The theological dialectic of creation and death in Hebrew Bible wisdom traditions
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING DEATH AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THEOLOGIES OF CREATION ASSOCIATED WITH THE HEBREW BIBLE WISDOM TRADITION

The diverse and disparate theological voices encountered in the Hebrew Bible (HB) often present a challenge to biblical scholars. In particular if it is agreed that these theological voices should be allowed to operate simultaneously and in their own right, instead of trying to incorporate them within an all-encompassing framework. Creation and death as theological themes present some of the clearest instances of such theological disparity, not only between but also within diverse theological traditions. This also applies to the HB wisdom tradition (hereafter “wisdom tradition”). By means of a selection of texts associated with the wisdom tradition (cf. §1.6), this study will investigate the theological relation of creation and death in the context of each text and the broader tradition of which it forms a part. Further, an attempt is made to see how these texts interrelate, and how the diverse theological voices encountered therein may be held together in a meaningful theological discourse. In tracing the trajectory of how the theological construct of God as creator in the wisdom tradition offers a framework for making theological sense of the phenomenon of death, a plea is put forth for a constructive engagement with this theological diversity. Recognising and maintaining this theological diversity constitutes a creative tension, and an engagement herewith on the part of theologians could open up new avenues for theological reflection in diverse present day contexts.

2 To use the term “tradition” or “theological tradition” with regards to the HB presents an anachronism. But the HB does present us with differing views of the divine, and reflect different attitudes toward religious practices operative at different stages in Israelite society. These different views and attitudes have a legitimating function, voicing religious and ideological convictions of diverse religious functionaries.
4 This creation-death relation has not received that much attention within the field of HB studies. The work of C. Dohmen, Schöpfung und Tod: die Entfaltung theologischer und anthropologischer Konzeptionen in Gen 2/3 (SBB 17; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996) provides an example, but deals with the Jahwistic tradition, and has a different focus than this study.
5 J. Goldingay, Theological Diversity and Authority of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 39 rightly argues that a mere acceptance of the variety of perspectives in the HB is not enough, but “should be followed up by a consideration of how they are to be interrelated and allowed to function in practice, so that we hear all of them and not only those to which we are already attuned.”
6 Here “creative tension” implies that the theology of the HB is dialogical in nature, with contrasting views serving as a sounding board for one another, either confirming or challenging, but always in dialogue.
7 The development of theological tradition(s) does not mean that the older is replaced by the newer, even if the newer clashes with the older. Cf. H. Gese, Essays on Biblical Theology (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 19.
1.1 Considering the Research Problem

Texts provide windows to realities inviting readers to look in.\(^8\) Stories about the beginning and end of life occupy a central place in this process of looking in. Stories about the beginning are inherent and foundational to the social fabric of all cultures, for without them people face chaos.\(^9\) Such stories of the beginning, which often find expression in the form of a creation account, are not mere fiction or fantasy, but constitute realities in which people live.\(^10\) In a similar way death is a universal concern and the tendency to personalise or personify death has been labelled archetypal, i.e. “corresponding to an innate structure or tendency of the human psyche.”\(^11\) Such personifications of death, often expressed in the form of aetologies of death, are not merely poetical colourings,\(^12\) but real attempts at ascribing meaning to an otherwise tedious phenomenon.\(^13\) This study is concerned with the relation of these two phenomena, namely creation theologies, and attempts that ascribe meaning to the phenomenon of death.\(^14\) More specifically, how the phenomenon of death, as theological problem (§1.4), fits within the framework of theologies of creation. We will also consider to what extent the theological construct of God as creator offers a hermeneutical key for unlocking the complexities of this creation-death relation.\(^15\) As stated, the focus is limited to creation theologies associated with the wisdom tradition.

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\(^11\) N.J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 99. Of course, the adjective “primitive” has become rather derogatory and should be used carefully. Also J. Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 209 who points to the various responses to death and the ways in which death have been understood, ranging from defeat to punishment, to release and opportunity.
\(^15\) Here the argument of C. Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode: Leben und Tod in den Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments*, Edited by B. Janowski (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1997), 154 is relevant, namely that in the HB experiences of death are always experiences of God.
Creation and death are central and related theological themes in this tradition, and contribute to the construction of theological realities.\textsuperscript{16}

In considering the impact that death has on the evaluation of life, it has been argued that “Death is a cardinal validating fact of life. It stands sentinel at the end of every corridor of imagination and experience open to us, preventing our escape, turning us back on ourselves.”\textsuperscript{17} Vitality is dovetailed by knowledge of mortality. The inescapable reality of death prompts humans to ask existential questions concerning their origin and the meaningfulness of life in the wake of death. This is no different in the HB, and is particularly pertinent in the wisdom tradition. In the analysis of the selected texts we will also try to determine how death is negotiated in the search for meaning (Job 3; Qoh 11:7-12:8) and the celebration of vitality (Ps 104).

This brings into focus the perceived life-death relation operative in the selected texts. We will try to determine whether, in terms of this perceived relation, life and death are opposed to one another and as such constitute a binary opposition, or whether they present two sides of the same divinely created reality and as such constitute a complementary relation. In case of the former, death might be perceived as falling outside the boundaries of the divinely established creation, presenting a threat to life. As such it detracts from life and empties life, bringing life to an end. Because death is perceived as opposed to divine creation, it also distances from the creator. In case of the latter, death might be perceived as falling within the boundaries of divine creation, constituting a natural part thereof. As such death is perceived as the mere cessation of life, i.e. evaluated in biological terms, without any inherent, negative value attached to it. In this case it is the means of dying that becomes the qualifying principle.\textsuperscript{18}

Analysis of the selected texts shows that the wisdom tradition does not contain a singular response to these questions. This lack of theological uniformity presents a theological opportunity rather than a theological conundrum, and the theological integration of such diverse responses is not wishful. Rather, a contextual approach (historical, literary, and theological) is preferable in dealing with the multi-faceted nature of the wisdom tradition.\textsuperscript{19} In this study we will opt for the latter and steer clear of the former.

1.2 Considering the Theological Character of the Hebrew Bible

Given the biblical theological interest of this study, the aim of this section is to reiterate that the theological\textsuperscript{20} nature of the HB is not agreed upon by all biblical scholars,\textsuperscript{21} and should not be taken as a given. Some scholars argue unambiguously

\textsuperscript{16} I.e. theological reality constituted in the context of the text as distinct from a material reality outside the text.
\textsuperscript{19} A contextual approach is not without shortcomings, as indicated by J. Goldingay, \textit{Theological Diversity and Authority of the Old Testament} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 33. Yet it offers a viable approach for dealing with the rich theological variety of the HB.
\textsuperscript{20} Here “theological” qualifies a text or tradition that contributes to the description of the relation between God and humans and is understood as such by the communities of faith that produced, used, and transmitted the texts and traditions. Credit is given to Ed Noort for suggestions in this regard.
that the HB is a theological book and that a presentation of the theology of the HB requires no particular justification. Others counter this view, arguing that the HB contains very little if any theology at all. Yet the fact remains that the writings of the HB function in the context of religious communities and as such require a response or theological interpretation. Arguments concerning the theological character of the HB impact on the perceived task of Old Testament theology. So e.g. the criticism has been raised that biblical theology has been too much a child of modernity, serving the purpose to further theological interpretation of Scripture, whose concern presupposes a setting within a particular religious community. This criticism has been seconded by some in the sense that biblical theology should not serve the confessional interests of a particular group. But a theological approach to the HB can be both descriptive and confessional, as long as it is not enslaved to specific ideological agendas. Approaches to the HB that claim to be merely descriptive are also not innocent undertakings, since description always reflects the interest of those responsible for the description. As such, descriptive and confessional approaches both require a critical self-awareness.

Disagreement concerning the descriptive task of biblical theology coincides with the dispute concerning the nature of biblical texts. This includes the disagreement whether the biblical text should be seen as a witness to theological realities, or as a source for constructing theological realities. Childs maintained the notion of the text as witness, while Barr rejected this view, arguing that a text never witnesses to anything other than what the reader’s own personal theology regards as correct. He favoured the notion of the text as source, because it does not cancel out the possibility...

22 R. Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Ein kanonischer Entwurf* (vol. 1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), 1. His reasons for such an argument have more to do with the nature, function and intention of the writings of the HB.

23 E.g. D.H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Images* (BRLAJ 4; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17 for whom the HB contains beliefs and ideologies about God, social order and politics and ritual, but no theology. He sees scholarly attempts at dealing with the theology of the HB as imposing constructed theologies upon the HB and that such undertakings do not contribute to the furtherance of our understanding of Israelite ideas.

24 M. Sæbø, *On the Way to Canon: Creative Tradition History in the Old Testament* (JSOTS 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 160 differentiates three main types of Old Testament Theology, namely a salvation theology with a historical emphasis (especially the unique deeds of God); theology of order (i.e. creation theology) associated with the sages; a cult theology (salvation theology with a cultic emphasis) associated with the priestly circle and psalmic literature.


28 Idem, 78. But his claim that its confessional character will always serve Christian interests is not wholly warranted.


of finding other meanings in the text. Barr made the important observation that the real question is not whether the text is regarded as a witness or as a source, but rather how one decides whether it witnesses to a specific theological reality. That is, what hermeneutical framework or methodological approach governs our interpretation of texts? In case of methodological approaches the battle remains between those championing diachronic and those championing synchronic approaches for the purpose of discerning the theological realities operative in biblical texts. At least, in recent years, greater appreciation has developed for the contributions of both approaches, and indeed for their complementary nature. This notion is shared in this study, though it tends toward the synchronic. As such the first concern of this study is to determine how the distinct theological voices in the selected texts can be held together in a meaningful dialogue on the synchronic level.

1.2.1 Theological Diversity in the Hebrew Bible

Scholars who uphold the notion of the theological character of the HB for the most part agree on its theological diversity. But such agreement does not imply unanimity concerning the way in which this diversity should be dealt with. Gerstenberger stresses the multi-faceted theological nature of the HB and points out that “Many difficulties that we have with contradictory concepts of God arise from the fact that we constantly attempt to bring together the most different statements about God logically under one heading.” In a similar manner Murphy argues that “one can live comfortably with the several theologies of the Old Testament, without the need of any hierarchical systematisation of its pluralism.” In agreement with these arguments this study does not entail a unifying approach. Rather, an argument is put forth that the theological potential of the HB is located in its theological diversity. The HB should be allowed to function in all its diversity, rather than attempt to encompass the divergent views within the parameters of one theoretical or theological framework.

33 Idem, 14.
34 L.C. Jonker, Exclusivity and Variety: Perspectives on Multidimensional Exegesis (CBET 19; Kampen: Kok, 1996) illustrates this need for both in order to avoid exegetical exclusivity.
37 B. Janowski et al., Theologie und Exegese des Alten Testaments / der Hebräischen Bibel: Zwischenbilanz und Zukunftsperspektiven (SBS 200; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2005), 123. He highlights the diversified and often conflicting nature of theological themes and motifs in the HB, and argues that interpreters have to determine whether or not room is allowed for these texts to function theologically in their own right.
38 B.W. Andersen, From Creation to re-Creation: Old Testament Perspectives (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 75-96. It remains a task of biblical scholarship to differentiate between the theological dimensions in the different theological traditions or discourses of the HB, and to see how they are connected as part of the canonical writings.
In view of the texts that are analysed in this study we can again observe the argument of Gerstenberger that “theology in reality has exclusively to do with time-conditioned experiences of faith, statements and systems, in short with ideas of God and not with God in person or essence.” He views the theological plurality and diversity in the HB in a positive light. Scholars engaged with the theology of the HB should be content with and engage with the contextual images of God in the HB and proceed with the understanding that present day theological claims and statements are equally context-bound and of limited validity. Engaging with diversity and recognising the context-bound nature of theological statements contributes to the ongoing theological dialogue. The theological plurality of the HB presents an invitation to biblical scholars for critical and creative engagement. The fact that diverse theological perspectives and theological ways of imagining the divine were preserved, transmitted and allowed to function simultaneously in the HB points to the absence of theological normativity, but also toward a tolerance for theological plurality. In contrast with a modernist obsession with certainty and clear answers, the HB is much more open-ended in its theological argument. Allowing for diversity and appreciating this open-ended nature of HB theology stimulates dialogue and challenges theological arguments that have become rigid. This study proceeds with an awareness of the limits and boundaries of biblical theology, and recognises the conditioned nature of one’s reading of texts and ways of constructing theologies.

1.3 Creation as a Theological Problem in the Hebrew Bible

Creation as a central theological category in the HB has been rehabilitated to its rightful place, but during the first part of the twentieth century it was predominantly considered as foreign to or a late import into the theology of the HB. This resulted from the conviction that the theology of the HB rests on the twin pillars of covenant and salvation history. The Old Testament theologies of Eichrodt and von Rad, also R. Rendtorff, “Some Reflections on Creation as a Topic of Old Testament Theology,” in: E. Ullrich et al., Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp (JSOT 149; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 210 and R.J. Clifford, “Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation.” TS 46 (1985): 507 who point to the variety of people today who are asserting in different ways the central importance of the biblical doctrine of creation.


written during the turbulent times prior to the Second World War and in its aftermath, contributed to this devaluation of creation as theological theme in the HB. When an appreciation for the place of creation theology in the HB did develop, scholars were confronted with HB’s lack of uniformity in this regard. Instead of a single creation theology, the HB contains numerous creation texts which at times constitute contesting theologies. Such contesting theologies may even be encountered in a specific theological tradition, or more specifically a particular book. This last instance is exemplified by the primordial history of Gen 1-11. In the creation theologies associated with the wisdom tradition such contesting creation theologies and perspectives of the creator may also be identified. Also within a specific book, as in the case of Job.

A further concern for the study of creation theologies in the HB is authentication and relevance. That is whether a creation theology can really be judged as Israelite, or whether it constitutes an adaptation of an already existing creation account, or the reintegration and re-appropriation of already existing creation motifs from Israel’s Umwelt toward a particular theological intent. Given that the latter, i.e. literary and

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(OTS XLVII; Leiden: Brill, 2003). The first 107 pages of his book provide a good overview of the study of creation theology in HB scholarship.


46 Significantly Von Rad became a protagonist for ascribing a central place to creation within the framework of the theology of the HB. Cf. G. Von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970) for the re-positioning of creation as central theme within the wisdom tradition of the HB.


51 Particularly three publications served as a driving force behind these questions, namely C.R. Darwin, *The Origin of Species: by Means of Natural Selection* (1859); G. Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1876); H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (1895). In recent times the focus in HB scholarship has shifted from a historical or literary-critical approach to the theme of creation in the HB, to approaches that are more ecologically or theologically orientated. E.g. N.C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth* (EB 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

52 Transmitted theological traditions require recognition and authentication from those responsible for its transmission and from those receiving it.


theological cross-pollination, is often the case the question of theological significance arises. But in this regard the focus has rightly and often been re-directed to the question of purpose. That is, to what purpose were older creation accounts or motifs re-adapted and integrated in the theological traditions of the HB? How does the new theological mould into which it has been cast contribute in giving shape to the theological thrust of these creation theologies? This is a pertinent issue, seeing that the theology of the wisdom tradition is essentially creation theology. In the analysis of the selected texts we will return to this issue, and try to determine the purpose and intent of their particular creation theologies.

1.3.1 Creation Theology and the Significance of Worldview

An inquiry into creation theologies or cosmologies necessarily brings into picture the notion of worldview or Wirklichkeitsverständnis. The Israelites shared a basic tripartite worldview with their ancient Near Eastern neighbours, yet their view of the world had its peculiarities. Such peculiarities should not be studied in isolation from their Umwelt. To speak of the worldview of ancient Israel or the HB is not tenable.

54 See here E. Noort, Een Plek om te Zijn: Over de Theologie van het Land aan de hand van Jozua 8:30-35 (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 23 who argues for the continuing importance of ancient texts for theological reflection in the present and that these texts have a voice concerning the question of meaning in the presence.

55 In this regard T.N.D. Mettinger, “Intertextuality, Allusion and Vertical Context Systems in Some Job Passages,” in: H.A. McKay and D.J.A. Clines (eds.), Of Prophet’s Visions and the Wisdom of Sages (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 257 rightly argues that “All literature participates in the discursive space of the culture to which it belongs. A new text can only be fully appreciated in terms of a prior body of discourse which it implicitly or explicitly takes up, cites, prolongs, refutes or transmutes.”


57 W. Hendel, “Worldmaking in Ancient Israel.” JSOT 56 (1992): 3-18, at 17 argues that “The world of Israelite religion is neither wholly discontinuous nor is it a random collection of features from older versions. It is a world made from previous worlds.” World construction by means of words always takes place within the context of already existing worlds.


60 C. Houtman, Der Himmel im Alten Testament: Israels Weltbild und Weltanschauung (OtSt 30; Leiden: Brill, 1993). 283. R.A. Simkins, Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) attempted to construct a unified worldview of the HB, but has
In its present canonical shape the material of the HB is diverse in its view of the world. At the same time it is rather consistent in its Weltanschauung, i.e. its perception of who is responsible for creation, providence etc. How the creator is perceived and portrayed remains diverse however. As such it is preferable to speak of broadened worldviews in the HB, since new realities such as that brought about by the exile continue to give shape to already existing worldviews. For this reason the worldview(s) of ancient Israel is neither monolithic nor static. Since worldviews provide order, coherence and meaning to those who participate in it, it is comprehensible why changed socio-political and religious circumstance could lead to broadened or expanded worldviews. It could also happen, and often does, that there are variations in worldview among those who understand themselves to be part of the same religious tradition. To this we will return in the analysis of the selected texts, since they attest to such a variation in worldview within the wisdom tradition.

The worldview of the HB wisdom tradition is governed by the concept of order. This implies that the divinely established creation is an ordered world, and this order establishes and maintains the conditions necessary for life. In the earlier wisdom of Proverbs and the later wisdom of Job and Qohelet, divine creation is perceived to be governed by an inherent order. A disturbance of this divinely established order in been criticised as basically impossible, seeing the diversity of material in the HB. Cf. Brown, The Ethos of the Cosmos, 5. Indeed Simkins, Creator and Creation, 120 acknowledged this, since his reconstructed worldview does not manage to reflect all the complexities of the actual world in which ancient Israel lived.

In this regard Stadelman, The Hebrew Conception of the World, 177 argued that “The whole vision of the world and of physical phenomena is coloured by the ancient Hebrews’ conviction that God is creator and preserver of the natural order. Hence, God is the pivotal point of the Hebrews universe, and to this fact the biblical authors submitted their understanding of the structure and purpose of the world.” In situations of crisis, especially the exile, this basic tenet was scrutinised within different theological traditions of the HB.

R.K. Gnuse, No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel (JSOTSup 241; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 229 highlights the relationship between biblical thought and the antecedent worldviews of the ancient Near East. Thus, Israelite thought drew on existing thought forms to create a new synthesis.

N. Smart, Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983), 22-31 who defines worldview as an individual’s or group’s “orientation to life.” Also Niditch, Ancient Israelite Religion, 4-5 who employs and adapts four dimensions of worldview as proposed by Smart, Worldviews, 7-8, namely the experiential, mythical, ritual and ethical.

The selected texts do not contain personifications of wisdom as seen in Prov 1, 8, 9; Job 28; Sir 24; Wis 7-9. In the selected texts wisdom does not have a divine nature, but is a means of scrutinising creation one’s place in creation, as well as the creator and one’s relation with the creator. See also B. Lang, Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1986).

J. Sanders, “When Sacred Canopies Collide: The Reception of the Torah of Moses in the Wisdom Literature of the Second-Temple Period.” JSJ 32 (2001): 131. He utilises the categories drawn up by sociologist of religion Peter Berger, and argues that “...we may readily understand both the traditional sapiential approach to reality and the approach advocated by the Mosaic Torah as sacred canopies. Either the sapiential or the Mosaic tradition served to ‘legitimate the institutional world’ or to ‘integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality’ for those persons who accepted the one or the other.” A religious symbolic universe is seen as constituting a so-called sacred canopy.

creation can result in a disruption of the conditions necessary for life. When this perceived order becomes threatened, as in the exilic-postexilic period, some resistance or accommodation is expected in terms of worldview. This is particularly evident in the challenge posed to the principle of causality or Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang in the later wisdom tradition, as exemplified in Job and Qohelet. The result of such resistance and accommodation is that that which is judged as plausible remains. The incorporation of new ideas into already existing structures, such as that of proverbial wisdom, is not equal to assimilation, but rather the result of a process of negotiation. Older ideas often exist alongside new ideas and as such room for accommodation is possible within a new sacred canopy. This applies particularly to the wisdom traditions of the Second Temple period. The analysis of the selected texts, which were shaped during this period, also addresses the question of worldview reflected in their respective creation theologies. It is also considered to what extent these creation theologies reflect an expanded worldview, i.e. building on an already existing worldview, and what impact this had on the theological evaluation of death.

1.4 Death as a Theological Problem in the Hebrew Bible

The modern study of death in the HB is characterised by various phases, and little consensus exists on how best to present the diverse perceptions of the HB. For the most part the HB remains rather quiet concerning the theme of death, the dead and afterlife. For the most part we see only in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor 13:12). In view of such silence, death’s theological place in the HB continues to be debated. This of the biblical literature it is the wisdom writings that gave pride of place to the presupposition of a world shaped and governed by a single all-wise, all-seeing and all-powerful Creator.”

69 Contexts of pluralism, characterised by competing worldviews, could lead to a relativising of traditional religious tenets. Cf. Sanders, “When Sacred Canopies Collide,” 133.

70 So e.g. the more universalistic priestly conception of the world made it easier for the scattered Jewish minorities to live in the multi-cultural and multi-religious context of the Persian Empire. Cf. Al Bertz, A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period Vol. II, 493.

71 Remarkable about the sages of the Second Temple period is that they successfully sought such accommodation, but also retained the integrity of the wisdom tradition. Cf. Sanders, “When Sacred Canopies Collide,” 136. For R.E. Clements, Wisdom in Theology (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 63-64 the wisdom tradition of the exilic-postexilic context provided the Jews of the dispersion with the basis for a new, non-cultic, universalistic worldview.


74 A lack of evidence concerning the notion of an afterlife does not imply that there was no concern with the dead or what happened after the moment of death. It is particularly within the realm of ancient Israelite family religion that death and the proper relation of the living toward the dead played an important role. Cf. K. van der Toorn, Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life (SHCANE 7; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3.

75 The effect of changing perspectives on theological reflection is particularly clear concerning the subject of death and dying in HB, as argued by B.S. Childs, “Death and Dying in the Old Testament,” in: J.H. Marks and R.M. Good (eds.), Love and Death in the ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of
debate includes the question to what extent the HB perceptions of death reflect a development in changing historical contexts.\textsuperscript{76} In this regard it is often argued that before the Babylonian Exile death did not present a problem for the Israelites.\textsuperscript{77} Death was a biological inevitability and Sheol the final destination of all (e.g. Ps 6:6; 30:9; 39:13; 88:11-13; 146:4; Job 10:21; 14:10; Qoh 12:5).\textsuperscript{78} The only two exceptions in the HB are Enoch (Gen 5:21-24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11).\textsuperscript{79} In both cases, YHWH is the one that “takes” or “receives” (jql) them. Questions concerning the origin of death do not have a central place in the HB,\textsuperscript{80} which is more concerned with death’s impact on life. Further, YHWH is perceived as the God of life, the living God,\textsuperscript{81} who is first and foremost related to life. For this reason an etiology of death is not essential. YHWH alone holds the key to life and death (cf. Deut 32:39). The condition that characterised the exilic-postexilic, particularly the Second Temple period,\textsuperscript{82} contributed to the theological challenge posed by death. So e.g. the prohibition of any contact with death, the attribution of death and mortality to a devilish intent instead of divine design, as well as the development of the notion of resurrection, point to attempts at making sense of the phenomenon of death in a context of transition.\textsuperscript{83} This is also seen in the relation between resurrection and judgment after death, as a means of accounting for the premature death of the righteous, resulting from persecution.

single perspective gained a normative status. The lack of uniformity in the HB regarding the theme of death, and the lack of scholarly consensus regarding the interpretation of archaeological and literary sources, contributes to the complex theological character of death. In this study death is not investigated as an independent theme. Rather, the intention is to determine how it is perceived in the context of creation theologies, particularly that of the wisdom tradition. Coinciding herewith is the relation of death, the dead and the realm of the dead with the creator, but also the proper relation of the living toward the dead. By means of analysing the selected texts we want to determine how death, including the creator-death relation, is perceived and responded to theoretically.

As stated, death is variously perceived in the HB, but human mortality is presented as a given. This given has led to the argument that HB perceptions of death offer a contrasting interlude between the religions of the ANE and the mentality of the modern West. For the most part the HB perceives death and mortality as a natural and acceptable condition. This contributes to arguments that Israelite religion is essentially a Diesseitsreligion. Religions of the ANE, as well as Christianity and the modern West, often perceive death as something from without, as an autonomous or divine power, as an enemy of the created order, or as an inappropriate condition that

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90 In this regard Childs, “Death and Dying in the Old Testament,” aptly argues that “a most fruitful avenue for the theological reflection on death and dying in the Old Testament would be one which would reckon, not only with the original sociological setting of a biblical text, but with the later audiences who received, transmitted, and transformed the ancient literature to serve a new religious function.”


92 Feldman, Biblical and Post-biblical Defilement and Mourning, 16.

93 A good example concerns the so-called cult (i.e. veneration) of the dead. Here opinion can still be divided between the minimalists and the maximalists. In this regard E. Bloch-Smith, “Death in the Life of Israel,” in: B.M. Gittlen (ed.), Sacred Time, Sacred Place: Archaeology and Religion of Israel (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 139 rightly refers to the so-called cycle of interpretation concerning the dead in the HB, and argues that “Initially the dead were attributed an active role, only later to be consigned to Sheol. They were again resurrected and at present are being stripped of their powers.” The negative tendencies are viewed with suspicion by Bloch-Smith, identifying so-called “theological forces” at work.

94 C. Barth, Diesseits und Jenseits im Glauben des späten Israel (SBS 72; Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1974), 102 argued that despite the development of a Jenseiterwartung in the postbiblical period, a continuity of and commitment to tradition is also visible in Jewish faith in this regard. I.e. earlier thought and tradition is not merely brushed aside, but rather engaged with.

95 In the intertestamental Wisdom of Solomon human mortality is decreed as the result of the envy of a “devil” (דַּיְאָבָל o-; 2:23-24), rather than the design of the divine creator (1:12-13). This view is absent in the HB, which for the most part accepted human mortality as part of the original design of creation. Ideas and practices of the ANE concerning death, the dead and the realm of the dead were adapted in the HB and at times became polemical (Lev 19:28; 20:1-11), but in some instances these ideas and practices continued (e.g. 1 Sam 28; Isa 8:19).

96 Bailey, Biblical Perspectives on Death, 2-4.

97 In Israel and its Umwelt the death of the other challenged individuals and communities to consider their own mortality. The response to this challenge is seen in some of the earliest literature from the ANE. Myths and cosmogonies provided a means for ancient peoples who “tried to grapple with the reasons for death and its mechanics.” Cf. S. Campbell and A. Green (eds.), The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East (OM 51; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1995), ix.

98 Even when mortality belongs to mankind and Gilgamesh is told so, Tablet 10 lines 304-307 of the Gilgamesh Epic state: “No one sees death,
modern medical research might someday overcome. That is, prolonging life by trying to extend the boundaries of death. But perceptions of death in the HB, the ANE or the modern western world are not so clear cut. Such a distinction does however highlight the predominant HB view of death and mortality as natural, acceptable and inevitable, even if it is at times lamentable. This distinction should however not lead to a domestication of HB perspectives on death, since a too strong emphasis on the biological understanding of death could demean the radical intersection of death with life, which is at times expressed in mythical or metaphoric ways. The HB rather comprehends death through all its phases as a challenge to life, and that life and death throughout remain in a dynamic relation. That is, death might be the inevitable, natural end of all, but one should still try to avoid bringing an early death upon oneself, e.g. by means of foolish conduct. The analysis of the selected texts also indicates that the nature of this dynamic is influenced by the perception of God as creator, and the experience of the creator-creation relation. In the HB, death is understood and accepted as a natural part of the divinely created order, but experiences of death are far more pervasive that mere biological cessation.

1.4.1 Death and the Wisdom Tradition

In the wisdom tradition death is at times a dubious affair. In the wisdom of Proverbs death is associated with folly (tlw, cf. Prov 7:27; 9:18; 14:12; 16:25), and no one sees the face [of death,]
no one [hears] the voice of death:
(yet) savage death is the one that hacks man down.” Cf. George, The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic vol. 1, 697.


100 This is a characteristic of modern western culture. Cf. D.J. Davies, A Brief History of Death (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); also P. Ariès, Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present (trans. P.M. Ranum; Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).


102 Particularly when we consider that the contribution of faith communities situated in the present in determining which biblical response to death is most meaningful in a particular situation.


104 Isa 25:8 envisions this tension as being dissolved when háwytha swallows death (twm) in victory.

life with wisdom (חַיּוֹת, cf. Prov 3:18; 10:11; 11:30; 13:14; 14:27). The way of wisdom leads to life (Prov 8:35), i.e. life Diesseits, since death remains the inevitable, natural end of the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked. Wise living might bring about a long life, while foolish living could lead to an early, i.e. bad death (Prov 8:36; also Qoh 7:17). Wisdom can prevent a premature death of the righteous (Prov 10:2; 11:4). The spatial metaphor in Prov 15:24 (“The way of life is above to the wise, that he may depart from Sheol beneath”) emphasises the superiority of life as opposed to death. The negative evaluation of death and Sheol in proverbial wisdom derives from the fact that death deprives life of its positive values in the present. In proverbial wisdom death is a given, and Sheol awaits all. It entertains no notion of an afterlife, and Prov 23:18 and 24:14 which refer to an “after” (טִירָג) and “hope” (חַוֶּית) apply to this life, not a continued existence after death. Yet the open ended nature of these proverbial statements allowed for it to be entertained at a later time, e.g. in two postexilic wisdom Psalms, 49 and 73. At times, proverbial wisdom also reflects an awareness of its own limits (e.g. Prov 16:9; 19:21; 21:30-31; 26:12) in providing certainties, also pertaining to the theme of death.

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom constitutes life (חיים). For this reason death is not merely a consequence of folly, but an expression of a mode of living apart from life (e.g. Prov 8:35-36). To walk in folly is to live a life of death. In this sense dying is understood as a negative way of living. It is a mode of living in opposition to the way of life (Prov 2:19; 5:6; 6:23). This wise / foolish and life / death dichotomy becomes more complex in the later wisdom of Job and Qohelet. The lines of this dichotomy are less clear. Death is still regarded as the final, inevitable end of all. Yet the borders of death become more porous. Particularly due to the fact that wisdom’s guarantees became questionable. This disturbed the notion that the divinely established creation is well-ordered and beneficial for the wise. As a result, life within creation becomes uncertain. If wisdom can no longer “steer” (הָלִית) one’s course through life, life becomes characterised by endemic uncertainty. The intertestamental wisdom of Ben Sira raises the question concerning the vindication of the righteous, but resists any notion of an afterlife and rather affirms death as the lot and end of all (38:21-23; 14:17; 41:9-10). Wisdom of Solomon also raises questions concerning the suffering of the righteous, and in the process touches on the theme of immortality (e.g. 1:15; 3:4; 4:1; 8:17; 15:3, 15), but never raises the topic of resurrection. It is ultimately

106 Murphy, “Death and Afterlife,” 103-105.
107 Idem, 104.
108 Idem, 104-105.
110 J.L. Crenshaw, “The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,” in: J.G. Gammie et al., Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honour of Samuel Terrien (New York: Scholars Press, 1978), 212-213. Also Murphy, “Death and Afterlife in the Wisdom Literature,” 109-114. The HB text of Ben Sira does not introduce any new ideas on death an afterlife, but the Greek and Old Latin versions often expand on these themes, entertaining the notion of some form of afterlife or judgment after death, e.g. the expansion of Sir 16:22.
the problem of theodicy that gave rise to the notion of bodily resurrection, judgment and an afterlife by the second century BCE (e.g. Dan 12; 2 Macc 7). Questions pertaining to the death of the righteous became acute in view of the threats and persecutions experienced by the early Jewish community under the Hellenistic Seleucids, particularly during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (176-164 BCE), as exemplified in 2 Macc 7:1-42. The HB wisdom literature as well as the intertestamental wisdom literature offers no single universally held answer to the question of death or the life-death relation. Rather a variety of responses are offered and allowed to function simultaneously.

1.5 The Creation-Death Relation as a Theological Problem in the Hebrew Bible

It has rightly been argued that “Beliefs about life and death, whether consciously articulated or not, form part of the make-up of all human beings, and the people of the Old Testament provide no exception in this respect.” In as far as this argument holds true, the creation-death relation in the HB remains problematic. This is particularly pertinent from the diverse responses to the phenomenon of death, which often involve the maintenance of irreconcilable opposites in different and at times the same tradition(s). This is not a result of religions’ unwillingness to face facts, but rather because the facts of experience demand an attitude of both and not an attitude of either or. Religion, also Israelite religion, allows for complexities in understanding death.

114 Nickelsburg, Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life, 11. Also Crenshaw, Defending God, 151, 163.
115 H.Graf Reventlow, “Leben und Tod im Alten Testament,” in: G. Binder and B. Effé (eds.), Tod und Jenseits im Altertum (BAC 6; Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1991), 9-20 at 19. In this regard we can consider 2 Macc 7:28-29 where the mother employs the rhetoric of creation in addressing her youngest son before his execution, arguing that the creator also has the power to recreate, as a reference to future resurrection (“…that I may receive you again…”). This image of God as creator, whose creative power is not limited by death, contributes to overcoming fear of death. Cf. Groß, Studien zur Priesterschrift und zu alttestamentlichen Gottesbildern, 153-155.
118 Niditch, Ancient Israelite Religion, 50-51 indicates how the fundamental and value laden dimensions of creation (“cosmogony”) and death (“immortality”) intertwine and overlap in some threads of the Israelite tradition. She tries to establish how the notion of world creation and human mortality inform one another. In her view creation accounts (mythology) offer a sense of shared identity to communities by offering a picture of its earliest context. Stories about the beginning offer important information concerning one’s primordial roots in order to understand present realities.
119 This is related to the fact that in the biblical context, death was continually experienced and understood in new and different ways. Cf. Barth, Die Errettung, 154.
120 Bowker, The Meanings of Death, 211. He argues that “The religious exploration of death and of the continuities of consequences through death emerge from very cautious explorations of what belongs to our experience within the boundaries of this body and this life.”
An acceptance of human mortality in the HB implies that life is to be lived within the boundaries and time-limits of divine creation. Life in the present is what matters, with the striving toward some goal or reward after death absent in Israelite religion till a late stage. This does not mean that the continuation of one’s memory after death was insignificant for the Israelite. But for such remembrance life in the present is what mattered. Preferably one needed a good name, a good death, a decent burial and loyal offspring that would commemorate the deceased. Due to the emphasis on present living, the evaluation of divine creation, as well as the perception of the creator-creation relation and one’s place in creation become determinative for the way in which death is perceived. In terms of a positive experience of this relation, death commences with biological cessation, and being gathered to one’s people (e.g. Gen 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29; Num 27:13; 31:2) is part of an ideal death. A negative perception of life in creation can lead to an experiencing of death in life. (e.g. Ps 88, as metaphorical expression). In as much as life is to be lived within creation, creation is also the realm of divine activity, which includes setting limits to human life (e.g. Gen 3:22-23; 6:3) and even bringing life to an end (Gen 6:13, 17; 7:4). Invariably this raises questions concerning the place of death within the boundaries of creation and the relation between death and the creator, e.g. whether death brings an absolute separation from the creator (e.g. Ps 30:9; 88:10), and absolute separation between the living and the dead (e.g. Lev 11:31, 32; 19:28; 21:1; Num 5:2; 6:6; 16:48; 19:11 etc.). In this way the ambiguous nature of the Divine-dead relation in the HB becomes clearer, and is considered in the analysis of the selected texts.

122 Martin-Achard, From Death to Life, 3 argued for the Israelite love of and optimism for life, seeing it as a divine gift. Israelite religion does not reflect a longing to escape from this world, but rather a desire to have length of days in it, and to enjoy the resources offered by the creator in creation.
123 G. Kittel, Befreit aus dem Rachen des Todes: Tod und Todesübergang im Alten und Neuen Testaments (BTS 17; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).
124 Schmidt, Memory as Immortality, 99-100.
125 Martin-Achard, From Death to Life, 5 observed that “to live” (חי) in the HB is more than “to be,” since to live is also to be created. Further, “life” (חי) for the Israelites was not defined “conceptually,” but rather “functionally,” i.e. knowing it in its manifestations. See also T. Pola, “Was ist Leben im Alten Testament.” ZAW 116 (2004): 251-252. Life is seen as that which is in movement, whereas that which is static e.g. plants, were not considered to be “alive.”
126 Martin-Achard, From Death to Life, 5 viewed life in the HB as primarily a “force” which may increase or decrease, and of which the intensity can vary from moment to moment. Such an understanding of life as “force” led him to regard death (along with sickness, weariness, sleep) within the HB as an “enfeebled form of life.” See also Barth, Die Errettung; Loader, “Emptied Life,” 681.
127 So e.g. death is perceived as part of creation, but could also be perceived as divine punishment for sin. H.P. Schmidt, “Todeserfahrung und Lebenserwartung;” in: Leben angesichts des Todes: Beiträge zum theologischen Problem des Todes (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1968), 205.
128 Indeed, in different religions the phenomenon of death in the midst of life is accounted for either as part of creation or as something which came into the world after creation. Cf. Richardson, “Death: Old Testament,” 108-110. The HB contains no etiology of death proper (also not Gen 2-3).
129 E.g. Ps. 6:6; 88:11-13 and the prayer of Hezekiah in Is 38:9ff. In this regard Feldman, Biblical and post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning, 17-18 points out that God’s absence from death in certain HB texts led Sigmund Mowinckel to remark that it almost conflicts with the idea of the supreme power of YHWH over creation. However, the notion of God’s omnipresence, or the inescapable nature of God’s presence, is reflected in e.g. Ps 33:7; 95:4; 55:15; Job 11:7-8; 12:22; 26:6; Pr 15:11; Deut 32:22. Thus, it is not clear whether this divine-human relation ends at the grave.
130 Johnston, “Death in Egypt and Israel,” 94 argues that death in ancient Israel was considered to bring inactivity, no sanctioned contact with the living, and separation from the one official deity.
131 Feldman, Biblical and Post-biblical Defilement and Mourning, 16.
1.6. Delimitation of the Study: Accounting for the Selected Texts

In the HB the significance of life (µyyj, vpn) in the present, that is biological or physical existence, cannot be denied. But Israelite religion also looked to qualities of relationship with the deity to express the meaning of life (cf. Ps 63:3; also Ps 1:3; 36:9; 67:1; 31:16; 13:3) and hence the relationship of life to death (cf. Isa 9:3). In a variety of ways the wisdom tradition concerns itself with this quality of relationship with the deity and in particular with God as creator, both in individual and communal life. For this reason the selected texts, namely Ps 104, Job 3 and Qohelet 11:7-12:8 will be scrutinised for indications of this creator-creation relation. In these texts the perceived quality of relation with the creator, and the perception of one’s place in creation, is significant for the evaluation of death. The selected texts employ a particular pattern of rhetoric by means of which the creation-death relation is given literary shape. An analysis of these rhetorical aspects requires a focus on both the micro and macro literary context of each text. Likewise the wider socio-cultural and socio-religious contexts of these texts, in as far as they can be determined, are not left out of focus. It has implications for determining the connectedness of diverse concepts of God and creation as well as death in the exilic-postexilic period. It might also be suggestive of the social-structures in which these diverse concepts emerged and functioned. This applies e.g. to the traditions concerning the creation

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133 Though she focuses on a different text E.J. van Wolde, “The Text as Eloquent Guide: Rhetorical, Linguistic and Literary Features in Genesis 1,” in: L.J. De Regt et al., Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), 134 points out that texts employ literary means and stylistic features as part of their rhetoric in order to guide the reader and to focus the attention on one aspect rather than another. In how far this is applicable to the selected texts will have to be determined.
134 Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 114-116 argued for the importance of focusing on the “inner dynamic” of a text in relation to larger biblical units. But in this regard it has rightly been pointed out that references to death in the HB should be investigated “within its own literary-historical framework, with the understanding that each author, within his or her own political and spatial-temporal context, might have a distinct idea” concerning matters relating to death, life after death and the correct relationship between the living and the dead. Cf. Friedman and Overton, “Death and Afterlife: The Biblical Silence,” 56.
135 F. Stolz, Einführung in den biblischen Monotheismus (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 188 raises the important question concerning the possibility to establish the social-location of diverse theological traditions (theologische Strömungen) in the HB. He rightly points out that “religiöse Milieus sind nicht mehr automatisch soziale Milieus, ebenso wenig finden kultische und subkulturelle Milieus vorexilischer Zeit einfach eine Fortsetzung.”
136 In this regard Berlejung, “Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellung der Israeliten,” 465 correctly argues that “Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellung der Israeliten ist kein Thema, das ohne die entsprechenden Vorstellungen der Umwelt sachgerecht erfasst und verstehend beschrieben werden kann.” At the same time the common stock of ancient Near Eastern ideas concerning life and death has in many ways been adapted to fit the theological interests of the Israelite community, or the theological or ideological interests of the biblical writers. Thus, the divergent representations should not merely be understood in the light of the broader ancient Near Eastern context, but also in the light of wider theological context of the HB of which it forms a part.
137 Stolz, Einführung in den biblischen Monotheismus, 188.
138 Nickelsburg, Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life, 10 emphasises the importance of taking serious the contexts within which texts and ideas reflected therein develop. “They are the products of real people, living in concrete historical situations. In no small measure, they are posed as answers to the problems which these people have seen arising from the situation they confront.” See also M.E. Stone, “Ideal Figures and Social Context: Priest and Sage in the Early Second Temple Age,” in: P.D. Miller and P.D. Hanson and S.D (eds.), Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore
of the world and creation of humanity. The exilic-postexilic context created room for the intertwining of aspects related to these two creation traditions. Such an occasional merging of creation traditions coincided with the increased significance of creation theology during the exilic-postexilic period. In the exilic-postexilic period it became increasingly difficult to affirm the saving acts of God in history, leaving a theological void. Creation theology contributed in filling this void and in this way gained greater theological significance.

The analysed texts stem from turbulent contexts of socio-political, cultural and religious change. Confrontation with foreign religious ideas (Babylonian, Persian, Greek), and the eventual development of new religious ideas such as bodily resurrection and judgment after death in the early Jewish community called for a religious response, either by challenging, or reasserting existing religious conceptions of the creator and creation. In part this accounts for the religious perspectives encountered in these texts, since responses to death and perceptions of creation are time conditioned. It is significant however that while some of these responses gain a particular prevalence, others are gradually replaced or adapted in such contexts of transition. This context also entailed a blurring of the lines demarcating official and personal religion.

It is particularly during the exilic-postexilic context that the Israelites, without established kingship, cultic and social structures, became aware of their fragility, both individual and communal, and had to face it head on. But the crisis of the exile also

Cross, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 575-586 at 582 who points out that the roles of the sage and priest are deeply influenced by social context in the early Second Temple period.

Westermann, Biblical Reflection, 98-100 argues that the background of so-called origin narratives was an “existential” rather than an “intellectual” problem. One of the reasons lying behind a consideration of origins is that such “knowledge” serves as ground and support of one’s continuation in the present. Particularly in situations of threat, such “knowledge” serves an important function. Albertz, Israel in Exile, 136. See also Albertz, Persönliche Frömmigkeit, 27-96, 179-190. According to his argument, creation theology retained its importance due to its continuance in the realm of family religion, basing the divine-human relation not on God’s acts in history, but God’s creation of each individual.

In this regard S. Burkes, Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period (SBLDS 170, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) argues that the circumstances within which the material of the Second Temple period was composed included developments such as increased individualism, the detachment of the individual from the community, a view of God as ever more distant, and the uprising empirical approach, with a consideration for further social and historical developments, all led to a changed attitude toward the phenomenon of death. Also S.E. Burkes, God, Self and Death: The Shape of Religious Transformation in the Second Temple Period (JSOJSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

Here the tension between the work of the Chronicler and Qohelet is significant, serving as an example of a tension filled co-existence of theological traditions. Cf. Sacchi, The History of the Second Temple Period, 197. The religious response to the challenges presented by the exile led to the contextualisation of theology. Cf. Gerstenberger, Theologies, 207.


Albertz, Menschenschöpfung und Weltschöpfung, 125 locates the HB Weltschöpfung tradition in the realm of Israel’s official religion as practised in the larger cultic places of the land, while the older Menschenschöpfung tradition is located in the realm of personal religion (persönliche Frömmigkeit). Also R. Albertz, Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion: Religionsinterner Pluralismus in Israel und Babylon (CTM 9; Stuttgart: Calver, 1978), 37-38.

led to a questioning of the breadth of YHWH’s creative power (§5.2). The theologies operative in Ps 104, Job 3 and Qoh 11:7-12:8 do not have to be labelled as crisis theology. Rather, they present different responses to particular challenges posed to existing religious conceptions of creator and creation. This includes the theology associated with covenant and salvation history. Creation theology contributed to this process of facing their fragility, while death began to present a theological problem. The Israelite reinterpretation and re-appropriation of existing theological ideas, and literary motifs from its Umwelt reflects the ability to imagine the world, i.e. present reality, in new and different ways (e.g. Isa 40). The impact of events surrounding the Babylonian exile on Israelite religion should not be underestimated, but the extent of this influence remains open for debate. In part it led to a reformulation of Israelite religious tradition, given the collapse of its major religious institutions. Experiences of these events impacted on the perceptions of God, and during the exilic-postexilic period the God of Israel becomes increasingly “a universal God of the worlds, and therefore the creation of the world is also attributed to him.” In the texts investigated in this study the tradition of world creation is

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146 W. Groß, *Studien zur Priesterschrift und zu alttestamentlichen Gottesbildern* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1999), 153. In Ps 104 and Job 38, the difficulty is encountered that YHWH’s provision of sustenance for some implies the suspension of life of others.

147 Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period*, 161ff discusses the work of the Chronicler and the books of Job and Qohelet within the context of late Zadokitism (c.a. 400-200 BCE) and points out how these works are reflective of developing social and religious change within the postexilic Judean context.

148 In this regard it has been pointed out that this period is characterised by a gradual shift in focus from the community to the individual, particularly concerning the principle of retribution. Cf. Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period*, 186-87. This shift is already seen in Ezek 18, and culminates within the books of Job and Qohelet. Sacchi places the book of Job after Ezekiel and contemporary with the work of the Chronicler.


150 A focus on creation and death contributes to a reframing of the present, i.e. present life situations. See here W. Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 49 who argues “We will not get very far in reshaping the present until both past and future are boldly reframed.”

151 That the importance of the exile is overstated in biblical scholarship or that the tradition of the exile is merely an instance where ideology was read as history, as the work of e.g. H.M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the “Exilic” Period* (SO 28; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996) seems to claim, has been variously criticised. There was certainly continuity, i.e. continued existence in Judah after the exile, but this cannot downplay the impact of the exile, as illustrated by the body of literature that resulted from this event.

152 See here D.L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989). Also R. Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (trans. D. Green; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 133-34. Without a king or temple, without political or cultic institutions, it became impossible to maintain the basic tenets of Jerusalemite or Zion theology. As such the theological void resulting from the exile was filled with new theological voices that were critical and at times hopeful. A spin-off of this “deregulation” of official religion is the increase in literary production, as well as the development of new theological schools. In this regard Clements, “Wisdom and Old Testament Theology,” 273-275 argues for the increased importance of wisdom in this context, contributing to a non-sacramental understanding of religion.


154 Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, 242. In this regard he shares the argument of Albertz, *Mensenschöpfung und Weltschöpfung*, 171 that the creation of humanity presents the older tradition and the creation of
prominent, and the tradition concerning the creation of humanity less apparent, though not absent. This complicates attempts at positioning these texts within the religious development of ancient Israel. But it is indicative thereof that in situations of crisis, new strategies had to be thought out in order to ascribe meaning to creation, that is personal, communal and universal creation, and in effect also to the phenomenon of death and its relation to these forms of creation.

1.6.1 Psalm 104

Psalm 104 as a doxological hymn (v 1, 35b) of creator and creation constitutes an amalgamation of the theology of wisdom and the cult. This is evidenced by its wisdom orientation (v 24), and theological affinities with Gen 1:1-2:4a. This fusion of diverse theological traditions complicates diachronic and synchronic analysis. In this study the focus rests predominantly on the final form of Ps 104. In this doxological psalm creation and creator take centre stage, and death does not present an independent theological theme. Yet the theme of death is present in this creation psalm, and this is not without significance. An abundance of life does not imply the absence of death. In Ps 104 the creator-creation relation comes into sharp focus. The perception of this relation, which is overtly positive, contributes to the theological evaluation of death. The negative tone in v 35 is indicative of an expectation and hope directed toward the present, and is based on a trust in the goodness of the creator. In this regard we will consider the argument that experiences of death in the HB are always experiences of God. Even in death, created beings do not fall outside the parameters of divine creation and involvement. The individual is part of the greater creation and as such the death of the individual does not present a threat to the continuation of creation (v 30). The positive perception of creator and creation and the continued trust in the creator, provide reasons why death in Ps 104 is not regarded as an emptying of life, or as bringing about a separation from the creator. It does not stand in opposition to the divinely established creation, and is not experienced as a threat to its inherent order.

Given that Ps 104 presents a fusion of theological traditions, we will try to determine to what extent this text presents a different perspective, i.e. whether it deviates from or perpetuates existing theological thought. In as far as death is presented as the end of individual life Ps 104 corresponds with earlier (e.g. Gen 2:4b-3:24) and later (Job and

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the world a later development in the religion of ancient Israel. This argument goes back to Westermann, *Schöpfung*, 100-102 according to whom it initially presented two independent traditions that were brought together at a later stage. Also R. Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (CTM 9; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978), 37 for the argument that the tradition of the creation of the world belongs to the official religion of ancient Israel as practised at the major sanctuaries and occurs especially in the communal lament, while the tradition of the creation of humanity occurs particularly within the individual lament or “personal religion.”


As e.g. the development of the notion of the divine vindication of the righteous after death, in view of the suffering experienced in the intertestamental period and the challenges it posed to the traditional tenets of the principle of retribution (*Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*).
Qohelet) theological traditions. Due to the positive emphasis Ps 104 places on divine omnipotence and the beneficence of creation, as does the P creation account of Gen 1:1-2:4a, it stands in stark contrast with Job 3 and Qoh 11:7-12:8, in which the theological affirmations of Ps 104 become problematic. Ps 104 stresses the dependence of all of creation on the creator. This theme of dependence becomes complicated in later theological traditions. Also in Job 3 and Qoh 11:7-12:8. In turn this contributes to the particular perception of death. In Ps 104, death is defined in terms of the experiences of creator and creation, as well as the creator-creation relation.

1.6.2 Job 3

The Promethean-like Job speaks to the imagination of many exegetes. Job’s severe calamity described in the prose prologue of chapters 1-2, is met by an equally calamitous poem that finds literary expression in Job 3. In this text creation and death are two integrally related theological themes. Job is brought to light (i.e. life) by the creator (v 20), but now wishes to be covered by the shadow of death (vv 4-5), in order to escape the oppressing omnipresence of the creator. Having lost just about all reason for hope in the realm of life, he turns his attention and hope to the realm of death (vv 17-19). His perception of death in this chapter is defined in terms of his experience of the creator, creation and the creator-creation relation. In Job 3 the basic nature of death corresponds to that of the wider context of the book, but the way in which death is perceived differs markedly. This embracing of death and the positive envisioning of the realm of the dead constitutes a unique scenario in the HB. This is also the case in the book of Job and brings into focus the theological and rhetorical function of Job 3, particularly in relation with the divine speeches (chs. 38-41), which are often claimed as countering Job’s wish for the undoing of his creation.

The divine speeches do counter Job’s claims, but a direct answer does not seem to be their immediate intent. But in the end Job concedes and claims that he has “seen” the divinity (42:5). This brings the Job of the epilogue in close proximity with the taciturn Job of the prologue (1:22; 2:10). Such an internal movement does not however detract from the sharpness of Job’s outcry in chapter 3. Significant is that Job claims to have seen the deity, his creator, in the context of divine creation as depicted in the divine speeches. This suggests that hope is to be found within the parameters of divine creation, i.e. in the realm of life, rather than the realm of death. In part this accounts for the reversal in Job’s initial appraisal of death and the realm of the dead. For a Joban change of tongue occurs before the actual restoration of his fortunes. The creation theology operative in the broader context of the book of Job is ultimately determinative for rehabilitating Job’s longing for death. In Job, death finds its theological place within the parameters of creation, and for this reason Job’s initial embrace of death presents an attempt to restore his creation, i.e. his life. Ultimately, Job’s experience of suffering leads to a renewed or deeper understanding of God as creator. Ultimately it is his negative experience of creator and creation, and the creator-creation relation that led to his redefinition of death’s traditional qualities in his opening self-speech in chapter 3.

1.6.3 Qohelet 11:7-12:8

Qohelet’s musings concerning the meaning of life, in the broadest sense of the word, have grabbed the attention of numerous HB scholars. Instead of calling for consensus, the book of Qohelet flourishes amidst often contrasting scholarly opinions. It is significant that scholarly interest concerning the theme of death outweighs that devoted to the theme of creation in Qohelet.\(^{158}\) But both creation and death are central and theologically interrelated themes in the book. This also applies to Qoh 11:7-12:8, which can be read as a hymn to life or a fugue of death, and prompts the question whether Qohelet is essentially a preacher of joy or of doom. For Qohelet life’s positive moments are to be praised and enjoyed within creation (e.g. 2:24; 3:1, 11a, 12-13, 22a; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7), yet it always remains clouded by the knowledge of death’s certainty, and the uncertain nature of the creator-creation relation (e.g. 3:18-21; 11:5). Indeed, the deity presents one of the greatest riddles for Qohelet.

By means of an analysis of Qohelet 11:7-12:8 the relation of creation and death as theological themes is investigated, particularly in view of the perception of the deity. Both the micro and macro literary context of this periscope are taken into account. The rhetoric of Qohelet is ambiguous at times, but it does affirm that death impacts in life and ultimately presents a challenge to life. With Ps 104 and Job 3, Qoh 11:7-12:8 affirms death as the natural and inevitable end of all. Yet it emphasises the absolute and certain nature of death. In Qohelet, life is redefined in view of death’s certainty. This is seen in the resounding theme of the book’s frame, that all is vanity (1:2; 12:8). The catalyst of this is the apparent incapacity of wisdom to provide certainty in life, or to distinguish between the wise and the fool, or the righteous and the wicked. Coinciding with this is wisdom’s inability to provide insight into the purpose and nature of the divine works. It is however also this perception of death’s impact in life that leads to death serving as an impetus for life. Life is to be lived under the sun, for this life is humanity’s share. Once the light of life fades and the dust returns to the ground, it has come to an absolute end. At death the spirit returns to God (12:7), which might suggest (3:21 expresses doubt in this regard) that the creator does not abandon His creation at the moment of death. But this does not detract from the uncertainty Qohelet experiences in the realm of divine creation. In this realm, death remains the only certainty. Therefore, it is in the context of this creation that every moment of life has to be seized optimally.

1.7 Procedure

The analysis of the selected texts comprises a theologically orientated textual interpretation.\(^{159}\) The texts, within their final form, are interpreted within the framework of a particular theme, and toward a particular theological goal, as indicated

\(^{158}\) M. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie bei Kohelet* (BEATAJ 15; Frankfurt: Lang, 1989) offers an extensive investigation into this topic, particularly creation terminology, but is a rare example.

\(^{159}\) W.G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (trans. T.J. Wilson; New York: Cross Road, 1988), xvi, 1 emphasises that theology, as “talking about God,” is continually invited to involve itself with texts. Therefore it has no choice but to engage in the interpretation of texts. Theology is by nature a “textual science,” and existing interpretations must always be re-evaluated in the light scripture and methodological advances.
earlier in this chapter.\footnote{This does not imply that insight from material culture is ignored. F.E. Deist, “The Bible as Literature: Whose Literature?” \textit{OTE} 7 (1994): 327-342 warned that cultural information should not be neglected in the interpretation of biblical texts and that synchronic approaches often fall into the trap of not taking enough cognisance of cultural information. The work of E. Bloch-Smith, \textit{Judaite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead} (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) provides a good example of how material culture can be significant and insightful for the interpretation of textual remains, even if her interpretation of archaeological data is not shared by all.\footnote{In this sense Jeanrond, \textit{Text and Interpretation}, 3-4 rightly argues for the need to return to textual origins in order to further theological thinking and that interpreters of scripture should be open to the fact that biblical texts “challenge their readers to a new reflection on their thought and practice…”} The analysis of each text is two-fold. In the first instance a literary analysis of the text is conducted, taking into consideration its immediate and wider literary context. This exegetical section will focus on the language and rhetoric employed in relation to the themes of creation and death. This provides the background for the second part of the analysis, which entails a thematic discussion. On the basis of this literary and thematic analysis, we will try to establish how the perceived creation-death relation of each text relates to the broader theological tradition of which it forms a part. In chapter 2 Psalm 104 will be analysed. In chapter 3 the focus will rest on the text of Job 3, and Qohelet 11:7-12:8 forms the centre of discussion in chapter 4. The outcomes of the analysis of these texts will be systematised in chapter 5, bringing the study to a close.

In view of the preceding we here reiterate that the textual analysis in the following chapters is guided by the argument that in the wisdom tradition, death stands in a binary relation to life. It presents the natural end of all life, but can also be considered as emptying life of all meaning, detracting from life and bringing life to an end. The perceptions of creation and creator contribute to these experiences of death. Thus, experiences of God, as creator, and death are intrinsically connected. God remains the creator and death remains certain. Yet the experience of the one impacts on the perception of the other. The result is not just a fleeting theological moment, e.g. Job 3, ultimately displaced by the voice of theological orthodoxy, e.g. the prose epilogue of Job 42:7-17. Ultimately we want to establish how the respective perceptions of the creation-death relation relate, and too what extent they can be held in a meaningful, tension-filled relation. In this way we also want to illustrate that the theological diversity of the wisdom tradition for which this study argues, entails a moment of tension and equilibrium. It is also postulated that a meaningful discourse between disparate theological voices is possible, without having to systematise them within an all encompassing framework.\footnote{P.D. Hanson, “The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant,” in: G.W. Coats and B.O. Long (eds.), \textit{Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology} (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 110-131, at 131.} To allow for a continued theological tension does not have to imply an irresolvable dialectic. We will argue that it is rather in this disparity that the theological potency of the HB is located. For this reason the argument is proposed that the theological nature and authority that we encounter in the HB is dynamic, living and unfolding, rather than static and unchanging.\footnote{In this sense Jeanrond, \textit{Text and Interpretation}, 3-4 rightly argues for the need to return to textual origins in order to further theological thinking and that interpreters of scripture should be open to the fact that biblical texts “challenge their readers to a new reflection on their thought and practice…”} The analyses of the texts will illustrate various points of contact between them. Yet the argument is presented that we should approach these wisdom texts with a greater appreciation for their theological intricacies. It is not just a matter of allowing theological diversity to exist, but especially of allowing one’s own theological constructs to be informed by it. Such a multi-focal view, i.e. becoming attuned to the
polyphone character of the wisdom tradition, presents an alternative route for theological argumentation that might otherwise become stale. Theological discourse gains new momentum when it is dialogical, i.e. discoursing with and hearing the other. The wisdom tradition offers a valuable example of such theology in dialogue, and to this we will now try to tap in.

163 L.J.M Claassens, *The God who Feeds: A Feminist-Theological Analysis of Key Pentateuchal and Intertestamental Texts* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 2001), 14-43. In her argument for biblical theology as dialogue, she draws from the dialogical model of Michael Bakhtin and points out how our reading of texts is shaped by the dialogical encounter with texts. Hearing texts in dialogue, and focusing on where they intersect impacts on our reading of texts.