

**Coronavirus Pandemic and Humanity:
Some Biblical Insights how to Deal with/in the Crisis**

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The Coronavirus pandemic has covered the planet as a tsunami and caused different kinds of losses: our loved ones, our day-to-day life, our plans and even our dreams. It has changed on a large scale our social behavior, our perception of time and space. It has caused an immense feeling of anxiety and uncertainty. We are blocked in the present and hardly think of the future. Current studies about mental health effects after natural disasters (tsunami, earthquake, wildfire etc.) show that most people are resilient after calamity and only a small number of people develop post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological and social disorders (depression, domestic violence, child abuse, anxiety etc.). People tend to find secure area after natural disasters, but with the Covid-19 no such safe zone can be found.¹ These days we are experiencing uncertainty and anxiety. We keep running, hoping to reach the final goal but so far we are unsuccessful. As people of faith we reach out to the foundations of our belief, including the Bible. Some may look for the answers and solutions, some for comfort and peace, some for insights and inspiration. In my opinion it is up to a person to decide what and how to approach the Bible on their spiritual pathway. “For the word of God is active and alive” (Hebrews 4:12) I personally look for the biblical insights how to deal in the situation of uncertainty and hopelessness. So many studies have been done on Covid-19, however the vaccine and proper treatment of the virus is not in sight yet. The image of a runner who never reaches the finish point reflects the now-a-days situation. For that reason, I would like to begin my reflections with the quotation from the Book of Isaiah 40:31:

But those who put their hope in the Lord shall renew [their] vigor, they shall raise wings as eagles; they shall run and not weary, they shall walk and not tire.

There are three words in this passage I would like you to pay attention to: the verb “to hope,” the divine name “YHWH” (usually translated as Lord to avoid using the most sacred name of God in Jewish tradition) and the plural pronoun “they.”

The first term (in Hebrew קוה/מקוה/תקוה) predominantly refers to the feeling of trust and confidence in God’s strength now and not to the expectations of the future outcomes. It describes people’s assurance that God sustains all things on the earth.² Interestingly the Hebrew term “hope” (מקוה) is the same word that has a meaning of “gathering (together)” (Gen 1:9-10; Ex 7:19; Jer 3:17).³ This noun occurs first in the story of creation: “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/07/coronavirus-special-mental-health-disaster/613510/>

² In some cases, it means also “to wait, to expect.” Cf. Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (trans. by Mark E. Biddle). Hendrickson Publishers 1997, 1126.

³ HALOT 559.

the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:9-10, NRSV). God’s power to create the world and to control the chaos (primordial waters) is the reason to trust him in all sorts of situations. By the way, this story of creation in Gen 1 was written in Babylonian exile (586-536 BC) – the first national tragedy as the first Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, the royal house was suspended and a part of population was deported into captivity. This devastating experience had led religious leaders of ancient Judah to rethink their theology, religious practice and, most likely, social life as well. In this creation story we hear the emphasis that God created the time and therefore controls the history, the world he created is good⁴ in its nature and therefore goodness will prevail. And finally, humans as an image of God can rule the earth and overcome chaos. Important to note, that this Hebrew term “hope” is also one of the very frequent words that has been used by Job in the same titled book to describe his feelings.⁵ Furthermore, most scholars agree that the Book of Job was composed in the time of Babylonian exile or just sometime after it.⁶ The feeling of despair and hopelessness prevailed amongst the captives. The prophet Ezekiel catches this feeling quite well: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (Ez 37:11 NRSV). The questions, or better to say, outcries such as “Why did it happen to the nation? How could it happen? How shall we carry on?” naturally pop up. The author of Job is in fact trying to reflect on the situation and get some insights how a community might overcome this disaster. We shall get back to this theme shortly.

The second term which is used in the above quoted passage from Isaiah I would like you to take into consideration is the Being on whom the prophet suggests relying on – יהוה. This is the most sacred name in the Hebrew tradition. This name had been revealed to Moses at the outset of creation of a new community – a community of chosen people (יהוה אשר אהיה Ex 3:14). This name is evoked in the covenantal context (Ex 19–24) when God and the community of Israel establish a mutually responsible relationship. To say it with the biblical language: blessings will be bestowed on those who follow the commandments and curses will befall on people as penalty of infidelity. The Book of Deuteronomy in chapter 28 contains a detailed list of blessings and curses. Attentive reader will notice that the blessings and curses involve not only spiritual gains or losses, but mostly material, emotional and social ones. Let me show you two examples.

Blessing for those who live righteously according to the commandments: “*Blessed shall you be... The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you. The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings... if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them.*” (Deut 28:2, 11-12, 13 NRSV)

Curse for those who are wicked according to the commandments: “*The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and*

⁴ Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31 (“And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was **very good**, and it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day.”)

⁵ Job 4:6; 5:16; 6:8; 7:6; 8:13; 11:18-20; 14:7, 9; 17:15; 19:10; 27:8.

⁶ Norman C. Habel. *The Book of Job. A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster 1985, 40-42.

perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish... The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind.” (Deut 28:20-23, 28 NRSV)

Now imagine Job who at the very beginning of the story (Job 1-2) is presented as a righteous person, who does what is required of him. He does not know what happens in heaven. That is not his business. He does what is prescribed and yet all the possible calamities befall him, except his life is left untouched. The disasters that Job experiences alternate between manmade and natural ones. He has every right to ask: “how come?”

Finally, the third word from Isaiah’s quote I would like to draw your attention to is the plural pronoun “they.” We see in this passage a community of runners. I think the plural form is used here on purpose to emphasize the importance of a community in overcoming challenges, losses, disasters. Kathleen M. O’Connor in her book *Wisdom Literature* titles the chapter on the Book of Job as “The Book of Job and the Collapse of the Relationship” and states: “Every relationship in his (*i.e.*, Job’s) life collapsed around him, and his personal world returns to chaos.”⁷ I think that is an illuminative perspective to look at the Book of Job – the relational one. The outburst of Job’s harsh emotions occurs after the visit of his friends who came to comfort him. What did they do? Let us have a look at the text:

*Now when Job’s three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and **bemoan** and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they **raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads.** They sat with him on the ground **seven days and seven nights**, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:11-13 NRSV)*

In this passage we note the commitment of Job’s friends to comfort him in his situation of despair. This is the only positive aspect of their act as many biblical scholars suggest. Even the silence can be perceived as a proper way to be with someone who is in pain. In fact, Job himself will acidly tell his friends that it was the only good thing they have done to him: “If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!” (Job 13:5). Other acts that friends perform such as mourning, weeping, tearing garments and throwing dust, seven days in grieving are typical elements of a burial and a mourning-week practice. The friends of Job by their acts virtually buried Job as a righteous person. This will be clear when we read the dialogues between Job and his comforters.

The imaginative funeral of Job performed by his friends’ bodily expressions, in fact, caused his emotional outburst:

⁷ Kathleen M. O’Connor. *Wisdom Literature*. Liturgical Press, 1990, 86-87.

“Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ ... ‘Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? ... Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light?’” (Job 3:3, 11-12, 16 NRSV)

In the Book of Job, we hear four views on the situation represented by three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar) and by one young man (Elihu) who later joins the conversation. Each of them uses theological concepts and principles to explain Job’s nightmare. Eliphaz: suffering is a result of human activity and divine punishment (Job 4:8-9). Bildad: God is just and cannot cause suffering, therefore Job himself is the cause of suffering, he must do a more careful review of his thoughts and deeds (Job 8:3-4, 13). Zophar: Job is guilty (Job 11:6) and there are no other options to explain his suffering. Elihu: Job’s suffering has an educational goal: “They are also chastened with pain upon their beds, and with continual strife in their bones, so that their lives loathe bread, and their appetites dainty food” (Job 33:19-20 NRSV). To be short, everyone, even though expressing it differently, states that Job is a sinner and he must repent. Suffering is understood only as a sign of punishment. As Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: “We see this psychology at work elsewhere, blaming the victim so that evil doesn’t seem quite so irrational and threatening... If the Jews had behaved differently, Hitler would not have been driven to murder them. If the young woman had not been so provocatively dressed, the man would not have assaulted her. If people worked harder, they would not be poor... This is the approach of Job’s friends, and while it may solve their problem, it does not solve Job’s, or ours.”⁸ Do you remember another example of the same kind? Jesus and his disciples meet a blind born person. They simply ask: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (John 9:2-3). Jesus tells that there can be other reasons why misfortunes happen, and this is not the way his disciples should treat the person. Jesus heals the blind man and shows him kindness and love. That is an important lesson. Not to judge and question but to show care and *caritas* to those who are in pain and distress.

Apparently, Job disagrees with his friends’ explanations and urges God to intervene. It is important to note that the biblical author shows two ways of Job’s reaction to the calamities. The first one he describes very briefly: “‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:10). Job shows reverence to God and expresses his belief that God governs everything. God is a source of everything that happens to him. The second reaction is presented in the form of Job’s emotional outburst (lamentations) and fiery-rational dialogues with the friends. In this regard, Roland E. Murphy observes: “... one could make a list of statements by Job that cancel each other out. He attacks God (Job 7:20-21; 9:22-24; 16:7-17) and he cajoles God (Job 10:4-12). His despair (9:16-18; 14:18-22) is matched by his faith (Job 13:15-16; 19:23-27).”⁹ An attentive reader will notice that Job is grieving not for his material and social losses. He is grieving for his relationship with God, for the loss of understanding God’s justice, for the loss of the genuine friendship. He feels

⁸ Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Schocken Books 1981.

⁹ Roland E. Murphy. *The Tree of Life. An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing House 2002, 40.

betrayed both by his friends – “My companions are treacherous like a torrent-bed, like freshets that pass away, that run dark with ice, turbid with melting snow” (Job 6:15-16 NRSV) and by God – “you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is no one to deliver out of your hand? Your hands fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me” (Job 10:6-8 NRSV). The process of grieving is not linear, it is more like a roller coaster. This is what the author of Job is showing to us. When calamities, misfortunes, disasters befall us and we cannot find any rational answer, besides our convictions are undermined, be honest with yourself and express what you feel. Turn all your anxieties over to God and be frank with God.

In the Epistle of James, Job is presented as a steadfast person: “you have heard of the endurance of Job” (Jas 5:11 NRSV). The Greek word ὑπομονή¹⁰ is used here to describe Job’s stance. Many translations use the term “patience” to render this Greek term and thus underline the humble character of the hero. I think it is misleading. We can hardly define Job as a patient person, but surely as a steadfast person who despite meaningless to him situation remains persistent in his search for truth. In his final discourse Job recalls the days when God watched over him (Job 29:2), when God’s lamp shined and he could walk in the darkness (Job 29:3), when God’s friendship was upon his tent (Job 29:4), when Almighty was with him (Job 29:5). These were the blessed and happy days. Furthermore, his place was assured in the community. But when God “turnes cruel” to him; “with the might of his hand persecutes him” (Job 30:21), his friends mock him, neighbors hate him and want to drive him from the community (Job 30:1, 10), he feels lonely and isolated and yet does not give up. He calls upon God.

In chapter 38 God finally answers Job, but how? By asking questions about the creation of the universe, about the laws of nature, about the life of wild animals, and at the end about Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (41:1-34). These questions have theological implications: 1) the world is more complex and vast than Job knows; 2) the world is orderly created and good in its nature; 3) there are some chaotic elements that are permitted to exist but they do not undermine the created order.¹¹ Behemoth (hippopotamus) and Leviathan (crocodile) represent a temporary evil that is allowed to exist. They embody a threat to the harmony and to the order of the created world. Hence, God asks Job if he can control these powers.

Behemoth: “*Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you;... only its Maker can approach it with the sword... Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened; it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth. Can one take it with hooks or pierce its nose with a snare?*” (Job 40:15, 19, 23-24 NRSV).

¹⁰ This noun derives from the same root verb that means “remain or stay behind while others go away,” “remain instead of fleeing,” “stand one’s ground,” “endure in trouble, affliction”. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition [Walter Bauer, Gingrich, F. Wilbur, William F. Arndt, Frederick W. Danker]. The University Of Chicago Press 1979, 845.

¹¹ Eric N. Ortlund. “The Identity of Leviathan and the Meaning of the Book of Job”, *Trinity Journal* 34 (2013) 24

Leviathan: “*Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord?... Will you play with it as with a bird, or will you put it on leash for your girls?*” (Job 41:1, 5 NRSV).

These questions suggest the author’s acknowledgment of human limits either on the level of power/control or on the level of comprehension. In fact, the notion of human limits to have a comprehensive understanding and ability to explain everything are described in a poem about Wisdom in Job 28. This chapter is a later addition to the book. Perhaps it represents yet another attempt to provide more arguments how to react to unjust suffering and to cope with uncertainty. This poem is structured around one question “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” (Job 28:12, 20). The author of the poem admires humans for their ability to discover things, to be able to get into places where even wild animals cannot get to and, at the same time, humans cannot find wisdom. They search for her, but she is beyond their comprehension. It is only God at the moment of creation who “saw her and declared her; established her, and searched her out” (Job 28:27). In other words, Wisdom is God’s privilege, she is embedded in creation, but creatures cannot grasp her. Humans had to admit the limits of reason on a large scale (how much, for instance, we do not know yet about other galaxies, or even the planets in our solar system) and the limits on a smaller scale (6 months have passed since SARS-CoV-2 has spread around the world, but how much we do not know yet about it; neither substantial drugs have been developed nor vaccine to combat the virus). And yet humanity does not give up: we explore the universe and we continue to combat the virus by doing research.

When finally, God speaks to Job he does not provide any reason for Job’s cause, but Job is relieved. Why? Because he has experienced God. He had a moment of meeting the Divine. Job did not need any explanations anymore:

Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ 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 42:3-6)

Although Job was very harsh in his laments against God, he was justified, not his comforters. The friends were sure they know the law and can talk on behalf of God. But they were wrong. Their “pastoral counselling” and theological discourse fail. The Book of Job teaches us to think out of the box and not to be legalistic when we treat someone. We should abandon harsh legalism because we can easily fall into a superiority complex by creating an image of God that fits our perceptions. As a matter of fact, most probably Job needed just to have his community and friends being compassionate. God answers our cry by making people come to us. We must reach and show people that we care. It is very important. Usually when something bad happens to us we think that we are guilty. We feel rejected. That is important to show up. Say I am sorry and hold the hand and listen. We help more by listening than by explaining. “Why me? Why this is happening to me?” that is not a question. It is a cry of pain. You will help not by

answering but by easing the pain. Job did not get an explanation, but consolation. Not try to make a sense, but simply be there.

One more time I would like to go back to the Creation stories in Genesis. It is not a VIP status that we are given as an image of God as it may seem: “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5 NRSV). We ought to be responsible for the created world. In fact, in Gen 2, a second Creation story, more ancient than that in Gen 1, we learn about the task *adam* – a human being is given to do: “The LORD God took the *human* and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15 NRSV). The phrase “to till it and keep it” literally from Hebrew means “to serve it and guard it”. In other words, the mission of humans is not simply to cultivate the earth and have profits from it, but to be responsible for it. The ecological mindset is already present in this ancient story. The pandemic lockdown has shown how nature needed a rest, a reload because of pseudo-rational¹² decisions humans make. Now I would like to give you an example that connect two themes: unjust suffering and humans’ responsibility for the creation. Martin Gray, a Holocaust survivor, after all World War II calamities he had experienced, managed to rebuild his life. He was happily married and lived with his wife and children in the south of France. This happiness was interrupted by a forest fire in which he lost his entire family. What a tragedy. He had people to urge him to inquire who is responsible for this disaster, but he refused to do so. Instead, he dedicated his life to prevent this kind of disasters.¹³ To sum up, instead of unanswerable questions we might ask ourselves: “Now as it has happened, what are going to do about it?”¹⁴ Let us not concentrate on the past but let us look to the future as humanity.

To conclude, what are biblical insights to deal with the Covid-19 situation? I would summarize them in the following list:

Keep running, do not give up, be aware that this one is a long marathon

Be honest with yourself, accept limits

If you do not find a meaning, try to impose the meaning on what seems senseless

Build a community of caring people

Trust God and do not be afraid of expressing fears, disagreements, pain

Be sure God will provide you with strength to overcome calamities

¹² Read irrational, it is rather the desire to have more than is necessary.

¹³ Martin Grey. *For Those I Loved*. Hampton Roads Publishing 2006.

¹⁴ Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Schocken Books 1981.