

## Death in the Wisdom Literature

### 1. Job

**Date:** written in Hebrew, likely in Israel; date uncertain – many think late fifth or early sixth century BCE (i.e., under Persian rule). Oddly, however, the book contains no reference to the Babylonian Exile and may have an Edomite hero (i.e., Job).

**Theodicy:** Skepticism about the main principles of the earlier Jewish Wisdom tradition (as outlined, e.g., in the book of Proverbs)—most notably the idea that the righteous will receive reward in life, while the evil will suffer. Here, the righteous Job suffers on account of his righteousness (which leads Satan to test him) and cannot fathom God's justice, against which he cries out, challenging God Himself to answer.

**Attitude towards death:** Skepticism predicated on assumption that death is truly an end of life (7:9-10: "those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more."). Job proclaims death as preferable to suffering in life (and even wishes that he was never born in the first place). Yet, in Job's laments, he also complains that all people – wicked and righteous – suffer, at the end, the exact same fate. Even the wicked gain this rest at the end (see quote in box on right)! Notably, God does not answer his challenge; rather, the total transcendence of God is

Qoh 8:6 Every matter has its time and way, although man's trouble lies heavy upon him. 8:7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? 8:8 No man has power to retain the spirit or authority over the day of death; there is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 8:9 All this I observed while applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while man lords it over man to his hurt. 8:10 Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. 8:11 Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set to do evil. 8:12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him; 8:13 but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. 8:14 There is a vanity which takes place on earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. 8:15 And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun. 8:16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep; 8:17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

asserted as a reply: divine wisdom is beyond human knowing. There is, in other words, no appeal to postmortem punishment or reward.

Job 21:7 Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? 21:8 Their children are established in their presence, and their offspring before their eyes. 21:9 Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them. 21:10 Their bull breeds without fail; their cow calves and never miscarries. 21:11 They send out their little ones like a flock, and their children dance around. 21:12 They sing to the tambourine and the lyre, and rejoice to the sound of the pipe. 21:13 They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol. 21:14 They say to God, 'Leave us alone! We do not desire to know your ways. 21:15 What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?' 21:16 Is not their prosperity their own achievement? The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me. 21:17 "How often is the lamp of the wicked put out? How often does calamity come upon them? How often does God distribute pains in his anger? 21:18 How often are they like straw before the wind, and like chaff that the storm carries away? 21:19 You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their children.' Let it be paid back to them, so that they may know it. 21:20 Let their own eyes see their destruction, and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.

### 2. Qohelet (= Ecclesiastes)

**Date:** written in Hebrew, likely in Israel; date = fourth or third century BCE? (i.e., under Hellenistic [specifically Ptolemaic] rule)

**Theodicy and attitude towards death:** Skeptical outlook similar to Job. For Qohelet, life is filled with suffering, to which death can be preferable (7:1 A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death [is better], than the day of birth. 7:2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart). There is, in other words, no appeal to postmortem punishment or reward. Moreover, the unfairness of a common fate at death lies in the fact that the wicked who were prosperous in life get the same rest as the righteous who suffered! No solution is suggested; humans, however wise, cannot really know the mind of God—piety and worship are nevertheless enjoined.

### 3. Tobit

**Date:** written in Aramaic, possibly in the Diaspora; date = fourth or third century BCE? (i.e., under Hellenistic [specifically Ptolemaic] rule); the book mentions the rebuilding of the Temple. The hero, Tobit, is a member of one of the "lost tribes of Israel" which was dispersed with Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and lives in Ninevah (capital of Assyrian Empire).

**Theodicy:** Tobit is a narrativization of common themes in the Wisdom tradition: human events are orchestrated by God so that the righteous end up rewarded in life with prosperity and children; even in their suffering, the righteous can thus have hope that all will work out according to God's plan.

**Attitude towards death:** Here, the focus falls on proper burial. This is why Tobit gets into trouble with the authorities: he secretly buries the bodies of Jews whose corpses were left exposed after being killed by Assyrians. Tobit sees death positively (see Tobit 3), as release from the pain of life; it is presumed, moreover, life (not death) is the realm of judgment on which an individual's sins, and the sins of his/her ancestors, might be visited upon him/her. The aim is to die in peace, leaving children and transmitting one's wisdom to them—which is how, in fact, the story ends (Tobit 14)!

### 4. Wisdom of ben Sira (=Ecclesiasticus)

**Date:** Written in Hebrew around 180 BCE (under Hellenistic [specifically Seleucidic] rule) in Jerusalem and translated into Greek by the author's grandson, who lived in Egypt.

**Attitude towards death:** Same sense of the inevitability of death that we find in Job and Qohelet. One survives death only by children and reputation. Everyone dies, but this means that one must have compassion for others (8:7 Do not rejoice over any one's death; remember that we all must die.) God is the source of everything; worship of Him is reward in itself for righteousness:

11:14 Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from the Lord. 11:17 The gift of the Lord endures for those who are godly, and what he approves will have lasting success. 11:18 There is a man who is rich through his diligence and self-denial, and this is the reward allotted to him: 11:19 when he says, "I have found rest, and now I shall enjoy my goods!" he does not know how much time will pass until he leaves them to others and dies. 11:20 Stand by your covenant and attend to it, and grow old in your work. 11:21 Do not wonder at the works of a sinner, but trust in the Lord and keep at your toil; for it is easy in the sight of the Lord to enrich a poor man quickly and suddenly. 11:22 The blessing of the Lord is the reward of the godly, and quickly God causes his blessing to flourish. 11:23 Do not say, "What do I need, and what prosperity could be mine in the future?" 11:24 Do not say, "I have enough, and what calamity could happen to me in the future?" 11:25 In the day of prosperity, adversity is forgotten, and in the day of adversity, prosperity is not remembered. 11:26 For it is easy in the sight of the Lord to reward a man on the day of death according to his conduct. 11:27 The misery of an hour makes one forget luxury, and at the close of a man's life his deeds will be revealed. 11:28 Call no one happy before his death; a man will be known through his children.