



The Certainty of Uncertainty

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Dr. Cooper's publications include a monograph on Canaanite divine names that appear in the Hebrew Bible, and many articles on biblical poetics and the history of interpretation. Recent articles include "Once Again Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk" (in *JSIJ* [*Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal*]); "Some Aspects of Traditional Jewish Psalms Interpretation" (in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*); and "Introduction to Leviticus" (in *Engaging Torah: Modern Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible*). His work in progress includes a commentary on Psalms 31 through 60 for the Jewish Publication Society.

1. Lamentations 3:25-29

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| <p>[≈JPS:] The LORD is good to those who trust in Him, To the one who seeks Him; It is good to wait patiently Till rescue comes from the LORD. It is good for a man, To bear a yoke when young; Let him sit alone and be patient, When He has laid it upon him. Let him put his mouth to the dust— There may yet be hope.</p> | <p>(כה) טוב ה' לקוֹן לְנַפֵּשׁ תִּדְרָשׁנוּ: (כו) טוב וַיִּחַיֵּל וְדוּמָם לְתַשׁוּעַת ה': (כז) טוב לְגֶבֶר כִּי יִשָּׂא עַל בְּנֵעוּרָיו: (כח) יֵשֵׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדַּם כִּי נִטַּל עָלָיו: (כט) יִתֵּן בְּעַפְרָ פִּיהוּ אֲוֵלֵי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה:</p> |
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2. As punishment for King David's adulterous union with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan announces that the first offspring of their relationship will die: (2 Samuel 12:14):

אָפֶס כִּי־נֵאֵץ נֶאֱצַתְּ אֶת־אֵיבֵי ה' בְּדַבַּר הַזֶּה גַּם הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוד לְךָ מוֹת יָמוּת:
 However, since you have spurned the enemies of the LORD¹ by this deed, even the child about to be born to you shall die.

Despite the dire prophecy, when the child is born and becomes critically ill, David fasts and prays for the infant's life (v. 16). As soon as the baby dies, however, David ceases his petitioning and almost immediately resumes his normal activities. When his servants ask him to explain his behavior, he says (vv. 22-23):

¹ According to Rashi and Redak, "enemies of the Lord" is a circumlocution for "the Lord," although other commentators try to make sense of the text as it stands.



בְּעוֹד הַיֶּלֶד חַי צָמַתִּי וְאָבַכְּהָ כִּי אֶמְרֹתִי מִי יוֹדֵעַ וְתַנְנִי ה' וְחַי הַיֶּלֶד: וְעַתָּה
 | מֵת לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי צָם הָאוֹכֵל לְהַשִּׁיבּוֹ עוֹד אֲנִי הַלֵּךְ אֵלָיו וְהוּא לֹא־יָשׁוּב
 אֵלָי:

“While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought:
 ‘Who knows? The LORD may have pity on me, and the child may live.’
 But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back
 again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me.”

3. In his commentary on 2 Samuel 21:21, Levi Ben Gershon [Rabag, Gersonides] (France; 1288-1344) uses the allusion to Goliath’s disparagement of Israel (vv. 20-21; cf. 1 Samuel 17) as an occasion to enumerate 68(!) lessons (תועלויות) that may be derived from the stories about David.

המ"ד הוא להודיע שאע"פ שגזר הש"י להביא רע מה שאין ראוי לאדם מלהמנע להתפלל לו להעביר הרעה היא כי חנון ה' ונחם על הרעה ולזה תמצא שאע"פ שיעד הש"י לדוד על יד נביאו כי מות ימות הילד ההוא הנה לא נמנע דוד מלהתפלל עליו ומלצום צום והיה שוכב ארצה לרוב ההכנע לפני השם ית' אולי יחננו ה' ויחי הילד ומזה המקום למדנו שמה שאמרה התורה וכי תבאו מלחמה בארצכם על הצר הצורר אתכם והרעותם בחצוצרות ונזכרתם וגו' הנה הרצון בו עם התפלה והתענית כמו שבארנו בביאורנו לדברי התורה.

#44 is to teach how even though God has decreed to bring about evil, it is unfitting for a person to refrain from praying for God to remove that evil because He is gracious and renouncing punishment. In this respect, even though God had fated for David by means of His prophet that the child surely would die, David did not refrain from praying, fasting, and lying on the ground, greatly abasing himself



before God. **Maybe** God would be gracious to him and let the child live. From this we learn that when it says in the Torah, “When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered [before the LORD your God and be delivered from your enemies]” (Numbers 10:9), it means by way of prayer and fasting, as we explained in our Torah commentary.

[There is no explicit mention of prayer and fasting in Numbers 10:9. According to Ralbag, however, the sound of the trumpets is intended to inspire acts of penitence that evoke God’s mercy, וירחמם בהתפללם, “and God will have mercy on them for their praying to Him because it is the prayer along with the trumpet blast that occasions their being remembered.”]

המ"ה הוא במצות והוא להודיע שאין ראוי לצום ולהתפלל על הצרה אחר שכבר הגיעה כי אין ראוי להתפלל על דבר הנמנע לאלהים אם לא היה המתפלל נביא והיה שואל זה על דרך המופת ולזה אמר דוד למה זה אני צם האוכל להשיבו וגו' וכבר בארנו זה בביאור התורה ממה שאמר על הצר הצורך ולא שכבר צר.

#45 has to do with the commandments: it teaches that it is unfitting to fast and pray about a hardship that already has come to pass. It is unfitting to pray for something that is impossible for God except if it were a prophet praying and petitioning for a miracle. For this reason David said, “But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?” We also explained this in the Torah commentary from the fact that it says “an aggressor who *attacks* [is attacking/is about to attack] you,” not one who *has attacked* already.



4. In Esther 4:11, Esther expresses her fear that she will be executed if she enters the king’s presence unsummoned. Mordecai remonstrates with her (4:13-17):

וַיֹּאמֶר מְרַדְכָּי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־תְּדַמֶּי בְּנַפְשְׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ
מִכָּל־הַיְהוּדִים: כִּי אִם־הִחַרְשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רִיחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד
לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תֹאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵעַת כָּזֹאת
הִגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־מְרַדְכָּי: לֹדְ כְּנוֹס
אֶת־כָּל־הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאֶל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל־תִּשְׁתּוּ
שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם גַּם־אֲנִי וְנִעַרְתִּי אֲצוּם בָּן וּבָכָן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כֹדֶת וְכֹאשֶׁר אֲבִדְתִּי אֲבִדְתִּי: וַיַּעֲבֵר מְרַדְכָּי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל
אֲשֶׁר־צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר:

The religious message that may be implicit in the Hebrew is spelled out in one of the Greek versions of Esther:

| <u>Hebrew:</u> | <u>Greek Alpha-text:</u> |
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| <p>¹³Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. ¹⁴On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have</p> | <p>⁹⁽¹³⁾So Mardochoaios sent to her and said to her,</p> <p>⁽¹⁴⁾“If you ignore your nation and do not help them, <u>then surely God will be to them a helper and deliverance</u>, but you and your father’s household will perish.</p> <p>¹⁰And who knows if for this time you were made queen?”</p> |



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| <p>attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” ¹⁵Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai:</p> <p>¹⁶“Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!” ¹⁷So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.</p> | <p>¹¹⁽¹⁵⁾Then the queen sent saying,</p> <p>⁽¹⁶⁾“<u>Proclaim a religious service, and petition God earnestly</u>, and I and my girls will do likewise.</p> <p>And I will go to the king uninvited, even if it be necessary that I die.”</p> <p>¹²⁽¹⁷⁾And Mardochoaios did so.</p> |
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5. Jeremiah 18:5-10 contains an essential statement about the equivocal character of divine judgement:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: הֲכִיּוֹצֵר הַזֶּה לֹא־אוֹכֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת לְכֶם בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם־ה'
הִנֵּה כַחֲמֹל בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר כִּן־אַתֶּם בְּיַדִּי בַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל: רַגַע אֲדַבֵּר עַל־גּוֹי וְעַל־מַמְלָכָה
לְנַתּוֹשׁ וְלְנַתּוֹץ וְלְהַאֲבִיד: וְשָׁב הַגּוֹי הַהוּא מִרְעַתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי עָלָיו וְנַחֲמֹתִי
עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁבְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ: וְרַגַע אֲדַבֵּר עַל־גּוֹי וְעַל־מַמְלָכָה לְבָנֹת וְלְנֹטֶע:
וְעָשָׂה הָרַע בְּעֵינַי לְבַלְתִּי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְנַחֲמֹתִי עַל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְהִיטִיב
אוֹתוֹ:



Then the word of the LORD came to me: O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?—says the LORD. Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel! At one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed; but if that nation against which I made the decree turns back from its wickedness, I change My mind concerning the punishment I planned to bring on it. At another moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be built and planted; but if it does what is displeasing to Me and does not obey Me, then I change My mind concerning the good I planned to bestow upon it.

6. In Joel 2:1-11, the prophet depicts the advent of the Day of the Lord, when as punishment for sin the Divine Warrior and His troops will turn the land from a veritable Garden of Eden into a desolate waste (v. 3). But then the prophet declares (vv. 12-14),

וְגַם־עַתָּה נֹאמֶ־ה' שָׁבוּ עָדֵי בְּכֹל־לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְצֹמִים וּבְבִכּוּי וּבְמִסְפָּד: וְקִרְעוּ
 לְבַבְכֶם וְאַל־בְּגְדֵיכֶם וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כִּי־חַנוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֲרֹךְ אַפַּיִם
 וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה: מִי יוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנִחָם וְהִשְׁאִיר אַחֲרָיו בְּרָכָה
 מִנְחָה וְנִסְדָּךְ לֵה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

“Yet even now”—says the LORD— “Turn back to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.” Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment. **Who knows** but He may turn



and relent, and leave a blessing behind for meal offering and drink offering to the LORD your God?

[In the following verse (2:15), the prophet calls upon Israel to “Blow a horn (*shofar*) in Zion, solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly” in order to plead for divine compassion, which is granted in the form of an oracle of salvation (vv. 18-27).]

7. In Jonah 3:4-10, the uncertainty inherent in what sounds like an unequivocal oracle of judgement motivates the Ninevites to act. They seem to be acting out the scenario depicted in Joel 2:

וַיַּחַל יוֹנָה לָבוֹא בְעִיר מֵהַלָּךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבַּעַיִם יוֹם
וַיִּנְוֶה נְהַפְכֶת: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִיְנוּה בְּאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ-צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים
מִגְדוּלָם וְעַד-קִטְנָם: וַיִּגַע הַדָּבָר אֶל-מֶלֶךְ נִיְנוּה וַיִּקָּם מִכִּסְאוֹ וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶדְרֵתוֹ
מֵעֲלָיו וַיִּבֶס שֵׁק וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-הָאָפֶר: וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִיְנוּה מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וַגְדִּלְיוֹ
לֵאמֹר הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבְּקָר וְהַצֹּאן אֶל-יִטְעֲמוּ מֵאוֹמָה אֶל-יִרְעוּ וּמִים
אֶל-יִשְׁתּוּ: וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהִים בַּחֲזָקָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ
אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הִרְעָה וּמִן-הַחֶמֶס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם: מִיִּיּוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וּנְחָם
הָאֱלֹהִים וְשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ וְלֹא נֶאֱבַד: וַיִּרְא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי-שָׁבוּ
מִדַּרְכֵּם הִרְעָה וַיִּנְחָם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל-הִרְעָה אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת-לָהֶם וְלֹא
עָשָׂה:

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day’s walk, and proclaimed: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a



fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: “By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. **Who knows** but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish.” God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.

8. In Jonah 4:1-3, the prophet is profoundly disturbed by what is tantamount to the falsification of his oracle. **Jonah’s *certainty* about the outcome had motivated him to flee from his prophetic mission, in contrast to the Ninevites’ whose *uncertainty* motivated their repentance:**

וַיֵּרַע אֶל־יֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיַּחַר לוֹ: וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה ה' הֲלוֹא־אָנֹכִי
 דְבָרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתֵי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרַח תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי
 אַתָּה אֶל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אַרְךָ אַפִּים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה: וְעַתָּה ה'
 קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי:

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the LORD, saying, “O LORD! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I



know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, LORD, take my life, for I would rather die than live.”

→ Trust ≠ Certainty

9. Abraham Maimonides (Maimuni; son of Rambam); Egypt (1186-1237), *Kitāb Kifāyah al- 'Ābidīn* (“Sufficient Guide for Servants of God”), on *tawakkul=biṭṭaḥon* (“trust”) [adapted from trans. Samuel Rosenblatt]

Trust in God is among the elevated paths, one of the fundamental principles of the Law. None of the adherents of the Law would deny its obligatory character.... The essence of faith consists in the belief that God is the creator and provider, the one who gives life and brings death, makes sick and heals, makes rich and poor. Everything that happens in the world, in general and in particular, reverts to God. God is the author who decrees and executes everything except for the matter of obedience and disobedience.²

[Maimuni describes three kinds of trust in times of crisis: (1) hope for a miracle, which is amply attested in Scripture but is presumptuous and misguided in the absence of authentic prophecy; (2) reliance solely on “proximate, external, ordinary means” rather than God, which is characteristic of unbelievers and the “wicked”; (3) taking ordinary measures to ensure one’s welfare while recognizing that their efficacy is dependent on God. This third kind of trust is “obligatory upon all adherents of the Law.” It entails the belief that “natural

² Cf. *Berakhot* 33b, “Everything is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven.”



causes and ordinary means are disposed in accordance with the particular will of God with respect to every person at every time in every situation.” God may allow natural means (e.g., good nutrition, medication) to attain their natural result or cause them “to depart from their natural course.”]

10. Hazon Ish (Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz; Belarus/Israel (1878–1953), *Sefer emunah u-viṭṭaḥon* (“Book of Faith and Trust”), ch. 2

טעות נושנת נתאזרחת בלב רבים במושג בטחון. שם בטחון המשמש למדה מהוללה ועיקרית בפי החסידים, נסתובבה במושג חובה להאמין - בכל מקרה שפוגש האדם והעמידתו לקראת עתיד בלתי מוכרע ושני דרכים בעתיד, אחת טובה ולא שניה - כי בטח יהיה הטוב, ואם מסתפק וחושש על היפוך הטוב הוא מחוסר בטחון:

A venerable error has been instilled in the hearts of many with respect to the concept of **trust**. The word “trust,” used by the pious to designate a praiseworthy and fundamental attribute, has come to connote the obligation to believe—in all circumstances in which people confront an uncertain future with two directions, one good but not the other—that surely the outcome will be good, and if one doubts and worries about the opposite of the good one it is on account of deficient trust.

ואין הוראה זו בבטחון נכונה, שכל שלא נתברר בנבואה גורל העתיד אין העתיד מוכרע, כי מי יודע משפטי ד' וגמולותיו ית': אבל ענין הבטחון הוא האמון שאין מקרה בעולם, וכל הנעשה תחת השמש הכל בהכרזה מאתו ית', ...

This teaching about trust is incorrect. Whenever future destiny is not made explicit by prophecy, the future is undecided, for **who knows** God’s judgements and



requisites? The meaning of “trust” is the belief that there is no chance in the world: everything that happens under the sun is by divine decree....

וכאשר האדם נפגש במקרה אשר לפי הנוהג שבעולם צפוי' אליו סכנה מדרכי הטבע לפחוד מטבעת העולם, וקשת רוחו ירפהו מלזכור שאין המקרה אדוניה לנו ושאינ מעצור לד' מלהושיעו ולהכין מסבבים שיחליפו את כל המסובבים, וההבלגה בשעה הקשה הלזו ולהשרות בקרבו את האמת הידועה כי אין כאן לפניו שום פגע רע מיד המקרה רק הכל מאתו ית' בין לטוב בין למוטב, ואשר שרש אמונתו מפיגה פחדתו ונותנת לו אמץ להאמין באפשרות ההצלה, ושאינ לפניו נטיה לרעה יותר מנטיה לטובה, ענין זה יקראוהו מדת הבטחון:

When a person encounters an occurrence in which fear-inducing danger might naturally be expected, and depression weakens his recollection that chance does not lord over us (for there is no impediment to God’s rescuing him by reversing the course of events), at that difficult moment he must internalize the well-known truth, namely that no harm comes about by chance. Rather, everything is from God, for better or worse.³ The root of one’s faith should cancel out fear and encourage belief in the possibility of rescue, for the proclivity for a bad outcome is not greater than for a good one. This is what is called “the attribute of trust.”

“Doubt is unpleasant, but certainty is absurd.” (“Le doute n'est pas une condition agréable, mais la certitude est absurde.”) – Voltaire, Letter to Frédéric II, King of Prussia, April 6, 1767.

³ In the idiom *ל טוב בין למוטב*, “for better or worse,” the word *מוטב* is a euphemism.

