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## Finding (or Missing) God and Meaning in Suffering

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## Introduction

Some preliminary remarks are in order. For one, our thinking, talking, writing about God always is a precarious, even a dangerous undertaking. Not because we have to fear divine wrath, but much more so because we are likely to overestimate our capacity to meaningfully perform such kind of God-taLuke The Scriptures are full of warnings over against arrogant postures of theological knowledge: “We know only in part, and we prophesy only in part” (1 Cor 13:9).<sup>2</sup> God’s encompassing presence is so much beyond our grasp that the psalmist moans: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it” (Ps 139:6). And prophets describe their impressions of encounters with God with great reluctance, as in Ezekiel 1:26, “something like a throne,” “like sapphire,” “like a human form,” etc. The incomprehensiveness to humans regarding the depth and width and height of God should be kept in mind. Theological thinking and speaking should always be founded on this basic insight: we cannot possibly know and understand *fully* the ways of the Lord nor HIS/HER qualities (names and gendered pronouns in relation to God betray already the incompatibility of human language and divine reality, cf. Deut 4:16).

Two, not every bad situation can be blissfully resolved. We have to consider despair and failure, even utmost senselessness and bitter injustice in human life and society. They are to be encountered in

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<sup>2</sup> NRSV, as will be all future quotations unless stated otherwise.

faith (cf. Kohelet/Ecclesiastes), perhaps even in rebellion against God (cf. Job). Believers are saved—others are lost in the Bible. Destiny from the beginning is a human effort to explain the enigmas transcending our limited understanding. It was John Calvin, among others, who seriously wrestled with the question, whether all the course of history and its myriads of biographies were determined from the beginning of time.<sup>3</sup> But the Swiss reformer also acknowledged the shortcomings of human knowledge and reason.<sup>4</sup> Thus we may consider many doctrinary debates as fundamentally precarious. They do claim absolute validity while they are only partial, contextual, limited efforts to articulate some important truths. The basic theological insight is: humans are ignorant of the Divine (Ps 139:1–6).

Three, the gross balance of premature deaths and crippled lives on this globe may well overcome the positive counterparts of happy, healthy, peaceful existence, considering exemplar centuries like the 20th and the beginning of the 21st. The Second World War alone, ignited by Hitlerist fanatics in Germany, cost about 60 millions of mostly innocent victims. Post-war times, partially taking shape under slogans like “Make love, not war” and “Not ever again!” did not develop as peacefully as war-torn citizens in many states hoped. Facts and figures of gruesome battles, deadly concentration camps, but also of terrible catastrophes like the great tsunami of 2006 remind us of so much undeserved and totally insensate suffering. Not to forget countless millions of people, especially children in their early years, who perish continuously because of lack of nourishment, medicaments, clean water, education, knowledge, etc. Add the growing number of disturbed, rootless, derailed, addicted, radicalized, hopeless young persons especially in the industrialized societies and the global masses of mostly southern inhabitants of this globe who are in want of the most essential goods of daily survival. The balance of welfare on this globe is quite gruesome. If eight billionaires own as much as 3.6 billions of lower income people on this globe, there must be something basically wrong.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, book III, ch. 21–23.

<sup>4</sup> *Finitum non capax infiniti*: “The finite is unable to harbor the infinite”; cf. Nicolaus Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia* (Kues, Germany: n.p., 1440).

## **A. Biblical Witnesses: Manifold, Not Homogeneous**

Jewish-Christian Holy Scriptures are the fundament of our respective communities of faith and to some extent also of Islam and other religions (cf. Bahai, Zulu groups, Mormons, etc.). The Jewish and Christian Bible contains a large harvest of Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian traditions reaped in the 10th century B.C. through the 2nd century A.D. by successive faith communities, commencing with Ancient Israel of the pre-monarchic, dynastic, exilic-postexilic periods and the shorter epoch of Early Christianity (cf. *Biblische Enzyklopaedie*, 1996ss). The body of those recognized and authorized writings has been every now and then arranged and re-arranged by successive communities of faith under the guidance of the Spirit as the normative set of documents comprising the experiences of our ethnic and spiritual ancestors with their God. Such collections of faith-documents (Holy Scriptures) are by necessity pluriform, spiritually and theologically varied, polyphone and layered; they have to be interpreted in their primary and subsequent settings and in interpretations as well as in regard to their contemporary meanings. What different attitudes and experiences with severe suffering can we encounter in the different layers of Biblical tradition?

### **1. Suffering Is Normal, Integral to Life, Undebatable**

Depending on life-situations and perspectives on suffering we find in the Biblical writings some basic indifference or even fatalistic acceptance of evil conditions. “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of all” (Prov 22:2, cf. v. 7). However, other passages vehemently denounce poverty as disgrace in the eyes of the Lord. As the following investigations will turn out, other great evils are sickness, famines, war and violence, being mobbed in one’s own community, fear of demons, and forsakenness by one’s personal God. They all can fall into the category of inevitable shortcomings of human life. Most all of Ecclesiastes thinks about the unexplainable evils and deficits while seeing no solution to these enigmas (cf. Eccl 1:12–18; 2:18–23; 3:1–8, 16–22; 4:1–4, etc.). Narrative, legal, psalmic, and prophetic literatures only partially tolerate the corrupt state of affairs (cf. Isa 40:6–8, 21–24). They overwhelmingly try to explain bad living conditions, especially life-threats, and speak up against their causes.

## 2. Suffering Is Reward for Misbehavior, Error, Rebellion, Sin, and Violations of Rules

First of all, some important ancient Israelite and subsequent Christian witnesses (as well as countless Ancient Near Eastern contemporaries) wrestle with their personal destiny. At the brink of death they cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1<sup>5</sup>). There were countless causes known to the ancients which might have initiated fatal developments in a person’s biography. Adam’s and Eve’s urge for divine knowledge and super-human power (a trait of all humanity?) makes for their expulsion from paradise under miserable conditions (Gen 3; cf. the tower of Babel, Gen 11:1–9, confusion of language, strife). Personal guilt finds its revenge (Judg 15:1–8, 16:28–30). Kings suffer from their personal misdeeds as well as in their collective function (cf. 2 Sam 11–12, 24:10–17). Each incident of personal guilt and punishment in the Bible is a case all on its own.

Numerous are the tendencies to rationalize on the relationship between personal behavior and bad fates, as will be shown later. One dominant theory, especially in wisdom literatures of the Ancient Near East including the Bible, is the belief that humans by their misdeeds create a destructive sphere around themselves which eventually will engulf the evildoer and his fellow-men (cf. Koch 1955). Phrases like “his [the victim’s] blood may come over him [the murderer]” (cf. Josh 2:19; Judg 9:24; 1 Sam 1:16; 1 Kgs 2:32–33, etc.) are indicative of the power of spilled blood; in other cases it is the ensuing curse of a stricken family (cf. Judg 17:2) which is to hunt the agent of *’awen*, *’wel*, *ḥaṭṭā’t*, *to’ebah*, *ra’ah*, *ḥāmās*, *raeša’*, *dāmīm* and more Hebrew designations of destructive deeds.<sup>6</sup>

Old Israelite concepts of “revenge,” then, as well as the other examples given above, indicate that personal perpetrations never are seen as isolated acts. They always involve other people, be it as victims or partisans (kinship) of a perpetrator. Guilt, sin, damage, injustice, etc., are performed or staged by individuals, but in ancient times the collective dimensions always are extant. In consequence,

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrew MS v. 2; mind the difference of Greek and Hebrew verse-numbers in the Psalter.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the relevant articles in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the O.T.* (Stuttgart/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973ss).

there is a broad acknowledgment also about families, groups, cities, nations, which by common transgressions can commit wrongdoings, habitually or incidentally. In these cases collective bodies are liable to divine punishment because there was hardly any human institution capable to judge communal wrongs. The prophets' wholesale indictments were ordered by God. Clear enough, however, is the biblical attitude over against collective wrongdoings: they cause much distress for lowly people and need to be stopped (cf. Am. 1:3–2:16, Lev 25:25–55, Jer 46–51, Lam 1–5). The exact ligations between sin and punishment, however, are always debatable. No mathematical formula is applicable. Jesus calls attention to this fact in Luke 13:1–5.

### **3. Suffering Is Unjustified, Senseless, Arbitrary**

#### **a. What Would Ancient People Do when Confronted with Life-hazards?**

In Biblical exegesis, one should not only consider the sacred text but also the circumstances in which it was recited. This “life situation” (German *Sitz im Leben*) does decisively shape, according to Hermann Gunkel and many others, the meaning and message of the text itself. Ancient Israelites as well as many other contemporary peoples of the Near East (and many tribal societies around the globe to this day) would consult diagnostics and healers of different specialization whenever grave dangers or life-threats were imminent (Gerstenberger 2009). When a child went sick, when famine would rise to a breaking point, or when war-situations became unbearable people would seek a “man of God,” a “seer,” a “medium” (literally: “mistress of a spirit,” 1 Sam 28:7), “medical expert,” etc. (cf. 1 Kgs 14:1–3, 2 Kgs 4:18–24, Num 22–24, Isa 38:21) in order to cope with those serious situations. Inevitably, the experts would try to apply medical and ritual means, as can be seen in a few OT narratives (cf. Isa 38:21, 2 Kgs 4:30–35). Babylonian sources tell us in great detail how ritual healing was practiced (cf. Maul 1994; Heessel 2000). Prayers of the sufferer, intoning complaint, petition, confidence, imprecation, and vow were part and parcel of the healing ritual. Most probably, the “complaints of the individual” in the Psalter, 30 to 40 in number, originally belonged into the context of healing ceremonies (cf. Ps 102 headline; Pss. 22, 31, 35, 38, 51, 55, 59, 69, etc. with their allusions to physical and social ills).

**b. Basic Issue of Ethical Perturbations in Difficult Passages**

Treating the calamities of individual sufferers was the professional task of the healer. And in general, experienced professionals were quite effective. The real challenges of faith arise when they failed, and suffering became totally inexplicable. Efforts to explain failure would prove fruitless, and the continuing ills would counteract hope. Weak, dubious, and misleading as all rational explications of distress may seem, as long as they give only a faint idea of being right or possible they often do have an assuaging effect. Every pastor can tell stories about bereaved or despaired people who clung to a minimal reasoning to give plausibility to the dreary and painful happenings. When, however, all counselling is doomed or becomes senseless—is everything lost? Does God disappear completely from the scene? Compare Psalm 22:1–2. Dead-end streets of human biographies are perhaps test cases for trust in God.

What is so surprising and rewarding with Biblical witnesses is that they already know of the fundamental, existential impasses of life, and they do not hide them. Christian preaching may have a tendency to emphasize saved lives or a successful prayer for deliverance. Suicidal rates are perhaps corresponding to the degree of comfort a suffering person may achieve. In any case, the lesson from the O.T. complaint psalms causes to think. They give the impression that the prayers for specific cases of illness, hostility of neighbors, demonic possession, being robbed and exploited normally will be accepted by the Lord (cf. Pss. 38, 41, 91, 9/10). They move from invocation, complaint, to affirmations of confidence to petitions and vows of giving due thanks for salvation (cf. Barth 1997). We do not know how often each prayer was used and the supplicant heard. Certainly, however, to some extant salvation from death was not achieved, but the outcome of the healing ritual was:

- “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer ...” (Ps 22:2)
- “I am weary with my moaning, every night I flood my bed with tears ...” (Ps 6:6)
- “[wicked] stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might. They think in their heart, ‘God has forgotten, he has hidden his face ...’” (Ps 10:10–11)
- “I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me ...” (Ps 38:17)
- “Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city ...” (Ps 59:6, 14)

- “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink ...” (Ps 69:21)

Hundreds of affirmations within these complaints sound very desperate, but most all the prayers end up in hopeful or even triumphant tones. Some of the cries for help, however, seem to be wrapped in blank despair, notably Psalm 88. Was the text damaged in the course of tradition? Is something missing? Regardless, the end of Psalm 88 is devastating.

### **(1) Hard to say whether or not Psalm 88 is incomplete**

Clear enough is the fact that it has been used for centuries in the same form we now find it in the Hebrew Bible. It starts out with a regular invocation: “... incline your ear to my cry” (v. 2). After this the whole prayer is an endless repetition, in growing resentment, of complaints and contestations challenging the good care and responsibility of God for the supplicant (vv. 3–9a, 9b–12, 13–18). “I am counted among those who go down to the Pit” (v.4); “I am like ... the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more” (v. 5); and “You have put me in the depth of the Pit” (v. 6). Life has come to an end by God’s arbitrariness, the cord to family and friends has been cut (vv. 8, 18), because down there in the abyss God is absent (vv. 10–12). A renewed outcry to the Lord (v. 13) does not amend the situation of being lost. The horrified question “why do you cast me off?” (v. 14) confirms isolation and hopelessness. “Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate (v. 15 [Hebrew MT = 16] is textually difficult: “desperate” = *’apunah*, is a unique word in the Hebrew Bible). Being shunned by one’s intimate fellows does seal the condemnation of the supplicant (v. 18). And there is not a simmer of optimism in this psalm (cf. Pss. 44, 89, 137 with urgent questions and desperate pleas at the end). Hopelessness is part of Biblical witness!

### **(2) Somewhat different stance in rebellious prayers of Jeremiah<sup>7</sup>**

In all probability they have been formulated by late composers in order to portray the inner feelings of the prophet during his turbulent times of activity. Jeremiah in their view was commissioned by Yahweh to a very difficult task of announcing the decline of the

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<sup>7</sup>Jer 11:18–12:6; 15:10–18, 19–21; 17:14–18; 18:19–23; 20:7–18.



Davidic kingship over against the Babylonian onslaught and beyond (cf. Jer 1:4–10). The prophet, however, is in the line of other reluctant messengers of God (cf. Jon. 1:3; Exod 3:11–12, 4:10–13; Isa 6:5; Judg 6:11–17). Do the prayers of Jeremiah revolt against his commissioning? Does the message he has to proclaim meet heavy resistance, for political or for religious reasons? Or both? People are threatening the prophet's life (in line with some narrative parts of the book of Jeremiah and with a good number of Psalms; cf. Jer 11:19, 21; 15:11; 18:19; 20:10). The prophet cries for urgent relief and destruction of the enemies; he wrestles with God, and even accuses Him with treachery (Jer 15:18, 20:7). The climax is the last of the so-called "confessions": a desperate cry to be caught with the Word of the Lord, which forces him to speak out against his own will.

For the Word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention Him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:8b–9).

Furthermore, after a short hymnic praise, which may well be the composer's insertion (20:13), the prophet all but collapses. He curses the day of his birth (20:14–18; cf. Job 3:3–12). That means: he wants to annihilate himself together with any relationship he has with God.

### **(3) Lamentations is a collective liturgy (except Lam 3) dealing with the frustrations of suffering.**

Invasion of foreign troops, destruction of city and temple, violence of the victors, famine, homelessness, and the lack of divine protection create an atmosphere of near total despair. Of course, the book of Lamentations, a composition of high literary quality (acrostic lines!), was composed for and used in lament ceremonies after the fall of Jerusalem and the burning down of the temple (cf. Zeph 7:2–7, 8:19). The predominance of mourning and lament, therefore, is justified. The massive preponderance of descriptions of death, violence, famine, sometimes articulated by the voice of "virgin Jerusalem" herself, is unusual, also in comparison to Sumerian City Laments (cf. O'Connor 2003). Lamentation 1, 2, and 4 are filled with laments, bitter questions, and accusations against God. Only in Lamentations 4:22 a little glimmer of hope appears ("he will keep you in exile no longer"), and ch. 5 is stylized as a communal petition with confession of former guilt: "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,

and we bear their iniquities” (5:7). Then, drastic descriptions of suffering continue, unhampered (5:8–18). A very brief hymnic interlude (5:19) is followed by more incisive, distrustful questions: “Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?” (5:20). The final plea for help is immediately counteracted by a mental reserve: “Restore us to yourself, O Lord... unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure” (5:21–22). In this fashion the lament falls out of the framework of normal complaint and petition. It leaves open whether or not God will re-establish normal relations with his people. A possibility of final rupture remains open, just like in some prophetic speech: Hosea 1:6–8 (renounced in 2:1–3); Amos 2:4–8, 5:18–20, 8:1–3, 9:1–4 (partially revoked in 9:11–15); Isaiah 5:1–7; and Jeremiah 2, etc. What kind of liturgy is Lamentations if there is a built-in chance of failure?

#### **(4) Job against his “friends”**

The book of Job is composed of several different parts. The narrative frame (Job 1–2, 42:10–17) and the inserted speeches of the Lord (Job 28, 38:1–42:9) are remarkably distinct against the debates Job has his “visitors” or “friends” (Job 3–27, 32–37), and then inserted is Job’s resentful monologue against God (Job 29–31). Obviously, the narration of Job’s trials and restitution voice a strong conviction that God may severely test a human being with plagues hard to bear (1–2, 42:10–17). Yet, on the instigation of a satanic counsellor? This itself poses problems. If that person resists the temptation to turn away from his supreme protector, then he will be rewarded manifold. The poetic part of the book containing heated dialogues with four self-styled friends and counsellors purports to demonstrate an exemplar relationship of a frustrated individual who resents that painful, obscure divine guidance, which he experiences as arbitrary, unfair, burdensome, repressive (Job 3–27, 32–37). Also mind that the precise calamities of Job 1–2 are never mentioned in the dialogues.

Other ancient Middle Eastern literatures brought forth similar pieces of “Jobian” suffering and challenging the deities. The O.T. Job begins his revolt with that suicidal self-curse (3:2–26) which also closes the prayers of Jeremiah. He outright rejects the many consoling and admonishing words of his counsellors. They want to convince

him of the superior justice and goodness of God, who supposedly always administers chastisements for good, even if for hidden reasons. Instead of complaining, Job should accept all hardships and repent unknown sins. And this is exactly what the spiritual revolutionary does not want to do. He insists on his own righteousness, which makes divine punishments unwarranted, and he directly accuses God of arbitrariness and tyranny:

I will say to God: Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me... you seek out my iniquity and search out for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty (Job 10:2, 6–7a).

God has put Job in the wrong (19:6), the consequences are terrible:

He has stripped my glory from me ... he breaks me down on every side, and I am gone ... he has kindled his wrath against me ... his troops ... have thrown up siege-works against me ... He has put my family far from me ... my relatives and my close friends have failed me (Job 19:9–14).

Relationships to God and to fellow humans have been broken. “My breath is repulsive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even young children despise me” (Job 19:17–18a).

#### **(5) Suffering is ordained for betterment, a toil to receive honor and well-being**

Job’s friends Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and afterwards Elihu present traditional theologies in this exemplar debate on “who is righteous?” (Job 4–5, 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, three rounds of speeches by the first three opponents with Zophar missing in the third round; 32–37, one rambling theological discourse of Elihu). They drone away without acknowledging a single argument of the afflicted one. Their main argument is, essentially: God cannot inflict unjust punishments, because our cherished doctrines make Him an unflinching eternal and sovereign judge who detests fooling around with his clients (they obviously do not know Job 1–2). If God is genuinely just and only just throughout, Job’s misery must have different origins. They can only be determined by the ancient’s belief in the doctrine of “reward and punishment.” Somebody who suffers must identify the true reasons of his plight in his or her own biography. Sufferers are bearing their guilt in the form of divine retribution:

- “Can mortals be righteous before God?” (Job 4:17);

- “Do not despise the discipline of the Almighty” (Job 5:17);
- “Does God pervert justice? ... If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression” (Job 8:3–4);
- “See, God will not reject a blameless person” (Job 8:20);
- “You say: ‘My conduct is pure ... but O that God would speak ... and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!’” (Job 11:4–5);
- “You are doing away with the fear of God.... For your iniquity teaches your mouth” (Job 15:4–5);
- “Is not your wickedness great?” (Job 22:5).

Some social misdeeds are pointed out (v. 6–9), to be refuted by Job in 23:12 and extensively in 29–31. Ever more the friends repeat their creed: “How then can a mortal be righteous before God?” (25:4; cf. 33:12; 34:10–12, 21–26). The friends in all their talking rely on the superior wisdom and justice of God who does punish only the wicked; he helps the blameless and rehabilitates the repentant (cf. the proposed prayer ritual by a professional mediator in 33:12–28). So, the “friends” defend God’s equity and righteousness (“theodicy”), but they totally fail to realize that humans are able only to imagine precarious human standards of justice. To measure God by earthly norms simply misses all divine dimensions. God declares Job to have spoken rightly about Him, accepting the charges of arbitrariness (cf. Job 42:7).

The way other layers of the Job tradition wrestled with this traditional theology is both remarkable and disturbing. In Job 38–41, God himself is cited to use much of the friends’ theology of majesty: God is immensely superior to human reasoning, therefore untouched by earthly grumblings. This argument, pushed aside when the Job’s counsellors spoke, now convinces the “righteous sufferer” (42:1–6). He concedes that God is right (42:5–6). But, in a different line of argumentation, where Elihu is not mentioned any more, God seems to revert himself confronting the “friends” with a harsh verdict: “you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7). The traditionalists, good theologians as they were, have to offer penitentiary sacrifice and depend on Job’s intercession to be restored. These are bewildering interpretations of an unsolvable theological problem. God cannot act in such a contradictory manner, can He? The lesson to be learned from the compilation of different reasonings in the book of Job simply is this: We all may voice our own insights and convictions in regard to extreme suffering, but we should know, that

they all are far from the comprehensive and uniform truth to which we aspire. Human knowledge of the divine is fragmentary, ambiguous, and very limited at best.

**(6) Skeptic theology all around (Kohelet/Ecclesiastes)**

Some other parts of the Bible of similar attitudes notwithstanding, the book of Ecclesiastes (Hebrew name: *Kohelet*) is an outsider among canonical literature. It does propagate theological insights not common in the Torah, prophets, and writings, nor in the N.T. The book certainly is not a uniform presentation of coherent teachings, much rather it is a collection of mainly skeptical views on the vanity of earthly values like property, honor, happiness, labor, justice, success, knowledge, etc. Some parts are clad in argumentative discourse, often in the first person singular and partly in the guise of Solomon, king in Jerusalem (cf. Eccl 1:12–18; 2:1–11, 12–26; 3:9–22; 6:1–6; 7:23–29; 9:1–2, 11–16), others present proverbial sentences, admonitions or prohibitions (cf. Eccl 5:1[Hebr. 4:17]–12[Hebr. 5:11]; 7:1–14, 16–21; 10:1–4, 8–20; 11:1–6). The whole of life seems so transitory, fragmentary, full of frustrations, that only short termed pleasures may be counted as worthwhile and a gift of God:

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun (Eccl 9:9).

**(7) Suffering as programmatic meaninglessness, emptiness, forlornness**

We have met, so far, several different attitudes against suffering, in particular to the dead-end-roads of despair, forsakenness, and utter helplessness of the believer. Are there chances to meet God in such situations? How could this come true? And, after all: What does it mean to find or miss God? Who is able to judge whether or not a person has met or lost his/her Divine creator, redeemer, father, friend? The book of Ecclesiastes, in contrast to all its skepticism, seems to offer a first glimmer of hope in a dreary reality. Ancient Near Eastern thought and faith opened this avenue already centuries before the teachers of Israel. A Sumerian collection of sayings and exhortations bears the title: “Vanity, nothing but vanity” (Alster 2005, pp. 266–287). God, in all these wisdom writings, is not a personal being,

talking with and meeting people. Rather, he dispenses mysterious destinies, unaccountable portions of well-being and/or hardships. Human senses and thoughts cannot fathom God's decisions. People must accept what they receive from him in the fleeting stream of their short lives. Sure enough, there are other passages in the Bible which stress the transiency of existence (cf. Pss. 39, 90) or the instabilities and corruption of life (cf. Pss. 14, 73, 94). *Kohelet*, on principle, casts serious doubts on the ideal of a harmonious life under the guidance and protection of a benign deity. The book of Job, on the other hand, in part chastises God's arbitrariness to the point to make him renounce theological doctrines of just retribution and redemption of sinners. Both writings, then, are really far away from what we commonly understand by a normal relationship of any human being to his or her God.

#### **(8) Jesus and Paul as sufferers**

Quite often it has been observed in Christian and other interpretations of Scripture that the N.T. uses wide and exhaustive concepts of the O.T. in order to articulate its new messages under the name of Jesus Christ. The passion story of the gospels thus has been thoroughly composed most of all in the light of O.T. psalms (Pss. 22, 31, 35, 69, 110, 118), prophetic texts (cf. Zeph 9:9, 11:13, 12:10, 13:7; Dan 7:13) and in particular of 2nd Isaiah's figure of the "Servant of the Lord" (cf. Isa 42:1–9, 49:1–7, 50:4–11, 52:13–53:12). Chances of frustrations and failures are high in all these accounts. Only the faith message of resurrection, conceived in the mental context of separate physical and spiritual worlds does relieve the anxiety-stricken followers of Jesus (cf. Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18). Death in their mind has been overcome by "New Life" in Christ. Henceforth, the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ acquire an encompassing, mythical, and redemptive meaning for the Christian churches. The conceptions of suffering in the passion stories corresponds to the insights of Isaiah 53:1–12. Jesus' death was the utmost sacrifice God Himself made to compensate for the sins of mankind: "When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring and prolong his days ... The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous" (Isa 53:10–11). The ultimate sacrifice will atone for the multitude (Heb 9:23–10:18).

It is especially the apostle Paul who developed and refined the concept of suffering. He takes pains to demonstrate on the basis of Hebrew Scriptures that from the beginning humankind has fallen into disobedience and rebellion (cf. Rom 1:18–3:20).

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith (Rom 3:23–25).

In accordance with his mystical understanding of the church as “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:12–31), he prolongs the sufferings of Christ into his own life and commissioning: “the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us.... If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation” (2 Cor 1:5–6). The ongoing hardships of apostles and other Christian believers do have a positive meaning for everybody concerned (cf. 1 Pet 3:17–19; 5:1, 9). Suffering, in the eyes of early Christians was a gateway to the coming glory and fullness of life. It did merge with the initial torments of O.T. prophets like Jeremiah, the “Servant of the Lord” in 2nd Isaiah, Jesus Christ, and the martyrs of all times (cf. Sobrino 2002). Tortures and traumas are destructive and painful, but they do not signify the end of all hope. In itself, Christ’s suffering was brutally senseless. As a substitute sacrifice, it became absolutely meaningful for his followers. But the individual and collective Christian conscience nevertheless retained the problems of theodicy. Few have been able to “put their own ailments under the cross” and be content with their sometimes very troublesome destinies.

#### **(9) Biblical witness in overview**

The multi-faceted picture of suffering we get in the Bible is very heterogeneous, but it seems universal. Paul in sum speaks of the whole (!) creation groaning and longing for salvation (Rom 8:18–25). From ancient times onward humans have been aware of the ills of earthly conditions. Depending on cultural and historical circumstances, they all longed for betterment in all realms of life. Supplications of the death-threatened individual (cf. complaint Psalms) often are met by trust in temporary restoration of health and well-being; but there are notions of possible failure visible in quite a few texts. Some Psalms and the Book of Job doubt that God applies fair play on his believers. They are afraid of divine arbitrariness and

do articulate freely their anxieties. Skeptic wisdom, especially the Ecclesiastes, makes the fragility of life its concern. The latter constructs a minimal theology on the basis of *carpe diem*, “use the daily opportunities” and be content with what you are given. N.T. witnesses, in the wake of O.T. prophecies and the preaching of Jesus rely on a creative significance of suffering which will end soon and turn into boundless joy within an apocalyptic renewal of heaven and earth (cf. Zeph 12–14; Isa 9, 11, 24–27, 60–62, 65:17–25, etc.). Christian writers, also under the influence of Zoroastrian and late Greek apocalyptic imaginations, laid great emphasis on the crash of the old world and a renewal of the universe (cf. Mark 13; 1 Cor 15:35–58; Apoc. 6–22, etc.). Horrible torments had to be undergone until the breakthrough could be reached.

## **B. Finding or Missing God**

### **1. How Dare We to Describe the Finding or Missing of God in Tribulations without End?**

We first have to think about the meaning of “finding God.” The presupposition of this concept surely is the “loss of God” testified by the Scriptures and in some of the ancient writings outside Israel. But what does this phrase mean? And how is God conceived of so that He may be separated from his creatures to “get lost” or “remains remote” as some Psalms complain? Should we not consider at least a second way to “find” God (besides a first and often considered normative “return of the prodigal son,” Luke 15:11–32) in the search for the lost sheep performed by the Great Shepherd (Matt 18:10–14)? The basis for all these conceptions is very human indeed, as if God were an emotive person reacting against bad behavior of his creatures or clients. The imagination of our biblical forebears painted God as king, warrior, judge, father, creator, elder, shepherd, midwife, wisdom, etc., and sometimes even in impersonal terms as storm, breath, spirit, fire, depth and the like. Psalm 139:7–12 protests against all identifications of God, maintaining that his inexorable “presence” transcends every localization, so that nobody ever can escape him. Deuteronomy 4:15–20 warns against all and every likeness of God with earthly entities. God, who cannot be likened to anything in the same vein cannot be forsaken or put into a distance. So, what is “finding God” like? Can He be found? Will we be found, every one of us, by Him? Or are we



only talking about erroneous human sentiments to feel distanced, shut away, banned and forlorn in relation to God?

## **2. There Is a Great Need to Reflect on the Seekers of God**

Since genuine God-Talk of any kind is always metaphorical—our language is unable to partake in the otherness of God’s reality—faith and theology are thrown back to earthly dimensions. Indeed, we are completely on the human side especially when uncertainties arise. The heavenly voice “Keep away from God’s presence” (cf. Exod 19:21–24; Deut 5:22–27) and the unapproachability of the Divine are configurations of theological minds. This is true also for the priestly idea of God’s deadly presence in the Holy of Holies (cf. Lev 16:15–19). Criteria of “finding God” are to be established by human thinking, feeling, ascertaining. We need to rely on shaky signs of God’s nearness and benignancy. Some of the most popular ones are the questions: “Does God (according to my knowledge and insight) treat me justly and friendly?”—this is the age-old issue of theodicy. Another one runs: “Am I behaving correctly in the eyes of God?”—amounting to the problems of righteousness and justification. Others signs of God’s nearness include confessions and actions of faith. Sufferings of many kinds are sometimes apt to unsettle even firm convictions: “Stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face,” says the Satan to the Lord about righteous Job (Job 2:5). Quite a true recognition of human mores!

## **3. Finding or Missing God in the Contemporary World**

Biblical witnesses must be tested in our own world. There certainly are many situations in which women and men of faith have been feeling tested as to their steadfastness regarding their life-programs, confessions, and humanitarian engagements. What are such adverse, utterly threatening conditions able to do to the victims? Many may be discouraged and cross the lines, abandoning their beliefs. But it seems a whole lot of them remain upright, and we may include heroines and heroes of all creeds and convictions.

Do they meet their God in such final challenges? They often risk their lives in defense of justice and love; the list of those who actually *lose* is very long. In the hour of death, or of utter depravation, what are their thoughts? What are *our* thoughts?

**a. Lost in Persecution, Torture**

In recent times perhaps more so than in some preceding centuries, minority religious, ethnic, and gender groups here and there have been hunted down, abused, massacred, enslaved. Nadia Murad Basee and Lamija Aji Bashar, two Yesidi women, recently receiving the Sakharov Prize, spoke before the United Nations about their sufferings. They felt confirmed and strengthened in their battle for the persecuted. Countless martyrs in Latin America remained firm in their plights and struggles for the underprivileged. From Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai survived a shooting and continued her work for discriminated women. Old Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela became illustrious pioneers of perseverance in troubled times. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, outstanding Protestant fighter against Hitlerism, prisoner in a concentration camp, in the face of death composed the hymn: “Von guten Mächten treu und still umgeben” (Surrounded faithfully and silently by benign powers). Jehuda Bacon, survivor of the Nazi-holocaust, and many others like him, dedicated the rest of their lives to testify against racism and hate, in order to build a better world of solidarity and equality of all human beings. Singular examples of a wonderful trust in the Lord?

We should not forget, however, millions of people who did lose their faith in a just God. Could anybody judge that they missed their goal?

**b. Lost in Sickness, Frailty, Disease**

Amazing progress in modern medicine has not done away with human problems of high-grade physical sufferings. What to do if causes of illnesses stay undetectable, pains remain unbearable, decay of cells and nerves cannot be stopped, death is demanding its toll, even—*horribile dictum*—at an early age? Our ideal images of a wholesome and blessed life, given by God to His favorites, falls into pieces when we carefully observe human realities. Openly and under the surface there is so much absurd suffering going on in almost all societies and groups that world views of harmony, complacency, and peace are shattered. Henning Luther, a young theologian who died at the age of 46 years from a HIV infection, plausibly spoke about the “fragmentariness” of life, which we must take into account as a normal possibility, and even the reality for too many. Others have reflected upon physical and mental deficiencies which must be

tolerated as a divine “gift” and which must *not lead* to discrimination by the self-declared “sound” ones (against e.g., Lev 21:16–24). Human conceptions of holiness and wholeness are no safe matrixes of exclusion or disdain.

### **c. Lost in Despair, Depression**

Many sufferers end up in a dead-end road perceiving no exit, seemingly lost without hope. Suicides are high in our world, depending among other reasons on cultural patterns and the intensity of the crises. Remarkably, many calm and rational thinkers do put an end to their own lives knowing about their social responsibilities, even their obligations over against God. (Those who committed suicide under the impact of their guilt, like Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering, etc., need to be discussed separately). A case in question is that of the famous Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, who died in 1942 together with his wife, by their own decision, after fleeing Nazi Germany. He talked and wrote about his imminent departure from life, arguing that there was no hope for him and the world to achieve betterment of the ongoing hellish conditions of war, brutality, injustice, and persecution.

Jochen Klepper was a successful, very soft-spoken writer, servile to government authority, yet ousted by the Nazis from his jobs. When they threatened to deport his Jewish wife and her daughter, the three of them committed suicide after painful deliberations about the legitimacy of such an action before God.

Consciously renouncing the gift of life: Can this be a way out of severe suffering and a means to find God? To pull the ripcord and disappear from the scene, instead of suffering martyrdom, could that mean to “miss God”?

### **d. Lost in Calamities and Catastrophes**

For many humans, life does end abruptly, without much forewarning. All ages of victims are involved, from the youngest to the oldest. There is not much difference in man-made or natural (divine?) causes for sudden deaths. Millions and millions of people never had a chance to ask for God. Did they miss Him? Before one’s last breath, is there any last moment in a human life where one takes an instantaneous balance of everything that happened during their lifetime? Even a last-second evaluation of all of one’s life *including* a full recognition of God’s overwhelming grace, acceptance, and love?

In one last moment! But why are we concerned about such kinds of reckoning, if the Biblical witnesses quite often insist: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6; cf. Pss. 103:8, 111:4, 145:8; Luke 6:36; Heb 2:17; James 5:11, etc.)? To engage God in prayer and service in order to achieve graciousness, peace of mind, and basic trust have been good biblical practices through the ages. Secularized persons and groups do not care for religious certainty but quite often manage to acquiesce in their fates and circumstances and accept the comforting voices of their friends to rest in peace.

**e. Lost in Doubts, Unbelief, Remorse**

Biblical testimony is manifold in portraying human rebellion, waywardness, treachery against neighbors and against strangers, and, last but not least, over against his or her own self. Human beings have been at odds ever more with their own cognitive and technical achievements. Horst Eberhard Richter (1979), renowned psychotherapist and social philosopher, described our times after the “dethronement” of God in vivid terms. Humans now feel abandoned, forlorn, and compelled to take over all positions of the Almighty. But they get thoroughly confused, unable to fill their self-imposed role. The apprentices are overburdened by those magisterial tasks, they fall mentally sick, and they ruin themselves. Uncertainties and anxieties abound in present-day civilizations. Seeking God and finding only one’s lonely self? Is that the destiny of modern mankind? Is the universe empty of any empathic Divine? Even agnostics and atheists may find consolation and meaning in unheard of agonies (cf. Heym 1942).

**f. Lost in Hate—Saved through Love**

Incredibly, the Bible does tell very much, perhaps too much, about hate. God, at times and places, is an irascible ruler who revenges and destroys his enemies (cf. Deut 32:39–42; Pss. 11:5, 45:8, 94:1–3, etc.). Invariably, the followers of Yahweh adopt similar attitudes (cf. Pss. 89, 24, 119:104, 113, 139:21, etc.), so that hating adversaries and wishing them and their families bad luck, pestilence, and death become a pattern of thought. Even the prophets (cf. Jer 18:19–23) and kings (cf. Ps 18:16–50) have adopted hostile patterns. And they enter into prayers of petition. Since most ills of suffering individuals were attributed to demonic or evil-minded human action,

the curing process included the elimination of the enemy influence. This fact explains a lot about the condemnation and cursing passages in individual complaints in the Bible (cf. the extreme example in Ps 109). On the other hand, collective Psalms of complaint dwell on military action by Yahweh and his people (cf. Judg 5; Pss. 44, 89).

In short, ancient Near Eastern belligerence (fight for fertile lands and resources of water) and population-growth (fertile crescent!) also cultivated a system of violent power and ruthless revenge that were handed down to Christian (after Constantine) and Islamic communities. Those are opposed to strong sentiments of social justice, solidarity, and “love” of neighbor and the resident foreigners.

In our times, states and empires on a Christian or Islamic basis inherited those political traditions. Populistic leaders preach nationalism, chauvinism, ethnic ideologies, technical and economic hegemonies. Hate has a large and self-destructive part in these developments. How can we escape the doom of rational and responsible politics? Meet God and stand up for global solidarity and love? Christ himself and many Christians did overcome hate by sympathy with those who chose to be enemies of a few, of many, or even of everyone.

### **Conclusion**

The menaces of unexplainable suffering are manifold both in the Bible and in modern times. Also, the attitudes and strategies to cope with these attacks on spiritual equilibration vary with great and ongoing concerns, because the basic questions remain unsolved. What does it really mean to be in concordance with God? To seek and find Him when the right relationship seems to be lost? And how do we define a “stable relationship” with the Divine? Does it suffice to “trust in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” as the Heidelberg catechism spells it out? Can we rely on our own feeling of being accepted regardless of our merits and actions and confessions? Does our dubious record of obedience to the Word of God disqualify us? Should we define a “reconciliation” with God in terms of unconditional trust in Him, no longer being concerned about anything which might befall us, leaving behind all concerns and speculations about a “happy end”? Some believers and non-believers have been able to do just that. The best answer, however, to the vexing questions

of unbelievable suffering is the insight that we are freed from any pressure to “find” or “meet” God, because He already has found us.

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