

# THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY IN PSALMS

RAYMOND APPLE

After the customary Grace After Meals comes a series of scriptural verses about the bounty of the Creator. The choice of verses – mostly from the Book of Psalms - varies from one tradition to another, but all versions indicate a serious theological problem. They claim that no believer is abandoned and his descendants need not beg for bread. As Aḥad HaAm puts it, “*Thou art righteous, O Lord* – this the Prophet cannot doubt, although his eyes tell him that *the way of the wicked prospereth* (Jer. 12:1).”<sup>1</sup>

The Psalm verses added to the Grace include two particularly difficult phrases. The first is Psalms 34:11, which contrasts young lions (*k’firim*) with believers: the former feel hunger, the latter do not. Why mention young lions? The second verse is Psalms 37:25, which says that the author once was young but now is old and has never seen righteous people abandoned and their children hungry. Both provocative phrases need comment, not only to enable us to try and read the Psalmist’s mind, but to know how a modern person should respond when he confronts these phrases in his Grace After Meals.

The claim that the righteous do not go hungry is made throughout the conventional Ashkenazi selection of verses (Ps. 34:10, Ps. 34:11, Ps. 118:1/136:1, Ps. 146:15, Jer. 17:7, Ps. 37:25 and Ps. 29:11). The final verse speaks of God giving His people *shalom*, a comprehensive blessing which must include freedom from hunger (Mishnah *Uk’tzin* 3:12). The Sephardi selection of verses (in most rites, Ps. 34:11, Ps. 37:25, Ps. 37:36, II Kgs. 4:44, Ps. 115:15, Jer. 17:7, Ps. 29:11, plus a line based on Job 25:2) does not spell out the claim so unequivocally, but it can easily be deduced homiletically. The Psalmist himself must know that, despite his pious assertions, good people can be short of food, and being a believer is no protection from hunger or other forms of deprivation.

One key word punctuates the main body of the Grace as well as the added verses: a verb from the root *h-s-r* to diminish or lack. The first blessing of the Grace asserts that through God’s great goodness, food *has not failed us and*

*will not fail us.* The point is reinforced a little later in a prayer concluding with the request that *we may never suffer any lack.* In both Ashkenazi and Sephardi versions, the added verses include Psalms 34:10-11: *Fear the Lord, you His consecrated ones, for those who fear Him lack nothing [ein mah'sor]; lions have been reduced to starvation, but those who turn to the Lord shall not lack any good [lo yah'seru kol tov].* A bold climax comes in a further verse, *I have been young and now am old, but have yet to see (lo ra'iti, literally, I have never seen) a righteous man abandoned or his children seeking bread* (Ps. 37:25).

Is it true that belief and faith protect a person from want? Not only the Book of Job but the record of many other biblical and post-biblical figures argue otherwise. Affliction and hunger can come upon the greatest paragons and escape the worst villains. From the time of the Talmudic sages – no, indeed much earlier – thinkers have observed that things are sometimes fair and sometimes not. Life can go both ways, without any apparent logic, though the sages earnestly searched for the logic and Rabbi Yannai had to conclude that the explanation “is not in our hands”; only God knows the answer, and no human being can predict how things will turn out for a given *tzaddik* or *rasha* (Mishnah Avot 4:19).

TB *Berakhot* 7a notes that in life there are both righteous and wicked people who prosper and who suffer. The biggest problem is *tzaddik v'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo*, “the righteous person who suffers evil, the wicked person who enjoys good”. The way Job puts it is, *Why do the wicked live on, prosper and grow wealthy?* (21:7). The Book of Psalms occasionally raises the question of theodicy (e.g. Psalms 49 and 73). None of the traditional thinkers would contemplate the possibility that it is all random and that God is capricious: man says to God, *Righteousness and justice are the base of Your throne* (Ps. 89:15).<sup>2</sup>

An exegetical possibility is to focus on the word *abandoned* in Psalms 37:25, *I have yet to see a righteous man abandoned*, and to say that a righteous person tends to have the attitude that, with God on his side, he does not really feel let down or abandoned, even when events seem to go horribly wrong. *I will be with him in distress* (Ps. 91:15). Reward and punishment are irrelevant in his scheme of things. Objectively, he may be deprived of food or

another material comfort: subjectively, he does not feel the disadvantage. Maybe he does not even notice it. If he does, he is not bowled over; he does not complain; he believes God knows best; he possibly says, “These are *yis-surim shel ahavah* – the chastenings of (Divine) love” (TB *Berakhot*. 5a, based on Prov. 3:12: *Whom the Lord loves, He rebukes*). It is the righteous, according to the Midrash, whom God tries with suffering, just as a potter tests the apparently wholesome pieces of pottery but not the cracked ones (Shir HaShirim Rabbah on 2:16).

Another approach is that though we may not realize it now, the suffering is really for the best. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I suffer no want. I do not miss what I do not have. I do not feel its lack, since it is God, my shepherd, Who has seen fit to withhold it from me. He shows me His love by denying me that which I desire but which, were I to have it, would cause me harm”.<sup>3</sup>

On Psalms 37:25, Hirsch adds that the suffering may have time limits. Eventually “the Lord will send him help, either directly or in the form of aid by people who do no more than their rightful duty when they offer him help”.<sup>4</sup> It is common in Jewish thinking to say that in God’s good time all will be well (Psalm 92): the problem is not God’s nature but His timetable (*How long, O Lord?* – Psalms 94:3).

The “suffering servants” have the ability to transform and rise above their situation. The righteous do not feel deprived. They believe they are the ones to whom the Torah refers when it says, *When you have eaten your fill* (literally, *you shall eat and be satisfied*), *give thanks to the Lord your God* (Deut. 8:10). For them there is no point in Arnold J. Wolf’s question, “If the righteous suffer, why be righteous?”<sup>5</sup> For them, righteousness is its own reward, worth more than all the good and silver in the world (Ps. 19:11). Suffering is no more than an illusion. Although in Psalms it is the onlooker who notes that the righteous does not lack for anything, and it has to be the righteous man himself who insists that he lacks nothing, here the onlooker is teaching the reader what the attitude of the righteous is regarding their travails.

#### THE K’FIRIM (PSALMS 34:11)

In order to have an alphabetical acrostic, the psalmist needed a verse that began with *kaf*; presumably he considered other options. The verse as it

stands continues the theme of the previous (*yod*) verse, *Fear the Lord, you His consecrated ones, for those who fear Him lack nothing*. There is a contrast: while *k'firim* can go hungry, those who seek God don't. Maybe the word *k'firim* literally means young lions, who are certainly strong and agile, but don't always secure their prey.<sup>6</sup> Pious people, in contrast, who are able to make do with very little, accept their privations out of love for God.

Additionally, there is a metaphoric meaning. Since the root *k-f-r* has a range of meanings, including to deny or disbelieve, *k'firim* can be understood to connote *kof'rim*, unbelievers. The *rasha* in the Passover Haggadah, for example, is a *kofer ba'ikkar*, a denier of a basic principle. *K'firah* is heresy, as against the piety of the person who seeks God. Ibn Ezra knows this view of *k'firim*, though he rejects it. Modern translators who accept it include Gordis and Hammer.<sup>7</sup>

The Septuagint renders the word as “wealthy men”,<sup>8</sup> possibly a metaphor for wickedness. People who chase after power and possessions are unlikely to be humble and devout enough to seek God. The advantage of this reading is that it contrasts man with man, not man with beast. In another metaphorical possibility, maybe the young lions symbolize the brute force of rough bullies who intimidate their more pious brethren. David Kimḥi thinks that David wrote this psalm after roaming amongst Philistines who failed to scare him because God was with him. Psalm 34 notes in verse 20, *Though the misfortunes of the righteous be many, the Lord will save him from them all*.

#### CONCLUSION

The idea that believers do not go hungry is so clearly out of accord with general human experience that some interpretation is necessary. The most practical approach may be the exegetical understanding which suggests that though believers might suffer deprivation they don't really feel it. They rise above their problems and deny that they have anything to complain about.

#### NOTES

1. L.Simon (ed.) *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha-'Am* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962) p. 133.

2. The Book of Job revolves around the issue. Because Satan traduces the pious and virtuous Job, the latter loses everything. He realizes that he is not perfect (6:2), but he is unwilling to judge his defects as sufficient to warrant the disasters that befall him. In his extreme agony, he says it

might have better all round if he had never been born (Chapter 3), but he will not accept his friend's question, *What innocent man ever perished?* (4:7). He feels terrible (7:11); he thinks God has wronged him (19:6); but he refuses to give up his piety despite his anger at God (Chapter 27). The most he will do is to demand from God to know what He has against him (10:2), though God is not forthcoming (Chapter 23; 30:20). Eventually God comes out of the whirlwind and trenchantly rebukes Job, who finally admits that God is the one who is wise and just (42:5-6) and is subsequently rehabilitated by God with even more prosperity than he had at the beginning (42:10).

3. *The Hirsch Psalms*, G. Hirschler, trans. (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1978) p. 170.

4. *Loc. cit.*, p. 277.

5. A. J. Wolf, *What is Man?* (USA: B'nai B'rith, 1962) p. 6.

6. J.J.M. Roberts, "The Young Lions of Psalm 34:11", in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eerdmans, 2002) pp. 262-5.

7. R. Gordis, "Studies in the Relationship of Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew", in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (NY: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945) p. 180; R. Hammer, *Or Chadash: A commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2008) p. 236.

8. *Plousioi*, possibly indicating a Hebrew text *k'vedim*.



Full text of articles from Volumes 1 - 44 is available for download on our website:

<http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/>

