



FAITH CRISIS AND ITS RESOLUTION IN THE BIBLE

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*“For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
Why have you cast me off?” (Ps 43:2)*
*“Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” (Ps 73:12-13)*

Faith in God is not an immovable mountain. Events in the believer's life place him and her at crossroads that raise questions about faith and even create cracks in it. We know about the crisis of faith in God among some of those who went through the atrocities of the Shoah. They came to the conclusion that in a world where such evil is possible, there can be no God, for if God did exist, God would not have allowed the greatest horror to occur. This dramatic crisis among Shoah survivors illustrates the meaning of the faith crisis in the modern world; it is loss of faith in the existence of God and its result is life without God, a secular world. This is not the case for the biblical person in the ancient world. Society was religious and the existence of God was never queried, even among those who experienced moments of doubt. For the biblical person in such situations of crisis, the perception of God's essence and character was at issue. What kind of God leads the world? Is he a personal God who acts according to principles of justice and morality? Or is it a distant power that acts according to brutal arbitrariness? In this God's world, is there a link between the deeds of a person and her fate in life, or do powers dominate that do not even see what a person does? Is God a compassionate God or is God vindictive even in cases when a person stumbles through natural weakness?

The harmonious World of the Believer

In order to understand the biblical person's faith crisis, we must understand the world of the believer. The Psalmist in Ps 34 states:

“Fear the Lord and you shall lack nothing.” (vs. 10)

And

*“Young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.”
(vs. 11)*

The Psalmist in Ps 37 gives evidence based on his life experience:

“I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken.” (vs. 25)

And he concludes:

"The Lord loves justice and will not forsake his faithful ones." (vs. 28)

These and many other expressions throughout the Bible teach us that the biblical believer's God is a personal God who watches over him and her personally and gives them the reward they deserve. Though he is a great God, the Creator of the world, transcendent and beyond nature, dominating it, still God is a God who listens to the individual and who responds when called upon, as the Psalmist in Ps 34:5 testifies:

"I sought the Lord and he answered me."

God is one who acts according to right and justice, even when God brings terrible disasters upon humanity. For example, the deluge that caused almost the total annihilation of humanity is seen as a just retribution for the evil deeds of humankind:

"The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth ... I will blot out from the earth the human beings ..." (Gen 6:5-7)

The salvation of Noah and his family is also presented as a result of the principle of right and justice. Noah is not chosen by chance. As Gen 6:9 says,

"Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation."

Throughout the Bible, in narrative, prophecy and poetry, it is a solid principle that the human person receives in his or her life according to his deeds. The believer's world is a harmonious one, in which nothing happens that can disturb it. Such a world is that of the Psalmist in Ps 23:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not lack."

In this world, the Lord's presence is an every-day experience and the world is perceived as "green pastures" "beside peaceful waters". With such an experience, no wonder he has no fear of the "darkest valley", for the Lord is always there.

The Emergence of the Crisis of Faith

What happens when reality slaps the believer in the face, when she encounters a world in which justice and right are not present? How does she react to terrible natural disasters in which young and old lose their life? How does he react to earthquakes, hurricanes? And human wickedness in which the strong take advantage of the weak? When reality proves in thousands of ways that the person who believes that "the righteous are not forsaken" (Ps 37:25) is mistaken?

Such doubts in God's justice and management of the world appear from the beginning of faith. It is Abraham whose confidence in God was unlimited - as was proven in his willingness to sacrifice his son - who first expresses such doubts in Genesis 18: when he hears about God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorra, he immediately realizes the lack of justice. It is impossible, he thinks, that in such a great city there are not also righteous people as well as babies and children who never committed any evil, and he does not hesitate to voice his thoughts before God:

"Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked ..."

The thunder of this question resonates to this day:

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"

Later on, we meet Jeremiah with his apologetic yet disturbing question:

"You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you, but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them and they take root." (Jer 12:1-2)

Not surprisingly, doubt and defiance reach their highest degree in the Books of Job and of Psalms. In most of the Bible, certainly in the Torah and the prophets, God and his messengers are speaking, and they present the official foundations of faith in God (Jeremiah's outburst is very exceptional). In Job and especially in the Psalms, a human person is speaking, so the direction of communication is not from heaven down but the opposite. The human speaking comes from many different *Sitz-im-Leben*: joy and sorrow, success and failure, thanksgiving and complaint, distress and need, and also doubt and defiance.

Job puts God's morality and the justice of God's ways to the test. Job is an object of that strange gambling between God and Satan, and with God's agreement, Satan inflicts terrible suffering upon Job. And Job, who is described as a righteous man, moves from his harmonious life to a painful perception of God and the world. At first he wants God to tell him the reason for his suffering:

"If I sin, what do I do to you ... Why have you made me your target? Why have you made me a burden to myself?" (Job 7:20)

Later, Job realizes that the question is not only his personal one. He sees the suffering of other righteous people and in contrast to them,

"the tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure." (Job 12:6)

Thus he reaches the conviction that there is no link between a person's doing and the retribution given. But Job does not stop there: he sees the evil that fills human life; he sees human suffering from birth to grave; he sees torturing diseases in a life that passes like a shadow:

"A mortal born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last ... Since their days are determined, and the number of their months is known to you, and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass, look away from them, and desist, that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days." (Job 14:1-6)

Is it really possible that such a world is led by God according to justice? Experience does not show that moral order prevails in the world. And if God does not lead the world morally, it is probably because justice and morality are not attributes of God. God's doing and behaviour prove God is an immoral God. The perception of God in Job's words is frightening: this is a powerful God without justice, demonic and arbitrary, obscure and dangerous, who brings the world into immoral chaos and bases the relationship between the human being and God only on fear.

"God is wise in heart and mighty in strength – who has resisted him, and succeeded? – he who removes mountains, and they do not know it, when he overturns them in his anger ... Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him. He snatches away; who can stop him? Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?' ... He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness ... Though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse ... He destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges – if it is not he, who then is it?" (Job 9:4-24)

Reality takes us from the prophetic perception of religion and God to the primitive pagan perception, which is based on fear only. According to this primitive perception, arbitrary powers fix the

fate of humans and the universe, and the human beings' religious reaction to those gods is rituals such as sacrifices in order to appease them and to remove their anger. The suffering of Job made him "wise", but because this wisdom removed justice from God, it inflicted great tortures on Job: those of a believing human person who lost his God. What a price! This is the crisis of faith we are talking about.

Like Job, the Psalmists face the vanity of human life: its weakness versus the power of nature, the arbitrariness of the universe:

"You sweep them [human beings] away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it fades and withers. For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed." (Ps 90:2-11)

A similar mood is expressed in Psalm 39. Countless realities lead to doubts as to the existence of a moral system of retribution. Confronted with a verse such as:

"The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (Ps 34:10),

the naïve believer cannot escape asking: Is this really so? Reality shows the opposite:

"The evil say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good." (Ps 53:1)

The inescapable question then arises:

"How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Ps 73:11)

Is there any divine leadership? Does God know or care about those who are called "moths" or "fading grass"? Psalm 42 expresses the psalmist's fear that God has forgotten him and his depression because of it:

"I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'"

A climax in the psalmist's search is vividly described in Psalm 73, which speaks of the success of the wicked and of the psalmist's temptation to join them.

"As for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence."

Resolving the Crisis

A number of methods are used in the Bible to resolve the crisis and to save the believer from his and her torturing doubts. It should be noted that in this talk we are not looking at post-biblical methods of dealing with this issue.

a) From you to you I will escape

The renewal of the connection with God is itself the path to the renewal of faith. Renewed contact with God does away with the questions that were shaking faith in God. Thus with Job: although God's answer from out of the storm does not at all respond to Job's questions, it does bring him back his lost God. And therefore he says in response to God's revelation:

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-6)

The psalmist in Psalm 73 goes through the same emotional process: although he does not receive a direct revelation, his visit to the temple renews his contact with God and supplies him with the "insights" he needs.

"When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end [that of the wicked]." (Ps 73:16-17)

The psalmist in Ps 73, like in the whole Bible, has no rational answer to his torturing question. The success of the wicked and his doubts took him away from God, but when he returns to God's closeness, these doubts fade away.

"I was like a brute beast toward you. Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand ... But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge." (Ps 73:21-28)

In an inexplicable way, the intimacy with God brought him back his faith in God's justice, and thus became the highest religious value.

Looking again at Ps 23 as well as Ps 16 and Ps 131 will help us to understand this sense of closeness to God. These three Psalms paint us a picture of pure joy without any tension and pain under the wings of God. In Ps 23, the psalmist is a sheep whose shepherd is God. The other image is that he is the guest in God's house and God is the host. No wonder he has no fear of going through anything in life. His experience of God is not a momentary experience; rather, it is perpetual, ongoing, accompanying him all his life and supplying him with constant happiness. This is not a mystical unification with God or the kind of experience people get by using drugs. Rather, the psalmist is rooted in normal human reality, but lives with this trust in God. The same perception underlies Psalm 16:

"I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure." (Ps 16:8-9)

The deepest expression of life in God's sphere is presented in Ps 131:

"O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me." (Ps 131:1-2)

Here, intimacy with God is even greater than that of the psalmist in Ps 23. Now, the human being rests in God's bosom like a baby with its mother. The image testifies to naivety, joy, warmth and confidence. The purity of the sphere of God's closeness fills him and her with a sense of total humility.

b) Prayer

Another method for achieving resolution is through prayer. Prayer has a healing power, and even though nothing changes in the reality of the person praying, the prayer itself causes a change in his or her mood and she feels as if her prayer was already accepted and her real situation was transformed. This is the case in Ps 42/43 where the psalmist moves from a state of depression ("Why have you forsaken me?" – Ps 43:2) to a state of thanksgiving to the Lord, from a situation of being in exile to a sense of being in God's circle, in the midst of a parade in God's temple, which is the goal of his yearning.

"O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God." (Ps 43:3-4)

This experience of transformation from depression and torturing doubts to a sense of joy and thanksgiving runs through the Psalms of the praying individual. For example, Psalm 13 starts with a cry:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

It continues with a prayer:

"Look at me and answer me, O Lord my God!" (13:4)

And it ends with a feeling of confidence in God's grace and an outburst of joy and a song of thanksgiving to God:

"He has dealt bountifully with me." (13:6)

Although the psalmist uses the past tense, it is unlikely that in the course of his prayer anything changed in his real situation. The prayer that came from the depths of his distress and the catharsis that followed are the factors responsible for the change in mood: the person who was forgotten by God became the one who has been dealt with bountifully.

c) Accepting that God's ways are inexplicable

Comprehending the infinite distance between God and human beings and accepting God's transcendence lead to the realization that God's considerations and deeds cannot be perceived by human understanding. Asking for answers concerning God's leadership is an attempt to understand and to confirm God in human categories, and that is impossible and will lead nowhere. This approach underlies Job's second reaction to God's revelation to him. God bombards Job with so many questions about what happens in the world: life and death, animals and human beings, earth and sky, etc. And Job's reaction is:

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." (Job 42:2-3)

God's appearance is God's greatest theodicy, and what God says to Job is meant to remove the need to justify God's self. This emphasizes the human inability to understand God's ways in the world. This approach is probably one that helped so many of the Shoah survivors who stuck to their faith in God in spite of what they saw and experienced in their flesh.

d) Denial

Another method of coping with the doubts is to deny reality and to stick dogmatically to theological statements, as happens in Psalm 37:25:

"I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."

Most likely the speaker knows that this is not reality. Nevertheless, he repeats the words like a mantra that no one can doubt, despite the evidence of reality. The psalmist in Ps 37 is very aware of the existence of people's jealousy in the success of the wicked. In spite of that and again in a dogmatic approach, he advises his audience to stop being jealous because the end of the wicked

is that they will be harvested like grass. Throughout the whole Psalm, he keeps repeating his stereotypical statements that “the righteous shall inherit the land” (vs. 29), that there is no righteous person who has been forsaken (vs. 25), and that the wicked will collapse:

“I passed by, and they were no more; though I sought them, they could not be found.”
(vs. 36)

This method is also used by Job’s friends who keep protecting God from Job’s accusation and urging Job to confess his sins. According to their dogmatic approach, if a person suffers, he must have committed a sin. But God himself was annoyed with them:

“After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’” (Job 42:7)

At first glance, God’s words raise a question: why would God be annoyed with Job’s friends and say what he does about Job? On the surface it should be the other way around. But God obviously does not accept their flattery, their lack of honesty, and their dogmatic theology that only cause them to lose their human capacity for compassion towards a suffering friend.

I would like to end with a story that speaks to our topic with a smile:

It was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The whole congregation had gathered in the synagogue with its very pious rabbi to pray with great conviction, asking God to forgive them for the sins they had committed throughout the year. Among them was the shop-keeper Michael. He was not learned – he could hardly read the prayers in Hebrew. He gazed at the Torah shrine and did not really look like he was taking part in the service.

As every year, the night after Yom Kippur an angel appeared to the rabbi in a dream and told him which prayers had been accepted. To the rabbi’s great surprise, Michael headed the list. The rabbi couldn’t wait until morning, when he summoned Michael to ask what had made his prayer so special.

Michael was afraid he had done something to harm the community, but he told the rabbi the truth: “I don’t know how to read the prayers, so instead I negotiated with God. I told God: it’s true that I did not always keep all of your commandments; I sometimes came late to the daily services, at times I charged too much for things in my shop, and I even occasionally enjoyed the beauty of my neighbour’s young wife. Still, what have I done compared to your sins this year?! Earthquakes in which hundreds of people died and thousands lost their homes; millions of innocent people starving to death in Africa; and you made Sarah a widow with eight small children to care for; and many other big sins ... However, God, I’m willing to turn a blind eye on your sins, if you will do the same for my sins.”

“Oh no!” screamed the rabbi. “You let God off the hook too easily! If only you had insisted! You could have made God send the Messiah now in our day!”