

Biblical Psychotherapy: Reclaiming Scriptural Narratives for

Positive Psychology and Suicide Prevention

Kalman J. Kaplan and Paul Cantz

Americans and Westerners generally have been living in recent times in an affluent society with an abundance of choices. Yet many people report feeling that their lives are aimless and without purpose, and moreover spiritually empty. Indeed, an April 22, 2016, article on health by Sabrina Tavernise in the *New York Times* reported that suicide rate in the United States has surged to a 30-year high, according to the National Center of Health Statistics, with increases in every age group except older adults. The rise was particularly steep for women and was substantial among middle-aged Americans. The overall suicide rate rose by 24% from 1999 to 2014, lifting the nation's suicide rate to 13 per 100,000 people, the highest since 1986. In all, 43,773 people died from suicide in 2014 compared with 29,199 in 1999 (Tavernise, 2016).

Statistics are just statistics, and cannot always be applied to a particular clinical case (i.e., the “ecological fallacy”), though these statistics offer compelling evidence that something has gone terribly wrong in the American society. Why are so many people choosing to take their lives? Does Judaism and biblical thought have something to contribute to this terrible national problem. We (Drs. Kalman Kaplan and Paul Cantz) have published a new book suggesting that stories in the Hebrew Bible have a great deal to contribute to reducing suicide and indeed valorizing and invigorating life.

Examination of ancient source materials, reveals that over 16 suicides and self-mutilations emerge among the 223 characters presented in the 26 surviving plays of the great Greek tragedians, mutilations among the 223 characters depicted in in the 26 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides

yielding a suicide percentage of 7.2%. Countless other suicides occurred in actual Greek and Roman lives. In contrast, only six suicides occur among the 2,855-different people (2,730 men and 1125 women) mentioned in the 39 books of the Hebrew Scriptures spanning a period of 3,330 years (see Ziffer, 2006). Only six are identified as completed suicides (see Table 2), yielding an overall suicide rate of 6/2855 or .02%, including none by women. A huge Chi-Square statistic emerges when we compare this biblical rate of .02 to the 7.2 % suicide rates in the 26 plays of Sophocles and Euripides discussed above (Chi-Square = 141.39 $p < .001$)

The ancient Greek world, despite its unquestioned brilliance, was fatalistic, depressed, fearful of change, and profoundly hopeless. Yet much of modern mental health is implicitly or explicitly based on ancient Greek narratives (e.g., Oedipus, Electra, Narcissus) and a split between *psyche* and *soma*. To combat the suicide epidemic with narratives implicitly based on ancient Greek narratives and pessimism is akin to treating a patient with influenza with medicine contained on a spoon infected with the virus itself.

In *Biblical Psychotherapy: Reclaiming Scriptural Narratives for Positive Psychology and Suicide Prevention*, Kalman J. Kaplan and Paul Cantz (2017) offer life-enhancing biblical narratives which they employed with 14 patients (actual cases are discussed) as alternatives to matched Graeco-Roman suicidal stories with regard to seven evidence-based risk factors: 1) Overcoming feelings of isolation: Elijah against Ajax; 2) Overcoming feelings of meaninglessness in the face of misfortune: Job against Zeno 3) Overcoming feelings of being an outcast/a refugee: David against Coriolanus; 4) Overcoming inability to be oneself with others: Jonah against Narcissus; 5) Overcoming insecurity of being adopted: Moses against Oedipus, 6) Overcoming the empty nest syndrome: Rebecca against Phaedra, and 7) Overcoming an enmeshed (incestuous) family background: Ruth against Antigone.

Stressor 1: Feeling Isolated and Ignored

The Ajax Syndrome

After the death of Achilles in the Trojan War, the Greek leaders choose Odysseus over the great warrior Ajax to inherit his arms. With the collusion of the goddess Athena, Ajax is driven mad and acts accordingly. When he comes to his senses, he becomes suicidal and is left to go out from his tent alone and falls on his sword in despair. (Sophocles, *Ajax*, ll.748-755, 848-849, 865).

The Elijah Intervention

. In the midst of an ongoing conflict with Jezebel, the biblical prophet Elijah is at the end of his rope and expresses a wish to die (*I Kings* 19: 3-4). God sends an angel to provide Elijah with food and drink and allowing him to rest (*I Kings* 19: 5-8). Elijah recovers his strength and goes on to Mt. Horeb with the help of young Elisha (*I Kings* 19: 15-18).

Stage	Ajax	Elijah
1 Precipitating Stressor	Ajax is humiliated by both Agamemnon and the goddess Athena	Elijah is overwhelmed and exhausted from his harassment by Queen Jezebel
2 Reaction	Ajax says he wants to die	Elijah says he wants to die
3 Response Of Others	Ajax is allowed to leave his tent alone.	Elijah is sent an angel who bring him food, drink and companionship and lets him rest.
4. Effect	Ajax kills himself by falling on his sword	Elijah recovers his strength and goes on to Horeb to continue his mission

Table 1. Elijah against Ajax

Stressor 2: Feeling One’s Life is Without Meaning in the Face of Adversity

The Zeno Syndrome

. Zeno, founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, wrenches his toe on the way home from lecturing at the *Stoa* (porch). He catastrophizes this objectively minor mishap as a “sign from the gods that he should depart” and voluntarily holds his breath until he dies (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.28). Zeno’s over-interpretation may represent his attempt to find

meaning and purpose in an otherwise hopeless and meaningless world.

The Job Intervention

Job, in contrast, does not commit suicide despite being assailed by far more serious misfortunes – the loss of his wealth, his family, and his health. His wife tells him to curse God and die (Job 2: 9) and his friends tell him to admit he deserves his punishment, but he refuses because he knows it is not true (Job 4-32). Job certainly complains bitterly deeply grieved and indeed wrestles with suicide, indeed stressing the same method of death, *strangling*, as did Zeno. “So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death, rather than these bones.” (Job 7: 15). However, Job does not act on this feeling, reaffirming his relationship with his Creator: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Job 13: 15

Stage	Zeno	Job
1 Precipitating Stressor	Zeno the Stoic trips and stubs a toe on the way back from giving a lecture at the Stoa	Job suddenly and unexpectedly loses his property, his children and his health
2 Reaction	Zeno interprets this as a sign from the gods he should depart.	Though Job complains, he maintains his innocence faith in God despite his misfortunes. This despite the reaction of his friends that he must be guilty and that of his wife that “he should curse God and die.”
3. Response of Others	No mention made of reaction of others	Job’s three friends tell him that he must be guilty, and his wife tells him to curse God and die.
4. Effect	Zeno immediately holds his breath until he dies.	Job steadfastly maintains his faith in God while proclaiming his innocence. God punishes Job’s friends for saying they understand His (God’s) ways and tells Job that he alone has spoken the truth, and restores him.

Table 2 Job against Zeno

Stressor 3: Feeling exiled from one’s home or homeland (as a refugee or outcast.

The Coriolanus Syndrome

The legendary Roman commander Gnaeus Marcius whose military valor at Corioli against the Volsci, the enemies of Rome in the 5th century B.C.E., won him the honorary name of Coriolanus. Plutarch describes Marcius as a man of great energy and strength of purpose but combined with so violent a temper and self-assertion that he could not cooperate with people. Marcius becomes embroiled in angry arguments between the upper and lower classes of Rome, and his outspoken insults to the plebeian's leads to his banishment. Obsessed with wreaking revenge on Rome, Marcius (Coriolanus) goes over to the Volsci, enemies of Rome, and persuades them to attack Rome. Ultimately, he is dissuaded by his mother but acts disdainfully to the Volscians, who he provokes to kill him. Though not a suicide story *per se*, there is no question that the rigidity of Coriolanus helped provoke his death.

The David Intervention

David is a very different sort of war hero, described as playing the lyre for King Saul, and is loved by the people. He slays the Philistine giant Goliath not by brute strength but through agility and the use of a simple slingshot. Later, his life threatened because of the jealousy of King Saul, David flees his native Israel with a band of men to live under the Philistines, longtime foes of Israel (I Samuel 27). Even in exile, David does not turn from his love of Israel, despite Saul's anger at him. In the period that David and his troop live among the Philistines, he leads his troops in war against common enemies of Israel and the Philistines, but he is spared the conflict of having to fight for the Philistines in a decisive battle against Israel (1 Samuel 29: 6-11). David becomes King of Israel after Saul's death in this battle.

Stage	Coriolanus	David
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1 Precipitating Stressor	Coriolanus, a Roman military hero, antagonizes his countrymen and is exiled from Rome.	David, a military hero in Israel flees from Israel to escape Saul's murderous jealousy and wrath
2 Reaction	Coriolanus joins with the Volsces, the enemy of Rome	David joins with the Philistines, the enemy of Israel
3. Response of Others	The Romans fear Coriolanus will lead the Volsces in battle against Rome. His mother, his wife and his children come to him to try to dissuade him.	David, attacks common enemies of Israel and the Philistines.
4. Effect	Coriolanus stops the Volsces from attacking Rome but remains condescending, provocative, and insulting to the Volsces and is subsequently killed by them.	David is spared fighting against the Israelites and is thus able to remain loyal both to King Achish of the Philistines and to Israel. David becomes King of Israel after Saul's death.

Table 3. David against Coriolanus

Stressor 4: Feeling one is unable to be oneself with others

The Narcissus Syndrome.

Narcissus is born out of a rape of his mother Lirope by a river god. When Lirope enquires from the Greek seer Tiresias about whether her son will live to a ripe old age she receives a strange answer: He [Narcissus] will live a long life as long as he doesn't come to know himself (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3: 343-350). Narcissus grows to be a vain young man, so physically beautiful that many falls in love with him (ibid, 3: 359-378). Narcissus is self-absorbed, treating lovers of both sexes as mere mirrors of himself. One would-be lover who feels scorned prays to the god of fate, Nemesis, and asks that Narcissus too fall hopelessly in love and be unable to achieve his desire. (ibid, 3: 405-6). Soon, Narcissus sees a beautiful youth in a pond, not realizing it is his own reflection. Narcissus is obsessed with the image in the brook, and looks at it night and day (ibid, 3: 414-454). Ultimately, Narcissus recognizes the face in the brook is his own (ibid, 3: 463-473).and realizing he cannot possess it, kills himself, described in Ovid as

pinning away and in Conon as actively stabbing himself in his chest (Conon, 1798, *Narrationes*, 24). In other words, Narcissus vacillates between detachment and enmeshment, and ultimately kills himself.

The Jonah Intervention.

Jonah is placed in an essentially similar individuation-attachment dilemma. God calls on Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh of their wickedness. Jonah does not want to go, but he is too God-fearing to defy the command and too strong-willed to submit. In desperation he flees to Tarshish and tells his shipmates to throw him overboard when a terrible storm threatens the ship (Jonah 1: 1-12). The story could thus end in Jonah's suicide, but it doesn't - God intervenes as a protective parent, swallowing Jonah in the protective stomach of a great fish until he overcomes his confusion. Jonah prays to God from the belly of the fish until he becomes stronger. Then the fish vomits him out on dry land (Jonah 2).

This pattern repeats itself. God again commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah goes and gives the people God's message. They repent and are saved (Jonah 3: 1-10). Jonah becomes angry and again expresses the wish to die and sits on the outskirts of the city (Jonah 4: 1-3). Again, God intervenes, sheltering Jonah with a leafy bush from the burning sun (Jonah 4: 6). After a worm destroys the protective bush, Jonah again expresses suicidal thoughts (Jonah 4: 7-8). God intervenes, this time engaging Jonah in a dialogue to teach him the message of *teshuvah* (repentance) and divine mercy and that he can reach out to another without losing himself (Jonah 4: 9-11). Biblical thinking sees self and other in harmony. Jonah avoids the *narcissistic* polarities of disengagement and enmeshment. In the words of the biblical sage, Hillel, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" (*Pirke Aboth* 1: 14).

Stage	Narcissus	Jonah
1 Precipitating Stressor	Narcissus is born of a rape of his mother. He is prophesied to have a long life as long as “he does not come to know himself.”	God asks Jonah to go and warn the wicked people of Nineveh to repent lest they avoid great punishment. Jonah does not want to go and runs away to Tarshish to avoid the conflict.
2 Reaction	The beautiful Narcissus heartlessly exhibits <i>hubris</i> by rejecting would be lovers of both genders.	God sends a great storm and Jonah becomes suicidal while on board a ship. When discovered, Jonah tells his shipmates that he is the reason for the storm and asks his shipmates to throw him overboard. However, rather than let him drown, God sends a big fish to swallow Jonah and protect him, and allowing him to recover his strength, and come to “know himself.”
3. Response of Others	Narcissus is brought down by <i>Nemesis</i> and becomes completely infatuated with a face he encounters in a brook.	After the fish vomits out the restored Jonah unto dry land, God again asks him to go to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants to repent and change their ways. This time Jonah goes.
4. Effect	Narcissus realizes the face in the brook is his, and thus unobtainable. He is without an identity that self-knowledge makes possible He commits suicide, either in a passive (pining away) or active (stabbing himself) manner, depending on the source. Narcissus fruitfully looks to the outside world for his own missing identity. Yet, according to prophesy, if he finds it, he will die.	Jonah warns the people of Nineveh but becomes suicidal again and sits outside the city walls under a hot sun. God again protects Jonah through shielding him from the sun with a large gourd. Ultimately God removes the gourd, and in addressing Jonah’s complaint, strengthens Jonah’s identity and teaches him the lesson of mercy and compassion -- and that reaching out to others does not mean that he must lose himself.

Table 4. Jonah against Narcissus

Stressor 5: Feeling one is alone and unsupported in one’s life mission

The Oedipus Syndrome

Laius, King of Thebes, hears from an oracle that his newborn son Oedipus will murder him and marry his wife when/if he grows up. He unsuccessfully attempts to have him killed but Oedipus is saved and raised by the King and Queen of Corinth. As a young man, he hears his identity questioned at a dinner party. He goes to the Oracle of Delphi to inquire about his identity.

The Oracle does not answer him but instead prophesies that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother, whom he mistakenly thinks are the King and Queen of Corinth. Trying to avoid doing this, Oedipus flees to Thebes and kills an older man after an altercation on the road (not realizing the man is Laius) and is given his widowed mother Jocasta (also unknown to Oedipus) as a wife as a reward after he solves the riddle of the Sphinx who has been terrorizing Thebes. He begets four children with her. Oedipus does not seem able to solicit or accept help from anyone, being done in by riddles from the Oracle of Delphi, convoluted responses from the prophet Teiresias, and mistrust of his brother-in-law Creon. Nowhere does Oedipus receive any real help he can fully trust. (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*; Aeschylus, *the Seven against Thebes*).

The Moses Intervention

For Moses also, birth brought danger of death. His life is threatened by Pharaoh's decree to throw all males born among the Israelites into the Nile., Moses is sent away by his natural family when he is 3 months old to save his life and is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter who sees him floating in the river in an ark with bulrushes and brings him into the house of Pharaoh himself to raise him. Significantly Moses' sister Miriam watched from a distance to remain aware of what would happen to him.

Moses does not consciously attempt to seek clues about his destiny but the account of Moses going among his Hebrew "brethren" reveals his latent identification: he kills an Egyptian attacking a Hebrew (Exodus 2: 11-12). Moses subsequently chances upon the burning bush and encounters the Hebrew God, who informs him of his mission to save the Children of Israel from Pharaoh. Yet Moses has a speech impediment - he stutters - and is genuinely helped in his mission by his older brother Aaron who does the public speaking for him. (Exodus 7). He subsequently feels overwhelmed by his task and unable to go on, crying to God in his despair: (Numbers 11:

12), The demands are too great, and Moses feels inadequate to the task. (Numbers 11: 13, 21-23) and blames himself. (Numbers 11: 14)., challenging, God to kill him (Numbers 11: 15). God responds and provides Moses with the help of seventy people, a Sanhedrin, (Numbers 11: 16-7).

Stage	Oedipus	Moses
1 Precipitating Stressor	Oedipus's mother sends the infant Oedipus away to be exposed on mountain top and die.	Moses's mother sends the infant Moses away to save him from being killed by Pharaoh.
2 Reaction	Oedipus is rescued and raised by the king of a neighboring state, Corinth	Moses is rescued and raised by the daughter of Pharaoh
3. Response of Others	Oedipus's identity is questioned, and he has no one to talk to. He attempts unsuccessfully to gain usable information from the Oracle of Delphi, who speaks in riddles and entraps Oedipus into patricide and incest.	Moses sees an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite and kills him with a rock. He flees Egypt, but God appears to Moses and chooses him to lead the Israelites against Egypt.
4. Effect	Oedipus attempts to save Thebes from a plague but is undone by misinformation and riddles from others. This results in Oedipus's self-blinding as well as many killings and suicides.	Moses seeks and receives necessary help at various times in his mission (Aaron, a Sanhedrin. etc.) and is able to carry out his mission.

Table 5. Moses against Oedipus

Stressor 6: Feeling abandoned by one's child leaving the family nest and building his/her own life.

The Phaedra Syndrome

In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra, the wife of King Theseus is caught in a miserable family situation, and at the same time she has unrealistic expectations of herself. By the goddess Aphrodite's design, she falls madly in love with her stepson, Hippolytus. Though she resists her passion, her servant betrays her secret to Hippolytus. Phaedra then hangs herself (ll. 776-779), leaving behind a note that falsely accuses Hippolytus of raping her (ll. 882-898). Theseus believes the note and pronounces a curse of death on his son. The curse is soon fulfilled, and the truth of Hippolytus's innocence is revealed too late. According to this play, the gods are selfish and cruel,

utterly without compassion toward humans. There is no stopper in Phaedra’s rush toward suicide. Death seems to be the only cure: (l. 397). As she expresses it with finality, “I know only one way, one cure for these my woes, and that is instant death” (l. 599).

The Rebecca Intervention.

The story of the biblical matriarch Rebecca is very different. After participating in the deception by which they have obtained Isaac’s blessing, Rebecca tells Jacob to go away to her brother Laban, so that he won’t be killed by his brother Esau who feels that Jacob has stolen his father’s blessing that rightly belongs to him (Gen. 27:42-45). Immediately afterward, Rebecca tells Isaac that her life has been made miserable by Esau’s Hittite wives, and she worries that Jacob may similarly marry a daughter of Heth, the Cannanite and that she is “weary of life”. (Gen. 27:46)

Her suicidal threat works, and Isaac commands Jacob to not marry one of the daughters of Canaan, who are so offensive to Rebecca and instead tells him to go to Laban and marry one of his daughters. Rebecca is relieved, and there is no more mention of her “suicidal” musings (Gen. 28:1-4). Rebecca is not being seductive towards her son, nor is she trying to block him from living his own life. What she wants is that Jacob marry a suitable partner. When Isaac listens to her, Rebecca’s suicidal impulse is resolved.

Stage	Phaedra	Rebecca
1 Precipitating Stressor	Phaedra falls passionately in love with her stepson Hippolytus, wanting him for herself.	Rebecca is concerned that her son Jacob will marry a totally unsuitable Hittite woman

2 Reaction	Phaedra attempts to resist her passion but becomes very depressed.	Rebecca tells her husband Isaac that “her life will not be worth living” if Jacob marries a Hittite woman, like his brother Esau did.
3. Response of Others	Phaedra’s servant betrays the secret of her infatuation to Hippolytus.	Isaac sends Jacob away to marry a daughter of Rebecca’s brother Laban.
4. Effect	Phaedra hangs herself and leaves a note to her husband Theseus falsely accusing Hippolytus of raping her. This leads to the death of Hippolytus	Rebecca is satisfied and does not speak of suicide again.

Table 6 Rebecca against Phaedra

Stressor 7: Feeling doomed by a dysfunctional family of origin

Let us compare the Greek suicide story of Antigone with the biblical life-affirming story of Ruth with regard to addressing the suicidal implications of coming from a dysfunctional (e.g., incestuous) family of origin.

The Antigone Syndrome

Greek thought posits that one is doomed when being born of a dysfunctional family. Oedipus expresses this succinctly “For now. I am forsaken of the gods, son of a defiled mother, and successor to his bed who gave me my own wretched being.” (Sophocles, Oedipus the King, ll. 1359-1361). This is played out in the story of Antigone, daughter (and half-sister) of Oedipus. She is the product of the incestuous union of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta.

Antigone is unable to separate herself from the incestuous nature of her birth. “From what manner of parents did I take my miserable being? And to them I go thus, accursed, unwed, to share their home” (Sophocles, Antigone, l. 869). Antigone (which in ancient Greek literally translates to "opposed to motherhood or anti-generative") ultimately hangs herself after being buried alive for trying to bury her dead brother Polyneices, a rebel against Thebes, against the order of her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes. Strikingly, Antigone says she values her brother more than a husband or a child because the latter can be replaced while the former cannot (Sophocles, Antigone, 907-

913).

The Ruth Intervention.

Biblical thought offers a hopeful alternative. One can overcome the effects of a dysfunctional or even an abandoning family. “Cast me not off, neither forsake me, O god of my salvation. For though my father and mother have forsaken me, the Lord will take me up.” (Psalm 27: 9-10). When the sinful people of Sodom are destroyed, Lot and his two daughters escape thinking their father is the last living man, they get him drunk and have sexual relations with him, so that humanity will not perish. (Genesis 19: 31). Out of the union of Lot and his older daughter come the people from Moab (literally, “from the father” in Biblical Hebrew). Thus, Ruth also is a product of incest, several generations removed. Nevertheless, Ruth the Moabitess does not remain a victim but progresses to becoming a survivor and an important figure in the history of Israel. This despite the fact that Ruth, her mother-in-law Naomi and her sister-in-law Orpah all are widowed while “strangers in a strange land,” without male relatives to protect them and thus vulnerable. Indeed, Orpah abandons Naomi and returns home. However, Ruth does not and in one of the most moving speeches in the Hebrew Bible she pledges her loyalty to her mother-in-law: “Whither thou goest, I will go....” (Ruth 1: 16-17).

Naomi accepts Ruth as her daughter and brings Ruth back with her to Judah and facilitates Ruth’s marriage to her kinsman Boaz. Yet despite her losses and despite her dysfunctional family history several generations earlier, Ruth, unlike Antigone, is not suicidal, thrives and becomes a mother of Obed, and ancestress of King David and the Davidic line, Integrating Naomi into her family in a beautiful way (Ruth 4).

Stage	Antigone	Ruth
1. Precipitating Stressor	Antigone is the direct product of an unintentional incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta.	Ruth is a descendant of an intentional incestuous relationship on the part of Lot's eldest daughter with her father.
2. Reaction	Though raised in a seemingly secure home, Antigone does not seem to be able to separate from her family of origin	Though Ruth is widowed at an early age and away from her native land, she does not seem to be enmeshed and indeed is able to bond to her also widowed mother-in-law Naomi
3. Response of Others	Antigone is over-identified with her family of origin and winds up being buried alive because she will not leave her brother fighting against Thebes to remain unburied.	Naomi accepts Ruth as her daughter and brings Ruth back with her to Judah and facilitates Ruth's marriage to Boaz, the kinsman of Naomi.
4. Effect	Antigone hangs herself, rejecting her wood be lover. Antigone means in Greek against generativity (semen).	Ruth thrives and becomes a mother of Obed, and ancestress of King David and the Davidic line. Integrates Naomi into her family in a beautiful way.

Table 7. Ruth against Antigone

Summary

While the Greek oracles transmit predictions of the future which cannot be altered, the biblical prophets allow for the possibility that people can grow, develop, and even change. The Greek Pandora locks hope in her urn after releasing all evils unto the world. The biblical Noah, in contrast, is shown a bow in the sky as a sign of hope and a promise of no more floods. The time is long overdue for a Biblical Psychotherapy, especially applied to an in-depth positive psychology and suicide prevention.

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