

Dying in Peace: Old Age and Death Anxiety in the Hebrew Bible and in the Ancient Near East

Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the changing attitudes of old Jacob towards death in comparison with other stories about old age and death in the Hebrew Bible and in a number of ancient near eastern texts. With the help of the anthropological model of Tomer and Eliason different determinants of death anxiety are discerned. This appears to be a helpful tool in the comparison of these texts, underlining the special place the story of old Jacob takes among them.

In the Old Testament the topic of old age and the soon to be expected demise plays a prominent role in the stories about the patriarchs, especially those about Jacob and the remarkable change in his view on death. With the help of modern research on death anxiety we shall analyse the influence of memories of the past and expectations of the future on this life and the afterlife. In this respect the story of Jacob will be compared to other texts about elderly people and death anxiety in the Hebrew Bible¹ and in the ancient Near East.²

The Changing Attitudes of Old Jacob towards Death

The first reference to the aged Jacob³ is at the beginning of the stories about Joseph: 'Israel (Jacob is called here by his second name) loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age (Gen. 37:3)'.⁴ The same is said of the other son Jacob had with his favourite wife Rachel, Benjamin (Gen. 44:20). It can be compared with what we read in Gen. 21:2 about Sarah giving birth to Isaac as 'a son in his [Abraham's] old age'. At the moment of Joseph's birth, Jacob was almost as old as his grandfather Abraham when he was given his son, Isaac. Abraham was one hundred years old and Jacob probably ninety-one.⁵ The references to his old age in connection with Joseph can be seen as foreshadowing the mourning over his son that will characterize his old age. They prepare the reader for Jacob's reaction to the message of his other sons from which he concludes that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal:

All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him' (Gen. 37:35).

We find the same combination of references to Jacob's old age and his death in chapter 44. In Gen. 44:20 Jacob's sons speak of their 'old father' and of Benjamin as 'the young child of (his) old age'. It is part of Jacob's reaction to the request to bring Benjamin to Egypt: 'If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to Sheol' (Gen. 44:29). This is a repetition of what he had previously said to his sons: 'My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol' (Gen. 42:38). When things turn out positively and Jacob can even expect to be reunited

with Joseph, he can now speak positively also about his death. When Jacob realizes that Joseph is still alive ‘his spirit revived’ and he says: ‘My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die’ (45:28). When Jacob finally can embrace Joseph again, death no longer appears to be experienced as a threat: ‘I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive’ (46:30). The prospect of his death has turned from negative into positive. It is remarkable that in the latter situation Jacob does not speak of death as going down to Sheol. Apparently, this name for the world of the dead has a negative association, which is not appropriate in relation to the positive idea of the continued existence of the ideal successor.⁶

The evaluation of his life now that he is an old man, appears to be a recurring element in the stories about Jacob. When he introduces himself to Pharaoh as an elderly person, Jacob indicates that until now he has not lived a happy life. His ancestors Abraham and Isaac had been better off: ‘The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn’ (Gen. 47:9). This moment, however, proves to be a turning point. Things are changing for the better in the rest of his life. Just like he did himself, we can illustrate this by comparing it to what happened with his ancestors. He had become visually impaired in his old age (Gen. 48:10), just like his father Isaac (Gen. 27:1), but Jacob did not share with his father the fate of being misled by his offspring at the moment that he wants to give his blessing. Joseph tries to direct his father by placing his sons in the right position before their grandfather, so that Jacob will put his right hand on the first born, Manasseh, and his left hand on his younger brother, Ephraim (Gen. 48:13). When Jacob reverses the order by crossing his hands, Joseph assumes that his father makes a mistake and wants to correct it, but Jacob makes clear that he deliberately made this choice. This is in more than one respect the opposite situation of what was said in chapter 27 about the blessing by Isaac. Jacob was not fooled by his son. Joseph did not take advantage of his father’s weakness and did not prevent Jacob from acting against the wish of his son. So Joseph pays to his old father Jacob the respect, which Jacob himself had previously withheld from his own father.

The following chapters of the book of Genesis also indicate that Jacob’s complaint about having had a more difficult life than his ancestors did not apply to his old age. In line with what was said about the blessing of the sons of Joseph, he is given ample opportunity to bless his own sons and to arrange his own funeral in the grave of his ancestors. He ends his life in full command, and only after having completed all the arrangements, does he die. His death comes at the moment he must have wished for himself: ‘When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people’ (Gen. 49:33).

A Good Death versus a Bad Death

The way in which Jacob ended his life is an example of what was thought in ancient Israel to be a good death.⁷ It is the combination of having had a long life, enjoying the presence of children, and having the prospect of being given a proper funeral in a grave in one’s own land. Aged 147 years (Gen. 47:28) Jacob may not have become as old as his father Isaac (180 years, Gen. 35:28) or his grandfather Abraham (175 years, Gen. 25:7), but it is still far beyond the average and much older than, for instance, his son Joseph (110 years, Gen. 50:22).⁸ With regard to his offspring, Jacob is luckier than Abraham and Isaac. He has more children and unlike his two ancestors even enjoys the presence of grandchildren. All three patriarchs had to witness the quarrels between their sons. Abraham was forced by his wife Sarah to send away Ishmael after she had seen him mocking Isaac (Gen. 21:9-10). Only after the death of Abraham did these two sons get together again for the burial (Gen. 25:9). In his old age, Isaac himself was involved in the fight between Esau and Jacob. Before he died his sons were reconciled, but Isaac did not

play a role in that. Jacob also was aware of the tensions between Joseph and his other sons (Gen. 37:10). More than with Isaac we read how Jacob was also present when his sons got together again (Gen. 46:28-31).

A special element of the positive ending of Jacob's life is the fact that until the end he was in charge and was not fooled by his offspring. After the previous stories of betrayal this was not a given. Isaac had been betrayed by his son Jacob (Gen. 27). Jacob himself had been betrayed by a number of his sons (Gen. 37). In both cases the betrayal concerned a conflict between brothers. As was mentioned above, Jacob had taken advantage of his father's weakness. It has a parallel in the story of Lot who in his old age (Gen. 19:31) was manipulated by his daughters who plied him with wine. Compared with these stories, Jacob is far better off. Joseph treats his father with respect, not misleading him or forcing his will upon him. Jacob is able to make his own choices and is treated respectfully. He dies in the knowledge that his family has been saved from the famine and he himself will be buried in the grave of his ancestors (Gen. 49:29-33). During his lifetime he had come to the realisation that he could not always bend things to his will. At the end of his life however, Jacob is able to arrange everything according to his own wishes. The contrast with the other periods in his life and with other stories about old men in the book of Genesis indicates that Jacob's old age is more or less ideal.

As is indicated in Gen. 37:35 and 42:38; 44:29, 31 things would have been very different if he indeed had lost his favourite sons, first Joseph and later Benjamin. It would have resulted in his going down to the world of the dead, while he himself was mourning. A similar contrast between a good death, dying in peace, and a bad death, ending life unhappy, is found in the story of David. At the end of his own life ('his time to die drew near'; 1 Kgs 2:1) he wishes to ensure that the death of his opponents is miserable. Apparently, he cannot die in peace without these accounts being settled. Like Jacob his old age does not prevent him to impose his will. He commands his successor Solomon not to let two of his former enemies die in peace: he has to make sure that their 'grey head shall not go down to Sheol in peace' (1 Kgs 2:6; 'with blood', verse 9⁹). Within the Hebrew Bible Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31 and 1 Kgs 2:6 and 9 are the only texts where the expression 'go down to Sheol' is given an additionally negative overtone.¹⁰ In contrast to this David's death is formulated as 'sleeping with his fathers' (1 Kgs 2:10). Just as Jacob's 'lying down with my fathers' this points to a positive ending: to the comfort one finds in being part of the ongoing line of the family.

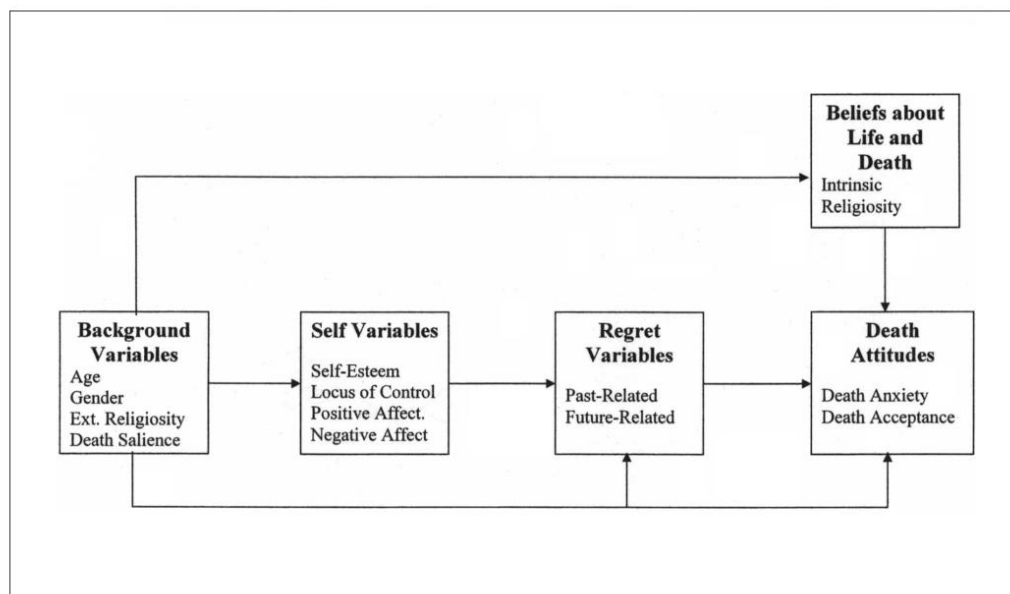
The 'normal' example of a bad death, in contrast to the good death of Abraham and Jacob, is the story of how Absalom came to his end (2 Sam. 18:9-18). After his failed attempt to take the throne of his father David he is killed while fleeing. The dishonourable character of his death is enhanced by the situation in which he is executed: hanging with his long hair caught in a tree. He dies a violent, ignoble death, unable to defend himself, at a relatively young age, and without a surviving heir. The latter is emphasized by the remark at the end of the story, that he had set up a pillar for himself because he had 'no son to keep his name in remembrance'. More than elderly people with offspring Absalom appears to have feared death. In the story of Jacob this role of the son is taken up by Joseph in an excellent way, taking care of a fitting funeral, bringing the body of his father back to the homeland and burying it in the tomb of his forefathers (Gen. 50:1-14). The fact that he promised his father to do so (50:5) must have contributed to Jacob's dying in peace.

The Fear of Death

In the survey of the attitude towards death in the texts about Jacob and related stories it has become clear that when it comes to death anxiety the situation at the moment of death is decisive. There are no explicit references to the expected situation in the afterlife. What appears to be more important is that one has the opportunity to settle one's accounts before it is too late.

In the following paragraphs it will be discussed how what we read in the Hebrew Bible relates to coping with death anxiety by elderly people in general. With the help of the concepts used in modern research also some relevant texts in the ancient Near East will be taken into account.

It is human to fear death. Specific circumstances will increase this fear. With regard to the topic of old age one could ask whether there is more or less anxiety over death among



elderly people, or how the prospect of an imminent death and the possible expectation of the situation after death, influence the well-being of the aged. There are many modern anthropological studies on the relation among elderly persons between their convictions about the afterlife and their anxiety about death. They lead to varying outcomes, basically depending on the different contexts of the people participating in the research.¹¹ Of course, when it comes to the influence of religion, much depends on the answers given to existential questions about life and death. It is to be expected, for instance, that it makes a big difference to anxiety about death if one literally expects to experience heavenly bliss or hellish torments in the afterlife, or whether one sees things more symbolically or takes an agnostic position.¹² A useful model for describing death anxiety and its possible determinants is presented by Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason.¹³ They used it for a study on attitudes towards death in college students¹⁴, but it can be used for research on elderly people as well, and also on those living two to three millennia ago in the ancient Near East.¹⁵ The model of Tomer and Eliason¹⁶ shows how attitudes towards death, either fear of death or acceptance of death, are influenced especially by beliefs about life and death next to a set of variables like age, self-esteem and regrets about unfulfilled goals in life. Part of what they call 'self variables' is the 'locus of control'. This has to do with the extent to which people believe that they have control over their lives, or that others control their lives or that their lives are influenced by chance.¹⁷ The 'regrets variables' concern the disappointing experience of unfulfilled aspirations are related to the past, or realizing that it will not be possible to fulfil these goals, to the future. Beliefs about life and death have most influence when they are intrinsic, that is, part of one's own convictions, based on personal experiences and not just part of shared religious conceptions. The latter merely belong to the background factors, together with personal characteristics like age and gender.

Looking at the story of Jacob from the perspective of this model, it can be noted that Jacob's attitude towards death is clearly influenced by positive regret variables. This is especially clear because of the reversal from despair over the missing son to the happiness of being reunited. Even more important appears to be the positive influence which comes from the

fact that despite his illness Jacob remains in charge. Within the model of Tomer and Eliason this has its place in the category of ‘self variables’, especially the ‘locus of control’.

Unsurprisingly, in the Hebrew Bible old age is associated with weakness. For instance, in the prayer of Psalm 71:9 (‘Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone’) or in the famous allegory on old age in Eccl. 12:1-7. Also old Jacob is reported to be ill (Gen. 48:1), but is able to ‘summon his strength’ (48:2) and to give his blessing to his grandsons in the way he wants to. Although he is visually impaired (48:10), he knows which boy he has to put his right hand on to give him the first blessing and is able to withstand Joseph’s attempt to manipulate him. To this can be added that Jacob not only reached a blessed old age (one of the ‘background variables’ indicated by Tomer and Eliason), but also that at the moment when he felt that his death was near, was able to arrange a funeral according to his wishes (Gen. 47:27-31).

The stories do not offer explicit information about Jacob’s or the author’s beliefs about life and death. When it comes to the future the emphasis in this and also in the other stories about the patriarchs, is on the question of the offspring. Hope for life after death is in the first place the hope that the family line will continue. For Jacob himself this is important with regard to a proper funeral. He is happy that he can entrust it to his favourite son. But although he can safely assume that the affection is mutual, he still wants to make sure that things will go his way and asks Joseph for a solemn promise. Only after Joseph has made this vow can Jacob rest assured: ‘he bowed down at the head of his bed’ (Gen. 47:31), indicating that he no longer has to take action. One can also conclude that he accepts and does not fear his soon to be expected death. It is now described positively as ‘lying down with my fathers’ (Gen. 47:30) instead of ‘going down to Sheol’ with its more negative associations. The latter was related to the regretful situation when he was convinced that he forever had lost his favourite son.

Old Age and Death Anxiety in the Ancient Near East

The model of Tomson and Eliason can also help as a way to look at factors influencing the perspective of elderly persons on death in the ancient Near East in relation to the Jacob story. A good example, to begin with, can be taken from the many texts about death and afterlife in ancient Egypt. The ideal old age of a high ranked Egyptian official – in this case Ay, the royal scribe in the court of Akhenaton – is well described in his prayer to the king. He expresses his hope for a blissful afterlife, together with his king, but at the same time he hopes to reach an old age and being, in his words, ‘sated with life’. The latter can be compared to Abraham being said to have died ‘old and sated’ (Gen. 25:8).

Grant me a lifetime high in your favor!
How happy is your favorite, O Son of the Aten!
All his deeds will endure and be firm,
When the *ka* of the Ruler is with him forever,
He will be sated with life when he reaches old age.
My Lord who makes people and fosters a lifetime,
Give a happy fate to him whom you favor,
Whose heart rests on Maat, who abhors falsehood.
How happy is he who hears your teaching of life!
He is sated by seeing you constantly,
His eyes beholding the Aten each day.
Grant me a good old age as you favor me,
Grant me a good burial by the wish of your *ka*

In the tomb you assigned me to rest in,
In the mountain of Akhet-Aten, the blessed place.
May I hear your sweet voice in the *benben*-temple,
As you do what your father praises, the living Aten;
He will assign you to everlastingness,
He will reward you with jubilee feasts.

...
Grant that my *ka* abide and flourish for me,
As when on earth I followed your *ka*,
So as to rise in my name to the blessed place,
In which you grant me to rest, my word being true.
May my name be pronounced in it by your will,
I being your favorite who follows your *ka*,
That I may go with your favor when old age has come:
For the *ka* of the Vizier, Fanbearer on the right of the King,
True, beloved Royal Scribe, God's Father, Ay, living anew.¹⁸

In comparison with the story of Abraham's and Jacob's old age and death it stands out that with Ay the expectations about the personal state in afterlife plays an important role. The expected continuity between his present well-being and the situation in the afterlife helps Ay to accept death.¹⁹ From the many ancient texts describing the afterlife we can deduce that the Egyptians had clear ideas about what was waiting for them and how it was possible to find your way there. This must on the one hand have been reassuring, but on the other hand they must have feared the dangers of grave robbers in this world and demonic powers in the other world. One rarely finds expression of this fear and even then the emphasis is on the admonition to enjoy life as long as it is possible.²⁰ This, however, may have been caused exactly by this fear, hence avoiding any reference to things one did not dare to think about. Within the model of Tomer and Eliason it can be noted that the beliefs about life and death were very influential not only with regard to acceptance of death but also causing death anxiety.

A nice example of a happy old age in the prospect of escaping the danger of an unworthy burial, can be found in the Egyptian story of the royal physician Sinuhe. He was forced to leave the homeland and at the end of his life, with failing health, he fears that he will die abroad and will be buried there. Unlike Jacob, he probably would not have been able to arrange a later burial in the homeland. Fortunately, the king grants his request to return home and avoid a burial in a foreign land with strange customs. Instead, he may expect that his death will be accompanied by the beautiful Egyptian mortuary rituals.

May Egypt's king have mercy on me, that I may live by his mercy! May I greet the mistress of the land who is in the palace! May I hear the commands of her children! Would that my body were young again! For old age has come; feebleness has overtaken me. My eyes are heavy, my arms weak; my legs fail to follow. The heart is weary; death is near. May I be conducted to the city of eternity!

...
Royal decree to the Attendant Sinuhe: (...) Come back to Egypt! See the residence in which you lived! Kiss the ground at the great portals, mingle with the courtiers! For today you have begun to age. You have lost a man's strength. Think of the day of burial, the passing into reveredness. A night is made for you with ointments and wrappings from the hand of Tait. A funeral procession is made for you on the day of burial; the mummy case is of gold, its head of lapis lazuli. The sky is above you as you lie in the hearse, oxen drawing you, musicians going before you. The dance of the *mww*-dancers is done at the door of your tomb; the offering-list is read to you; sacrifice is made before your offering-stone. Your tomb-pillars, made of white stone, are among (those of) the royal children. You shall not die abroad! Not shall Asiatics inter you. You

shall not be wrapped in the skin of a ram to serve as your coffin. Too long a roaming of the earth! Think of your corpse, come back!²¹

So in the end Sinuhe reaches the ideal as sketched in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, Spell 183, ll. 98-103, describing 'the city of the god', that is Memphis, as the place to be, in this life and in the afterlife:

as for anyone who rests within it, he will never have to express a wish. Happy is he who does what is right for the god in it; he will grant old age to him who does it until he reaches the blessed state, and the end of this happy burial in the Sacred Land.²²

It is interesting to note that as an element of the blessed state, is the fact that at the moment of death there is nothing left to be desired.²³ This belongs to the 'regret variables' mentioned by Tomer and Eliason contributing to the acceptance of death.

The story of the search for immortality in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh is based on the protagonist's great fear of death after he witnessed the death of his companion Enkidu.²⁴ Like Enkidu at the moment of his death, Gilgamesh is in the prime of his life. What he fears is premature death and also the afterlife as it is pictured in a dream by Enkidu on his deathbed as

the house which those who enter cannot leave,
on the journey whose way cannot be retraced;
to the house whose residents are deprived of light,
where dust is their sustenance, their food clay (VII.185-188).²⁵

From Utnapishtim, who survived the great flood and was given immortality like the gods, Gilgamesh learns that what happened to Utnapishtim is no more than the exception to the rule that every human being has to die. Even though the gods may have made Gilgamesh 'two-thirds of him god' (I.48) his human third part appears to be decisive here. At the end of the story it is told that even the fact that Utnapishtim reveals to him the 'mystery of gods', telling him how the immortals can remain youthful, cannot help him. Gilgamesh manages to get hold of the plant that works this miracle, but it is stolen from him by a snake, thus enabling the snake to rejuvenate by sloughing its old skin. The name of the plant is telling: 'The Old Man Has Grown Young' (XI.299), indicating an ideal that appears to be unfeasible for mankind. The text never speaks about something like a happy old age. According to the text directly following the passage about the loss of the miracle plant, Gilgamesh finds his comfort not in a long, happy life, but in his achievements as a city builder. It is the brickwork of Uruk that will stand the test of time. Within the model of Tomer and Eliason this high self-esteem fits in the category of the 'self variables'. On the one hand it led to the wish to be more than mortal men and live forever like the gods, on the other hand it made him realize that the greatness of his deeds would keep his memory alive. This can also be connected positively to the category of the 'future related regret variables': Gilgamesh can calmly die without regrets, knowing that he has done enough to live on in the memory of the people of the future.

The next tablet of the standard Babylonian version takes up the older Sumerian poem 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld'. It seems to have been added to present another perspective on the afterlife with more attention to the importance of progeny. This also has repercussions for the views on old age.²⁶ The clear message of the text is that the fate of the deceased in the netherworld depends on the number of sons taking care of their ancestors by maintaining their graves and supplying the dead with the things they need in the netherworld. The poem tells how Enkidu descended into the netherworld to return the special ball and mallet which had fallen down there. Only with the help of the sun god Shamash is he able to return.

When Gilgamesh asks him to describe what he saw, Enkidu warns him that his report will not make him happy. Man's mortal remains will be consumed by worms as they slowly turn into dust. On the other hand, having sons will help to make life over there bearable

'Did you see the man with one son?' 'I saw (him).
A peg is fixed in his wall and he weeps over it bitterly.'
'Did you see the man with two sons?' 'I saw (him).
He sits on two bricks eating a bread-loaf.'
'Did you see the man with three sons?' 'I saw (him).
He drinks water from a waterskin slung on the saddle.'
'Did you see the man with four sons?' 'I saw (him).
Like the owner of a donkey-team his heart rejoices.'
'Did you see the man with five sons?' 'I saw (him).
Like a fine scribe his hand is deft,
he enters the palace with ease.'
'Did you see the man with six sons?' 'I saw (him).
Like a ploughman his heart rejoices.'
'Did you see the man with seven sons?' 'I saw (him).
Among the junior deities he sits on a throne and listens to the proceedings.'
'Did you see the *palace eunuch*?' 'I saw (him).
Like a fine standard he *is propped in* the corner (XII.102-119).²⁷

Here the text is broken, but it is clear that people like eunuchs with no offspring to honour the memory of the dead, perform commemorative rites and bring offerings to the dead, will find little or no comfort in the afterlife. Apparently, also only one son is not enough. The sadness of the man with only one son is illustrated by referring to 'a peg fixed in the wall'. It is a mark of ownership.²⁸ In this case it probably refers to the situation that the man with one son was someone who had secured a loan by pledging his house. He weeps in the realization that a single son will not be able to provide both for the needs of the surviving relatives, being forced to sell the house. This will also have negative consequences with regards to providing in the needs of the deceased. The importance of the memorial rites is underlined in the final lines describing the difference between those who died a violent or sudden death and those who died naturally of old age:

'Did you see the one who [died] a natural death?' '[I saw (him).]
He lies drinking clear water on the bed of the gods.'
'Did you see the one who was killed in battle?' 'I saw (him).
His father and mother honour his memory and his wife weeps over (him).'
'Did you see the one whose corpse was left lying in the open countryside?' 'I saw (him).
His ghost does not lie at rest in the Netherworld.'
'Did you see the one whose ghost has no provider of funerary offerings?' 'I saw (him).
He eats the scrapings from the pot (and) crusts of bread that are thrown away in the street'
(XII.146-153).²⁹

When thinking of death, old people in Mesopotamia confronted with the fact that death is inescapable, as is impressively expressed by the Gilgamesh epic, will have found comfort in the added vision of the netherworld. They will want to make sure that they have made their preparations with regards to their tomb in time. A medical text described the situation of a sick old man who realizes that it is too late for this:

If he is in his seventies and he wails for his household, he will die.
if he is in his seventies and he wails for his household and his children, he will die.

If he is in his seventies and he makes the assignments for his tomb, he will die.³⁰

Within the model of Tomer and Eliason this is specified as the 'locus of control'. Just as in the story of old Jacob the fact that one is in control not only over this life but also over the situation after death is of prime importance when it comes to the attitude towards death. In this the role of God or the gods appears to be of little influence.

Old people especially feared death when they had no sons and because of their age no hope that this would change. A measure that can be taken in this situation is to adopt children. It was a common practice to adopt a slave or orphan. The adoptee was expected to support his adoptive parent, thus ensuring him a bearable old age. After the adoptive parent's death the adopted child would be free but had the obligation to use part of the inheritance for the necessary commemorative actions.³¹ Adoption as a way to safeguard the care for the elderly is also attested in the Hebrew Bible, but without an explicit associated instruction of care, after the death of the adoptive parents.³²

A terrible threat is expressed in the Babylonian poem Erra and Ishum, while making the enemy understand good and proper, that with the loss of his son he will also lose any positive prospects for the afterlife:

Him who had a son and said 'This is my son!
'Thus I have raised him, so he will return my favour!' —
I shall do the son to death and his father shall bury him,
then I shall do the father to death and he shall have none to bury him (IV.95-98).³³

It is a theme that also takes an important place in the Ugaritic legend of Aqhat. This is the story of king Daniel who with the help of the god Baal gets a son, Aqhat. However, he loses him again through the goddess Anat who is offended by Aqhat. This has consequences also for the funerary rituals for Daniel as can be derived from the way the importance of a son is expressed no less than four times:

Let him have a son in his house,
offspring in his palace,
one who sets up the stelae of his ancestral gods,
in the sanctuary the marjoram of his clan,
one who makes come out his smoke from the earth,
from the dust the Protector of his place,
one who puts the lid on the abuse of his revilers,
who drives away those who do something to him,
one who holds his hand in drunkenness,
who carries him when filled with wine,
one who serves his emmer-corn in the house of Baal
and his share in the house of El,
one who plasters his roof in the muddy season,
who washes his garments in the days of loam.
(KTU 1.17:I.25-33 = I.42-52 and II.1-8.16-23)³⁴

This describes it as the duty of a son to protect his father in moments of weakness, for instance when he is drunk. In the Hebrew Bible the story of Ham, who neglected this and instead mocked his intoxicated father Noah shows how seriously this command should be taken (Gen. 9:20-27). The son is also held responsible for his father when he has entered the netherworld, which is indicated in KTU 1.17:I.27-28 with 'earth' // 'dust'.³⁵ One could call this another state of weakness. To keep the memory of his father alive the son had to set up a stele, which could also function as a place for offerings to the dead. The Ugaritic text probably points to the apotropaic

herb marjoram. Other texts speak of offerings of animals, for instance, texts on stelae found in the same region of Syria and can be regarded as illustrations of the stele mentioned in KTU 1.17. They also underline the important role of the son in the memorial cult. In Sam'al, modern day Zinçirli, a city in south-eastern Turkey, situated about 200 km north of Ugarit, a basalt stele dating from the eight century BCE was found with an inscription by king Katumuwa. With this stele Katumuwa the 'still living' king makes arrangements for sacrifices to the gods and a feast at his burial chamber. He himself will be present after his death with 'my soul in this stele', whereas he expects his sons or other offspring to perform the rites.

I am Katumuwa, servant of Panamuwa, who commissioned for myself (this) stele while still living. I placed it in an eternal chamber and established a feast (at) this chamber: a bull for Hadad Qarpatali, a ram for NGD/R ŠWD/RN, a ram for Šamš, a ram for Hadad of the Vineyards, a ram for Kubaba, and a ram for my 'soul' that (will be) in this stele. Henceforth, whoever of my sons or of the sons of anybody (else) should come into possession of this chamber, let him take from the best (produce) of this vineyard (as) a (presentation)-offering year by year. He is also to perform the slaughter (prescribed above) in (proximity to) my 'soul' and is to apportion for me a haunch.³⁶

The second example concerns the funerary stele of the earlier king Hayyan from the same city of Sam'al. This was already found in 1888, but only recently it became possible to decipher it on the basis of new photographs.³⁷ This stele describes the same situation, with the deceased king being present as a 'soul' ordering his sons to bring sacrifices to the gods and also to feed him, 'so that I can eat and enjoy a good name, so that I, the soul of Hayyan, drink in my eternity'.³⁸ Being blessed with sons and having taken these measures will certainly have contributed to a happy old age for people like Hayyan.

In the Hebrew Bible we find a reference to such a stele in the sad story of Absalom mentioned above. He died a violent premature death without offspring. As if he had foreseen this already at a young age, he had 'set up for himself a pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance"' (2 Sam. 18:18). In fact, in comparison with the two Syrian stelae it only emphasizes the fact that a stone alone is far from ideal.

Some Concluding Remarks

The ancient Near Eastern texts discussed show that for old people their imminent death evoked mixed feelings. On the one hand the inescapable descent into the netherworld was frightening. On the other hand, there was the comforting idea that it is possible to have a positive influence upon one's state in the afterlife, especially in the continuity of the family. Whereas old age is usually associated with growing weakness ending in death, old people can show their resilience by making the right arrangements for the situation beyond one's demise. The story of old Jacob, read against the background of related stories in the ancient Near East and from the perspective of the model by Tomer and Eliason describing death anxiety, illustrates this well in the way in which Jacob is able to deal with setbacks. He could have died of grief because of the loss of his favourite son. But he survived. He could in his old age have been manipulated by his son, just like he manipulated his old father himself. But Jacob managed to give his blessing to the grandson of his own choice. He could have been buried in a foreign land. But he arranged that his remains would later be taken to the homeland and he could leave this up to the son of his own choosing. So at the end of his life, when he spoke of his coming death, he did not speak in a negative sense of 'going down to Sheol', but of 'being gathered to my people' and 'going to be buried with my fathers' (Gen. 49:29). The text does not inform us about what precisely Jacob

expected for himself in the afterlife. More important than this was what Tomer and Eliason call the 'locus of control' and the 'regret variables': he remained in control even beyond the boundary of death and at the end of his life was not spoiled by regrets.³⁹

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¹ In general the topic of old age in the Hebrew Bible is extensively studied by J. Scharbert, 'Das Alter und die Alten in der Bibel', *Saeculum* 30 (1979), 338-354; S. Sapp, *Full of Years: Aging and the Elderly in the Bible and Today*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1987; R. Dulin, *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging*, Mahwah: Paulist, 1988; M.A. Klopfenstein, 'Die Stellung des alten Menschen in der Sicht des Alten Testaments', in: idem, *Leben aus dem Wort. Beiträge zum Alten Testament* (BEAT 40), Bern: Peter Lang, 1996, 261-273; Athalya Brenner, 'Age and ageism in the Hebrew Bible, in an autobiographical perspective', in: A.G. Hunter, P.R. Davies (eds), *Sense and sensitivity: essays on reading the Bible in memory of Robert Carroll*, London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, 302-310; A. Meinhold, 'Bewertung und Beginn des Greisenalters', in: idem, *Zur weisheitlichen Sicht des Menschen. Gesammelte Schriften* (ABG 6), Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002, 99-116; J.G. Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging: God and the Elderly* (second edition), New York: Routledge, 2008; E. Otto, 'Altersversorgung im Alten Orient und in der Bibel', in: idem, *Altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte. Gesammelte Studien* (BZAR 8), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2008, 367-393; Ch. Frevel, "'Du wirst jemand haben, der dein Herz erfreut und dich im Alter versorgt'" (Rut 4,15). Alter und Altersversorgung im Alten/Ersten Testament', in: R. Kampling (ed.), *Alter – Blicke auf das Bevorstehende*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009, 13-43; Joel A.A. Ajayi, *A Biblical Theology of Gerassapience* (Studies in biblical literature 134), New York: Peter Lang 2010; S. Ernst, *Segen – Aufgabe – Einsicht: Aspekte und Bilder des Alterns in den Texten des alten Israel* (ATSAT 93), St. Ottilien: Eos Verlag, 2011; A. Michel, 'Texts of Terror für Alte? Gewalt gegen ältere Menschen im Alten Testament', in: I. Fischer (ed.), *Macht – Gewalt – Krieg im Alten Testament: Gesellschaftliche Problematik und das Problem ihrer Repräsentation*, Freiburg: Herder, 2013, 53-82; M. Werren, *Alttestamentliche Altersvorstellungen. "Ehe die Tage des Übels kommen..." in Kohelet 11,7-12,8*, München: Grins Verlag 2016.

² Cf. on the topic of old age in the ancient Near East R.M. Janssen, J.J. Janssen, *Getting Old in Ancient Egypt*, London: The Rubicon Press, 1996; M. Stoll, S.P. Vleeming (eds), *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 1998; R. Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature*, Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.

³ Part of the following paragraph is taken from my article 'Aged Jacob: Jacob's Final Years as the Biblical Ideal of Old Age', *Communio Viatorum* 58 (2016), 279-291.

⁴ Translations of the texts of the Hebrew Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989).

⁵ When Jacob meets Pharaoh he is 130 years old (Gen. 47:9). At that moment Joseph is 39 years old. He was 30 at the moment when he explained the dreams of Pharaoh (41:46). Between that moment and the moment when he is reunited with his father there are the seven years of plenty in Egypt (41:53). Together with the two years of famine before Jacob and his family move to Egypt (45:6). This adds up to 39 and indicates that Jacob was 130-39=91 at Joseph's birth.

⁶ Cf. the discussion by Matthew Suriano, 'Sheol, the Tomb, and the Problem of Postmortem Existence', *JHS* 16, article 11 (2016), concluding that 'Sheol stood in contrast to life after death as the opposite of an ideal fate' (p. 31).

⁷ Cf. my article 'Good Death and Bad Death in Ancient Israel According to Biblical Lore', *Social Science and Medicine* 58 (2004), 987-995; Ute Neumann-Gorsolke, '„Alt und lebenssatt ..." – der Tod zur rechten Zeit', in: A. Berlejung, B. Janowski (eds), *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt* (FAT 64), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 111-136.

⁸ In the Pharaonic Period in ancient Egypt 110 years appears to have been seen as the ideal lifetime; cf. Janssen, *Getting Old in Ancient Egypt*, 67-68. It is certainly no coincidence that the numbers of the age of the patriarchs are mathematically related: $147=3 \times 7^2$, $180=5 \times 6^2$, $175=7 \times 5^2$. It underlines the coherence of their stories.

⁹ David's command has a remarkable parallel in the Ugaritic myth of Baal. To put pressure on her request to the supreme god El for a palace for her consort Baal, the goddess Anat utters a terrible threat announcing what she will do to El if he does not give a house to Baal like the other gods: 'I shall make his grey hair run with blood, the grey hair of his old age with gore' (KTU I.IV.1-3). The fact that this is said to the god of the highest rank

underlines how offensive it is to make this threat to an aged person. It completely turns around the commonly shared ideal of a happy old age and peaceful death.

¹⁰ Num. 16:30, 33; Ps. 55:16; and Prov. 1:12 speak of 'going down to Sheol alive', indicating a sudden death. In all other cases 'going down to Sheol' is the equivalent of 'to die'.

¹¹ For example, M. Falkenhain, P.J. Handal, 'Religion, Death Attitudes, and Belief in Afterlife in the Elderly: Untangling the Relationships', *Journal of Religion and Health* 42/1 (2003), 67-76, researched a group of 71 middle class well-elderly persons in the Midwest United States and concluded that there is among them a 'strong relationship between intrinsic religion and belief in afterlife' (p. 73). On the basis of the review on recent literature on death anxiety by Robert A. Neimeyer et al., 'Psychological Research on Death Attitudes: An Overview and Evaluation', *Death Studies* 28 (2004), 309-340, one can assume that this leads to less fear of death. Apparently, elderly people exhibit less fear of death than the middle-aged. When it comes to the differences between age groups it is interesting that according to research by R.J. Russac et al., 'Death Anxiety Across the Adult Years: An Examination of Age and Gender Effects', *Death Studies* 31 (2007), 549-561, among students and people from church groups and senior centres in the Southeast of the USA '(d)death anxiety peaked in both men and women during their 20s and declined significantly thereafter. However, women displayed a secondary spike during their 50s not seen in men'.

¹² Cf., for example, Jessie Dezutter et al., 'The Role of Religion in Death Attitudes: Distinguishing Between Religious Belief and Style of Processing Religious Contents', *Death Studies* 33 (2009), 73-92. On the basis of their research among 471 Belgian adults they conclude that with advancing years there appears to be more acceptance of death, but also that the effect of the religious attitude was more important: 'a literal, closed-minded and dogmatic approach to religious contents is associated with more death anxiety and with a stronger tendency to avoid and suppress death-related thoughts' (p. 90). On the other hand, Faisal Azaiza et al., 'Death and Dying Anxiety Among Bereaved and Nonbereaved Elderly Parents', *Death Studies* 35 (2011), 610-624, note that among the researched 97 bereaved and nonbereaved elderly Israeli parents religiosity was unrelated to death and dying anxiety. Something similar was noted by Christopher M. Moreman and Joshua Kerr, 'Fear of death unaffected by intensity or type of afterlife belief in a Jewish population', *Death Studies* 46 (2022), 360-368, in their survey among 444 elderly Jewish people in the USA. According to them it shows 'that specific beliefs, intensity of belief, and orthodoxy of held beliefs play no significant role in the self-reported level of death anxiety in a Jewish population' (p. 360). This seems to be different, again, among older British Christians. On the basis of their research among 143 older adult British Christians Victoria Ka-Ying Hui and Peter G. Coleman, 'Afterlife Beliefs and Ego Integrity as Two Mediators of the Relationship Between Intrinsic Religiosity and Personal Death Anxiety Among Older Adult British Christians', *Research on Aging* 35 (2012), 144-162, conclude 'that intrinsic religiosity had a negative indirect effect on personal death anxiety through the joint agency of more benign afterlife beliefs and greater ego integrity' (p. 144). Also Monika Ardel and Kimberly Wingard, 'Spirituality and Wisdom: Their Differential Effects on Older Adults' Spiritual Behavior, Well-Being, and Attitudes Toward Death', in: Vern L. Bengtson, Merrill Silverstein (eds), *New Dimensions in Spirituality, Religion, and Aging*, New York & London: Routledge 2019, 183-213, conclude on the basis of their research among 150 elderly persons in the Southwest of the USA, among whom 19 hospice patients, that spirituality (defined as 'intrinsic religious orientation and spiritual beliefs') is a 'pathway to aging well and dying well' (p. 206).

¹³ Adrian Tomer, Grafton Eliason, 'Toward a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety', *Death Studies* 20 (1996), 333-365.

¹⁴ Adrian Tomer, Grafton Eliason, 'Life Regrets and Death Attitudes in College Students', *Journal of Death and Dying* 51 (2005): 173-195.

¹⁵ Leah Whitehead Craig, 'A Journey Into the Land of No Return: Death Attitudes and Perceptions of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Near Eastern Literature' (2008). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 106. http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/106 (assessed 24 July 2023), pp. 6-10.

¹⁶ Tomer, Eliason, 'Life Regrets', 177, figure 1.

¹⁷ Tomer, Eliason, 'Life Regrets', 181.

¹⁸ Translation by Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II: The New Kingdom*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, 95-96.

¹⁹ Cf. Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*, Cambridge: University Press, 2011, 119-120, on 'the Egyptian attitude toward death'.

²⁰ Cf. Nicola Harrington, *Living with the Dead: Ancestor Worship and Mortuary Ritual in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: Oxbow, 2013, 122.

²¹ Translation by Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings I: The Old and New Kingdoms*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 229-230.

²² Translation by R.O. Faulkner as published in Eva von Dassow (ed.), *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994, 147.

²³ This is very clearly expressed in the German translation by Erik Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1990, 397: ‘Keiner, der in ihr ruht, sagt “Hätte ich doch ...!”.’

²⁴ Cf. Annette Zgoll, ‘Die Toten als Richter über die Lebenden: Einblicke in ein Himmel, Erde und Unterwelt umspannendes Verständnis von Leben im antiken Mesopotamien’, in: Berlejung & Janowski, *Tod und Jenseits*, 567–581; esp. 567-568.

²⁵ Translation by A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Volume I*, New York: Oxford University Press 2003, 645.

²⁶ Cf. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, 65.

²⁷ Translation by George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic I*, 734-735.

²⁸ Cf. A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Volume II*, New York: Oxford University Press 2003, 903.

²⁹ Translation by George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic I*, 735.

³⁰ Translation by JoAnn Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Writings from the Ancient World 36), Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014, 160. See for this interpretation of the text A. Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im alten Mesopotamien* (AOAT 2016), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985, 112, n. 404, who translates the final line: ‘Wenn ein Mann alt wird und (erst) dann für sein Grab Zuweisung zuteilt, wird er sterben’. (tr. When a man grows old and (only) then allots for his grave, he will die.)

³¹ Cf. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, 66.

³² Cf. Otto, ‘Altersversorgung’, 380-393.

³³ Translation by A.R. George, ‘The Poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian Poet’s View of War’, in: H. Kenney (ed.), *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2013, 39-71, 56.

³⁴ Translation by K. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986, 146-147; cf. also J.C. de Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, Leiden: Brill, 1987, 227-228.

³⁵ On this interpretation see also Matthew McAfee, *Life and Mortality in Ugarit: A Lexical and Literary Study* (Explorations in Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations 7), University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2019, 299-302.

³⁶ Translation by Dennis Pardee, in: Virginia R. Herrmann and J. David Schloen (eds), *Remembrance of Me: Feasting with the Dead in the Ancient Middle East* (Oriental Institute Museum Publications 37), Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014, 45. Cf. also Dennis Pardee, ‘A New Aramaic Inscription from Zincirli,’ *BASOR* 356 (2009), 51-71.

³⁷ Cf. Émile Puech, ‘La stèle funéraire Araméenne de Ḥayyan, roi de Sam’al, à Ördekburnu,’ *RB* 128 (2021): 332-353.

³⁸ Puech, ‘La stèle funéraire Araméenne de Ḥayyan,’ 339: ‘afin que je mange et que soit favorable le bon renom, alors que moi, “la personne” de Hayyan, je bois (dans) mon éternité’.

³⁹ Thanks are due to Alice Deken for correcting the English of this article.