

## Why Hope Matters : Theological & Philosophical Perspectives

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This paper is of necessity very selective in its attempts to bring three overlapping perspectives within relatively close focus: first, the Judaic inheritance within western culture; second, the centrality of hope in New Testament tradition in continuity with Judaism; and third, hope understood as a crucial example of the theology of divine grace in the work of the (then and now) hugely influential medieval commentator, St Thomas Aquinas. It concludes with some remarks on theology, psychoanalysis and the philosophy of language.

### Hope in Judaism : Origins

The so-called Holiness Code is the collection of secular, ritualistic, moral, and festival regulations recorded in Leviticus chapters 17–26. It's thought to be one text upon which Ezra and Nehemiah based their religious reforms following the return, under the aegis of the Persian emperor Cyrus, from Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It stresses that the people of Israel are separated from the rest of the world as a chosen people, to be signified in their detachment from profane worldliness, and that this identity is to be sustained through preserving ritualistic and moral purity. Accompanying the Code itself is the *Tocheicha* (= 'admonition' or 'reproof') in Leviticus 26, a collection of terrifying curses (so fearsome as to be usually recited in the synagogue in an audible undertone) warning of the consequences of betraying God's covenant: defeat and disaster, exile and persecution – a warning seemingly borne out in that 6<sup>th</sup> century exile and in the experiences of later centuries.

Yet the passage ends on a note of hope, in Leviticus 26:44-5: 'Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them... I will remember in their favour the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the LORD.'

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks singled out this text as representing a turning point 'in the history of the human spirit' He ventures that this 'birth of hope' is, for Judaism, constitutive of the very shape of history itself – analogous, he thought, perhaps, to Martin Luther King's 'arc of the moral universe'.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Hope as a Conceptual Driver

Several points are worth making here.

First, to view hope in this way is to position Judaism as a decisive articulation of hope as a historically constitutive paradigm (in other words, more than simply a contributory element) within Western civilisation.

Second, this anchors the paradigm in Judaism's foundational notion of divine *chesed*. This word has no exact English equivalent, and so is variously translated as 'loving-kindness' (the composite noun coined by Miles Coverdale in his 1535 English Bible), otherwise usually as either 'mercy', 'steadfast love' or 'faithfulness'. The term occurs only in cases where there is a recognised tie between the parties concerned, and not indiscriminately of kindness in general.

In the third place, divine *chesed* is in this way internally related to the notion of *covenant* (Hebrew *b'eryth*), and the profoundly asymmetrical bond between a faithful God and his often fickle and faithless people.

Fourth, the concept of hope introduces an eschatological and soteriological (salvific) dynamic into historical existence. History is no longer merely 'one damn thing after another'. To speak of an 'eschatological' dimension to history is to attribute to it a trajectory towards a final end, or *telos* (or, indeed, *eschaton* = 'end'). Here, one must beware of the usual (Christian) overtones of eschatology understood as concerned solely with 'the last things' (death, judgement, heaven and hell), for it also covers the signifying of future promise (or judgement) in the present moment, for example through prophetic utterance or action. Rabbi Sacks thus positions Judaism's legacy as a countervailing tendency alongside the 'tragic' Hellenistic inheritance in western culture (with its associated concepts of fate and fortune).

### **Hope and Disenchantment**

Max Weber (d.1920) among others posited a process of secularization in Western society from early modernity onwards, whereby Protestantism precipitated the process of 'disenchantment' of a hitherto richly sacralized world. On this view, the narratives with which religious and mythic traditions furnished the human universe with a 'sacred canopy'<sup>[2]</sup> have given way to an impersonal picture of the world animated by the natural sciences and amplified by technological advance, emptying the world of ultimate meaning and objective value. So, for example, Nietzsche's solution to what he termed the 'problem of nihilism' was intended not (in his words) to 'overcome' religion, but to transform it in the name of eternal recurrence and the *Übermensch*, in the service of a 'desacralized' mythology consistent with the natural sciences. Hope, formerly vested in a transcendent dimension to history, in Nietzsche becomes flattened out and, as in Feuerbach and after him Marx, desacralized in a historicist, this-worldly eschatology.<sup>[3]</sup> In other contexts it might also be worth considering just to what extent, given the ascendancy of the natural sciences in his lifetime, Freud conceived his theoretical project as a *Naturwissenschaft* as opposed to a *Geisteswissenschaft* - a 'natural' rather than 'social science'.

In any case, on any such reading, 'secular' hope is seen as an illusion, and a mature response to our place in the universe is to accept its fundamental meaninglessness and to cultivate the stoic virtue of acceptance - what the philosopher Benjamin Lipscomb has dubbed 'the Dawkins Sublime'.<sup>[4]</sup>

Disenchantment is not entirely absent from Judaic tradition. For the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, time is cyclical. In the opening chapters, the Preacher laments that history is a set of eternal recurrences; nothing ever really changes:

What has been will be again,  
 what has been done will be done again;  
 there is nothing new under the sun.

(Eccl. 1:9)

This is a rare voice in Hebrew scripture and the wider tradition; elsewhere, the paradigm of hope beckons a people to an ‘eschatological’ journey whose *telos* is redemption and a Messianic Age. In the psalms, for example, we find an entire affective spectrum: of hope emerging out of penitence (e.g. Ps.130, the *De profundis*) through nostalgic yearning in exile (e.g. Ps.137, ‘By the rivers of Babylon’) to exalted hope (Psalm 126, ‘When the Lord delivered Sion from bondage’) again in reference to release from exile. The Festival’s headline themes of memory, loss and survival are signature themes in the Psalmist tradition.

Judaism’s principled rejection, in the name of hope, of tragedy and the ineluctable triumph of suffering and injustice is reiterated throughout the prophets, and unsurpassably in the tradition of Isaiah, through successive iterations of that prophet’s core message of hope throughout the book bearing his name, in three collections of oracles spanning a period of climactic transformation in the history of the Israelite people: from the lifetime of the 8thC prophet himself (chapters 1-39) through the 6<sup>th</sup> century destruction of the temple and exile in Babylon (chapters 40-55) to the return (chapters 56-66) and the beginnings of the Second Temple era (515BCE-70CE). The suggestion ventured here is that, from within Judaism, the Isaianic tradition has provided the most influential articulation of hope throughout its centuries of reception within Judaism, Christianity and beyond.

### **Recapitulation and Continuity: Three Texts**

Various texts in the New Testament recapitulate the tradition of hope in direct continuity with Christianity’s Judaic origins, reinforcing its prophetic, eschatological impetus through four Gospels and the other New Testament texts, three examples from which (given here in the Revised Standard Version) may perhaps suffice for present purposes to illustrate hope’s focal position in New Testament thought:

Romans 8:24-25:

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

1 Corinthians 13:13:

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Hebrews 11:1:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction (ὑπόστασις / hypostasis = ‘substance’) of things not seen.

The Judaeo-Christian articulation of hope is not expressed through text alone, however, but by text typically embedded in *enactment* (see ‘Hope, Memory and *Anamnesis*’, below).

### **A Medieval Analysis**

The Italian Dominican friar St Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274), is celebrated for his ground-breaking analysis of focal concepts within the Biblical tradition. Associated as he is with Christianity’s medieval recovery of Aristotle through largely Sephardic and Arabic sources, Thomas has received growing attention over the last fifty or so years from both theologians and philosophers.

The ‘Angelic Doctor’ holds that hope is born from the desire for something good that is ‘difficult but possible to attain’ (*Summa Theologiae* 11-11, 17.1). There is no need for hope if we can easily get what we want, but neither is there any reason to hope when what we desire is completely beyond our grasp.

He observes that hope is unusual in denoting both a ‘passion’ or natural affect, rooted in the ‘sensitive appetite’ which we share with other animals, and a ‘theological virtue’, one of the three highest divine gifts (see 1 Corinthians, above) which find their ‘origin, motive, and object’ in God. In this way it is *both* one of the ‘lowest’ kinds of pursuit after a good, *and* one of the ‘highest’. In his earlier *Commentary on Peter Lombard’s Sentences* Thomas spends (I think significantly) fully half his time on hope as a passion before addressing it as a ‘theological virtue’!

Interestingly, Aquinas sometimes interprets anthropomorphically what we would regard as purely instinctual drives in other species as an example of the ‘lower’ pursuits: in seeing, for example, birds’ nestmaking as self-conscious, goal-oriented intentionality ‘for the sake of raising their young’ (*Sentences of Peter Lombard* Book III D.26, Q.1,A.1).

### **A Passion and a Virtue**

Thomas’ fundamental point still stands: Hope as an emotion is a response to a perceived good. But unlike simple desire it seeks a future good that may be ‘arduous and difficult’ to attain, but not impossible. And as distant as the passion and the theological virtue are from each other, they nevertheless possess a unique affinity:

The names of the other passions cannot so appropriately be applied to virtues as hope can, because hope is said [to be] about an ordering to the good and thus involves a movement of

desire toward good; and this has a certain resemblance to the intention and choice of the good that is required for any virtue. (*Sentences III*)

Hope for Thomas thus extends analogically across an entire spectrum of possible goals. All intentional action presupposes it in some degree. Many thoughts and emotions are shaded with it. Gabriel Marcel<sup>[5]</sup> and Jonathan Lear<sup>[6]</sup> contrast the ‘propositional’ kind of hope embedded in intentional thought or action (as in, ‘to hope for *x*’) with what might be termed ‘basal’ (or ‘radical’) hope - an anticipatory stance without specific object, a more general sense of agency in a person’s ‘life-world’. (On this basis the nest-building instinct in birds might therefore be viewed as bearing an element of family resemblance to ‘basal hope’ in humans, insofar as instinctual behaviours count as boundary instances of intentional action.) As another kind of boundary example, in a military ‘last stand’ (such as that of Leonidas at Thermopylae)<sup>[7]</sup> hope still figures on some level - if not hope for survival, then perhaps an altruistic hope of gaining time for others to escape, or for the sake of a cause.

### A ‘Graced’ Virtue

This way of understanding analogical diversity in our use of a word undergirds Aquinas’ theology of grace. Grace has been defined as ‘divine influence in humans to regenerate and sanctify’, but this sounds somehow impersonal; for Thomas, divine grace is overwhelmingly personal *gift*: an invitation to friendship, and *the* enabling condition of human freedom, *empowering without compelling* human consent. The three ‘theological virtues’ – faith, hope and love – are so named for their divine origin and goal, transformatively reorientating a ‘natural’ virtue towards heavenly realities.

### Theology and Philosophical Analysis

Aquinas’ remarks on hope exemplify his alertness to the kind of language that behaves ‘analogically’ across differing linguistic domains. Perhaps partly because of the complex range of meanings of ‘analogy’, the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (d.1976) coined the term ‘polymorphous’ to describe this pervasive feature of ordinary language. A whole class of expressions (such as *working*, *playing*, or *farming*) are ‘polymorphous’ – capable of a whole range of differently connected meanings, each at home in its immediate context. At the 1951 Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association on *Thinking and Language*, he observed that to the question ‘What does working consist of?’ there is no general answer; different sorts of work are done with different sorts of tools, and many some kinds of work need no tools at all. He cites *fighting*, *trading*, *playing*, *housekeeping*, and *farming* as examples of such polymorphism, whereas the concepts of *boxing* and *apple-picking* are ‘nearly enough non-polymorphous.’<sup>[8]</sup>

This is Aquinas’ ‘analogy of attribution’, or something close to it: words behaving ‘analogically’ across widely different contexts, expressing language’s latent power to work across ever-new situations. Across a

wide spectrum of domains, hope qualifies as a polymorphous concept, falling under the general account that Aquinas gives of analogical usage, which allows hope's 'polymorphous' potential extension into properly theological contexts whilst nonetheless preserving divine transcendence.

### **'Saying More Than We Know'**

In describing the concepts of *boxing* and *apple-picking* as 'nearly enough non-polymorphous', Ryle implies that there are degrees of polymorphism in natural language. On this account, relatively speaking the speech-fragment 'in', for example, would be (so to say promiscuously polymorphous, whereas 'trading' would be much less so. There is *no natural limit* to any imagined series of possible uses of 'in': For any such series – say 'in the cupboard', 'in a temper', 'in good time', '*in flagrante delicto*', 'in case of fire' (or, indeed, 'in psychoanalysis') there will always be indefinitely many other possible uses. To take a specifically theological example: when St Paul uses the language of 'incorporation into Christ' he is describing a divine mystery, as for example when he tells the Colossians,

...you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

(Col.3:3)

Here he recruits five fragments of ordinary speech to describe the life of the baptised 'in Christ'. Each of them are polymorphous: *died*, *life*, *hidden*, *with* and *in*. He deploys them to do an extraordinary job - to capture transcendent meaning without presuming to fathom it: to 'describe' without 'explaining', who we are, and to whom we belong. Transcendence is preserved: the polymorphous notation embedded in ordinary language allows St Paul to discern and describe divine *and* human mystery, without trespassing upon either *and in ways proper to each*. This is one way that human speech allows us to 'say more than we know'. The concept of 'saying/meaning more than we know' is of relevance in contexts well beyond the scope of this essay, though indeed it does suggest a not altogether distant conceptual resonance between theology and psychoanalysis.

### **Hope, Memory and Anamnesis**

Part of the brief for this paper was to explore some conceptual connections closely clustering around the notion of hope within the Judaic and Christian traditions and beyond. Within that joint tradition, these include links with *chesed* or 'loving-kindness', with the notion of covenant (*b'eryth*), with intention and desire, with grace and the 'theological' virtues and (as I shall mention in conclusion) with that of *success*. The Festival headlines three other themes also intimately connected with hope, namely *memory*, *loss* and *survival*.

Hope presupposes memory. As memory is a constitutive element in personal identity, so recollection and remembrance are equally necessary conditions for any kind of collective identity, and so for the inner shape and constitution of both Judaism and its Christian offshoot where, in both traditions, 'remembrance'

takes the form of an *anamnesis*, an enacted making-present of certain past events. In one of the principal highlights of the Jewish year, the *Pesach* or Passover Week and its signature meal, the *Seder*, the foundational experience of the Exodus from Egypt is symbolically recapitulated. The Christian Holy Week and Easter make sacramentally present the events of Christ's death and resurrection, and their analogical and historical connections with the Jewish Passover. In both traditions, a season and its associated meal (the *Seder*, and the Eucharist or Mass) bind past, present and future together in eschatological time and, in Christian usage, this is recapitulated afresh through the year in each individual celebration of the Eucharist.

### **Hope, Loss and Survival**

Mention has been made above of 'Judaism's principled rejection, in the name of hope, of tragedy and the ineluctable triumph of suffering and injustice ...reiterated throughout the prophets' (Hope and Disenchantment' above, final paragraph). The thought cannot be passed over in silence that such 'principled rejection' has had repeatedly to face the threat of persecution (ideological and actual) including, just within living memory, the catastrophe of the *Shoah* ('Holocaust') and thus the challenge this poses to hope's ultimate survival. In the eschatological context I have tried to outline above, in both traditions past loss or displacement is counterpoised by a future hope vested in the promise of a 'homeland' both historical and transcendent: of historic 'survival', and of a future rest that will transcend 'mere' survival. In Judaism the historical reference is principally to a future *Aliyah*, or 'return', from 'the land of their enemies' (Leviticus 26:44, quoted above) to the land of promise. Beyond any specific tradition though, religious or otherwise, and in *any* possible context, hope and memory remain intrinsically linked, including and especially in any endeavour - psychoanalytic or otherwise - to work through grief and loss, through a process of *anamnesis* (in which hope is a 'basal' counterpoise to loss) towards some form of rest or resolution.

### **Why Hope Matters**

As this study has attempted to show, the concept of hope has both an historical and a 'constitutive' place in Judaeo-Christian tradition (and thus, as some have argued, a formative influence until now throughout Western culture). In adopting hope as a connecting theme across a diversity of films, the European Psychoanalytic Film Festival 2022 seeks to offer a vantage point for reflection on hope's wider role in the human project as a whole. I have ventured to argue here that the concept covers an indeterminably wide range of contexts, from the trivial through the existential (as in *Anna's War*, for example) to the transcendent. And there is, as I have noted, a close internal, conceptual connection to another context-dependent notion, that of *success*, as in, say, the hunter-gatherer's hope for catchable prey, or the student's hope for success in exams, or in Anna's impulse to survive. And notwithstanding Wilfred Bion's injunction<sup>[9]</sup> to the analyst to approach the analytic setting 'without memory or desire', hope is and must be a 'second order', constitutive element in any psychoanalytic encounter, and the psychoanalytical

project as a whole; for hope presupposes memory and is, as Aquinas reminds us, born from the desire for something good that is ‘difficult but possible to attain.’

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#### Notes

[1] <https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CC-5779-The-Birth-of-Hope-Bechukotai-5779.pdf>).

[2] ‘Sacred canopy’: Sociologist Peter Berger elaborates this concept in *The Social Reality of Religion*, Penguin, 1973 (in the USA *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967).

[3] On desacralized eschatology/soteriology in Marx, see especially Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian’s Reflections on the thought of Karl Marx*, DLT, 1998, and in particular chapters 6, 17 and 18. (The literature on this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought is too large to attempt useful citation here.)

[4] Benjamin Lipscombe - the ‘Dawkins Sublime’: See *The Women Are Up to Something*, OUP, 2022, pp. 1, 7 and *passim*.

[5] See Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd, New York: Harper, 1962

[6] See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006

[7] I am grateful to Michael Brearley not least for suggesting Thermopylae as an instance of ‘altruistic hope’ along with his other very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[8] See, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Vol. 25, 1951

[9] Wilfred Bion: *Los Angeles Seminars and Supervision*, 136.