

LIFE, ΖΩΗ, ἭAYYİM.

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It clearly is most important for the student of the Bible to have an exact understanding of what is meant when he reads in it about "life". "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"—this is one of the fundamental questions underlying biblical theology. Or again: "This is life eternal, to know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ." What notions had the writers of the Books of the Old and New Testaments about life, and did these notions correspond with those we ourselves have?

The Greek word for "life" is Ζωή, a word that in itself presents very little difficulty to the European student. It corresponds to the verb ζῆν "to live", just as τιμή "honour" corresponds to τιμᾶν "to honour". The noun and the verb stand in much the same relation to one another as "life" and "live" in English, or *Leben* and *leben* in German. Moreover in Greek the word is feminine; it is easy to make a kind of personification of Ζοῆ, just as is done with the fair and fascinating, but fickle, *Tychē* (τύχη), Mistress of Fortune. It is not unnatural that we should sometimes think of aeonian Ζοῆ as the fair and pure companion of the heavenly soul, as a sort of romantic possession which awaits the saint. "*Zoë mou, sas agapo!*" sings the poet.

This romantic view of "Life" is quite impossible to the student of Hebrew or Syriac. Ζοῆ disappears, and the word for Life is masculine plural.

What precisely is the meaning of ἥayyīm, the Hebrew word for life? The Syriac ḥayyē is also masculine plural; in fact, it is the exact equivalent of the Hebrew term. This peculiarity of Hebrew and Syriac is not, however, shared by all the Semitic languages. Assyrian, for example, has two words for "life", *balāṣu* and *balṣūtu*: one is masculine, the other feminine, but both are used in the singular, like Ζωή, or *uita*, or *Leben*, or *life*.

I venture to think that the plural form found in Hebrew really demands explanation, and I wish to suggest that it is plural because the Hebrews regarded life as consisting of successive instants or moments or days or years. A man's *ḥayyīm* is the period during which he is alive. *Death* is instantaneous, but *life* continues till it is cut short.

In this way *ḥayyīm* is cognate with those other Hebrew words for special kinds of life which are also in the masculine plural, such as *zēnūīm* "old-age", *nūrīm* "youth", *bḥalīm* "maidenhood". The connexion of *ḥayyīm* with such words has of course long been observed, but the subtle influence of Greek and Latin Grammar has made Grammarians use strange phrases about these so-called "abstract" nouns, e. g. *ḥayyīm* has been regarded as "the abstract idea of the qualities of a living being" (Gesenius-Cowley, § 124^d). If the ancient Hebrews really thought like that, what brains they must have had! No wonder that the Old Testament is not always easy to understand! It seems to me much simpler to regard these words as temporal, as denoting the duration of the term. *zēnūīm* denotes all the days you are old; *ḥayyīm* denotes all the days you are alive.

This meaning accords with its actual use in literature. The reader of the Old Testament can easily find out what is meant in it by "life": he need only take note of the ordinary law of Hebrew parallelism. The King in Psalm XXI did not ask what "life" was; he asked to experience it. "Life he asked from Thee and Thou gavest to him" — what? — "length of days for ever and ever". That is what *ḥayyīm* means; it means "length of days". Thus it generally comes nearer to βίος than to Ζωή.

The nearest approach to the qualitative as distinct from the temporal notion of life is, I suppose, to be found in Gen 2, 7. Yet the expression *nīšmath ḥayyīm* ("breath of life") hardly means more than "the breath which is always present in animals while they are alive".¹ What the Jews thought of the nature of human life may perhaps be gathered from the so-called Targum of Jonathan on this verse, which is worth quoting, late as it is, because it seems to be uninfluenced here by Greek speculation: "The Lord God created Adam with two dispositions, and He took dust from the place of the Sanctuary and from the four winds of the world and kneaded it with water from the four seas and created him red and brown and white, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the breath became in the body a

¹ So also Job XXVII, 3.

talking spirit to make the eyes light up and the ears attend."¹ This "talking spirit" that gives mere clay the faculty of attention is not "life", but it is "the breath of life", i. e. the breath which is always observed to be present in animals, as long as they are alive.

The qualitative notion of Life, ἡ Ζωή, so prominent in the Johanneine writings can hardly be coordinated with the Old Testament use of ἡαγγίμ. The Hebrews did not ask for life that they should have it more abundantly,² but that they should have long life; they wanted a career (βίος) rather than a state (Ζωή). When the Rich Young Man, no doubt speaking in Aramaic, asked about "eternal life" (probably ἡαγγεϋ 'ālmā³), he wanted a βίος in the age-to-come. If there be no death in the age-to-come, then that βίος is eternal in the colloquial sense. It all depends on the nature of the New Age, the "Ōlām hab-dā": what the Young Man wanted was a footing in that New Age.

It is perhaps worth while in conclusion to remind ourselves that much of the more romantic view of "life", with which we started, belongs in Hebrew usage to *nefeš*, which is singular and feminine. What *Zoë* loses, *Psychē* gains. Yet ψυχή-*nefeš* always remains a sort of intermediate entity. Flesh-and-blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; but the ψυχή, i. e. the "soul", was identified with the blood according to Hebrew physiology. It is only necessary to quote the familiar words of Deut XII, 23 in Greek to shew how different that physiology is from ours: αἷμα αὐτοῦ (i. e. of killed game) ψυχή· οὐ βρωθήσεται ἢ ψυχή μετὰ τῶν κρεῶν. Even in the time of Jerome this was felt to be impossible, and so the Latin Vulgate has *sanguis eorum pro anima est*, which is not quite the same thing.

¹ Gen 2, 7 (= Ginsburger, p. 4).

² Cf. Joh X, 10.

³ See Dalman, *W. Z.*, 128.