

DEATH WISH AS NEGOTIATION STRATEGY

For me, the most striking use of the death wish in the Hebrew Bible is the death wish as negotiation strategy, and thus I start with it. These death wishes are found in the Pentateuch, where they are uttered by Rebecca, Rachel, and Moses.¹ They function as deliberate strategies employed by the person with less power in an unequal relationship. Sometimes the inequality is gendered, as when Rebecca and Rachel speak up against their husbands.² At other times, there is a divine–human power differential, as with Moses’s two death wishes, which are voiced in dialogues with YHWH. Although Rebecca, Rachel, and Moses all utter death wishes, I will argue that they have no real desire to die. Rather, they use the language of the death wish as a means to achieve specific goals. The weaker party is the one who utters the death wish, setting the stakes and taking a substantial risk by bargaining with their life. Because of the power differential between petitioner and addressee, a death wish can thus function as an act of empowerment, as we will see in the following.

A close reading of two prominent examples will illustrate how the death wish as negotiation strategy functions in its literary setting and in the conversation between characters. The first example is the story of Rachel in Gen 30. Rachel threatens her husband, Jacob, with her own death if she does not have sons. The second example comes from the story of Moses, who argues with YHWH repeatedly in the Pentateuch. In two of these arguments (Exod 32 and Num 11), Moses plays the highest card in the deck—the death card—to add force to his argumentation. We will look at how Moses does this in Num 11.

¹ Gen 27:46; 30:1; Exod 32:32; Num 11:15.

² Only two of the nine characters who utter a death wish in the Hebrew Bible are women: Rachel and Rebecca. Interestingly, both instances appear in the negotiation category.

Table 2.1

Condition—protasis	Consequence—apodosis
If we are not there soon	I will simply die
If [you do] not [give me sons] אִם־אֵין	I will die מתה אנכי

A common characteristic of the death wishes that function as negotiation strategies is that they all occur in conditional sentences, following the pattern, “If x . . . then y . . .,” as in our earlier example, “If we are not there soon, I will die,” spoken by the eight-year-old in the back seat of the car.³ “If [you do] not [give me sons], I will die,” Rachel says to Jacob in Gen 30:1.⁴ Following my definition, both these utterances, one from a boy on a mundane car trip to visit relatives, the other from a biblical matriarch, are examples of a death wish (see Table 2.1). They are also conditional clauses. In both examples, we are presented with a condition or a wish, the protasis, the *if* or *if not* statement. Both examples also understand death to be the consequence, the apodosis, if the condition is not fulfilled: “I will die.”⁵

In English, conditional sentences are usually identified by the opening conjunction *if*.⁶ Hebrew generally marks conditional sentences with an opening word as well. Conditional sentences introduced by אם or כי are usually understood as real, fulfilled, or fulfillable conditions. Those introduced by לו (neg. לולי) are unreal, contrary to fact, and unfulfillable conditions.⁷ In other words, “there are two classes of conditionals, depending on whether the condition

³ This example was introduced in Chapter 1.

⁴ Lambdin explains, “Any two clauses, the first of which states a real or hypothetical condition and the second of which states a real or hypothetical consequence thereof, may be taken as a conditional sentence.” Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 276.

⁵ “A conditional sentence is an ‘if-then’ statement. For example, ‘If it rains, then I will get wet.’ The protasis (also called the condition of a conditional clause) is the ‘if’ part of a conditional sentence (e.g. ‘If it rains’). The apodosis is the ‘then’ part of a conditional sentence (e.g. ‘then I will become wet’).” Ronald J. Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, ed. John C. Beckman, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 180.

⁶ This said, conditional sentences can be both marked and unmarked. If unmarked, the statements might be ambiguous, leaving it up to the reader to decide “where to end the protasis and begin the apodosis.” Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, 276.

⁷ Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, 277. See also Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. Arthur E. Cowley (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006), §159f; and Joüon, §167f.

Table 2.2

Text	Quotative frame	Protasis	Apodosis
Gen 27:46	“Then Rebecca said to Isaac, ‘I am tired of my life because of the Hittite women.	If Jacob takes a wife from among the Hittite women, such as these, from the daughters of the land,	what will my life be to me?”
Gen 30:1	“When Rachel saw that she did not bear [any children] for Jacob, Rachel was jealous of her sister, and she said to Jacob:	‘Give me sons; if not,	I will die!’”
Exod 32:32	“So Moses returned to YHWH and said: (Exod 32:31)	‘But now, if you will forgive their sin ‘but if not,	— ¹ wipe me out of the book that you have written.”
Num 11:15	“And Moses said to YHWH: (Num 11:11)	‘If this is the way you are going to treat me, ‘If I have found favor in your sight,	then kill me now.” do not let me look upon your evilness.”

¹ An apodosis is lacking here but, as Joüon writes, it is “understood.” Paul Joüon, §167r.

is *real* (whether fulfilled in the past or still capable of being fulfilled) or *irreal* (whether contrary to the facts of a previous situation or incapable of fulfillment).⁸ Rebecca, Rachel, and Moses’s death wishes are all introduced with **אם**.⁹ They are real, fulfillable, conditional sentences, and thus they are powerful in a negotiation situation.

Table 2.2 provides an overview of death wishes used as part of a negotiation strategy in the Hebrew Bible.

With this overview in mind, we can now take a closer look at the example in Gen 30.

⁸ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §38.2c.

⁹ Gen 27:46; 30:1; Exod 32:32; Num 11:15.

Rachel: "Give Me Sons; If Not, I Will Die!"

Rebecca and Rachel are the only women in the Hebrew Bible who utter death wishes. Both of them do so in dialogues with their husbands. In the following, we will look closely at Rachel's death wish, in which she threatens her own death if she does not have sons (Gen 30:1). Barrenness and the struggle for children are well-known themes in the Hebrew Bible and reflect the importance of children and childbearing in ancient Israel.¹⁰ In Genesis, all the matriarchs are portrayed as experiencing periods of infertility and yearning to become pregnant; in the larger context of the Hebrew Bible we also find similar stories about Hannah and the mother of Samson.¹¹ The focus here is not infertility as such, but rather how to understand Rachel's demand to Jacob when she has not borne any children.¹² There is no uncertainty about what Rachel wants. She wants children, and more specifically, in the context of the patriarchal values of the time, she wants sons.¹³ If she does not have sons, so Rachel claims, she will die. But what does this mean? What are the consequences if she does not have a son? Does Rachel literally want to die if her wish is not fulfilled? In other words, is this a *real* death wish? As we know, Rachel dies not from *not* having children but rather from giving birth to her second son: "But as her breath left her—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni" (Gen 35:18).

¹⁰ For the importance of children and childbearing in ancient Israel, see M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and in the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, CM 14 (Groningen: Styx, 2000); Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); Marianne Grohmann, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt in den Psalmen*, FAT 53 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), esp. 1–3, 271, 296–305; and Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 97–102, 136–39. For a discussion of the matriarchal childbirth narratives see Sarah Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch: A Feminist and Source-Critical Analysis*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 23 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 56–69.

¹¹ Sarah (Gen 11:30; 16:1), Rebecca (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 29:31), Leah (Gen 30:9), Hannah (1 Sam 1:2, 5), and Samson's mother (Judg 13:2).

¹² For a recent, thorough, and thought-provoking treatment of infertility in the Bible, see Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹³ See also David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 229 n. 22; and Leo G. Perdue et al., *Families in Ancient Israel*, Family, Religion, and Culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 191. For a discussion of whether ancient Israel was indeed a patriarchy, see Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 180–202.

Scholars have proposed several interpretations of Rachel's death wish, as we will see in the coming section on her rhetorical strategy and death wish. But before discussing these proposals, I will first argue that Rachel's death wish functions as part of a careful negotiation strategy. In Rachel's case, it is a strategy to get a son.¹⁴ The death wish is the first of several steps that Rachel takes to achieve her goal, and her strategy serves as a means of her own empowerment. In addition, she wants a son for her own sake, not for Jacob's. Finally, Rachel achieves her goal as a result of her negotiation and strategies (though with the help of God).

The Narrative: Delimitation and Structure

"When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren" (Gen 29:31). This verse (here in NRSV translation since I will discuss my own translation below) serves as the exposition of our narrative and presents two problems: Leah is unloved (שְׁנוּאָה),¹⁵ and Rachel is barren (עִקְרָה).¹⁶ These problems lead to the sisters' respective struggles, played out in the narrative, and also to jealousy.¹⁷ Rachel's problem, her barrenness, will be our main concern here, since Rachel is the one who utters the death wish. The problem finds a temporary solution when Bilhah, Rachel's enslaved woman, bears a son (30:5),¹⁸ but it is only fully resolved when Rachel herself gives birth (30:22–23). After Rachel gives birth, the focus of the narrative changes from Leah and Rachel to Jacob

¹⁴ Koepf-Taylor also sees this narrative as a study of Rachel's rhetoric in pursuit of fertility, but she does not focus on the death wish per se. Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children*, 47.

¹⁵ See the discussion of the meaning of the Hebrew term later in this chapter.

¹⁶ The Hebrew word עִקְרָה is also used about specific women in Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; Judg 13:2–3; 1 Sam 2:5; Job 24:21; Isa 54:1; and more generally in Exod 23:26; Deut 7:14; and Ps 113:9. In all these occurrences the meaning is "barren, infertile." See *HALOT* 2:874. See also the discussion of this term in Grohmann, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt*, 296–97.

¹⁷ So Gordon Wenham: "the whole episode is governed by Leah's longing for Jacob's love and Rachel's craving for children." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Waco: Word, 1994), 240.

¹⁸ "The custom of an infertile wife providing her husband with a concubine in order to bear children is well documented in the ancient Near East." Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 119. See also John Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," *JBL* 87 (1968): 401–8. He makes it clear that the children of the concubine are seen as the children of the (barren) wife.

and Laban (30:25);¹⁹ this shift in focus marks the common delimitation of our narrative as Gen 29:31–30:24.²⁰

The narrative is best divided into four scenes, with Rachel appearing in all of them. Scene 1 presents Rachel's problem (29:31). Scenes 2 and 3 are attempts to find a solution to this problem (30:3, 15), but the problem is only solved in scene 4 (30:22–23). Other observations also support this division. Scenes 1–3 open with the statement "when he/she saw" (29:31; 30:1, 9).²¹ In each of these scenes, the seeing leads to action and the action leads to fertility (29:32–33; 30:5, 8; 30:10, 12). Each scene also includes the naming of one or more children (29:32–35; 30:6, 8; 30:11, 13; 30:18, 20–21, 24). These repetitions create a symmetry, which Walsh refers to as *forwarded symmetry*, a phrase that suggests progression.²² In the fourth and last scene, God remembers Rachel and hears her (30:22). This remembering and hearing also lead to action and to fertility (30:22).²³ In the first and last scene, fertility is achieved through divine intervention: YHWH/God opens the womb in 29:31–32 and 30:20–21. In the two middle scenes, Rachel's and Leah's own actions lead to fertility when the women give their enslaved women to Jacob and have children through them (30:3–4, 9) (see Table 2.3).

¹⁹ "This episode of the birth of Jacob's sons culminates with the birth of Joseph (30:24), which is the cue for Jacob to return home (30:25)." Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 240. Claus Westermann argues: "The dispute between the two wives, Gen 29:31–30:24, has been inserted into the dispute between Jacob and Laban." Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 471.

²⁰ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 321; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 384; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 469; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 238; and Rachel Havrelock, "Vayeitzei: Genesis 28:10–32:3," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism and URJ Press, 2008), 164. Another argument for this delimitation is the already mentioned shift of main characters from Jacob and Laban in Gen 29:13–30 to Rachel and Leah in Gen 29:31–30:24 and back to Jacob and Laban in Gen 30:25. The use of the name of God is a further indication of delimitation. Sarna writes: "With the announcement about Joseph, the birth narrative is completed. It opens and closes with the use of the divine name YHWH (29:31; 30:24)." Sarna, *Genesis*, 210.

²¹ So also Wenham: "the first three scenes begin 'x saw that.'" Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 241.

²² Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, 117, and see also 108–10.

²³ The change of verbs here from *saw* to *remembered* can be understood as a deviation from the established symmetry (through repetition); with this deviation the last scene is singled out and the reader drawn to it. See Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, 117, on derivation of symmetry and the following asymmetry.

Table 2.3

	Opening phrase	The seeing leads to	Provider of fertility	Naming of one or more children
Scene 1	“when he [YHWH] saw” 29:31	Action and fertility 29:32–33	YHWH opens the womb 29:31	Genesis 29:32–35
Scene 2	“when she [Rachel] saw” 30:1	Action and fertility 30:5, 7	Rachel’s activities 30:3–4	30:6, 8
Scene 3	“when she [Leah] saw” 30:9	Action and fertility 30:10, 12	Leah’s activities 30:9	30:11, 13, 18, 20–21
Scene 4	“God remembered Rachel and he heard her” 30:22	Action and fertility 30:23	God opens the womb 30:20	30:24

These observations suggest the structure presented in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4

	Text	Focus	Toward a solution
Scene 1	29:31–35	Leah bears sons	Rachel’s problem is introduced
Scene 2	30:1–8	Rachel’s struggle for children	First attempt toward a solution
Scene 3	30:9–21	Leah’s struggle for children and the mandrake episode	Second attempt toward a solution
Scene 4	30:22–24	Rachel bears a son	Rachel’s problem is solved

Two Sisters and Their Characterizations

Rachel’s demand, or in my terminology, her death wish, is introduced with the quotative frame, “When Rachel saw that she did not bear [any children] for Jacob, Rachel was jealous of her sister, and she said to Jacob” (Gen 30:1). This frame has two functions in the narrative.²⁴ It introduces Rachel’s speech, which is the frame’s

²⁴ Some scholars do not see our narrative as a real narrative. Gunkel writes: “This account is not properly a ‘narrative.’ The treatment is too superficial.” Instead, he

primary purpose, but it also provides the context for Rachel's request in the larger narrative, in which Jacob was deceived by his father-in-law and ended up marrying both Leah and Rachel, although he loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29:30). As a result, the narrator reports, "When YHWH saw that Leah was . . . , he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (29:31). What is it that YHWH sees? The Hebrew word שְׂנוֹאָה in Gen 29:31 is rendered "unloved" in most English Bible translations.²⁵ The *DCH* also gives the meaning "be hated, i.e. unloved" for our text,²⁶ and hate is a common translation of שָׂנֵא in other contexts. The close context of our verse does not support either of these translations, however. Genesis 29:30 says that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, which would imply that he also loved Leah. Several scholars, as epitomized by John Skinner, see שְׂנוֹאָה in Gen 29:31 as "almost a technical term referring to the less favored of two wives (Deut 21:15ff.)."²⁷ Nahum M. Sarna writes: "The term has sociolegal implications in addition to its emotional dimension. It expresses not 'hated' as opposed to 'beloved' so much as relative degree of preference."²⁸ This understanding can also be found in *HALOT*, where our case is understood as follows: "a woman who has been scorned, decreased in status."²⁹ Chaim Stern translates שְׂנוֹאָה as "disfavored," a translation that makes good sense in Gen 29:31 and again in 29:33: "She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because the Lord has heard that

argues that the narrator wanted "to clothe the genealogy in the tasteful form of a narrative." Gunkel, *Genesis*, 321–22. Westermann also argues that this text is "not a narrative." He writes: "The dispute between the two wives, Gen 29:31–30:24, has been inserted into the dispute between Jacob and Laban; in its present form it is not a narrative but rather like a genealogy after which it has been constructed." Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 471–72. Both of them make interesting points: the genealogy is prominent and can distract from the narrative, and it is not unlikely that the genealogy and the narrative were created at different times. That said, it is fully possible to read our text as a proper narrative, as will be shown in the following. I will also not pursue a source-critical discussion of Gen 29:31–30:24 because it does not bring much to our understanding of the death wish in this text.

²⁵ See NAB, NKJV, NRSV, and NJPS.

²⁶ *DCH* 8:169. BDB, 971, gives the translation, "hate."

²⁷ Skinner, *Genesis*, 385. Gunkel referred to אִהְבָּה and שְׂנוֹאָה as legal terms; see Gunkel, *Genesis*, 324. See also Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 155; Cotter, *Genesis*, 22; and *HALOT*'s understanding of Gen 29:31 as "a woman who has been scorned, decreased in status." *HALOT* 3:1339.

²⁸ Sarna, *Genesis*, 206. See also Harry M. Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 109.

²⁹ *HALOT* 3:1339.

I am disfavored, he has given me this son also.”³⁰ Based on these observations, I prefer the translation “disfavored” in both verses. The narrator characterizes Leah as disfavored, not unloved. This problem does not find a solution in the narrative.

Whereas Leah is disfavored, Rachel is characterized as עקרה. In this case the translation is not problematic: עקרה means “barren” or “infertile.” What is important here is how barrenness was conceptualized in ancient Israel and in our text.³¹ Joel Baden and Candida Moss argue convincingly that in the ancient Near East the notion of infertility was based not on a biological or medical condition, as today, but rather on social experience: the experience of not conceiving and having a child.³² They also argue that infertility was seen as a female condition.³³ I share both of these assumptions in my reading. Infertility is experiential in Gen 30:1, which says, “When Rachel *saw* that she bore Jacob no children.” The experience of barrenness also included the feeling of shame and of being an outcast.³⁴ Again, we see this in our text,³⁵ when Rachel says, “God has taken away my disgrace” (Gen 30:23). Moss and Baden argue, though, that one is not necessarily responsible for one’s bareness: “Infertility can befall even those who are divinely designated as righteous and worthy. . . . These five women [the matriarchs] are blameless. They also happen to be infertile.”³⁶

Rachel’s Rhetorical Strategy and Death Wish

“Give me sons; if not, I will die!” (Gen 30:1) Rachel’s death wish is formulated in the imperative and set forth in a conditional

³⁰ Eskenazi and Weiss, *Torah*, 165. “Zurückgesetzt” in EIN and ZB expresses the same meaning.

³¹ Again, infertility is not our main focus, but we need some understanding of how barrenness was seen in ancient Israel to best read our narrative.

³² Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 38. They argue this following Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant*, Biblical Refigurations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21. See also Susan Ackerman, “The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 29–45.

³³ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 38.

³⁴ See the chapter entitled “The Shame of Infertility” in Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 39–44, and the entry on חרפה in *HALOT* 1:356.

³⁵ See also Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 39. They make the interesting point that “‘disgrace,’ both in English and Hebrew, is a social term. There can be no disgrace . . . without other people before whom one feels shame—without other people to do the shaming.” See also Grohmann, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt*, 299–300.

³⁶ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 49.

sentence.³⁷ Rachel wants children—or, as specified in the above quote, she wants sons. This is the condition set forth. If she does not have sons, then she will die.³⁸ That is the consequence she foresees. "If not x, then y." Robert Alter notes, "It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character's first recorded speech has particular force as characterization. Surprisingly, although Rachel has been part of the story for more than a decade of narrated time, this is the first piece of dialogue assigned to her."³⁹ In addition to providing important characterization, as Alter points out, Rachel's first speech here is just that: it is the first time she speaks. She continues speaking throughout the episode, where she has the leading voice. If she did not speak earlier, she is making up for it now.⁴⁰ Whereas Jacob speaks only once and then only in response to Rachel, and Leah speaks twice, including once in response to Rachel, Rachel is given four direct speeches in the narrative.⁴¹ First, she utters her demand to Jacob, "Give me sons!" (30:1). She speaks again when she gives Bilhah to Jacob: "Look, here is my enslaved woman" (30:3). Both her third and her fourth speeches are directed to Leah: "Please give to me some of your son's mandrakes" (30:14) and "Then he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes" (30:15). Every instance of Rachel's speech centers on the quest for fertility. Some scholars have suggested that Rachel also

³⁷ See the discussion of conditional sentences at the beginning of this chapter.

³⁸ Most commonly, **גַּתְּה אָנֹכִי** is translated "I will die," as for example in NRSV, NJPS, and NJB, and the ecumenical German *Einheitsübersetzung*: "Verschaff mir Söhne! Wenn nicht, sterbe ich" (Gen 30:1 EIN). Other translations have been suggested, e.g., "Let me have children; otherwise I am a dead woman," in Eskenazi and Weiss, *Torah*, 165 (translation by Chaim Stern). So also Alter, "give me sons, for if you don't, I am a dead woman!" Alter, *Genesis*, 158. "I will die" and "I am a dead woman" are both possible renderings of the Hebrew participle, and the meaning is basically the same in both translations.

³⁹ Alter, *Genesis*, 158. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 93–94.

⁴⁰ See Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children*, 51. Koepf-Taylor observes that of "the eighteen examples of direct speech in the text, eleven of them are Leah and Rachel's naming of the eleven sons they and their slaves bear. The other seven make up the two exchanges in which Rachel negotiates, first with her husband and then with her sister, in pursuit of her own fertility. These two exchanges result in four examples of direct non-naming speech in Rachel's voice, two in Leah's . . . , and one in Jacob's."

⁴¹ This does not include the name-giving speeches. We have direct speech when "the narrator 'quotes' the words attributed to a character." Person, *In Conversation with Jonah*, 24.

Table 2.5

First speech	“Give me sons; if not, I will die!” Gen 30:1	To Jacob
Second speech	“Look, here is my maid.” Gen 30:3	To Jacob
Third speech	“Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” Gen 30:14	To Leah
Fourth speech	“Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes.” Gen 30:15	To Leah
Fifth speech?	Does Rachel pray?	To God

prays in this narrative, which would mean that she spoke a fifth time (see Table 2.5).⁴²

The narrative does not include a prayer, nor does the narrator state explicitly that Rachel prayed.⁴³ However, elsewhere the narrator seems to imply that Rachel prays. When she names Dan, she says, “God has judged me, and he has also heard my voice and given me a son” (30:6). Later in the narrative, the narrator says that God heard Rachel: “Now God heard her and he opened her womb”⁴⁴ (30:22). A similar statement appears in Gen 30:17 about Leah: “And God heard Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.” These are seen as examples of how God responds with actions to the characters’ verbal requests. There is an alternative way of reading these reports, though, which I find more compelling: in the case of both Rachel and Leah, God might have heard what had been said between the characters. We find a similar notion of eavesdropping in the narratives of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:17) and the Israelites

⁴² Gunkel wrote, “The infertile wife prays to him [i.e., God], (30:6, 17).” Gunkel, *Genesis*, 324. So also Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 70. Ramban also saw Rachel as praying, “seeing that she could not rely upon Jacob’s prayer, then went to pray on her own behalf to Him Who hears the cry of those in trouble. This is the sense of the verse, *And G-d hearkened to her.*” Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), 367.

⁴³ Moss and Baden are among the scholars who argue that Rachel does not turn to God. See Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 47.

⁴⁴ “‘Listened to my voice,’ indicates that Rachel has indeed prayed, although nothing has been said about her prayer up to this point. She saw the birth of Dan as an answer to prayer, but whether the narrator would have agreed with her is dubious in view of this attitude to surrogate marriage in ch. 16. It is not until v. 22 that he says ‘God listened to her.’” Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 245. See also Sarna, *Genesis*, 208.

(Exod 2:24). I will return to the significance of eavesdropping later in the section "Did Rachel Succeed?"

It is clear from these observations that Rachel's speech is the driving force in the narrative. She is the one who initiates speech, and her speech sets in motion everything that follows. And as noted, every instance of her speech is part of her quest for fertility.

Rachel's first speech is key to understanding the purpose and outcome of the death wish, and is thus the focus of our investigation. The quotative frame of the first speech provides the motivation for Rachel's demand: Rachel is not bearing children. She wants sons because she does not have any, and the wish is intensified by her jealousy of her sister, who *is* bearing.⁴⁵ I differ here from Yair Zakovitch, who argues that neither Rachel nor Leah wants children for the children's own sake; rather, he argues, the children are (only) a means in the fight between the sisters. Concerning Rachel, Zakovitch writes: "Notice that it doesn't say, 'that she hadn't borne children,' but 'that she hadn't borne to Jacob,' emphasizing how it was not a longing for motherhood that propelled her actions, but something else."⁴⁶ That "something else" is for Zakovitch the jealousy toward her sister.⁴⁷ But the formulation "to Jacob" (Gen 30:1) is not surprising when we look at the ancestor narrative as a whole. God made the covenant with the fathers; the fathers are the ones who received promises of a people.⁴⁸ The children in the ancestor story are seen as a fulfillment of this covenant and are born to their fathers. The only exception to this is Hagar, who receives her own promise of a son and a people (Gen 16:10–11), but she is also said to bear a son "to Abram" (Gen 16:15).⁴⁹ Also, given the patriarchal

⁴⁵ See also Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 474: "The suffering is all the more bitter when each day Leah and her sons are present."

⁴⁶ Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 68. Concerning Leah, he writes: "Leah praises God . . . but she never expresses happiness for the sons themselves. Obsessed entirely with the competition with her sister, Leah seems to regard her children as but the means to draw her husband closer" (67). See also Cotter, *Genesis*, 229: "She speaks not of love, but of jealousy."

⁴⁷ Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 70. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, sees this jealousy not only as motivation for "the action at hand but also the whole subsequent story of the two sisters and their offspring" (231–32).

⁴⁸ Gen 9:8–17 (the covenant with Noah; God does not directly promise Noah offspring, but descendants are mentioned and only as Noah's descendants); 12:1–2; 13:15–16; 17:1–14 (interestingly, it is said of Sarah in 17:16 that she "will give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her"); 22:15–18.

⁴⁹ For a recent discussion of the promise to Hagar, see Sarah Shectman, "Israel's Matriarchs: Political Pawns or Powerbrokers?" in *The Politics of the Ancestors*:

context these texts were written in, the formulation should be expected. Children are generally seen as belonging to their fathers. The reference of a son being born “to Jacob” occurs in Gen 30:5 and 7 when Bilhah gives birth, in 30:10 and 12 when Zilpah gives birth,⁵⁰ and in Gen 30:17 and 19 when Leah gives birth. The formulation is not used when Leah gives birth in Gen 29:32, 33, 34, and 35, but it is used in v. 34 (“I have borne him three sons”) and in Gen 30:20 (“I have borne to him”) to summarize the outcome of her childbearing, so the norm still seems to be to emphasize the birth of a child to the father.⁵¹ With this background in mind, it is therefore actually *more* surprising and thus significant for our understanding that the formulation is not used when Rachel gives birth (30:23).

Even though jealousy intensifies the desire for sons, I see Rachel’s demand as a wish from a woman who wants sons for her own sake. But what triggers this desire? Laurel Koepf-Taylor emphasizes how the emotional need for children is primarily a twentieth-century construction, whereas children in premodern times were mainly seen as fulfilling an economic need.⁵² She makes a valid and necessary point in cautioning against anachronistic readings of the narratives about barren mothers in the Bible, where infertility is seen strictly emotionally. This said, however, we cannot understand Rachel’s desire for sons as primarily based in an economic need or a desire to add to her husband’s wealth.⁵³ Jacob already has children with Leah (Gen 29:32–35), and Rachel’s status as wife is not threatened; she is loved and is Jacob’s preferred wife (Gen 29:18, 30). Rachel wants a son because *she* desires one. Throughout the narrative Rachel underlines her own desire for sons. Rachel is quoted as saying, “Give me [בָּנִים] sons” (v. 1), “so I too might be built up” (i.e., that she will have children through her enslaved woman; v. 3),

Exegetical and Historical Perspectives on Genesis 12–36, ed. Mark G. Brett and Jacob Wöhrle, FAT 124 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 153–54.

⁵⁰ According to Sarna, the formulation is used here “because the paternity of a child born to a maidservant may be uncertain.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 208. This explanation cannot account for the use of the phrase in Gen 30:17 and 19, when Leah gives birth, and thus one might ask if this is also a good explanation in the case of the enslaved women.

⁵¹ See also Gen 21:2; 22:20; 25:2.

⁵² Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children*, 33–46. See also Moss and Baden: “From the perspective of the ancient Israelite women, those warm biological feelings [here seen as a stereotype of what women want] are a luxury.” Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 34. These statements would not imply that the ancient Israelites did not feel strongly for their children, but that these feelings were not the primary concern.

⁵³ Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children*, 35, and see 38.

"he has given me [לִי] a son" (v. 6), and finally, when she does give birth to a son, "may YHWH give me [לִי] another son" (v. 24). Rachel Havrelock concludes: "Rachel emphasizes her personal need for children through first person pronouns [S]he is concerned with her vitality and her own lineage."⁵⁴ Lineage is important in the Hebrew Bible, and this narrative is built around the genealogy of Jacob's children. Maybe Rachel needs a son in order to be a successful part of the lineage, the longer chain (in the larger picture, not just this story). Robert Alter claims that Rachel's demand shows "a Rachel who is impatient, impulsive, explosive,"⁵⁵ and he even refers to her demand as "rather hysterical in tone."⁵⁶ There is nothing in the quotative frame to support these evaluations of Rachel's character or her speech, however; nor does the storyline, with her careful maneuvering to get a child, paint a picture of an impatient or hysterical character—rather, it does the opposite.⁵⁷

Leaving Rachel aside for a moment, we might ask if it matters to Jacob whether Rachel has children. In this patriarchal culture, what would it mean to Jacob if Rachel never bore sons? Does he stand to lose something? This is not an easy question to answer, as the narrative does not address it. As mentioned above, Jacob already has children with Leah, so his future is not threatened by Rachel's barrenness.⁵⁸ But we learn later in the narrative that Jacob loves Joseph more than any other of his children (Gen 37:3–4). The narrator says this is because Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age, but we might suspect that it is also because he is the son of Jacob's preferred wife. Thus, even if Jacob does not stand to lose anything if Rachel does not give birth, the sons that she does bear are most dear to him.

⁵⁴ Havrelock, "Vayeitzei," 165. See also Irmtraud Fischer, *Gottesstreiterinnen: Biblische Erzählungen über die Anfänge Israels*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 111.

⁵⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 232.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁷ Alter presents an additional argument that I also do not find convincing. He claims that "'give' . . . is a word often used for preemptory and crudely material requests." Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 232. The only example he provides is Gen 38:16, Judah's request to Tamar. Other examples could be given, but there are also examples in which נָתַן, "give," is used not for preemptory and crudely material requests, but simply instead for requests stated with a certain intensity and desperation. See Gen 29:21; 47:15; Pss 60:13; 108:13.

⁵⁸ We may note that Jacob does not make a statement similar to the one made by Elkanah, Hannah's husband, in 1 Sam 1:8: "Hannah, why do you weep? . . . Am I not more to you than ten sons?" But it is difficult to draw any decisive conclusion from this.

Returning to Rachel, the fact that she wants sons for her own sake does not answer our opening question: What is the consequence for her if she does not have children? What does “I will die” mean? Is her life not worth living without children, so that she would want to die? This is Zakovitch’s conclusion: “without sons her life is not worth living,”⁵⁹ a reading more in line with the idea of social death. If Rachel does not have children, she does not fulfill her role as a woman and has no future. This is how Claus Westermann reads our text: “It is the suffering of the childless wife, of which we hear so much in the Old Testament . . . that cries out in Rachel’s demand It was a pain unto death (cf. Gen 25:22; 27:17), the childless wife had no future—such is the despair voiced in this outburst.”⁶⁰ Her future does not seem to be threatened, for she is, as we have already seen, the favorite wife. A third possibility is that death here means that Rachel’s story will never be told. As Rachel Havrelock argues, “Rachel equates her inability to give birth with death, implying that her story will never be told if not condensed in the name of a child; ironically, she will eventually die giving birth to her second child (35:18) Rachel speaks to the threat of her negation should she not reproduce.”⁶¹ Seen in the context of a narrative in which the giving of names is so important and the names tell the mothers’ stories, this reading makes good sense. Again, the lineage and Rachel’s role in it seems to be important. The threat of her negation also reaches beyond her current life. Moss and Baden argue that “these children are desired . . . for the safety of the mother’s social position and for the continuity of her name; for her status, now and in the afterlife.”⁶²

Rachel addresses her death wish, her demand, to Jacob. “Perceiving the limits of her own authority, she turns to a person with immediate authority over her—her husband Jacob.”⁶³ As noted above, it is the “weaker” party who utters the death wish and sets the

⁵⁹ Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 68–69.

⁶⁰ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 474. Rashi wrote, “One may infer from this that he [*sic*] who is childless may be regarded as dead.” M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, eds., *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi’s Commentary: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 5733 [1973]), 139.

⁶¹ Havrelock, “Vayeitzei,” 165.

⁶² Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 33–34, and for more on the importance of children for the afterlife and the ancestral cult, see p. 35. I agree with this understanding, but I have reservations about the use of the term *afterlife*, which seems to indicate a more modern notion of a “life” after death.

⁶³ Havrelock, “Vayeitzei,” 165.

stakes; they take the risk of bargaining with their life.⁶⁴ In the ancient Near East, the woman would be the one with less (at least formal) power in a marriage, and obviously Rachel cannot have children by herself but needs the assistance of her husband, as is apparent when she says "Give me sons" (30:1). In light of this formal power discrepancy, it is interesting to see that Rachel and Leah, the women, are the ones with active power in this story; they are the ones who run the show both for their enslaved women and for their husband. Jacob only speaks and acts on their initiative. Jacob responds to Rachel with words, and the quotative frame introducing his speech emphasizes his reaction: "Jacob became very angry with Rachel" (30:2). Jacob's angry response leads Rachel to pursue other means to reach her goal. In the terminology of conversation analysis, her request is followed by refusal or dismissal, and it is clearly a dis-preferred response. Rachel's first attempt to have a son (through pregnancy) does not give her what she desires, but I agree with Havrelock, who argues, "[H]ad Rachel not spoken out, her journey would have had no beginning and no fulfillment."⁶⁵

Ramban goes a step further than any of the readings mentioned above, claiming that not having children would lead to Rachel's actual death: "and if not [if God did not grant her children] she would mortify herself because of grief" and "die of grief."⁶⁶ He also understands Rachel to be "attempting to frighten him [Jacob] with her death."⁶⁷ My own understanding comes closest to the last reading: Rachel is attempting to frighten Jacob with the threat of her death. "If you do not give me what I want, the consequence is that I will die!" This reading fits regardless of how we understand the threatened death. The demand is the first of several steps taken to achieve her goal.

Jacob replies, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2). He clearly sees Rachel's request as a request for pregnancy⁶⁸ and answers with the conventional

⁶⁴ See the beginning of this chapter.

⁶⁵ Havrelock, "Vayeitzei," 165.

⁶⁶ Ramban, *Genesis*, 367.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Von Rad's reading of Jacob's response is fascinating and as far as I can tell unique. He writes: "There seems to be some criticism of the practice [for childless women to acquire children by their enslaved women], for Jacob at first does not understand the suggestion of the despairing Rachel." Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 158. In other words, von Rad sees Rachel's request as a request to have a child by her enslaved woman, not a request for her to become pregnant herself. Jacob's response is thus a misunderstanding which

biblical notion that God is in charge of the womb—only God can open (or close) a womb and thus provide children.⁶⁹ This might mean that Jacob is making a theological statement to explain to Rachel why he cannot help her, but it may also be understood as passing the buck or washing his hands of responsibility; why else would he reply in anger?⁷⁰

The first step, the first speech, is crucial for the journey, and the journey continues when Rachel speaks for a second time, “here is my enslaved woman” (30:3), and gives Bilhah to Jacob. This time Jacob responds with action, not words. He goes to Bilhah, and Rachel has a son through her (30:4–5); Rachel’s request is thus followed by acceptance.⁷¹ As noted above, the birth of Dan provides a temporary solution to Rachel’s problem, and had her main goal been to provide a son for Jacob, it would have been a satisfactory solution. However, her struggle continues, a point that strengthens my argument that her desire includes something more than simply giving her husband a son.

Rachel speaks a third time, this time to Leah: “Please, give me some of your son’s mandrakes” (30:14). Leah responds with dismissive words: “Was it not enough for you to take my husband, that you would also take my son’s mandrakes?” (Gen 30:15). Rachel’s request is met with refusal, a dispreferred response. But Rachel does not give up. She speaks for a fourth time: “Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes” (30:15). This time Leah gives her the mandrakes. Rachel’s offer is accepted, but we learn about this first in the reported consequences and in Leah’s own speech to Jacob about the deal: “You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes” (30:16).

Did Rachel Succeed?

Did Rachel succeed? Was her negotiation successful? As we know, she gives birth to Joseph at the end of our narrative (vv. 23–24) and

Rachel’s second speech clarifies: “here is my enslaved woman” (30:3). I do not follow von Rad here, because Rachel’s pursuit of a son does not end with the birth of Dan.

⁶⁹ See Hanne Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender? The Interpretation of Gendered God-Language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46 and 49*, FAT 2/32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008b), 156. Texts for this notion are Gen 20:18; 29:31; 30:22; 1 Sam 1:5–6. See also Grohmann, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt*, 299.

⁷⁰ The formulation used for Jacob’s anger, *וַיִּחַר אָף*, is similar to YHWH’s anger in Num 11:10, which will be discussed later; the difference is that in Jacob’s case the object of the anger is clear (see the section “Who Is Angry with Whom and Why?”).

⁷¹ This is a preferred response.

later gives birth to Benjamin (Gen 35:17), but is this the result of her own efforts? There are two possible and very different readings of Rachel's actions in this narrative. One reading understands all Rachel's attempts as futile. She is seen as jealous, impulsive, and improper.⁷² The only one who can give her children is God. Her request for the mandrakes is a sign of her lack of faith,⁷³ and her efforts to conceive a child are not seen as successful. In this reading, Rachel is seen as demanding that Jacob pray for her, and in the end she herself is seen praying to God.⁷⁴ It is when God hears her prayer and remembers her that she is given a son.

The other reading, which I hope I have contributed to here, sees Rachel's sons as the results of her own efforts. Rachel's efforts and God's acts are not mutually exclusive. Rachel uses all of the strategies available to her, and, in the end, she succeeds.⁷⁵ "The mandrakes . . . do not cure Rachel's barrenness, but they alert God to her desperation—and the lengths which she is willing to go in order to conceive."⁷⁶ Rachel does not pray, but she gets sons from

⁷² Alter claims that she speaks with "impetuosity" and "impulsivity," and that she "importunes." Alter, *Genesis*, 158. Wenham argues that she protested and blamed her husband for her barrenness. Hers is a "desperate desire." Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 244. Skinner describes her behavior as "petulant." Skinner, *Genesis*, 386. Cotter states that she "angrily confronts Jacob and demands that he give her sons." Cotter, *Genesis*, 229.

⁷³ See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 322, 326; and Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 476. They argue that the mandrakes themselves were effective, but this was problematic for the later editor of the narrative, and thus the text was altered to downplay the mandrakes and correct this understanding.

⁷⁴ Ramban argues that she spoke only to get Jacob to pray on her behalf and that she spoke "improperly." Ramban, *Genesis*, 367. Susan Ackerman sees her as pleading with Jacob to act on her behalf, as did Isaac in Gen 25. S. Ackerman, "Blind," 38. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, notes that "Rachel is set on solving her problem by her own devices and not waiting for God to act" (244). He concludes, however, "We glimpse the underhand tactics both women use to promote their goals This is a story of the triumph of God's power over human sinfulness" (250).

⁷⁵ Thomas Hieke says that Rachel's actions are an example of women taking "the initiative in order to avert the menacing extinction of the patrilineal (!) genealogical line and simultaneously to reinforce their own position" (179). Exclamation point in original. He continues: "in the cases of Leah and Rachel . . . the central lineage of the promises continues, thanks to the initiative of these women" (180). Thomas Hieke, "Genealogy as a Means of Historical Representation in the Torah and the Role of Women in the Genealogical System," in *Torah*, ed. Irmtraud Fischer et al., BW 1.1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 151–92.

⁷⁶ Havrelock, "Vayeitzei," 168. Zakovitch agrees with Havrelock in understanding that the mandrakes were not helpful, but his conclusion is very different: "Rachel's attempt to mother a son with the aid of mandrakes proves counterproductive. Not only does she remain barren, but her fertile sister beats her once again." Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 72.

God because she tries everything in her power to get them.⁷⁷ The positive reading of Rachel's speech strategies, suggested above, would have God eavesdropping on the conversations between characters, not responding to a particular prayer from Rachel. "Even for those who did not directly address God, it is God who relieves them of their infertility."⁷⁸ Rachel's death wish did not pay off directly, but it was a necessary first step to get a son: "had Rachel not spoken out, her journey would have had no beginning and no fulfillment."⁷⁹

One question remains, though: To what extent is Rachel's death ironic? As Havrelock observes, "Rachel equates her inability to give birth with death . . . ; ironically, she will eventually die giving birth to her second child (35:18)."⁸⁰ Several scholars have pointed out the irony in this: Rachel dies not from lack of sons, as she claimed she would, but from having her wish fulfilled.⁸¹ Alter goes so far as to suggest that Rachel's "rash words" in Gen 30:1 "are meant to foreshadow her premature death."⁸² I do find her death ironic, but I do not see causality implied by the narrator here. Rachel's original either/or construction—either sons or death—is fulfilled, but it is transformed into a both/and construction—both sons and death.

Moses: "Kill Me Now"

"If this is the way you are going to treat me, then kill me now," Moses says to YHWH in Num 11:15. "Kill me now!" The story goes

⁷⁷ Susan Ackerman notes that Jacob's failure to act on Rachel's behalf necessitates that she acts on her own, resorting to "magical practices that can be exercised outside the cultic sphere." S. Ackerman, "Blind," 38.

⁷⁸ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 51. Moss and Baden go further, though, arguing that "all women are by 'nature'—that is, using perhaps more authentic ancient categories, created—infertile" (58). In other words, wombs are by default closed, and God opens them. Further, they conclude: "if we say that active participation on the part of God is required for a woman—all women—to become fertile, then infertility is not divine punishment; it is rather the state in which all women enter the world" (60). I follow them in the first part of their reasoning, that infertility is not a result of divine punishment. The second part might be the logical consequence of the first, but conceptually it is hard, for me at least, to imagine that the ancient Israelites would have imagined women to have closed wombs by definition.

⁷⁹ Havrelock, "Vayeitzei," 165.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ See Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 35; and Irma Fischer, "On the Significance of the 'Women Texts' in the Ancestral Narratives," in I. Fischer et al., *Torah*, 282. She does not use the word *ironic* but one might infer this when she maintains, "in fact, Rachel, who believed that she would die without children (30:1), dies during the birth of her second child."

⁸² Alter, *Genesis*, 158.

like this: the Israelites have been wandering in the desert for forty years, after their deliverance from Egypt. The people are tired of eating manna, the bread from heaven. They long for the food they had in Egypt, and they cry out for meat. YHWH gets upset, Moses gets upset, and Moses starts complaining to YHWH about the burden the people have become to him. YHWH decides to take some of the spirit he had put on Moses and put it on the seventy elders instead, so that they can share the burden of leadership. YHWH also sends quails to serve as meat for the people, although in the end YHWH strikes the people with a plague. In the middle of all this, Moses utters a wish to be killed. The death wish is addressed to YHWH, but what is it that Moses wants when he asks to be killed? Samuel Balentine presents a typical reading of this text when he suggests Moses wants to escape: "If YHWH is to act in this manner, to bring evil on a faithful (and undeserving) servant, then Moses does not wish to live to witness it."⁸³ As I see it, the point of the narrative is not that Moses would prefer to die so that he will no longer see what is going on. Rather, Moses's death wish functions as part of his negotiation strategy in his dialogue with YHWH. Moses wants something from YHWH, and to achieve his goal, Moses builds up a rhetorical argumentation that ends in a condition. The outcome of posing this condition might be death—after all, he is bargaining with his life—but this is not the outcome that he seeks. Moses's request to be killed constitutes a threat to the Israelites because the Israelites need Moses.⁸⁴ Moses's request is also a threat to YHWH, because YHWH needs Moses as well. Moses is the one YHWH has chosen to lead the people, the one mediator between YHWH and the people. If Moses were to die, as he expresses a wish

⁸³ Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 122 n. 7. For similar views, see Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, trans. James D. Martin, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 87 ("Moses cannot carry alone the burden he has to carry, otherwise he would rather be killed by Yahweh in view of his unfulfillable task"); Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah: Numbers*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1975), 101 ("For it is better for me to die even by the sword of man than to live with this grief"); Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 107 ("Moses' fierce outburst concludes with a simple confession: I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me . . . and his exacerbation is dramatically underlined by his plea for Yahweh to kill him and have done with it"); and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 109 ("Rather let Yahweh, if He has any regard for Moses, kill him and have done with it").

⁸⁴ See Balentine, *Prayer*, 121.

to do, then both the Israelites and YHWH would be in trouble. YHWH's need for—or even dependence on—Moses is vital to understanding the function of Moses's request and the power of his negotiation. To understand what Moses finds important enough to bargain with his life for, we need to determine what triggers the death wish in this narrative.

The Narrative and Its Sources

The literary context that the narrative of Moses's death wish is part of is best delimited to Num 11:4–34, with v. 35, an itinerary formula, serving as a bridge connecting our narrative to the next one.⁸⁵ The exposition and opening problem of our narrative can be found in v. 4, which introduces a new topic: “The rabble who was in their midst had a strong craving; and the Israelites cried again⁸⁶ and said, ‘Who will give us meat to eat?’”⁸⁷ Verse 34 rounds out the narrative by telling us that the people who had the craving were buried. Both v. 4 and v. 34 use the Hebrew root אָוָה in the *hithpael*, which means “desire, crave.”⁸⁸ The place mentioned in v. 34, קִבְרוֹת הַתְּאֵוָה (Kibroth-hattaava),⁸⁹ plays on the same root. In other words, vv. 4

⁸⁵ “This chapter [Num 11] consists of a short narrative, ending in the explanation of a place-name (vv. 1–3), of a long story in expansive style which likewise ends with the explanation of a place-name (vv. 4–34), and of a concluding note about Israel's itinerary (v. 35).” Noth, *Numbers*, 83. Most scholars understand Num 11:1–3 as a separate small narrative not related to the following; see, e.g., Davies, *Numbers*, 98; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990), 82; Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers*, FOTL 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 170. This makes good sense. The narrative in vv. 1–3 has its own exposition: the people complain about their unspecified misfortune (v. 1a). YHWH gets angry with them and sends a fire (v. 1b). Moses prays or intercedes, the fire stops (v. 2a), end of problem and end of narrative (v. 3). Verse 4 starts something new. This said, vv. 1–3 can also be seen as a parallel or a contrast narrative to the one in vv. 4–34. Both narratives start in an unnamed place (vv. 1a and 4), in both cases God becomes angry (vv. 1b and 10), and Moses prays/intercedes (vv. 2a, 11–15, 21–22). Both narratives end with a name-giving. See also Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Numbers XI: Seeing Moses Plain,” *VT* 55 (2005): 208.

⁸⁶ The MT reads וַיָּשׁוּבוּ, “they returned” or “they turned,” i.e., they returned to crying, they cried again. The LXX and Vulg read, “they sat down and they wept”; see Davies, *Numbers*, 105. The emendation is not necessary, so I follow the MT.

⁸⁷ Literally: “Who will cause us to eat meat?” This is often translated with a different nuance: “If only we had meat to eat!”; so both NRSV and NJPS. See discussion below.

⁸⁸ *DCH* 1:149. BDB, 16, translates “desire, long for, lust after, of bodily appetites” for Num 11:4.

⁸⁹ Sometimes translated as “Graves of craving.” Davies, *Numbers*, 113; Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 69.

and 34 form an *inclusio* and thus provide a strong argument for delimiting the narrative to vv. 4–34.

The narrative starts with the lack of meat and ends with YHWH sending the quails as meat for the people and as a punishment. This leaves us, as readers, with the impression that this narrative is primarily about meat, and it would seem likely that when Moses bargains with his life he does so on behalf of the people, in order to get meat for them. But Num 11:4–34, in all probability, was not originally one narrative. Source critics explain the growth and development of the text in different ways, but most argue that the narrative originally was two separate stories, one concerned with meat and the other with the burden of the people and thus with Moses's leadership. The two stories are seen as deriving either from two literary sources⁹⁰ or from one source that has been updated and edited over time.⁹¹ This is as far as the consensus goes—which verses belong to which narrative or source is disputed.

My reading of Num 11:3–34 will include both a narrative reading of the final form of the text and a source-critical reading.⁹² These two approaches are often seen as mutually exclusive, or at least the approaches are not often combined. The reason for the combination

⁹⁰ See Benjamin D. Sommer, "Reflecting on Moses: The Redaction of Numbers 11," *JBL* 118 (1999): 601, 607; Joel S. Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch*, FAT 68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 110.

⁹¹ Noth argues that there are two separate elements or storylines in this narrative, but he sees the whole narrative (both storylines) as deriving from J. He sees the narrative of the people's disaffection as the "basic narrative" (vv. 4–13, 18–24a, 31–34) and the one of Moses's complaint as an addition from "a later hand" (14–17 and 24b–30). Noth, *Numbers*, 83. Knierim and Coats follow Noth; see Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 176–77; George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOTSup 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1998), 122; and Davies, *Numbers*, 102–3.

Some of the scholars who admit to two different sources or developments of the text also emphasize the coherence of the narrative as it is now. See Reis, "Numbers XI," 209 n. 4; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993), 327–28; and Pekka Pitkänen, *A Commentary on Numbers: Narrative, Ritual and Colonialism*, Routledge Studies in the Biblical World (London: Routledge, 2018), 107.

⁹² A third possibility is to compare our text with Exod 16, since these two texts clearly build on shared traditions. See, among others, George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 100: "Unless we are to assume that two different traditions of the quail existed without contact but nevertheless narrated their material in the same manner, we must conclude that we have parallel accounts of the same tradition." I will not pursue this here, because it will lead too far from our main focus, and Exodus does not share the tradition of Moses's death wish. Exodus 16 will be discussed in Chapter 5, though, as an example of a collective's death wish and death wish as wishful thinking.

here is first and foremost that neither of these methodological approaches manages on its own to explain the function of the death wish in this text.⁹³ A synchronic narrative reading does not take into account the different storylines, and thus can miss out on a significant reason for the death wish. In source-critical readings, the function of the death wishes easily falls off the radar, given that the aim of the method is identifying the different sources, not inquiring after the rhetorical function of the death wish. When we realize that our narrative is addressing two different problems in two separate storylines, new options for reading the text become available, and establishing the boundaries of the two storylines with some probability will help us to better understand Moses's death wish. This is the main goal for the following discussion. I am not concerned here with *which* literary sources are involved or when they date from. I will also (as in other chapters) make observations about the dialogue based on conversation analysis.

One argument for claiming that our narrative originated as two different stories in two different sources is that the narrative deals, as we have seen, with two different subjects: a desire for meat and the burden of the people. Painted in broad strokes, the two storylines can be separated out as follows.⁹⁴ The meat story has its exposition in v. 4. The focus on food continues in vv. 5–9 and is picked up again in Moses's direct question to YHWH in v. 13: "From where am I to get meat to give to all this people?" Verse 13 mentions meat explicitly and belongs to the meat story; we will see the importance of this in the following. YHWH's plan for how to provide meat for the people is presented in vv. 18–23, and the plan is executed in vv. 31–34.

The people-as-burden story has no clear exposition of its own,⁹⁵ but the problem of the burden is mentioned for the first time in v. 11. This storyline is also the focus of the main part of Moses's first speech, vv. 11–15.⁹⁶ Thematically, vv. 11–12, 14, and also vv. 16–17,

⁹³ I do not necessarily favor one of these methodological approaches over the other. I find reading both the final form of the narrative and the narrative in light of source criticism helpful; these approaches represent different readings of the narrative.

⁹⁴ The following is my division of the text based on observations in the text.

⁹⁵ So also Noth: "For the story of Moses' complaint does not stand on its own, but presupposes the narrative of the people's disaffection, which provides the necessary factual occasion for Moses' complaint (one can accept quite arbitrarily the supposition that the story of Moses' complaint had its own exposition, now completely lost)." Noth, *Numbers*, 83.

⁹⁶ Moses addresses God twice in this text, referred to here as Moses's two speeches: vv. 11–15 and 21–22.

YHWH's answer, deal with burden and carrying, and thus I understand all these verses to belong to the narrative about Moses's complaint and the burden of the people.⁹⁷ Verse 15, the death wish, does not talk of the burden of the people, but neither does it refer to meat. The verse is generally understood to belong to the burden storyline and not the one about meat.⁹⁸ One argument for seeing v. 15 as part of that story is Moses's statement, "If this is the way you are going to treat me," which connects to "Why have you done evil to your servant?" in v. 11.

YHWH's plan for a solution to the people-as-burden problem is given in vv. 16–17, and this plan is executed in vv. 24–25. Verses 26–30 can be seen as a little storyline by themselves, but they are connected thematically to the storyline of the people as burden, not the meat story. Verse 10 does not clearly connect to either of the storylines, and arguments can be made for connecting it to either story. In the final version of the narrative, v. 10 functions as a bridge between the people's complaint and Moses's first speech to YHWH. I will return to v. 10 later.

The vocabulary in the narrative is another indicator for source division. The problem for Moses in v. 11 is the burden of the people and, further, that he is expected to carry them. The Hebrew noun "burden" and the Hebrew verb "carry" are related, both being based on the three-letter root **נשא**. Taken together, the noun and verb occur seven times in only four verses here (11, 12, 14, and 17).⁹⁹ Neither this noun nor this verb nor any related word occurs in v. 13; instead, we hear of *meat*, **בשר**. The noun **בשר** is mentioned only twice in vv. 11–17, both times in v. 13, and **בשר** reoccurs in the latter parts of the narrative, three times in v. 18, once in v. 21, and once in v. 33, all identified above as belonging to the meat story. Both v. 11 and v. 15 use the phrase **חן בעיניך** ("favor in your sight"),¹⁰⁰ which is another argument for v. 15 belonging to the people-as-burden story; this phrase also connects the beginning and ending of Moses's first speech.

⁹⁷ For a similar division, see Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction*, 10.

⁹⁸ So Noth, *Numbers*, 83; Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 175; and Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction*, 10. Sommer, in contrast, sees vv. 4–15 as all belonging to one narrative. Sommer, "Reflecting on Moses," 604.

⁹⁹ The noun **נשא** "burden" (*DCH* 5:495–98) is used in vv. 11 and 17; and the verb **נשא** "to carry" (*DCH* 5:758–70) is used in vv. 12 (twice), 14, and 17 (twice).

¹⁰⁰ *DCH* 3:267.

Table 2.6

The meat story	The people-as-burden story
vv. 4–9	
v. 10	v. 10
	vv. 11–12
v. 13	
	vv. 14–17
vv. 18–24a	
	vv. 24b–30
vv. 31–34	

Again, v. 10 pulls in both directions. The reference to YHWH’s anger occurs both here and in v. 33. Verse 33 is part of the meat story, so the shared vocabulary here could indicate that v. 10 belongs to the meat story. However, vv. 10, 11, and 15 use the related words רע, רעע, and רעה. Verses 11 and 15 belong to the people-as-burden story; so does v. 10 belong to it as well? Verse 10 functions as a bridge that connects the different parts of the narrative, and I leave open the question of which storyline it originally belonged to. It may also have been written as a bridge by an editor when the two storylines were combined. Based on the above observations, we can divide Num 11:4–34 into two storylines originating from two different sources (see Table 2.6).

The most important result of this source division is that it establishes that Moses’s death wish (v. 15) was originally part of Moses’s dialogue with YHWH about the burden of the people; it was not connected to the problem of meat. In other words, the source division establishes that what triggers Moses’s request to be killed is the burden of his responsibilities for the people, which is raised and addressed by Moses in vv. 11–12 and 14–15. In the final form of the narrative, these verses belong to Moses’s first speech, vv. 11–15. These verses will be the focus of the discussion in the coming section on Moses’s rhetorical strategy and death wish; v. 10 gives the quotative frame for this speech and will be the starting point of our analysis.

Who Is Angry with Whom and Why?

In two well-established English translations, Num 11:10b reads as follows: “Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was

displeased"¹⁰¹ and "The Lord was very angry, and Moses was distressed"¹⁰² (וַיִּחַר אֵף יְהוָה מְאֹד וּבְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה רַע). Both translations are possible, but in my understanding they do not capture the tone of the Hebrew text. The text describes not so much Moses's feelings as how he evaluates something. In Moses's opinion, that is, "in the eyes of Moses," it was רַע.¹⁰³ The Hebrew adjective רַע means "evil, wicked behavior . . . unacceptable to people."¹⁰⁴ The verb, from the root רָעַע, is used in v. 11 and means in the *hiphil* "to do evil, to treat badly."¹⁰⁵ In verse 15 the noun רָעָה is used, and it can have a range of meanings, among them "evil," "wickedness," "misfortune," and "calamity."¹⁰⁶ The narrator's use of רַע, רָעַע, and רָעָה tie this part of the text together because all of these words refer to something evil. I translate verse 10 as follows: "Moses heard the people crying, every clan apart, and each person at the entrance of his tent. YHWH became very angry, and in the eyes of Moses it was evil." YHWH is clearly angry with the people (as in 11:1), but what is it that Moses sees as evil?¹⁰⁷ The verse is ambiguous, and there are two possible interpretations: either Moses is enraged with the people because of their crying,¹⁰⁸ or Moses is angry with YHWH.¹⁰⁹

Following the source-critical reading established above, the storyline of the burden of the people has no exposition in

¹⁰¹ NRSV.

¹⁰² NJPS.

¹⁰³ "Disapproval or dislike is expressed by 'bad/evil' in the eyes of' (*r' ' or ra' b'*)." F. J. Stendebach, "עַיִן," *TDOT* 11:37.

¹⁰⁴ *HALOT* 3:1251. "רַע, adj. Bad, evil (distinction from n., and vb. Pf. 3ms., is sts. not easy, and opinions differ)" (BDB, 948). *HALOT* 3:1250 notes the difficulty of distinguishing between forms of the adjective and forms of the substantive. *HALOT* 3:1251 lists Num 11:10 as an example of the adjective, while BDB, 949, *HALOT* 3:1269, and *DCH* 7:529 list Num 11:10 as a verb form.

¹⁰⁵ *HALOT* 3:1270.

¹⁰⁶ *HALOT* 3:1262–64.

¹⁰⁷ "What is *rā'*, 'evil,' in the eyes of Moses—the people's crying or God's anger?" Balentine, *Prayer*, 125.

¹⁰⁸ Noth argues that Moses is displeased with the people: "Moses is enraged with the people's desires . . . ; however, he turns in the first place not to the people but to Yahweh with reproachful questions." Noth also sees the complaints of the people as "unjustified in the sense of the difficult situation of the wilderness sojourn." Noth, *Numbers*, 86. See also Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 175, and Davies, *Numbers*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ According to Milgrom, Moses is displeased with God: "Moses' own discomfort with God in the following verses . . . indicates that he concurred with Israel that the Lord had dealt ill with it." Milgrom, *Numbers*, 85. So also Balentine, *Prayer*, 125; G. Gray, *Numbers*, 106; and Reis, "Numbers XI," 212.

our narrative, or it had an exposition that is now lost to us.¹¹⁰ This means that there is no reason given for the people's crying (again, as in 11:1). The root for crying, *בכה*, "appears in all cognate languages and in each means nothing more than 'to weep.'"¹¹¹ When we read the narrative in its final form, the only problem that has been presented so far is the lack of meat in v. 4, or more specifically, the problem that has been introduced is the people's question about the lack of meat. The people said, "Who will give us meat?"¹¹² In other words, there is no reason given for Moses (or YHWH) to be upset with the people.

However, Moses will soon give many reasons for being angry with YHWH. When Moses addresses YHWH, the focus is not on the people and their crying but on YHWH. This also supports the idea that what is evil in Moses's eyes is not connected to the people but to YHWH. Moses is primarily reacting to YHWH's behavior. It is what YHWH does that is unacceptable in Moses's eyes. Moses is angry with YHWH because of how YHWH is treating *Moses* (not the people). Balentine holds this same view:

The dialogue that follows between Moses and God leaves little doubt that from Moses's perspective the only legitimate target of this complaint is God. It is God's reputation that is, or ought to be, at stake here, not Moses's. Thus Moses turns to God with an address designed not simply to direct the complaint in the proper direction but also to raise serious questions about divine intentions.¹¹³

What, then, is Moses accusing YHWH of?

¹¹⁰ See the quote from Noth, *Numbers*, 83, in Note 96.

¹¹¹ Coats, *Rebellion*, 100. He also writes: "in none of the connotations of the word can an interpretation which would put it into the context of rebellion be seen" (101). See also *HALOT* 1:129–30. The root is also used in vv. 4, 13, 18, and 20.

¹¹² This is often translated "If only we had meat to eat" (so NRSV and NJPS) and is thus understood as more of a loaded expression, a rebellious statement, thereby changing the meaning of the text. But I agree with Knierim and Coats that this statement is "apparently neutral, simply an indirect petition or an expression of strong desire for meat without overtones of rebellion." Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 175. Coats also points out that none of the verbs that we typically connect to the rebellion motif are used in our narrative. Coats, *Rebellion*, 101.

¹¹³ Balentine, *Prayer*, 125.

Moses's Rhetorical Strategy and Death Wish

Moses's speech in vv. 11–15 is introduced with a quotative frame that uses the neutral verb אָמַר: "And Moses said to YHWH." What he says, though, is not neutral; rather, he poses a series of sharp questions: "Why have you done evil to your servant and why have I not found favor in your sight, that you have laid the burden of all this people upon me?" According to Christoph Dohmen, there is no differentiation between רָעַע as *evil* and as *bad* in the Semitic languages, so the translation here could be "Why have you treated your servant so badly?"¹¹⁴ It seems to me, though, that Moses believes the way YHWH is treating him, as YHWH's servant, is inappropriate and unacceptable, and therefore I translate "evil" here and not simply "bad." When Moses addresses YHWH, he does not begin with concern about the lack of meat or food. He is not concerned with the people and their needs. (This can, as we have seen, be explained by the source division of the text: we are leaving the meat story and entering the people-as-burden story.) Furthermore, when Moses addresses YHWH he does not ask, "Why have you done evil to your people?" He does not even ask, "Why have you done evil to me?" No, he asks, "Why have you done evil to your servant?" Moses is concerned with himself and the burden the people have become to him, but he is also emphasizing the special relationship between himself and YHWH. Moses is reminding YHWH that he is the servant of YHWH, so why would YHWH do evil to him?

Communication analysis is concerned with what is often referred to as "membership categories" and the question of "why did we characterize our social identity or the social identity of someone else in that particular way at that particular time?"¹¹⁵ Why does Moses (i.e., why does the narrator of our story have Moses) refer to himself as "your servant" in this context? Baruch Levine argues that Moses is here speaking in a "self-deprecating manner."¹¹⁶ He suggests this based on the epistolary style known from Old Babylonian letters, a style also found in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹⁷ I propose, instead, that Moses calls himself "your servant" for a different purpose, namely,

¹¹⁴ "רָעַע r''," *TDOT* 13:562.

¹¹⁵ Hutchby and Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis*, 35.

¹¹⁶ Levine, *Numbers*, 323.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* See also Benjamin Thomas, "The Language of Politeness in Ancient Hebrew Letters," *HS* 50 (2009): 17–39.

to draw attention to the need YHWH has for Moses and the moral obligation YHWH has to his servant. There is an appropriate way to treat your servant, and YHWH is not living up to what is expected. This reading inverts the traditional use of the membership category and fits better with Moses's overall speech in this text, as I will demonstrate.

Moses's second question is, "Why have I not found favor in your sight?" The two questions are parallel. YHWH doing evil to Moses also means that Moses has not found favor in YHWH's sight.¹¹⁸ The inappropriate treatment of Moses is "the burden of this entire people" that YHWH has placed upon him, and this is what Moses is protesting to YHWH about. The two questions in v. 11 can also be understood as laments. They are introduced with למה, "why," a term that is often an indicator of lament and part of the convention of protest against YHWH.¹¹⁹

The focus on the burden in v. 11 is continued in the reference to carrying in v. 12. This verse also follows up with two new questions: "Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their fathers?'" אֲנֹכִי, "I," occurs twice here. As an independent personal pronoun is not necessary in Hebrew to indicate the subject in a finite verbal sentence, the personal pronoun here is redundant. The function of the redundant pronouns becomes clear when we also notice that Moses's questions are rhetorical.¹²⁰ Whereas

¹¹⁸ "When anthropomorphic language speaks of God's eye the emphasis is on the eye's function as the locus of personal attitudes and actions. For instance, numerous texts speak of finding favor (māṣā hēn) in the eyes of Yahweh." Stenobach, "עֵינַי 'ayin,'" 40. Num 11:11, 15 are two of the examples given in *TDOT* 12:40.

¹¹⁹ Balentine, *Prayer*, 126. So also Claus Westermann, *Die Klagelieder: Forschungsgeschichte und Auslegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), 86; Claus Westermann, *Lob und Klage in den Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 134–35. Footnote 18 in Chapter 4 gives an overview of some of the primary research contributions on lament in the Hebrew Bible. This scholarship has strongly informed my own understanding of the genre. Lament is not the predominant mood here, and thus I will not discuss it further here.

¹²⁰ "When an independent personal pronoun is included as a subject of a finite verb, the pronoun may serve to clarify the subject, to contrast the subject with someone else, to indicate emotion, or to focus attention to the subject." Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, §106. See also Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*: "The independent principal forms of the personal pronoun serve . . . almost exclusively to emphasize the nominative-subject" (§322b) and "to give express emphasis to the subject" (§135a). Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §16.32: "There are three reasons why an independent pronoun is used with a finite verb The first reason involves a syntactic hole in

genuine questions *request* information, rhetorical questions *provide information*.¹²¹ The rhetorical questions Moses puts forth do not just expect a negative response, such as, "Of course I did not conceive this people; of course I did not give birth to them." They also volunteer information, saying, "You, YHWH did this." The rhetorical questions together with the independent personal pronoun create a contrast between Moses and YHWH in an "I am not the one, you are!" statement. The contrast is formulated as an implicit antithesis, because the contrasting party (YHWH) is not explicitly mentioned.¹²² In this way, Moses builds up his rhetorical argument, stating that it is not his responsibility to carry the people, it is YHWH's. Moses even claims that YHWH has said to him, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that I promised on oath to their fathers." The narrator has not quoted YHWH saying this. In Moses's opinion, YHWH is the one who should do this!

The metaphorical language here is striking and powerful, but it is not unprecedented, and today most scholars identify the metaphors as female metaphors.¹²³ We have come a long way since the rediscovery of female god-language in the seventies and eighties. That said, many readers, both ancient and contemporary, have found the female imagery in v. 12 remarkable, maybe even troubling, and there is still some scholarly debate about whether the metaphors in Num 11:12 draw on female source language alone, or on a combination of female and male sources.¹²⁴ The main reason for this is the reference

the language The other two involve logical contrast and psychological focus; both of these may loosely be termed emphasis."

¹²¹ See J. Kenneth Kuntz, "The Form, Location and Function of Rhetorical Questions in Deutero-Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, VTSup 70.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:121.

¹²² See Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §16.32.

¹²³ Even *HarperCollins Study Bible* routinely comments, "The female imagery used here . . . is unusual, but not unique." Jo Ann Hackett, introduction and notes to "Numbers," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, and Julette M. Bassler (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 214.

¹²⁴ "Source" and "source language" here refer to how all metaphors consist of a source (domain) and a target (domain), and the meaning of the metaphor is constructed in the interaction or the blending of the two. The question for Num 11:12 is whether the source of the metaphorical language is gendered female or male, feminine or masculine. For a discussion of gender in metaphorical language, see Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 84–87.

to the אִמָּן,¹²⁵ a grammatically masculine word, in v. 12b, and not to an אִמְנָת,¹²⁶ a grammatically feminine word.¹²⁷ According to my understanding, there is no question that v. 12a draws on female language when Moses asks, “did I conceive, . . . did I give birth?” הִרָה, “conceive, be pregnant,”¹²⁸ takes only female subjects in the Hebrew Bible and is thus explicitly marked for female gender.¹²⁹ “The verb יָלַד is a non-gender specific verb and can be used with

¹²⁵ Note that BDB translates this term specifically as a male caregiver: “foster-father” (52). The *DCH* does not provide gender-specific glosses for the masculine versus the feminine form of the participle. Instead, the *DCH* groups all forms of the active participle under the glosses, “guardian, foster parent, (wet-)nurse, to young child” (1:317). *HALOT* 1:64 translates “attendant (w. acc.) of children” for the masculine form of the active participle in Num 11:12 and Isa 49:23.

¹²⁶ “Foster-mother, nurse”; BDB, 52, with Ruth 4:16 and 2 Sam 4:4 as examples. *HALOT* 1:64 translates “nurse” for the female version of the word.

¹²⁷ A related issue here is how to understand the use of אַתָּה and not אַתְּהָ in Moses’s claim in Num 11:15: “If this is the way *you* are going to treat me.” According to Hershel Shanks, אַתָּה in Num 11:15 should be understood as the second-person feminine personal pronoun, and thus as the one instance in the Hebrew Bible where God is referred to with grammatically feminine gender: “If this is the way *you feminine* are going to treat me.” Hershel Shanks, “Does the Bible Refer to God as Feminine?” *BRev* 3 (1998): 2. His one-page article has become the go-to article for scholars who maintain that אַתָּה here is indeed a feminine pronoun, and that it indicates a notion of God being addressed as feminine. Reis argues that Moses “makes one last attempt to subtly arouse God’s ‘maternal’ feelings of mercy for his children in Num xi:15 He womanizes God with the feminine form of ‘you.’ I offer that the feminine ‘you,’ like the conception, the birthing, the carrying in the bosom, and the nursing-father images, is calculated to appeal to God’s gentle, and most motherly, parental affections.” Reis, “Numbers XI,” 217. For Reis, the feminine pronoun and the feminine metaphors are part of a broader argumentative strategy. Although I find Reis’s reading fascinating, I am not convinced that the pronoun here was intended as a feminine form, and I follow standard works such as *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, which simply says, “In three places אַתָּה appears as masculine Num 11¹⁵, Dt 5²⁴, Ez 28¹⁴.” Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §32g (note that it is Deut 5:27 in the MT). See also Frances I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, *Spelling in the Hebrew Bible: Dahood Memorial Lecture*, BibOr 41 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986), 135: “the survival of apparently feminine vocalization of clearly masculine forms . . . suggests that אַתָּה was a variant masculine form.”

¹²⁸ *DCH* 2:591.

¹²⁹ See Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 84–87, for a discussion of explicit and implicit markers of gender in language. I use *female* here and not *feminine*, since the reference is to biological sex markers and not to a notion of femininity (gender). Clearly, the differentiation between sex and gender, femaleness and femininity, can and should be questioned based on current theories of gender fluidity. More and more scholars, including myself, would argue with Judith Butler that not only gender, but also sex, is a social construction, and that gender is something that we perform. I still think it is an appropriate distinction to use for the Hebrew Bible material. See discussion in Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 57–74; and Hanne Løland Levinson, “Die nie aufhörende Suche nach Gottes weiblicher Seite: Weibliche Aspekte im Gottesbild der Prophetie,” in *Prophetie*, ed. Irmtraud Fischer and Juliana Claassens,

both male and female subjects. The two main understandings of יָלַד are 'to give birth,' said of women, and 'to beget,' said of men."¹³⁰ Given the combination with הָרָה in this verse, the verb should be understood as a reference to a woman giving birth.

Targum Onkelos changes the imagery in our verse to male imagery: "Am I the father of this whole people and are they my children, that you should say to me: Carry it with your strength as a nurse¹³¹ carries an infant?"¹³² Ramban saw this verse as using female imagery, but he also saw it as portraying Moses:¹³³

In my opinion the whole verse is a figurative reference to the mother, and the meaning thereof is as follows: Have I conceived all this people and have I given birth to them? Moses mentioned it in this way because it is the mother who suffers the pain of raising children, remembering what she suffered for them from birth, pregnancy, and conception. But Moses said *omein* since he is speaking of himself as a nursing-father, since he is not an *omeneth* (a nursing-mother).¹³⁴

On the surface, Moses is talking about himself, asking whether he is the one who conceived, the one who gave birth. But as I argued above, the rhetorical function of the questions in v. 12 is to make clear that Moses is not the one who has done these things, nor is he the one who should be doing them. YHWH should. YHWH is the one who should carry the people. YHWH is the one portrayed by the metaphors in v. 12. Moses is arguing that YHWH is the one who was pregnant with the people,¹³⁵ and YHWH is the mother who gave birth to them. The question now is whether the female imagery

Die Bibel und die Frauen: Eine exegetisch-kulturgeschichtliche Enzyklopädie 1.2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 322–35.

¹³⁰ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 120. See also HALOT 2:411–13; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Wilhelm Gesenius' Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, ed. Frants Buhl, 16th ed. (Leipzig: Verlag von F. C. W. Vogel, 1915), 300–1.

¹³¹ The Aramaic uses תּוֹרַבִּינָא (educator, guardian).

¹³² Bernard Grossfeld, ed. and trans., *The Targum Onkelos to Leviticus and the Targum Onkelos to Numbers*, ArBib 8 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 100.

¹³³ See also the discussion in Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23–47, especially 33–34.

¹³⁴ Ramban, *Numbers*, 99.

¹³⁵ An image we also find in Isa 46:3. See discussion in Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 146–58.

continues as Moses questions YHWH. Some scholars suggest the translation “guardian” for אִמָּן,¹³⁶ thereby downplaying the female language. I believe Noth was right when he wrote, “in spite of its masculine form, *ōmēn* must in the context, have a feminine sense.”¹³⁷ I would reformulate it to make it even clearer. In spite of the masculine form, the אִמָּן here is asked to take on the role and the responsibilities that an אִמָּנָה would usually have. According to my reading, this verse portrays YHWH as the mother, and YHWH is asking Moses to be the nurse for them, doing what a female nurse would usually do. This is what Moses does not want to do. Rhetorically, it is understood that this is not Moses’s job. How does YHWH respond to this? In the final version of the narrative, YHWH does not answer at all, and Moses shifts focus to the concern with meat. According to conversation analysis, the lack of response could be understood as a dispreferred second part in the dialogue, but the continuance of Moses’s speech without a pause suggests a different interpretation.

Verse 13 did not originally belong here. Moses’s line of argumentation continued in v. 14 with no mention of meat. In the final form of the narrative, however, v. 13 comes in between and provides yet another question, this time a real question, and real questions request information: “From where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they cry before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’” Verse 13 is

¹³⁶ Milgrom suggests “guardian” as a translation here, with a reference to Ramban, who understood אִמָּן as a “male caretaker of children.” Milgrom, *Numbers*, 85. Milgrom retains this understanding not in his Numbers commentary but in the Torah edition *Etz Hayim*, where he writes, “I am not the father of this people. You, God, are.” Jacob Milgrom, introduction and notes to “Numbers,” in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, ed. David L. Lieber (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2004), 829. Jeffrey Stackert translates: “Take personal responsibility for them, like a guardian takes responsibility for an infant.” Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 94. Stackert downplays the female associations in this translation in several ways, and he downplays the reference to the carrying in the bosom as well. Since all the uses of אִמָּן in this narrative refer to the act of carrying or the burden, and the basic meaning of אִמָּן is the physical movement of lifting up and carrying, it is hard to understand why he translates אִמָּן as “taking responsibility” in this verse. See a discussion of אִמָּן in Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 141–46.

¹³⁷ Noth, *Numbers*, 87. The whole quote is as follows: “Moses is after all, not the people’s mother and is, therefore, not obliged to fulfil maternal duties towards them. Implicit is the very unusual idea that Yahweh himself is Israel’s mother. . . . In v. 12bα the image alters slightly while Moses complains that he is supposed to be the nurse charged by the mother with the care of the child (in spite of its masculine form, *omen* must in the context, have a feminine sense)” (86–87).

only concerned with meat; there is no mention of carrying or of burden.¹³⁸ It is also interesting to note that Moses claims that the people came to him and asked for meat. This is not what the narrator reported in v. 10. In v. 10, Moses overheard the people's complaint, whereas in v. 13 Moses understands it as a question and demand of him. Of course, this difference can be explained via source criticism, and I have shown that it is not clear which source v. 10 belongs to. However, if we set the source division aside for a moment and look at the final form of the narrative, there are actually three different representations of what the people said and whom they addressed in this narrative. First, in v. 10 the people ask who will give them meat, and Moses overhears this. Second, in v. 13 the people address Moses, demanding meat; they even cry,¹³⁹ "Give us meat to eat." The third view is presented in vv. 18–20, where YHWH instructs Moses on what to say to the people. YHWH quotes the people, and he introduces the quote with the following claim: "You have cried in the hearing of the LORD, saying . . ." YHWH also adds a new element that we have not seen before in this narrative.¹⁴⁰ He quotes the people as saying, "Surely it was better for us in Egypt." YHWH then gives his interpretation of what this statement means, namely, "You have rejected YHWH who is among you, and you have cried before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" From YHWH's point of view, the people are rejecting him and the entire exodus experience in asking for meat.¹⁴¹

Moses continues to speak in v. 14, and we return to the people-as-burden story, the verse picking up on the theme and terminology of v. 12. Following his rhetorical (v. 11) and genuine (v. 12) questions, Moses provides an assessment of the situation: "I am not able, by

¹³⁸ Reading the final form of the text, the feeding could be seen as an aspect of the burden of leadership.

¹³⁹ בָּכָה; using the same root as in v. 4.

¹⁴⁰ It is a common element in the Pentateuch, as we will see several times in the discussions in Chapter 5.

¹⁴¹ So Balentine: "This quotation of the Israelites' complaint shows a subtle shift in rhetoric that reveals, along with the other reasons already given, God's interpretation of the people's behavior. As reported in verses 4–6 and again in verse 18, the substance of their complaint revolves around dietary concerns In God's review of the complaint however, the people are quoted as questioning not only their diet but also their entire exodus deliverance." Balentine, *Prayer*, 129–30. See also Knierim and Coats: "The elements of rebellion in the narrative appear only in the complaint in vv. 5–6, and there only implicitly. The nostalgia of Egypt anticipates the question more explicitly, rejecting the exodus and Yahweh in v. 20." Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 175.

myself, to carry all this people, for they are too heavy for me.” This is what weighs on Moses; the people are too heavy, and furthermore, he is left alone with all the responsibility for them. He is utterly alone. Once more, the personal pronoun *I* is technically redundant. But in this verse, it does not create a contrast as it did in v. 12; rather, it emphasizes the subject, Moses, and stresses the emotional aspects of his experience and his aloneness. The emphasized אֲנֹכִי, “I,” and לְבַדִּי, “alone,” show how outrageous this is for Moses. Did I do this (v. 12)? I cannot do this, not me alone (v. 14).

Moses’s speech culminates in v. 15 in a request: “If this is the way you are going to treat me, then kill me now.” Everything prior to this verse has been building up to this request, his death wish. Verse 15 consists of two conditional sentences, each presenting a condition and a consequence.¹⁴² There are two potential responses, two potential actions YHWH can take toward Moses, which would lead to two dramatically different outcomes. But which of the two responses would be the preferred one? Literally, Moses is requesting that YHWH kill him, but only if YHWH will not stop treating him inappropriately. The preferred response would be a different one (see Table 2.7 on next page).

The condition in v. 15a concerns the way YHWH is treating Moses: “If this is the way you are going to treat me” The condition is introduced with אִם, *if*, which indicates that this is a “real or fulfillable” condition.¹⁴³ If YHWH is going to continue to treat Moses the way he has, YHWH should just as well kill him. It is a real possibility. Jacob Milgrom writes, “Since God is the author of his wretchedness, He might as well finish the job—and take his life.”¹⁴⁴ It is the evil YHWH is doing to Moses, leaving Moses with the burden of the people, that triggers Moses’s death wish.

Moses is asking YHWH to kill him—not a common request in the Hebrew Bible. We find similar requests in the stories about Elijah (1 Kgs 19) and Jonah (Jonah 4),¹⁴⁵ and Samson indirectly asks YHWH to kill him (Judg 16) when he asks YHWH for the strength to take revenge and to take his own life along with the lives of the Philistines.¹⁴⁶ Exodus 32:32 must also be mentioned here, as it has

¹⁴² See discussion at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁴³ See discussion at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 86.

¹⁴⁵ See discussion in Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁶ Samson’s death wish is the only death wish addressed to God that actually ends in death.

Table 2.7

Condition—protasis	Consequence—apodosis
If this is the way you are going to treat me,	then kill me now;
ואם־ככה את־עשה לי	הרגני נא הרג
if I have found favor in your sight,	and do not let me look upon your evilness. ¹
ואם־מצאתי חן בעיניך	ואל־אראה ברעתך

¹ For my translation here and my emendation of the Hebrew text, see later in this section.

Moses saying to YHWH, “But if [if you do] not [forgive their sins], wipe me out of your book that you have written.”

The verb used in Moses’s request in Num 11:15, הרג, “kill” or “slay,” is often associated with violence.¹⁴⁷ With people as the subject, הרג is explained as “in murder, assassination or other personal or small-scale violence,”¹⁴⁸ and it is thus a striking verb choice. The verb is used with YHWH as subject in the exodus story, in the killing of the firstborn (Exod 13:15). Moses is not simply (if one can call it *simple*) asking YHWH to take his life, as Elijah and Jonah do, but is asking him to do so by violently ending it. The harshness of it fits Moses’s view of YHWH in this text as a whole.

A violent death is one outcome Moses pictures if YHWH continues to treat him evilly. But there is another option; in v. 15b, Moses raises the possibility that he might find favor in YHWH’s sight after all, and then the outcome would be very different. This would be the preferred response. In v. 15b, we again have a formulation in a conditional sentence, and again the condition is introduced with אם: “if I have found favor in your sight.” In v. 11, Moses asks YHWH, “Why have I not found favor in your sight?” The terminology in vv. 11 and 15 is mirrored, which underlines a close connection in Moses’s speech (see Table 2.8 on next page).¹⁴⁹

The terminology in v. 15 also mirrors v. 11 in another way. In v. 11, Moses said, “Why have you done evil to your servant?” The idea of something evil returns in v. 15b, when Moses says, “Do not

¹⁴⁷ See *DCH* 2:588–89; *HALOT* 1:255 “to kill, slay/slaughter.”

¹⁴⁸ *DCH* 2:588.

¹⁴⁹ Three times in this narrative we find a reference to someone’s eyes: vv. 10, 11, and 15.

Table 2.8

v. 11. So Moses said to YHWH, Why have you <u>done evil to</u> your servant? And why have I not <u>[found favor in your sight]</u> , that you have laid the burden of all this people upon me?	וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לָמָּה הֲרַעַת לַעֲבָדְךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־[מַצְתִּי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ] לְשׂוֹם אֶת־מִשְׁאָל כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי
v. 15. If this is the way you are going to treat me, then kill me now; if I have <u>[found favor in your sight]</u> , and do not let me look upon ¹ <u>your evilness</u> .	וְאִם־כִּכָּה אֶת־עֹשֶׂה לִּי הֲרֹגֵנִי נָא הַרְג אִם־[מַצְאֵתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ] וְאַל־אַרְאֶה בְּרַעְתָּךְ

¹ The combination of **אֵל**, **אַרְאָה**, and **ב** is used only here and in Gen 21:16, where Hagar says, “Do not let me look upon the death of the child.”

let me look upon . . . evilness.” Here, the noun **רָעָה** is used.¹⁵⁰ The translation “evilness” is not given in *HALOT* or *DCH*, but I find it a better rendering in the context than “wickedness.”¹⁵¹ Both vv. 11 and 15 refer to something evil, but whose evil are we hearing about in v. 15? I translate, “If I have found favor in your sight, do not let me see *your* evilness.” Here, my translation does not follow the Masoretic Text (MT), which reads, “Let me not see **בְּרַעְתִּי**.” In the MT, **רָעָה** has a first-person suffix, and the sentence can thus be translated “do not let me see my misery”¹⁵² or “and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”¹⁵³ As I understand it, this reading does not fit well with the line of Moses’s argumentation. I follow another text tradition, a rabbinical tradition noted in the *tiqqune sopherim* (“emendation of the scribes”).¹⁵⁴ According to the *tiqqune sopherim*, Num 11:15 originally had a second-person masculine singular suffix

¹⁵⁰ *HALOT* 3:1262–64, see also the section “Who Is Angry with Whom and Why?”

¹⁵¹ “Wickedness” is given as a possible translation both in *HALOT* 3:1262 and *DCH* 7:521.

¹⁵² NRSV.

¹⁵³ NJPS.

¹⁵⁴ “[T]he *Tiqqune Sopherim* refers to a list of eighteen passages in the MT which have undergone emendation for theological motives.” Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, OBO 36 (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 17. These emendations or corrections were made by the early scribes. They are listed in the Masorah and are not found in the Masoretic Text itself. See Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 60. The phrase in Num 11:15 is listed as one of the eighteen emendations of the *sopherim*.

here and thus referred to "your evilness," meaning YHWH's evilness. The emendations that the *tiqqune sopherim* point out are thought to have taken place to protect reverence for YHWH, and this would clearly be the case here. The text at an earlier stage had Moses blame YHWH for YHWH's evilness, which a later tradition (now reflected in the MT) found theologically unacceptable, and thus the text was changed to refer to Moses's own misery. There are no textual witnesses supporting the second-person suffix, but the emendation makes good sense, and as Emanuel Tov comments, "After all if we take into consideration that the rabbis suppressed the uncorrected readings, lack of textual evidence is not necessarily a valid criterion."¹⁵⁵ Even though Tov's argument here is an argument based on silence and thus problematic as a valid argument, it is worth noting as common sense.

Numbers 11:15 is included in twenty-two of the twenty-five lists of *tiqqune sopherim* and is thus the most frequent case of all the *tiqqune sopherim*.¹⁵⁶ All of them list ברעתך, with the second-person suffix, "your evilness," as the original reading,¹⁵⁷ which for me is a strong indicator that this might actually be so. Rashi also identifies a *tiqqun* in Num 11:15, but according to him the text read ברעתם with a third-person masculine plural suffix: "It should have been written their [i.e., the people's] evil."¹⁵⁸ A similar reading also appears in the Fragmentary Targum and in Targum Neofiti: "that I may not see the wretchedness of your people."¹⁵⁹ It is hard to understand, though, why there would have been a need to change "their evilness" to "my evilness,"¹⁶⁰ and so I see no compelling reason to emend the text in

¹⁵⁵ Emanuel Tov, review of *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, by Carmel McCarthy, *JQR* 73 (1983): 286. It should be noted, though, that elsewhere Tov goes farther, saying, "Probably most corrections were not carried out in reality; tradition merely reflects an exegetical *Spielelement* . . . and a 'midrashic fancy.'" Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 60. So he might very well not agree with my reading here.

¹⁵⁶ See McCarthy, *Tiqqune Sopherim*, 55.

¹⁵⁷ I hesitate in using the term *originally* here, as it is not clear what *originally* would refer to in this context, given that there might always have been different textual traditions and variants. At the same time, the emendations have probably been made on the assumption of what the text originally said.

¹⁵⁸ Rashi, *Bamidbar/Numbers*, vol. 4 of *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, ArtScroll (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1997), 124.

¹⁵⁹ See McCarthy, *Tiqqune Sopherim*, 124.

¹⁶⁰ So also McCarthy: "But it seems even more difficult to see how 'their wretchedness' could have been an original reading which needed to be changed to 'my evil,' to avoid disrespect, blasphemy, etc. It is far more probable that the reverse possibility is nearer to the truth, that out of respect for Moses, exegetical and homiletic traditions

that direction. The twenty-two occurrences of our text with the second-person masculine singular suffix in the *tiqqune sopherim* and the ambiguity in the tradition demonstrated above show that this verse has been challenging for readers, strengthening the possibility that the MT represents an emendation.

Another compelling reason for reading “your evilness” in Num 11:15 is the textual context. There are three references to something evil (רעה/רעע/רעע) in Num 11:10–15, and I have argued in each instance that the evil referred to can be understood as YHWH’s. First, in v. 10 it is said that “YHWH was very angry, and in the eyes of Moses it was evil,” and I have posited that it is YHWH’s anger and behavior that is evil in the eyes of Moses in the continuation of this verse. Second, in v. 11 Moses asks YHWH, “Why have you done evil to your servant?” Here, we have an explicit reference to YHWH as the doer of the evilness. Finally, in v. 15 Moses asks YHWH to kill him so he will not see more of YHWH’s evilness: “Let me not look upon your evilness.” In my understanding, what Moses sees as YHWH’s evilness throughout this text is that YHWH has not taken up responsibility for the people but left it to Moses and Moses alone. “Evil” here refers to improper and unacceptable behavior. It is the burden of the people, the burden of his own leadership and responsibility for the people, that pushes Moses to ask YHWH to kill him. From Moses’s point of view, the people are YHWH’s responsibility, not Moses’s. Moses is YHWH’s servant; this indicates a special relationship between YHWH and Moses, but Moses is left to carry the burden of the people, all alone, and he does not want to do it anymore. This leaves YHWH under pressure.

Did Moses Succeed?

Was Moses’s negotiation with YHWH successful? It seems to me that YHWH gives Moses what he bargained with his life for. Moses said, “I am not able by myself to carry all this people, for they are too heavy for me” (v. 14). YHWH answered him, “And I will come down and I will speak with you there; and I will take from the spirit that is on

grew up which transferred the ‘wretchedness’ of Moses to the people, for after all it was their fault rather than his, that the divine wrath was aroused There is no reason why Moses cannot, under the present circumstances, be referring to his own wretchedness. This wretched condition, which he wants blotted out by death, is the burden that is too heavy for him in v. 14.” McCarthy, *Tiqqune Sopherim*, 124–25.

Table 2.9

v. 14.	
<u>I</u> am not able, <u>by myself</u> to <u>carry</u> all this people, for they are too heavy for me.	לֹא־אוּכַל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשַׂאת אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כִבֵּד מִמֶּנִּי
v. 17b.	
and they shall <u>carry</u> together with you the <u>burden</u> of the people	וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתְּךָ בְּמִשָּׂא הָעָם
and <u>you</u> will not <u>carry</u> it all <u>by yourself</u>	וְלֹא־תִשֵּׂא אֶתְּךָ לְבַדְּךָ

you and put it on them; and they shall carry together with you the burden of the people and you will not carry it all by yourself" (v. 17). This is the preferred answer to Moses's questions and complaints, as we can see from the mirroring of terminology between the two verses. According to conversation analysis, Moses's speech (the first part of the adjacency pair) can be understood as an invitation or request, while YHWH's answer (the second part of the adjacency pair) can be understood as an acceptance.¹⁶¹ The second half of v. 17 responds word for word to Moses's complaint in v. 14 (see Table 2.9).

The word נשא is used in both verses. We hear about carrying once in v. 14 and twice in v. 17. The burden of the people is mentioned once in each verse.¹⁶² Further, Moses said, "I [אֲנֹכִי] am not able to carry all this people alone [לְבַדִּי]." YHWH says, "so that you [אתה] will not carry it all by yourself [לְבַדְּךָ]." Once more, a redundant independent personal pronoun serves to emphasize Moses's subjectivity. The mirroring connects different parts of the text, and in light of our source-critical analysis, it connects the verses that belong to the narrative of Moses's burden and leadership.

As for the burden of the people weighing on Moses, he gets the help he requests: the seventy elders. Milgrom has pointed out that Moses might have wanted divine assistance, and if this was the case, Milgrom notes, "God's answer is not what Moses expected."¹⁶³ He has a point; after all, Moses was arguing that YHWH was the one who gave birth to the people and thus should carry them. At the same time, Moses's main argument was that YHWH should stop treating him so badly,

¹⁶¹ See discussion in the section "Reflections on Methodology," Chapter 1.

¹⁶² Here marked with double underlining.

¹⁶³ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 86.

that he could not carry the people on his own, and these requests are answered. Moses does not question the proposed solution of the seventy elders. He seems satisfied with YHWH's plan to relieve him of his burden. His bargaining paid off. Moses's anger has been appeased; YHWH's anger (v. 10) has not.¹⁶⁴

Concluding Remarks

Our first case studies, Genesis 30 and Numbers 11, have demonstrated that uttering a death wish is not necessarily the same as expressing a desire to die—far from it. Rachel and Moses each set forth an ultimatum in which one outcome is death: “Give me sons; if not I will die!” (Gen 30:1) and “If this is the way you are going to treat me, then kill me now” (Num 11:15). In both cases, the death wish is a powerful communication strategy used to negotiate their circumstances and achieve their goals.

Rachel, who has the leading voice in Genesis 30, negotiates with Jacob (30:1) to get a son. Her first speech is met with dismissal, a dispreferred response (30:2), but she continues to speak and act toward her goal. Her voice is the driving force in the narrative, and in the end her speech and her actions receive a preferred response. She gives birth to her son, Joseph (30:22–24).

Moses rages against YHWH, accusing YHWH of treating him, YHWH's servant, unacceptably. Moses's death wish is the culmination of a long speech (Num 11:11–15), but it is not his goal to die (though he would prefer death if YHWH does not act favorably towards him). Rather, Moses wants to be released from his sole responsibility for the people. Moses's death wish is met with a preferred response. YHWH gives him the assistance of the seventy elders (Num 11:16–17); he does not have to carry the burden of the people alone anymore. For Rachel and Moses, uttering a death wish is a powerful, though risky, rhetorical strategy. They are the ones with less power in an unequal relationship, and for them uttering a death wish functions as an act of empowerment.

¹⁶⁴ When it comes to the first problem in our narrative—the people's quest for meat—the problem also finds its solution in our narrative. The people get meat, in abundance, but it turns out to be a punishment. See George Coats's interesting reading of rebellion and punishment as later stages of the tradition in Coats, *Rebellion*, 96–115.