

Rethinking Jesus — Reading #1

Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life

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Finite and Infinite Life in the Greek Language

[1] The interdependence of thought and speech makes it clear that languages are not so much means of expressing truth that has already been established as means of discovering truth that was previously unknown. Their diversity is a diversity not of sounds and signs but of ways of looking at the world. . .

[2] A wide range of meaning is bound up with the Latin word *vita* and its Romance descendants, and with life, or German *Leben* and Scandinavian *liv* as well. In their everyday language the Greeks possessed two different words that have the same root as *vita* but present very different phonetic forms: *bios* and *zoë*. While the Greek language was "in the making," these forms were produced by a phonetic development whose laws can be formulated with precision. Both words have maintained themselves, a phenomenon made possible by an insight, a distinction of the kind referred to above. This insight and distinction are reflected in the Greek language, which we shall consult for an understanding of them before we enter the realm of images and visions.

[3] *Zoë*, in Greek, has a different resonance from *bios*. Originally this difference did not spring from the phonetic form of the word *zoë*, and indeed we take the word "resonance" in a broad sense that goes beyond the acoustic. The words of a language carry certain overtones, corresponding to possible variations of the basic meaning, which sound in the ears of those who know the language intimately. The word *zoë* took on this resonance in an early period in the history of the Greek language: it "resounds" with the life of all living creatures. These are known in Greek as *zoön* (plural, *zoa*). The significance of *zoë* is life in general, without further characterization. When the word *bios* is uttered, something else resounds: the contours, as it were, the characteristic traits of a specified life, the outlines that distinguish one living thing from another. *Bios* carries the ring of "characterized life." Correspondingly, *bios* is in Greek the original word for "biography." This usage is its most characteristic application, but not an early one. *Bios* is attributed also to animals when their mode of existence is to be distinguished from that of the plants. To the plants the Greeks attributed only *physis*— except when a mode of living was to be characterized, and then they spoke of *phyton bios*, the "life of a plant." "A cowardly man lives the *bios* of a hare." The Greek who uttered these words looked upon the life of an animal— the hare— as a characteristic life, one of cowardice.

[4] Once we become aware of the difference in meaning between *zoë* and *bios*, we discern it in the usage of so early a writer as Homer, but this should not be taken to mean that such usage was wholly conscious. In the present and imperfect tenses, which signify the unlimited course of life, *zoen* is employed rather than *bioun*. In Homer the imperative *bioto* ("let him live," in opposition to "let the other die") or *bionai* (also in contrast to "to die") is used as an intensive, attaching special weight to life as the limited life of one man. *Zoëin*, the uncharacterized and not particularly emphasized state of enduring life, is often employed in Homer in parallel constructions signifying the minimum of life: "to live and see the sunlight," "to live and keep one's eyes open on earth," "to live and to be." For the gods it is easy to endure in life; accordingly, they are known as the *rheia zoöntes*, "those who live easily." But when one of them (Poseidon in the *Iliad*) wishes to assert his own mode of life in opposition to that of Zeus, he does so with the verb *beomai*, which is more closely related to *bios*.

[5] The "life" with which modern biology concerns itself cannot be related to *bios*. The word *biologos* meant to the Greeks a mime who imitated the characteristic life of an individual and by his imitation made it appear still more characteristic. *Bios* does not stand in such a contrast to *thanatos*, "death," as to exclude it. On the contrary, to a characteristic life belongs a characteristic death. This life is indeed characterized by the manner of its ceasing to be. A Greek locution expresses this in all succinctness: one who has died a characteristic death has "ended life with his own death." It is *zoë* that presents an exclusive contrast to *thanatos*. From the Greek point of view modern biology should be called "zoology." *Zoë* is life considered without any further characterization and experienced without limitations. For the present-day student of the phenomenon "life," the fact that *zoë* is experienced without limitation is only one of its aspects, not the whole. Here again we cannot speak of a thoroughgoing identity, for, as we have said, *zoë* is the minimum of life with which biology first begins.

[6] *Zoë* seldom if ever has contours, but it does contrast sharply with *thanatos*. What resounds surely and clearly in *zoë* is "non-death." It is something that does not even let death approach it. For this reason the possibility of equating psyche with *zoë*, the "soul" with "life," and of saying psyche for *zoë*, as is done in Homer, was represented in Plato's *Phaedo* as a proof of the immortality of the soul. A Greek definition of *zoë* is *chronos tou einai*, "time of being," but not in the sense of an empty time into which the living creature enters and in which it remains until it dies. No, this "time of being" is to be taken as a continuous being which is framed in a *bios* as long as this *bios* endures—then it is termed "*zoë of bios*"—or from which *bios* is removed like a part and assigned to one being or another. The part may be called "*bios of zoë*."

[7] Plotinus called *zoë* the "time of the soul," during which the soul, in the course of its rebirths, moves on from one *bios* to another. He was able to speak this way because in the Greek language the words *zoë* and *bios*, each with its own special resonance, were already present: the one for not-characterized life—which, unless we wish to join the Greeks in calling it "time of being," we can only define as "not a non-life"—the other for characterized life. If I may employ an image for the relationship between them, which was formulated by language and not by philosophy, *zoë* is the thread upon which every individual *bios* is strung like a bead, and which, in contrast to *bios*, can be conceived of only as endless. Anyone wishing to speak in Greek of a "future life" could say *bios*. "Anyone who like Plutarch wished to express thoughts about the eternal life of a god" or to proclaim an "eternal life" had to employ *zoë*, as the Christians did with their *aionios zoë*.

[8] The Greek language clung to a not-characterized "life" that underlies every *bios* and stands in a very different relationship to death than does a "life" that includes death among its characteristics. The fact that *zoë* and *bios* do not have the same "resonance," and that "*bios of zoë*" and "*zoë of bios*" are not tautologies, is the linguistic expression of a very definite experience. This experience differs from the sum of experiences that constitute the *bios*, the content of each individual man's written or unwritten biography. The experience of life without characterization—of precisely that life which "resounded" for the Greeks in the word *zoë*—is, on the other hand, indescribable. It is not a product of abstractions at which we might arrive only by a logical exercise of thinking away all possible characterizations.

[9] Actually we experience *zoë*, life without attributes, whether we conduct such an exercise or not. It is our simplest, most intimate and self-evident experience. When our life is threatened, the irreconcilable opposition between life and death is experienced in our fear and anguish. The limitation of life as *bios* can be experienced; its weakness as *zoë* can be experienced; and even the desire to cease to be can be experienced. We might like to be without the experience of our actual *bios*, which is given to us with all its characteristics, or to be without experience in general. In the first case, we wish *zoë* to continue in another *bios*. In the second case, something would occur that has never been experienced. Being without experience, a cessation of experience, is no longer experience. *Zoë* is the very first experience; its beginning was probably very similar to the renewal of experience after a fainting spell. When we return from a state of non-experience, we cannot even remember an end that we might call our last experience.

[10] *Zoë* does not admit of the experience of its own destruction: it is experienced without end, as infinite life. Herein it differs from all other experiences that come to us in *bios*, in finite life. This difference between life as *zoë* and life as *bios* can find a religious or a philosophical expression. Men even expect religion and philosophy to do away with this discrepancy between the experience of *bios* and the refusal of *zoë* to admit of its own destruction. The Greek language stops at the mere distinction between *zoë* and *bios*, but the distinction is clear and presupposes the experience of infinite life. As always, the Greek religion points to figures and images that bring the secret close to man. Elements that in everyday speech, related to everyday events and needs, stand side by side and are often intermingled, are transposed into a pure time—festive time—and a pure place: the scene of events that are enacted not in the dimensions of space, but in a dimension of their own, an amplification of man, in which divine epiphanies are expected and striven for.

Reflections on Mortality from a Jewish Perspective [excerpts]

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PHILOSOPHICAL AND MYSTICAL RESPONSES

[1] The philosophical sensibility within Judaism early on was reconciled to the inevitability of death and even strove to create a positive acceptance of death. . .

The mystical sensibility in Judaism . . . reads in the Genesis texts that humanity was created to live forever and that the arrival of death was a tragic interruption that must somehow, someday be overcome. Thus the thirteenth-century Spanish jurist, commentator, and kabbalist Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (d. 1270) reads Genesis 2:17, "But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for on the day you eat from it you will surely die," as teaching that Adam became mortal only after his disobedient consumption of fruit from that tree. A physician like Maimonides, Nachmanides insisted that the art of medicine was primitive compared to the divine science of healing by faith, for the human being is not merely natural. "Know that only faithless people who believe the world exists by necessity hold that the body is necessarily subject to corruption. But according to the faithful who hold that the world was created by the will of God, a human life can last forever so long as God wills it" (Ramban 1973; also at Lv 26:11). For the mystics, access to the will of God offers the possibility of overcoming the terms of life in the present.

[2] For the philosophers mortality cannot be overcome, but with the acquisition of wisdom it can be endured. Between these points of view a war of sensibility rages. Although mortal, Biblical Adam lived 930 years. A few generations later, Methuselah achieved 960 years. The Book of Genesis records the shrinking of life spans. Abraham reached 175 although Sarah only 127. Isaac reached 180, but Jacob did not reach 150. Tired, old Jacob (Gn 47:7—11), in a gesture that suggests the onset of senescence, greets Pharaoh for the first time, and in response to the potentate's question, "How old are you?" answers, "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life span of my fathers during their sojourns."

THE DEATH OF MOSES

[3] It is however the six score years of Moses that set the Bible's standard for humanity. Thus the Talmud reports that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva both lived 120 years. And on this basis there developed the tradition of wishing someone a happy birthday by saying, "May you live to a hundred and twenty." The Book of Deuteronomy makes it clear that Moses' death was not the result of gradual erosion of his faculties, the culmination of a process of illness and loss; rather "his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated." Moses responded, as it were, to the divine summons "ascend this mountain and die" (Dt 32:50) simply because it was time. The Five Books that begin with Creation find their culmination here in the death of Moses. Moses standing atop Mount Nebo gazing wistfully across the Jordan into the land that he will never enter—this is the signature of the Torah.

[4] Not death itself, but incompleteness haunts the man who has reached his life's limit. The Bible calls Psalm 90 "the Prayer of Moses," for in it these words appear: "You return man to dust. You decreed, 'Return you mortals.' For in Your sight a thousand years are like yesterday that has past, like a watch of the night. You engulf men in sleep; at daybreak they are like grass that renews itself; at daybreak it flourishes anew, by dusk it withers and dries up. . . . The span of our life is seventy years, or, given the strength, eighty years; but the best of them are trouble and sorrow . . . Teach us to number our days that we may obtain a wise heart."

[5] Moses' death is dignified, simple, paradigmatic. The text says that God buried him in a valley opposite Jericho in a place no one knows. Only once in Deuteronomy is there a suggestion that Moses sought to resist the command to die. 'Lord God, You have just begun to show your servant Your unparalleled greatness and might. . . . Let me cross over so that I may see the good land which is on the other side of the Jordan.' . . . But the Lord had become angry with me because of you and refused to listen to me. And the Lord said to me, 'This is enough for you. Speak to Me no further about this. Ascend the mountain and lift your eyes west, north, south, and east—but you shall not cross this Jordan' (Dt 3:24-27).

[6] Biblical Moses ultimately accepts the divine decree with grace, but the Moses of Midrash stages a grand struggle with death. We might say that Biblical Moses dies a good death in a hospice while Midrashic Moses is hooked to a vast array of life-support mechanisms that doom him to a protracted struggle with the inevitable.

Compare this simple tale of obedience with the following segment from a tenth-century Midrashic compendium known as *Midrash P'tirat Moshe* (The Midrash of the death of Moses):

When the day for Moses our teacher, may he rest in peace, came to depart the world, the Holy One Blessed be He said to him, "Your days have drawn near to die" (Dt 31:14). Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, after all the work that I have done, You say that I should die. 'I will not die but will live and recount the glory of God'" (Ps 118:17).

The Holy Blessed be He said to him, "Enough for you. You come this far and no further. Call Joshua so that I may give him his orders." He responded, "Master of the Universe, why must I die? If it is for the sake of Joshua's honor, let Joshua take over and I will give up my responsibilities." The Holy One said to him, "You will treat him the way he has treated you?" He answered, "Yes."

[7] Moses began to walk behind Joshua and to call him Rabbi Joshua. Joshua became very frightened and cried out to him, "Me, you call Rabbi?!" Moses said to Joshua, "Do you want me to live and not die?" He answered, "Yes." He said to him, "Isn't it good for you that I don't die like this? If any part of the job overwhelms you, I will instruct you. But understand that I shall live and that I will treat you the way you used to treat me." Joshua replied to Moses "Whatever you decree upon me I will accept just so that I may continue to see your face."

[8] Moses then began to appeal his sentence before God. He said to Him, "Master of the Universe, what sin have I committed that I should die?" The Holy One Blessed be He answered him, "Because of the sin of Adam . . . you must die." He replied, "Master of the Universe, was it for naught that my feet entered the cloud of the divine presence, and for naught that I ran like a horse before Your children?" He answered, "I have already sentenced humanity to die."

[9] He said to him, "Master of the Universe, You gave Adam but a single simple commandment and he transgressed it. But I have not transgressed." He answered, "Abraham sanctified My Name in the world yet he died. . . ." He said to him, "Master of the Universe, will not people say that if God had not found evil things in Moses He never would have forced him from the world?" He answered, "I already wrote in My Torah, 'Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out face to face. . .'" (Dt 34:10). "Maybe they will say that in my youth I obeyed You but in my old age I rebelled." "I already wrote that you did not sanctify Me [at the waters of Meribath-Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin]" (Dt 32:51).

[10] He said, "Master of the Universe, let me enter the land of Israel, live there for two or three years, then I will die."

"I have decreed that You shall not enter there."

"If I cannot enter in my life, let me at least enter in my death."

"No!"

He said to Him, "Master of the Universe, why is all this anger directed at me?"

[11] Although he must ultimately succumb, Moses disdains all of God's arguments and dismisses all of God's messengers. He dies alone, tradition teaches, with God's kiss on his lips. (Note that in structuring the dialogue between God and Moses the author of *Midrash P'tirat Moshe* does not resort to the argument for reward after death even though it was available to him. It is significant that Moses does not renounce this world in order to gain a greater prominence in the next. Rather, his loss is absolute. He had sought entrance to a land from which he was barred, the dark truth of all death.

Entrance into the City



Mural at Sepphoris archaeological site

Gospel of John: 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life [=zoe], and the life [=zoe] was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.