



“FOR THE LORD WILL BE YOUR CONFIDENCE ...” (PROV. 3:26)

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1. Introduction

I was pleased when I was asked to share my experience of reading the Bible in “exile” in northern Iraq. Let me speak the truth: it is not easy to read the sacred texts while in exile. Since 2014, the Christian community in Iraq cannot read the Bible as they used to do before the invasion of ISIS. Although, we are internally displaced, we still consider ourselves as having been doomed into exile. And, we continually ask the Lord why we had, and still have, the experience of the Israelites after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Is it because we deserve it? Is it because we have a corrupted government? Are we being punished because we have sinned? Are we just victims? Are we to be forgiven and to return to our places? Why did God allow innocent ones to suffer? Children, women, elderly people were forcefully displaced, and to leave behind everything for which they had worked their entire lives. Why? Where is God? We are wrestling with God in the darkness, and waiting for the dawn to come to receive the blessing. We have come to realize that a different way of being demands a different way of viewing and reading the Bible.

Therefore, it is a blessed opportunity to share with you some ideas about our way of thinking about and reading the Bible as people in exile.

2. Reading the Bible in exile

2.1 Placing our story in the context of biblical stories

The Bible relates stories of people who had different tragic experiences; they could be personal or communal stories: e.g., the story of the exile and destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the Second Book of Kings (chapter 25), the story of the suffering servant of the Lord in the Book of Isaiah (chapter 53), the abandoned and betrayed Jesus in the Gospels (Mark 14 – 15), and the suffering early Christian community in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 5). These are true stories. They tell the reader about people who lived special events that greatly affected their lives. Therefore, listening to these stories and taking the place of the characters, I trust, would help us to live our tragic experiences differently. The ways of dealing with disasters that are offered in these stories could enlighten us to live our reality as people whose faith is rooted in the Bible. So, like our ancestors, in times of distress, we ask, we pray, we recite lamentations and we compose stories. Just like them we try to feel the presence of God as they did wherever they were.

2.2 Listening to the wisdom in the book of proverbs

Since the present community is gathering to discuss some chapters of the Book of Proverbs, I thought it is opportune to listen to the sages who wrote the proverbs, and how they exhort people in times of distress. It is good to look at the possibility that this book offers for the afflicted ones to live their experience in relation to God and to the people. Chapters 1 to 9 clearly state that one possibility of surviving crisis is to listen to the wisdom therein. These words were written by sages who lived in exile, and who suffered and returned to their land after so much humiliation and anguish. So, their way of living and understanding wisdom will be of great help for us. The words of sages in the Book of Proverbs give us the courage to raise questions concerning the values, the moral behaviour, and the meaning of our existence in times of distress. Adopting the sages' way of thinking will surely provide profound insights on how to live amidst tragedy.

2.3 The Book of Proverbs and living tragic experiences

The Book of Proverbs offers some clues about tragic events and catastrophic times that humans can experience in their lives, be they considered among the upright or sinners. It is not the purpose of this modest work to investigate all of these indications. In fact, there are two verses in the Book of Proverbs in which the sages briefly but intensely give their advice to the reader about crisis and disasters that humans could face in their lives. These verses are 1:27 and 3:25.

These two verses come in different contexts. The first one is about those who do not listen to wisdom. When disaster comes to them, it will be too late to seek wisdom in order to survive. The second is about those who listen to wisdom; wisdom is assuring to them, that in time of affliction, they should not be afraid, for the Lord will be their confidence. Catastrophe happens to people in both cases. But those who listen differ in their way of living this catastrophe. In other words, it seems that according to the Book of Proverbs, listening to wisdom does not necessarily mean avoiding suffering or preventing disasters. But, more importantly, what matters is how to live the conflict and disaster with faithful hearts. Wisdom does not assure people that with her they can live life without storms or terror. On the contrary, affliction can come to the upright and to sinners, those who listen and those who do not listen. That is obvious from the way the two verses mentioned above are grammatically and linguistically constructed. Looking closely at the texts could be helpful.

1: 27 בָּבֶא (כְּשֹׂאָה) | פְּחַדְכֶם וְאַיְדֵיכֶם כְּסוּפָה יֵאָתֶה בָּבֶא עֲלֵיכֶם צָרָה וְצוּקָה:

When your dread comes like a storm, and your calamity comes on like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come on you.

3: 25 אַל־תִּירָא מִפְּחַד פְּתָאִים וּמִשְׂאֵת רְשָׁעִים כִּי תָבֵא:

Do not be afraid of sudden fear, nor of the onslaught of the wicked when it comes;

In Proverbs 1:27, there are some terms that express catastrophe: dread, calamity, and distress. Likewise, in Proverbs 3:25, there are similar words: dread and onslaught. What is worth noticing is that in both verses coming of these times of distress is expressed not in clauses but in sub-clauses. That is to say, there are prepositions before the verbs express the coming of distress. Then, the exhortation of the sages comes in the main clause with indicative verbs. This means that the sages' main point is to arrest the reader's attention to what to do during catastrophe since it is coming anyway.

Additionally, the repetition of the two words פְּחַד and שׂוֹאָה to refer to devastation worth a pause. As for the word פְּחַד, it mainly means dread, but it could denote experience of joy as is the case in

Isaiah 60:5 and Jeremiah 33:9.¹ While the other Hebrew term, שׁוֹאָה, contains all kinds of catastrophic experiences that humans can have. In the biblical context, it may have several meanings like destruction, desolation, darkness, bitterness. Therefore, it will be worthwhile to focus on this word and on how the sages understood it, and to hear the advice they offer to the reader. Of course, many are familiar with this word as it is used for the Holocaust. My intention in this essay is to use the term as it denotes catastrophe and all kinds of bitterness that human can face, and our experience of exile is no exception.

2.4 Shoah as expression for tragic experience

In his short article, Beyse gives a thorough explanation about the word שׁוֹאָה. He states that in most cases, the term denotes devastation and downfall.² This statement came to be affirmed and strengthened by the study that P. Overland made on the word שׁוֹאָה.³ He applies poetic analysis to three occurrences of the word שׁוֹאָה in biblical wisdom literature. The author investigates the manner in which שׁוֹאָה operates and the motive for which the sages used the word. As for the manner, Overland shows that there are three dimensions of שׁוֹאָה: speed, ferocity, and the tidal wave. As for the motive, Overland briefly concludes that it may either be deserved (punishment), or undeserved (persecution befalling the pious).⁴

From this, one can state that שׁוֹאָה befalls the upright as well as sinners. If so, what kind of solution does wisdom offer? If the sinners and the upright could have the same experience of distress and sorrow, what are the questions we need to ask in times of *shoah*? If it befalls sinners and the upright, talking about the reason for the happening will not be helpful since it could occur anyway. In this case, we need to direct our questions and ask or seek other ways of living the *shoah*. If we are sinners, we deserve it, but if we are innocent, how are we to take it? In *shoah* as it is presented in the Bible, it seems that logic is not working, where sinners are punished and good people are blessed. All are having the same destiny.

In this we are very close to what is happening in 2 Kings 25. The chapter ends the story of the glorious Southern Kingdom of Judah when the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar II invaded Jerusalem and looted the city and the temple. The kingdom is desolated. People are exiled. But the chapter ends in a strange way. Who are the sinners? Are they the kings or the people? There is no explanation as to why what happened had occurred. There is theological darkness. It is not the case in 2 Kings 17 when the author explains why Samaria fell to the Assyrians. It is because the people were sinners and they worshiped gods other than the one God. But this explanation is not given when the story of the destruction of Jerusalem is narrated. Later, the prophets explain why the destruction occurred. But the end of chapter 25 leaves us with so many questions without answers. It leaves us with tears, anger, and anguish.

One can conclude that *shoah* as expressed in the Book of Proverbs is rather equivalent to the tragedy we find in 2 Kings 25. Let us say it is a kind of *shoah*.

2.5 Shoah as a condition of being

In his comment on the probable social context of Proverbs 1 to 9, Leo Perdue states that “new forms of power in the rule of the royal dynasty required a new mode of knowledge”.⁵ If we apply that explanation to our reality, it would be reasonable to say that new form of being or existing

¹ H.-P. Müller, פְּתוּחַ, *TDOT*, 518.

² K.-M. Beyse, שׁוֹאָה, *TDOT*, 237.

³ P. Overland, “*Shoah* in the World of the Sages”, *SHOFAR* winter 2005 Vol. 23, No. 2, 9-18.

⁴ Overland, “Sages”, 9-10.

⁵ L.G. Perdue, *Proverbs. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville 1989), 67.

requires a new mode of thinking and planning for future directions. If we consider Overland's manner of describing *shoah*, then the time of *shoah* could be understood as an event or period that marks a turning point in the course of our existence. During or after this *shoah*, one's life is never the same. *Shoah* comes like a storm; it could leave an enormous amount of desolation and sadness behind. But, in living the tragic time of *shoah*, there could be an opportunity for new possibilities to appear and thrive. In this sense, the storm of *shoah* takes what can be taken and leaves behind what is essential ... that can never be taken. In other words, it winnows one's life to remove the chaff. It is time for people to seek what is indispensable and un-take-able in their lives. *Shoah* is a situation in which we ask ourselves how we relate to God, to the world and to ourselves. The reason for *shoah* might be something completely external; but, the real and most effective *shoah* is the one that individuals live internally because of their doubts. Forces and weapons can destroy houses, properties, and cause material loss. But the real loss is when victims doubt their morality, their traditions, and their faith. People come out of *shoah* with completely different attitudes toward what was considered to be factual and undoubtable. It is time for people to react to the invitation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1 to 9: either to refuse the invitation and be destroyed by the *shoah*, or to accept the invitation and to know how to live the *shoah*.⁶

2.6 Shoah as tragedy

Having reached this point, it is rational to recognize that asking who is sinner and who is upright is not really the crucial question to ask. Nor do we need to call out to God to know if we are being punished or whether we are victims. Whether we deserve what is happening to us, or if we are innocent and need God's intervention, is not the only way to focus. At this stage, we need to take one step further. Peter Dubovsky's unfinished essay is of great help at this point of the study. In his study on 2 Kings 25, Dubovsky describes what happens at the end of 2 Kings 25 as tragedy using Karl Jaspers' view and description of tragedy. Because his essay is very significant to this study, it will be good to summarize it in few points:

- The tragic vision of the books of Kings is not a dogmatic affirmation about divine nature, but it rather makes us crumble before the Hollywood-ian vision of the world where all aspects of life, even tragic ones, can easily be incorporated into a world vision with a happy ending, in a reassuring worldview where good defeats evil. The literary style chosen to present the tragic end of the North and South kingdoms lets us face the world marked by anguish and despair, the dark side of human existence. It lets us face the terror of irrationality.
- The tragedy according to Karl Jaspers recognizes a further disharmony of existence. The tragic hero becomes a victim of the forces he can neither dominate nor understand. He has to face doubts and ambiguity. The hero is brought to the centre of a world in which the problem of evil cannot be solved by dissolving it in a harmonious set capable of absorbing such evil.
- After reading such a tragic ending of the God-chosen nation, one remains with a deep sense of sorrow; this is the purpose of the tragedy to bring the reader into contact with disharmony that deeply marks human existence and the existence of entire nations. The forces (armed troops, administrative structures, secret services) that appear superhuman let people experience their power, insecurity and the transience of human existence. Man can experience his inability to hold back the waters of the deluge of evil. The tragedy's significance lies in its challenge to the reader, because it reveals the unavoidable need buried within the human heart to face the reality of death and complete destruction in order to become strengthened.

⁶ Perdue, Proverbs, 82-83.

– Tragedy brings to the surface neglected and unsolvable aspects, disturbing issues that threaten human existence precisely because they remain without real answers. Tragedy points to issues that cannot be resolved, but cannot even be readily expressed.

– What is important is not the quantity or the quality of misfortune but rather the struggle, the soul's resistance to accepting reality? The hero can die, but a soul that resists evil cannot die.

2.7 Application

Experiencing the irrationality:

If we apply logic to the events that transpired between June and August of 2014 in Iraq, all we uncover is the irrationality of those days. Although the people had been resolutely promised protection, they had a firm conviction that they would never be invaded and occupied. But, when thousands of residents were forced to leave their homes in a few hours, it was obvious that the end would not at all be felicitous. The exiled people came to understand that they had to reconsider everything they had believed in and had taken for granted. Is it possible that evil is prevailing? Is it possible that God has left Nineveh, the Great City? Those days of tragic exodus were times of theological darkness when signs of God's presence were not clearly seen. It was a long night of wrestling with the unknown, a long night of praying to the Lord to take that cup away from us. Not the cup of having lost everything, but rather, the cup of the feeling of having been betrayed by people very much trusted.

Being victims of overwhelming forces:

The irrationality flowed through to overwhelm the whole dam of dogmas and trust that had been built throughout years and years. The exiled people came to understand that they had to accept the reality that the cause of their loss was not the number of vicious armed men who attacked the innocents to take their properties. But rather, there was a malicious plan that went beyond properties and materials. In the midst of that chaos, the exiled tasted the disharmony in this world where judging between right and wrong is something very relative, as there are no fixed norms. In such situations: the experience of not knowing, of losing the ability to decide, and in living in uncertainty and ambiguity—all leave the exiled lost and confused.

Looking for a way out:

Having lost so much, at a certain stage, people who live the *shoah* try to look for what is still there: not having been taken by ISIS. Most positively, people in such situations will not look for material things, but rather for values and beliefs that can sustain them while in exile. It is time to look within, to search for what is solid and essential. Maybe at this point of our study, words of the Prophet Jeremiah are the most helpful. When Baruch expresses his distress and sorrow in Jeremiah 45:3, the answer of the Lord came to comfort Baruch saying: "Should you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them, for I will bring disaster on all the people. But I will give your life to you as booty in all the places where you may go." The word used for "booty" in Hebrew is לָלַץ which is quite significant. It is a unique expression that occurs four times in Jeremiah (21:9; 38:2; 39:18; 45:5) and means "to preserve one's life as spoil."⁷ The word also indicates what is taken after the war. This means that for the author, surviving the disaster is a sign of triumph. It is true that there was great loss; however, being alive is the point from which one can begin anew.

⁷ H. Ringgren, לָלַץ, TDOT, Vol. 2, 66-68, 68.

Legacy to leave for the next generation:

By now it is well-defined that it is unwise to be illusory toward ourselves and others by thinking that catastrophe happens only to those who are sinners. *Shoah* could come anyway. But what is important is the way it is lived. People die with or without disasters. What matters is the lesson they leave behind.

As for the Christian community that is exiled in Iraq, the message they could give to the next generation that would probably have a very similar experience, is to believe that in times of crisis they are not alone. God is there wherever they go. Also, being in the Middle East, one should never give up, and start from zero again and again. What really sustains people during *shoah* is keeping their hope and their solid conviction that God is the Lord of history. In times of *shoah*, He promises to be wherever we are.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, in Jaspers' view on tragedy there is an invitation to do some rethinking about our reality. *Shoah* is a time of anguish and distress, but it is also a time to look for the possibilities that might be possible from the outside (people that might help) and the inside (inner strengthening). That is what Kevin Vanhoozer calls *passion*: passion, not for submission to suffering, but passion as the will to live.⁸ To achieve that, one needs to listen to the voice of wisdom. Therein the sages speak of the world of blessing into which those who follow their instruction may enter. Sound wisdom and discretion will lead to well-being and security.

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⁸ K. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Sidney 1990), 6-7.