

Consolation and challenge

Signs of the Holy One

Waldemar Janzen

It was in the spring of 1952, and I was sitting in my mother's and my apartment in Waterloo, Ontario. I was preparing for the final examinations at the end of my first year as a student of Waterloo College (now Wilfrid Laurier University). These exams would be worth 80 percent of my final grades in five courses. Having immigrated to Canada only four years earlier and struggled with the language, I was not confident. Then, in my sporadic Bible reading, I stumbled onto the words of Acts 18:9–11:

One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

These words spoke to me. *The Bible teaches us to be brave*, I thought. *I will also be brave and not fear while preparing and writing my exams.* I did so, and I passed with fairly good grades, except for a D in English. Professor Clark had graciously given this immigrant a pass rather than an F. I thanked God and proceeded in my studies.

Simplistic interpretation of the Bible? Yes. Naive? Yes. But was I wrong? We will return to this question.

Interpretation

The Old Testament formula *Do not be afraid!* in Hebrew consists of two words: *Al tira* (fear not). It occurs forty-four times across many books in the Old Testament and is always translated in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as *Do not be afraid!* Other English Old Testament versions render it as *Fear not!* or similar phrases. The widespread appearance of the formula might suggest that the Old Testament strongly encourages its readers to be fearless and brave, but that would be a serious misunderstanding. The word "fear" (including in our formula) occurs 281 times in the NRSV Old Testament. Many persons in ancient Israel express fear of

all kinds of danger without being admonished not to be afraid. We need only to think of Job and the lament psalms—texts that are full of outcries of fear in all kinds of situations without being encouraged by our formula.

Fear, like pain, was a ubiquitous experience in biblical Israel, just as it is today. Although always unwanted, fear and pain are there at least in part to protect us. Without fear or pain we would not avoid or try to protect ourselves from many dangers. Indeed, there are many admonitions in the

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Old Testament *to fear*—and especially to fear God. These passages, however, refer less to ordinary fear of dangers than to awe, reverence, obedience, and devotion due to God. To be God-fearing is almost equivalent to being a believer and a follower of God, a God who must always be approached in a way that combines respect and devotion as well as a sense of mystery. And yet, this God who is to be

“feared” is at the same time the most frequent subject or speaker of our formula *Do not be afraid!* Let us sample some situations in which God tells someone not to be afraid.

(1) The formula *Do not be afraid!* first occurs in Genesis 15:1. Abraham has been asked by God to leave his homeland for a land that God will give to him and his many descendants so that they might become a blessing to all nations. He and Sarah, however, are old and childless. He despairs of God’s promise. God, however, assures Abraham in a vision, “Do not be afraid!” and reaffirms the promise.

(2) At the behest of Sarah, Abraham sends his Egyptian concubine Hagar, with her young son Ishmael, out into the wilderness. Her provisions and water soon run out. We read in Genesis 21:16–19:

Then she went and sat down opposite [her young son] a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw

a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

(3) The Israelites, having escaped from Egypt, found themselves between the pursuing Egyptian army and the sea. They cried out to Moses, and he replied, “*Do not be afraid*, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again” (Exod. 14:13).

(4) During the conquest of the land of Canaan, the Lord tells Israel’s commander Joshua, “*Do not be afraid* of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel” (Josh. 11:6).

(5) Ruth, a Moabite, faithfully accompanied her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, to Judah after a great famine there was over. She had to support herself and Naomi by gleaning after the reapers in the fields that were being harvested. The owner of the fields, Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi’s family, took note of her. When he found out her identity, he said to her, “And now, my daughter, *do not be afraid*, I will do for you all you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11). Eventually Boaz, as the nearest willing male relative to Naomi, followed the law and married Ruth. Thus a refugee from abroad was treated fairly and given a place in society.

(6) Our last sample, Jeremiah’s call, is told in Jeremiah 1:4–8:

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how
to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me,
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”*

Jeremiah faithfully followed his call as God’s prophet for the next four decades, in spite of much opposition, hostility, and persecution.

On the basis of these six Old Testament stories, we can make some observations with respect to central features and contexts that throw light on the meaning of the formula *Do not be afraid!*

First, in all six samples, the encouraging message comes from God. In samples (1), (2), (4), and (6), this is explicitly stated. In (3) and (5), it is implied.

Second, this message is conveyed in various ways: in a vision (1); by an angel of God, or heavenly messenger (2); through Moses, at God's direction (3); directly from God (4), (6); and by Boaz, motivated by observing the law of God (5).

Third, the recipients of the encouraging formula vary greatly: Abraham, the chosen ancestor of Israel (1); an Egyptian concubine (2) the Israelites fleeing Egypt (3); the leader of Israel and successor to Moses (4); a young Moabite widow and immigrant (5); and a young boy in Judah (6).

Fourth, the address serves different objectives: to strengthen Abraham's confidence in God's long-term plans (1); to keep Hagar from despairing of worry for her child, Ishmael (2); to call Israel to trust in God's redemption from Egypt rather than to capitulate in despair (3); to strengthen Joshua's and Israel's courage to fight for the Promised Land (4); to assure the widow and refugee Ruth of acceptance and security (5); to strengthen Jeremiah, the young boy, for his long prophetic ministry (6).

Finally, in all of these examples our formula not only exhorts the person addressed to rally his or her hope, courage, and stamina; it also somehow instills these. It is a formula that has power.

Transcendence and epistemology

That it is God, or someone speaking for God (an angel, Moses, Boaz), who addresses a person or a group with the consoling but also empowering words *Do not be afraid!* underscores the Old Testament understanding that this message comes from a *transcendent* source. Unlike the gods of Israel's neighbours, who were generally personified powers of nature (sun god, storm god, god of rivers and seas, fertility goddess, etc.), the God of Israel was understood, with increasing conviction, to be transcendent—that is, from beyond our world. To worship anyone or anything within the universe was considered idolatry.¹ Humans can “influence” this God only

1 Cf. Waldemar Janzen, “The first commandment of the Decalogue and the battle against idolatry in the Old Testament,” *Vision* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 15–24.

in one way: prayer. God, however, can send a divine message to humans in countless ways. Collectively, we call such communication *revelation*.

Like the Old Testament, the Christian faith thus involves us in questions of *epistemology*—the pursuit of knowledge. How can we know when and in what manner God speaks to us? My brief formulation of an answer is this: When something ordinary overcomes me with the conviction that it is given *to me* as assurance or guidance in a particular situation, I may recognize it immediately or later as having sign character. If many people receive similar signs, we call it “revelation.”² Here are some personal examples:

1. Above I told how a word of God to Paul encouraged me to study confidently for my exams. Had I failed those, I would probably have given up academic pursuits, and my life would have taken a different turn.

2. Each of our six sample texts shows God (or God’s agents) addressing persons in need, in danger, or of diffident spirit. When I think of encouraging and empowering signs in my life, my thoughts first turn to my early years under Soviet oppression, of World War II, and of narrow escapes from the grip of Soviet forces and subsequent banishment to a Siberian labour camp. Here I will recall one such experience. Mother and I made a daring attempt to escape from the Soviet-occupied Zone of Germany. We failed and only narrowly escaped our captors. We took various trains and ended up at night, exhausted and despairing, on a dirty platform in the main station of the city of Magdeburg. I was in the depth of hopelessness. As we sat there, Mother felt a paper in her coat pocket. It had been pushed there, just before we set out, by Frau Schepler, a younger woman who was a neighbour to our refugee home, to which we now had to return. Mother read it to herself and then to me. Our friend wrote that if our escape attempt should fail, we should come back and she would try her best to help us. Mother regained some courage, as did I. Frau Schepler kept her promise, devising an ingenious way for us to escape some months later. Was her letter a message from God? Was she an angel (“messenger”) sent by God? There can be no empirically demonstrable confirmation, nor should one attempt a rational explanation. Some events simply acquire sign character.

2 The biblical use of “sign” (Heb. *’oth*; Greek: *semeion*) has long been central in my understanding of “revelation”; see Waldemar Janzen, “Sign and Belief,” in *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 15–28 (essay first published in 1972). Although the article requires updating, it still conveys my basic position regarding its main claims.

The question of God and evil

Our findings so far may raise the question: Why does God need to encourage and empower the persons addressed with *Do not be afraid!* in order to cope with difficult situations? Why does God not avert or modify those situations? Such thoughts eventually lead to the further question: Why does a loving God allow, or even bring about, situations perceived by us as evil?

In my view, such disturbing or offensive aspects of *both* Testaments, such as violence, suffering, sickness, and ultimately mortality, lie at a deeper level than is accessible to human reason and exploration. That deeper level is God's transcendence. God's ways cannot be researched and analysed by the human mind; they can only be revealed to us by signs. Rabbi Harold Kushner attempted to resolve the problematic paradox of

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a world where “bad things happen to good people” despite our faith in a God who is both all-loving and omnipotent. Kushner concluded that God, although always loving, is limited in the full exercise of this love by autonomous laws of nature, by human freedom of choice, and possibly by an evolutionary dimension in God himself.³

Such attempts to resolve this overwhelming and daring paradox, although appealing at first glance, remain superficial and inadequate. The fallacy in Kushner's approach is the assumption that,

given our advanced understanding of the universe, all the evidence to reach a conclusion on the question of God in relation to love and evil “is in” and that the human mind has the capacity to process such data adequately and reach a satisfactory intellectual understanding of what otherwise would stay a paradox: the affirmation of an all-loving and all-powerful God and the existence of what we experience as evil.

The Church throughout the centuries has instead (correctly, I believe) held fast to what can only be formulated as a true paradox—namely, that the Holy One is both supremely powerful and supremely loving, and yet

3 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981).

evil persists in the world.⁴ Indeed, the biblical meta-story in both Old and New Testament reveals God's presence and acting within a cosmos where—to our necessarily limited mental grasp—good and evil seem inextricably intertwined. Only through sign-events, climaxing in Jesus as the supreme sign, can we become convinced that God's *ultimate* goal is our and the world's redemption and eternal life, as proleptically revealed to us in the resurrection of Jesus.

Further, if we could dissociate the character of the biblical God from war and violence by way of some rational explanation, as Kushner and others have tried to do, would we then not be forced to regard such a God as irrelevant to our experience of the real world? Alternatively, if we can see the life-giving and sustaining work of God shine through the darkness in the ancient biblical world, then we can gain hope for ourselves and others in the world in which we live.

Conclusion

Let me come full circle. In my childhood in the Soviet Union and the subsequent war and refugee years, an “awareness of the holy”—as I call it in retrospect—grew in me, was given shape by the biblical story, and was confirmed by (often veiled) sign experiences as the reality that transcended everyday life. It was not an easy and unproblematic reality, but one to struggle with, as Jacob at the Jabbok did (Gen. 32:22–32), sometimes leaving me injured, but in the end, also blessed.

About the author

Waldemar Janzen was born in Ukraine in 1932, experienced Soviet persecution, World War II, refugee life in Germany, and immigrant adjustment to Canada. After a long teaching career, he has been retired for some time as professor (emeritus) of Old Testament at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He and his wife, Mary, are members of the First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, where he is also an ordained minister (now retired). Among his many writings is the Believers Church Bible Commentary *Exodus*.

4 To try to dissociate God from evil in the world by reference to Satan or to God's permissive will is of little help here, for one can ask immediately: Why does an all-powerful God tolerate a cosmic power of evil, Satan? Or why does a good God permit evil (of whatever source or kind) to happen? Using such language serves a certain positive purpose, however: It expresses our (appropriate) reticence to attribute evil too boldly to God, and thereby it helps to safeguard the paradox mentioned above.