilation", Barré, *The Lord*, 170. This is an exaggeration of the negative view of death in the HB as death does not equal annihilation. So also Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 194-195.

[208] "Gilgamesh, SBV" (Dalley, *Myths,* 89). Cf. "Decent of Ishtar" (Dalley, *Myths*, 155) for a parallel description.

[209] "Gilgamesh SBV" (Dalley, *Myths*, 124).

[210] "Gilgamesh, SBV" (Dalley, *Myths,* 101).

[211] "Book of Dead 175" trans. Robert K. Ritner (*COS* 1.18:28).

[212] This is largely seen in the illustrations that accompany the literature. For an example, see Milde, "Going out into the Day, 24, fig. 5.

[213] As the throne of the Gods. J. Edward Wright, "Biblical Versus Israelite Images of the Heavenly Realm" *JSOT* 93, 59-75, 72.

[214] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 176.

link of Sheol to these waters,[215] though this connection also has a clear figurative sense, namely the image of death as anticreation and destruction.[216] This evokes the second meaning of בּוֹר, as that of a cistern collecting this destructive water.

The final meaning of בּוֹר, that of dungeon, is evoked when the Song describes Sheol with gates (שַׁעֲרֵי). In the HB the closest parallel expression is "gates of death" (שַׁעֲרֵי מָוֶת), which is used in Ps 9:14 for the place from whence the singer is rescued, and in Ps 107:18 of the place the sinful draw near to. As a feature of cities or palaces, gates are predominantly used to keep intruders out, and as an indication of strength.[217] In coherence with other HB passages where Sheol or death is seen as an imprisoning power (2 Sam 22:5-6, Ps 116:3, Jonah 2:7),[218] we should understand these gates primarily as a barrier dividing the living and the dead, keeping the living enclosed. This is highly analogous to The Decent of Ishtar, where the underworld is surrounded by seven walls that keep the dead in and the living out.[219] For each gate Ishtar passes through, she has to leave behind a piece of clothing or jewellery, leaving her naked and symbolically vulnerable when she arrives. Ishtar is unable to return without help from other gods who fashion a replacement for her, and the Mesopotamian underworld is frequently named as the "land of no return", Kurungi.[220] While this name is also used in Egypt, the gatekeepers we hear of there have a different function. They are hindrances for those seeking entry into the afterlife, and must be correctly named by the deceased in order to prove that he or she is worthy of entrance.[221] This slightly different dynamic is not surprising, as the Egyptians strived for entrance into the afterlife, and had a clear notion of what was to be gained in it.

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[215] E.g. Ezek 31:15, Jonah 2:2-3, and Enuma Elish.

[216] Rudman, "Water Imagery," 244.

[217] "Solid city walls were the most costly," Ze'ev Herzog, "Cities", *ABD* 1:1031-1043, 1038. Cf. the importance of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in Neh 4 and the praise of the walls of Uruk in Gilgamesh. The city gate is also the place of judgment and execution (Deut 22:24) and where the wise convene (Prov 8:3).

[218] Cf. also Job 38:10 where God restricts the primordeal ocean with bars and doors.

[219] The living are not allowed in the underworld, as seen in "The Underworld Vision of An Assyrian Prince" where the prince is nearly sentenced to death for his trespass. Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead* (NovTSup XCIII; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 12.

[220] "Descent of Ishtar" (Dalley, *Myths*, 155).

[221] "Book of the Dead 125", trans. Robert K. Ritner (*COS* 2.12:63): ""I shall not let you enter by me," so says the door-posts of this portal, "unless you have said my name.""

3.7 Comparison: Condition

In the analysis above, I have taken the bird imagery of chirping (צפף), moaning (הגה) and limping (דדה) to indicate that the singer is close to death, and experiencing himself as ghostlike. The image of the dead as birds has similarities with both Mesopotamia and Egypt, though these two are different from each other. In Mesopotamia, bird imagery is used to describe all those who belong in the underworld, both ghosts, demons and gatekeepers. The demon who shown Enkidu that he is about to die is described as having a face like an Anzu-bird, claws of an eagle. He turns Enkidu into a dove, and takes him to see the underworld, where the deceased are "clothed, like birds, with feathers."[222] We also find bird imagery used of sufferers who are close to death. In *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, for example, the singer says: "I moan like a dove all day long. [Instead of singing a] song I *groan loudly*."[223] Whereas bird imagery is clearly negative in the HB and Mesopotamia, it has positive connotations in Egypt. Here, the *ba*, which represents the personality aspect of the soul, is often portrayed as a bird. After death, the *ba* leaves the body until the funeral, when the two are reconnected. Spells in the Book of Going Forth by Day also imagine the dead to be able to turn into a bird in the afterlife, in which form it could visit the world of the living.[224] The bird is therefore an image of mobility in Egypt, quite far from the stifled bird of the Song of Hezekiah.

Apart from this bird imagery, the Song only mention the condition of the dead in terms of what they cannot do: The dead cannot see (ראה) God, they cannot look upon (נבט) the living. In v. 18, all the dead personified as שְׁאוֹל (Sheol) and מָוֶת (death), when it is stated that these do not give thanks to (הלל) or hope for (שׂבר) God. In light of the theme of silence in the Song we should assume that the negation indicates a lacking ability, not a lack of will. Furthermore, the dead do not have the strength (חלם), life (חַי) and peace (שָׁלוֹמ) that is required to live (v. 16-17). Describing death though negations is common

[222] "Gligamesh SBV" (Dalley, 89).

[223] "*Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*" (trans. Robert D. Briggs, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* [ed. James B. Pritchard; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991], 367).

[224] Hays, *Death*, 77.

in the HB,[225] and reminds us of the descending Ishtar removing her symbols of power. As we saw, the underworld was linked to darkness and decay. In such an existence it is only natural that the dead should be imagined as blinded and weakened and silenced. The contrast from the communal praise of v. 20 could not be greater. Death is silence, as in Ps 115:17: "The dead do praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence." (NRSV).[226]

Watts touches upon a central image of the Song, when he writes: "Death eliminates the two relationships that give meaning to life, those with God and those with human persons."[227] Silence limits communication, and causes isolation. The fear of isolation in death is found in all three cultures. In Mesopotamian *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the singer laments: "My god has forsaken me and *disappeared*, My goddess has cut me off and stayed removed from me."[228] And later: "My grave was waiting, and my funerary paraphernalia ready, Before I was even dead lamentations for me was finished."[229] The sorrow is deepened by the lack of mourners to care for the deceased, and the lack of familiar gods who will follow the sufferer into death. In Gilgamesh, the sun god, Shamas, comforts the dying Enkidu by reminding him that he has just these things. He says that Gilgamesh will "lay you to rest on a bed of loving care, And let you stay in a restful dwelling [...] Princes of the earth will kiss your feet. He will make the people of Uruk weep for you, mourn for you."[230] Enkidu is comforted by the reminder that he will be mourned and cared for, and perhaps by the knowledge of the friendly sun god also descends into the underworld every night. When Enkidu later describes the underworld, however, he describes it as a dismal fate, though slightly less horrible for those who have many children as they are fed and watered.[231]

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225 Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 187-196: Death as the multiple negation: No possessions, no memory, no knowledge, no joy, no return, no end. Also no torture and no annihilation. Exceptions include: Isa 14; sleep;

226 Cf. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 159: "Praising and no longer praising are related to each other as are living and no longer living."

227 Watts, *Isaiah 33-66,* 59.

228 "*Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi"* (trans. Robert D. Briggs, *An Anthology*, 367).

229 "*Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi"* (trans. Robert D. Briggs, *An Anthology*, 369).

230 "Gilgamesh SBV" (Dalley, *Myths,* 87-88).

231 "Gilgames SBV" (Dalley, *Myths*, 124).

In Egypt, isolation is combated in the mortuary cult, when the social connectedness of the deceased is restored, just as the body has been restored. The father and son relationship sustains both parties, and is the very essence of Egyptian social life.[232] Tomb is the site of this connection, and a powerful symbol of its durability.[233] Such connectedness is, in the Song, possible only in life, as this is where the father can make know the faithfulness of God to his sons (v. 18). Like isolation, the weakness and silence of the deceased is countered, and as Lichtheim comments: "Eternal life had come to be conceived in the most grandiose terms: the dead were to become godlike and join the company of the gods."[234] This idealised image is questioned in different layers of the literature, revealing how this conception, while widespread, did not always soothe the worried.[235]

No such comfort is available in the Song of Hezekiah. The singer has only one hope, and that is that his fears will not be realised, and that God may grant him a longer life.

3.8 Conclusions

The comparison above has given several new perspectives to our interpretation of the Song of Hezekiah. We have seen that the Song's understanding of premature death as tragic, is shared with both Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture. This shared value of life, is connected with the things that make a life worth living: Being part of a community, sharing one's beliefs with one's children, and praising the god of one's faith. These things are valued across the ANE, and in both Egypt and Mesopotamia we have encountered attempts at continuing them beyond the point of death. But in the Song, no such mellowing of death is possible. Death is not to go *to* an afterlife, it is to depart *from* a life.

The singer's violent images of death as the pulling up of his life, like a tent, suggests that God is behind the singer's suffering. This imagery is reminiscent of the things most feared in death in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Without a voice, the singer cannot be

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[232] Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 56.
[233] Ritchards, *Society and Death*, 62.
[234] "From the Book of the Dead" (Lichtheim, *AEL II*, n.p.)
[235] E.g. "The Dispute Between a Man and his *Ba"* trans. Nili Shupak (*COS* 3.146:321-325).

connected to anyone, and in the Egyptian sense, *this* is true death. The Mesopotamian portrayals of the underworld give depth to the Song's devaluation of any postmortem existence. The images of ghosts like chirping birds, eating clay and pining for water and company, resonate with the Song's images of the lamenting and worn down singer. So close to death, so far from life. So powerless and so silent. Like Ishtar, the singer has lost all power, and cannot do anything to help himself. Only an act of divine power can hold him back from the pit, and keep him from being trapped in death forever.

God is the giver of life. Humans cannot fashion it themselves by extravagant activities like mummification or the building of tombs. And unlike Shamash before Enkidu, the God of the singer acts. Going beyond consolation and advice, God intervenes through acts of association. The singer's life is attached to God, his sins are forgiven, and he is lifted out of the pit and back into the land of the living. He regains the chance to live a full life, with offspring and old age, and can return to his participation in the life giving community centred around the house of YHWH. The Egyptian conception of life as connectivity, opens up this relational view of life even further. To live, in the Song of Hezekiah, is to be connected, and death is to be cut off.

Perhaps most striking, is the insight that - unlike the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures - the singer of the Song of Hezekiah has no prospect of reunion, neither with his God nor with his fellow human beings - and still, he remains hopeful after his restoration. The singer may not hope for death, but neither does he despair over life. This reflects a surprising hope for life, and a faith in the community and relation to God which life is made up of.

I feel certain that some of the aspects I have now pointed out above, would have been clear, even if the Song had been read in complete isolation. However, the comparison has added nuances to the seemingly obvious, and brought the less obvious to view. For example the seemingly obvious image of death as silence and weakness has gained nuance in light of Egyptian practices to restore the dead, so that he or she can function fully in the afterlife. And the comparison with Gilgamesh has brought out the striking optimism of the Song. Even though the singer has no hope beyond death, he rejoices in life. When the singer one day faces his death, it will hopefully be at a time when he is

satisfied and full of days.

4. THE VALUE OF COMPARISON

4.1 The Bible as Source for Theology

While I cannot go deeply into the nature of theology here, I will note that I consider theology to be the continuous search for an understanding of God and the world in light of God. This understanding can be articulated and accepted in light of contemporary human experience and the faith of a community of believers that is the church of a given denomination. The Lutheran community, to which I belong, sees the Bible as a record of God's self revelation. It must therefore starting point of all theological discourse.[236]

In his essay on theological interpretation as method, Brown holds that a theological interpretation must bring forth a "text's context in all its nuances: historical, literary, and canonical", explore how the text speaks about the reality of God ("theo-logic") and the world ("cosmo-logic"), and articulate this "message" in response to the "needs and concerns of people today."[237] In this, Brown aptly captures the value of a variety of exegetical methodological perspectives, and he succeeds in keeping his proposed method for theological interpretation oriented towards the text. However, it is necessary to question the possibility of extracting a so-called "theo-logic" from a given text, without simultaneously bringing the interpreters own "theo-logic" to the interpretation. No reading is ever entirely unbiased, and no text is ever entirely unambiguous.[238] A theological interpretation must take this into account when approaching the biblical text. As Henriksen writes: "We cannot just repeat what the Bible says when developing theological standpoints. We are prompted to learn how to use and to continue to develop that which the biblical language universe communicates, in order to bring forth the right speech about God in our time."[239]

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[236] I will not take on the full complexity of the question of canon or the authority of the Bible here.

[237] William P. Brown, "Theological Interpretation: A Proposal" in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor or David L. Petersen* (ed. LeMon and Richards; SBLRBS 56; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 387-405, quotes from pp. 390-392.

[238] George Aichele and The Bible and Culture Collective, "Poststructuralist Critisism" in *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 119-148, 129. Mark K. George, "Postmodern Literary Criticism: The Impossibility of Method" in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebew Bible in Honor or David L. Petersen* (ed. LeMon and Richards; SBLRBS 56; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 459-477, 462.

[239] Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Teologi i dag: Samvittighet og Selvkritikk* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2007), 92 (my translation).

Henriksen suggests that theologians need to engage in a creative and productive process to develop lines of interpretation and understanding in relation to the confession of the church and the knowledge and experience of the modern community. The goal of this process is to establish a language for reality that is rooted in the biblical language, without being identical to it.[240] The theological construction is not to be a restoration of the past - of that which is already lost - but a further development of what the community of believers has inherited through tradition, so that new and situational human experiences may be integrated into the theological understanding. This requires the interpreter of biblical texts to be willing to go beyond (but not to forget) the historical situation of the text, and ask what the texts may provide for the interpretation of our current lives and situations. Bringing forward as many nuances as possible, the interpreter of a biblical text can then construct an interpretation, which in turn comes to be among the sources of the constructive theological discourse as it articulates the faith, and assesses the validity of its own articulation.

Hass describes theological knowledge as ”an imaginary state of knowing” where we ”imagine that our knowledge of the unseen can be firmly grounded, even if there is no empirical basis for the grounding”.[241] The question of death embodies this. Death is the great unknown, and our experience of death is, and will remain, limited. Our only tool for understanding death is through imagining what we have not yet experienced.[242] And just as imagination gives us the ability to look beyond our own situation, it allows us to see the texts of the past as relevant in our present.

The diversity of the imagery of death in the biblical texts shows that these texts do not merely render an accepted or authoritative conception. They also provide innovative and sometimes critical images of how death may also be conceived. For the historian it may prove important to distinguish which is which, but for the theologian the diversity itself must be seen as an invitation to continue the imaginative exploration both in the

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[240] Henriksen, *Teologi i dag*, 93.

[241] Andrew W. Hass, "Dicipline Beyond Diciplines" in *Literature and Theology* (ed. H. Walton; Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 19-36, 19.

[242] This can involve both the common imagination of recalling and reinterpreting past experiences, and the creative imagination of redescribing and transforming such experiences into new images. Cf. Leo G. Perdue, "Between Memory and Vision" in *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 263-298.

interpretation of biblical texts, and through engaging in the discourse of theological knowledge.

4.2 Comparison as Method

In the introduction, I established an understanding of comparison as a hermeneutical enterprise. The goal of the comparison is not merely to gain historical information which may help fill the gaps of the text correctly through illuminating "the cultural dynamics behind the text,"[243] nor is it to aid a polemical discourse defending or attacking the status of the biblical texts.[244] The goal is to gain insights into the individual texts which are to be interpreted through the "dialectic of similarity and difference".[245] I have made no preference for either similarity or difference, but I have ventured to see the two together, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the texts I have been working with.

All interpretation is an encounter between the familiar (the interpreter's own preconceptions presupposition) and the alien (the otherness[246] of the text). As readers, we cannot help but to look for the area where the text overlaps with our knowledge or conceptions, and we cannot help to notice that which seems strange or foreign to us. Understanding the text often springs from holding together just these two - between that which seems to be the most natural thing in the world, and that which seems beyond comprehension. Within such an inner tension, which may not necessarily be resolvable, the text comes to life. In comparison, we put different texts together to create such tensions. Green writes that the juxtaposition of what is alien and with what is familiar, alters our perceptions and transforms our imagination.[247] This is because it forces us to question our own presupposition and look at what we really perceive. In

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[243] So John H. Walton, "Background Studies," *DTI*, 45. Cf. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 18.

[244] Walton gives examples of polemical use in comparative results from both critical and confessional scholarship. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 33, 37.

[245] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches", 135.

[246] According to Brown the exegetical work helps us "distinguish the world of the text from the interpreter's", highligthing the "otherness"of the text. Brown, "Theological Interpretation", 398. Surely exegesis should also help uncover any non-otherness of the text, the similarities between the world of the text and that of the interpreter.

[247] Joel B. Green, "Context," *DTI*, 131.

describing that which is similar and that which is different, the interpreter enters into a dialectic movement which gradually illuminates both, or all, the texts that are juxtaposed. Just as we perceive our own individuality in what makes us distinct from others, seeing what a text does not say, helps us see more clearly what it says.

The value of comparison is therefore the forced seeing-together of texts and the rich nuances this adds to the reading. When interpreting biblical texts for theological purposes, this is exactly what the job of the interpreter entails: Bringing out the nuances and the richness of the text, an understanding of what is says and what it doesn't say, that can form the basis for working further with its conceptions of God and reality in the theological process.

4.3 Summary

In thesis, I have examined the Song of Hezekiah, its history, text and structure, and I have compared it carefully with other texts from the HB and from two different cultures. My goal has not been to determine the one and only correct reading of the text, nor to establish its historical meaning or its historical relation to its surroundings. Rather, through careful analysis, I have attempted to bring out as many features of the texts as possible, so that my findings may serve as a basis for continuing the imaginative discourse of constructing theology, that is, articulating the faith of the community in the present day.

The use of comparison has illuminated the text, not only showing us what is unique about it, but also revealing what it has in common with other articulations of the human relationship to, and image of, life and death. This process has brought forth perspectives that would not otherwise have been considered. For example, considering the Egyptian conception of death as joining the gods, has emphasised the conception of death as a loss of relationship with God in the Song of Hezekiah. Similarly, the comparison of the Song with the Decent of Ishtar has opened up the idea that death may be imagined as losing one's power and distinctive qualities. And the clear agreement between all the cultures that premature death is a tragic fate, underlines the human experience of life as valuable, across cultures and across times. In a Christian context, like my own, this

appreciation of life speaks also to the belief in, hope for, and imagination of, resurrection. To go beyond any beatific afterlife and regain real life, that is the hope of the believer.

Furthermore, the comparative work has shown that the images of life and death in the Song of Hezekiah, and in the HB in general, are not unique. The way they compare and contrast with the images of ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia shows that they - just like the images of death each of us form when we encounter it - are imagined. This evidence should give us confidence in using various sources to construct our current theological images of life and death, and in continuing the imaginative tradition of the Bible, rather than merely reproducing it.

5. AFTERWORD

The full significance of my work with this thesis became very clear to me when I, as a summer minister, came to stand before a family who had just lost a man in the middle of his years. He had four children, the youngest of whom were still in primary school. Before he died, this man had planned his own funeral and decided that he was to be cremated and have his ashes spread at sea. He had spoken of how he imagined his afterlife - as an eternity over the ocean he had loved so much in life - in the cycle of nature.

Death, so unknowable and frightening, touches all who face it, but not all dare to speak of it. In this family, it was the children who first shared their curiosity. They had heard about the dreams of their father, but as I came into the house, I could sense that they wondered if this eternity over the ocean was just one of those things adults say to make children feel better. So I offered my opinion. I said that their father's image of the afterlife sounded good to me. I said that the Bible speaks of humans as coming from dust and returning to dust, and that it therefore made good sense to think of their dad becoming part of nature after his cremation. Not sure if their worry was settled, I decided to make this matter part of my speech at the funeral. While we do not know anything certain about what comes after death, I said, we are permitted to imagine and think and dream up our own images of what is to come. And as we believe in a God who want good things for us, we can have faith that whatever is to come, will be good.

At the end of this project, I owe great thanks to my supervisor, Hanne Løland Levinson, for her patience and support though the chaos and order of my intellectual journey though this material. I would also like to thank Christine Henriksen Aarflot for proofreading my text, and the wonderful librarians at MF Norwegian School of Theology for their endurance in ordering books and articles from colleagues across the country. And finally, I would never have encountered the wonder and amazement of the Hebrew Bible if not for the wonderful teachers of the Old Testament department at MF Norwegian School of Theology. Thank you all so much for opening this world to us!

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