

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

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# LONGING

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# "LONGING" - SCRIPTURES

## Jewish Text 1

## Psalm 63

א מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד בְּהִיּוֹתוֹ בְּמִדְבַּר יִהְיֶה.  
ב אֵלֶּי קָו יָם אֱלֹהֵי אֲתָה אֲשַׁחֲרֶנּוּ:  
צִמְאָה לֶךְ נַפְשִׁי כָּמָה לֶךְ בְּשָׂרִי  
בְּאֶרֶץ-צִיָּה וְעַיִן בְּלִי-מַיִם.  
ג כִּן בִּקְדָשׁ חֲזִיתְךָ  
לְרֵאוֹת עֵינֶיךָ וּכְבוֹדְךָ.  
ד כִּי-טוֹב חֲסִדְךָ מִחַיִּים  
שִׁפְתֵי יִשְׁבְּחוּנֶךָ.  
ה כִּן אֲבָרְכֶךָ בְּחַיֵּי  
בְּשִׁמְךָ אֲשֶׁא כָּפִי.  
ו כִּמוֹ חֵלֶב וְדֶשֶׁן תִּשְׁבַּע נַפְשִׁי  
וְשִׁפְתֵי רִנּוֹת יִהְיֶל-פִּי.  
ז אִם-זָכַרְתִּיךָ עַל-יִצְוַעֵי  
בְּאֲשִׁמְרוֹת אֶהְגֶּה-בְּךָ.  
ח כִּי-הָיִיתָ עֲזָרְתָה לִּי  
וּבְצִל כְּנָפֶיךָ אֲרַנֶּן.  
ט דָּבָקָה נַפְשִׁי אֲחֵרֶיךָ  
בִּי תִמְכָּה יְמִינֶךָ.  
י וְהִמָּה לְשׂוֹאָה יִבְקָשׁוּ נַפְשִׁי  
יב אוֹ בְּתַחֲתִיּוֹת הָאָרֶץ.  
יא יִגִּירָהוּ עַל-יָדֵי-חֶרֶב  
מְנַת שְׁעָלִים יִהְיוּ.  
יב וְהִמְלִיךְ יִשְׁמַח בְּאֵלֶּי קָו יָם  
יְתִהַל כָּל-הַנְּשָׁבַע בּוֹ  
כִּי יִסְכַּר פִּי דוֹבְרֵי-שָׁקֶר.

## Psalm 63

<sup>1</sup> A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

<sup>2</sup> God, You are my God;  
I search for You,  
my soul thirsts for You,  
my body yearns for You,  
as a parched and weary land without water.

<sup>3</sup> I shall surely behold You in the sanctuary,  
and see Your might and Your glory.

<sup>4</sup> For Your kindness is better than life;  
my lips will praise you.

<sup>5</sup> I shall surely bless You all my life;  
I will lift up my hands in Your name.

<sup>6</sup> My soul is sated as though with a rich feast  
and my mouth will praise You, with joyful lips,

<sup>7</sup> when I remember you upon my bed,  
think of You in the night watches;

<sup>8</sup> for You have been my help,  
and in the shadow of Your wings I shall shout for joy.

<sup>9</sup> My soul clings to You;  
Your right hand supports me.

<sup>10</sup> But may those who seek to destroy my life  
enter the depths of the earth;

<sup>11</sup> May they be gutted by the sword;  
may they be the portion of foxes.

<sup>12</sup> But the king will rejoice in God;  
all who swear by Him shall exult,  
for the mouth of liars shall be stopped.

### Glosses

- v. 3: 'in the sanctuary' - *bakodesh*. If this psalm was written by David, this phrase is problematic, since the sanctuary (Temple) was not built until after David's death, in the reign of his son Solomon. The classical mediaeval commentators suggest that it refers to either Shiloh or Gibeon, where the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, was kept before the building of the Temple.
- v. 4: 'Your kindness' - *chasdekha*. The base word here, *chesed*, is a central concept in Judaism: possible translations include 'favour', 'goodness', 'love', 'grace', 'mercy', 'charity', 'benevolence', 'benefaction' 'loving-kindness'.
- v. 5: 'I will lift up my hands' - *esa kapai*. The traditional posture for prayer, at least up to the 3rd century CE, was standing with both hands raised, palms upwards, so this phrase means 'I will pray'.
- v. 6: 'a rich feast' - *chelev vadeshen*. Literally 'fat and suet', which were highly prized in antiquity (the Torah reserves certain sections of animal fat for sacrifices).
- v. 8: 'in the shadow of Your wings' - *uvetsel kenafekha*. Understood as a metaphor, as are other biblical references to God's 'mighty hand', 'outstretched arm', etc.
- v. 12: 'the king' - *hamelekh*. A reference to King David, the author, or 'voice', of this psalm.

א שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת  
 אֲלֵיךָ נִשְׂאֲתִי אֶת-עֵינַי  
 הִי שְׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם.  
 ב הִנֵּה כְעֵינַי עֹבְדִים אֶל-יַד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם  
 כְּעֵינַי שֹׁפְחָה אֶל-יַד גְּבוֹרָתָהּ  
 כִּן עֵינֵינוּ אֶל-ה' אֵלֵּנוּ  
 עַד שִׁיחַנְנוּ.  
 ג חַנּוּנוֹ ה' חַנּוּנוֹ  
 כִּי-רַב שָׁבַעְנוּ בּוֹז.  
 ד רַבַּת שָׁבַעָה-לָהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ  
 הַלְעַג הַשְׂאֲנָנִים  
 הַבּוֹז לַגֵּאוֹנִים (לְגֵאֵי יוֹנִים).

**Psalm 123**

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents.

To You, enthroned in heaven,  
 I lift my eyes.

<sup>2</sup> Look, as the eyes of slaves turn to their master's hand,  
 as the eyes of a slave-girl turn to her mistress' hand,  
 so our eyes turn to the Lord our God,  
 until He be gracious to us.

<sup>3</sup> Be gracious to us, O Lord,  
 be gracious to us;  
 for we had our fill of contempt.

<sup>4</sup> Our soul has had its fill of the scorn of the complacent,  
 the contempt of the arrogant.

Glosses

v. 2: 'until He be gracious to us' - *ad sheyechanenu*. The verb 'to be gracious' is based on the root word *chen*, which has connotations of 'grace', 'favour', 'beauty'.

v. 3: This verse, like Text 3 below, forms part of the Tachanun (Supplications) sequence recited by Orthodox Jews every Monday and Thursday.

טו וְעַתָּה אֲדָשׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ אֶת-עַמְּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם  
 בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְעֹשׂ-לְךָ שֵׁם כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה חָטְאנוּ רָשָׁענוּ.  
 טז אֲדָשׁם כָּכָל-צְדָקָתְךָ יִשָּׁב-נָא אִפְּךָ וְחַמְתְּךָ מֵעִירְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.  
 הֲרָ-קִדְשְׁךָ כִּי בַחֲטָאֵינוּ וּבְעָוֹנוֹת אָבֹתֵינוּ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וְעַמְּךָ  
 לְחַרְפָּה לְכֹל-סְבִיבֵי תֵינוּ.  
 יז וְעַתָּה שְׁמַע אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶל-תְּפִלַּת עַבְדְּךָ וְאֶל-תְּחִנּוּנָיו וְהָאֵר  
 פְּנֵיךָ עַל-מִקְדָּשְׁךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְמַעַן אֲדָשׁם.  
 יח הִטָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְאֻזְנְךָ וּשְׁמַע פִּקְחָה (פְּקָח) עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה  
 שְׁמַמֵּי תֵינוּ וְהָעִיר אֲשֶׁר-נִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עָלֶיהָ כִּי לֹא עַל-צְדָקָתֵינוּ  
 אֲנִיחָנוּ מִפִּילִים תְּחִנּוּנֵינוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כִּי עַל-רַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּיבִים.  
 יט אֲדָשׁם שְׁמָעָה אֲדָשׁם סְלַחָה אֲדָשׁם הַקְּשִׁיבָה וְעֲשֵׂה אֶל-  
 תְּאֵחֶר לְמַעַנְךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְאֻזְנְךָ עִירְךָ וְעַל-עַמְּךָ.

### Daniel 9: 15-19

<sup>15</sup> Now, O Lord our God—who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made for Yourself a name to this very day—we have sinned, we have acted wickedly. <sup>16</sup> O Lord, as befits all Your righteousness, let Your anger and fury turn back from Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; for because of our sins and the wrongdoings of our ancestors, Jerusalem and Your people have become a mockery to all those who surround us. <sup>17</sup> And now, O our God, hear the prayer of Your servant and his pleas: make Your face shine upon Your ruined Temple, for the Lord's sake. <sup>18</sup> Incline Your ear, O my God, and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolation and the city to which Your name is attached; for it is not because of our righteousness that we lay our pleas before You, but because of Your abundant mercies. <sup>19</sup> O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act; do not delay, for Your own sake, O my God; for Your name is attached to Your city and Your people!

### Glosses

v. 15: 'name' - *shem*. The word can also mean 'reputation' or 'fame'.

v. 16: 'Your holy mountain' - *har-kodshakha*. The phrase could be translated as 'the mountain of Your sanctuary'; in either case, this is a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, which stood upon a (small) mountain (now encased in the platform built for the Second Temple by Herod the Great in c. 20 BCE; it is still called the Temple Mount by Jews, and al-Haram ash-Sharif, 'the Noble Sanctuary', by Muslims. The Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque were built here in the 7th century CE).

v. 17: 'Your ruined Temple' - *mikdashkha hashamem*. The Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

## Christian Text

### Revelation 22: 1-7, 16-20

<sup>1</sup> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. <sup>4</sup> They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

<sup>6</sup> And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. <sup>7</sup> And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'

[...]

<sup>16</sup> 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

<sup>17</sup> The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

<sup>18</sup> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, <sup>19</sup> and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

<sup>20</sup> He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

#### Glosses

vv. 1, 3: 'throne' – *thronos*, a very important image in Revelation, with a long biblical pedigree (see, for example, Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6: 1). The throne signifies the site of God's presence and the source of his authority over both earth and heaven. Revelation shows the slain Lamb (Christ) occupying this throne.

v. 4: 'his name will be on their foreheads' – *to onoma autou epi ton metopon*, the protective seal of God is on the foreheads of the faithful, as the mark of the beast is on the foreheads of others. It evokes the pure gold plate worn by Aaron the High Priest in Exodus 28: 38, which bore the words 'Holy to the Lord', and the words of what Jews call the *Shema* (i.e. Deuteronomy 6: 4-9) carried by some Jews in receptacles on hands and foreheads.

v. 16: 'bright morning star' – *ho aster ho lampros ho proinos*, this star was a deity in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion.

v. 17: 'Bride' – *he numphe*, the figure of the bride is used at various points in the New Testament to signify the Christian community, but here seems to imply an aspect of the divine (like the Spirit with whom she is paired here), calling humanity to salvation.

v. 17: 'Come' – *erchou*, the Greek word for the Aramaic *maranatha*; see commentary.

## Islamic Text 1

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

### Surah Yusuf ('Joseph', 12: 11-13 and 80-87), Meccan

<sup>11</sup> They said: 'O our father! why do you not trust us with Joseph, seeing we are indeed his sincere well-wishers?

<sup>12</sup> 'Send him with us tomorrow to enjoy himself and play, and we shall take every care of him.'

<sup>13</sup> (Jacob) said: 'Really it saddens me that you should take him away: (further,) I fear lest the wolf should devour him while you attend not to him.'

...  
<sup>80</sup> Now when they saw no hope of his (yielding), they held a conference in private. The leader among them said: 'Know you not that your father did take an oath from you in God's name, and how, before this, you did fail in your duty with Joseph? Therefore I will not leave this land until my father permits me, or Allah commands me; and He is the best to command.

<sup>81</sup> 'Turn back to your father, and say, "O our father! Behold! Your son committed theft! We bear witness only to what we know, and we could not well guard against the unseen!

<sup>82</sup> "Ask at the town where we have been and the caravan in which we returned, and (you will find) we are indeed telling the truth".'

<sup>83</sup> Jacob said: 'Nay, but you have yourselves contrived a story (good enough) for you. So beautiful patience is most fitting (for me). Maybe Allah will bring them (back) all to me (in the end). For He is indeed full of knowledge and wisdom.'

<sup>84</sup> And he turned away from them, and said: 'How great is my grief for Joseph!' And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he fell into silent melancholy.

<sup>85</sup> They said: 'By Allah, (never) will you cease to remember Joseph until you reach the last extremity of illness, or until you die!'

<sup>86</sup> He said: 'I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allah, and I know from Allah that which you know not ...

<sup>87</sup> 'O my sons! Go and enquire about Joseph and his brother, and never give up hope of God's soothing mercy: truly no one despairs of God's soothing mercy, except those who have no faith.'

### Gloss

*ayah* 84: A phrase of magnificent, alliterative eloquence in the original. 'How great is my grief!' is *ya'asafa* and Joseph is *yusufa*.

## Islamic Text 2 [Qur'anic Arabic to be added]

### Surah al-Qasas ('The Story', 28: 1-13), Meccan

*In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful*

<sup>1</sup> *ta sin mim*

<sup>2</sup> These are Verses of the Book that makes (things) clear.

<sup>3</sup> We rehearse to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh in truth, for people who believe.

<sup>4</sup> Truly Pharaoh elated himself in the land and broke up its people into sections, depressing a small group among them: their sons he killed, but he kept alive their females: for he was indeed a maker of mischief.

<sup>5</sup> And We wished to be gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders (in faith) and make them heirs,

<sup>6</sup> to establish a firm place for them in the land, and to show Pharaoh, Haman, and their armies, at their hands, the very things against which they were taking precautions.

<sup>7</sup> So We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: 'Suckle (your child), but when you have fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve: for We shall restore him to you, and We shall make him one of Our apostles.'

<sup>8</sup> Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up (from the river): (it was intended) that (Moses) should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow: for Pharaoh and Haman and (all) their armies were men of sin.

<sup>9</sup> The wife of Pharaoh said: '(Here is) joy of the eye, for me and for you: kill him not. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' And they perceived not (what they were doing)!

<sup>10</sup> But there came to be a void in the heart of the mother of Moses: she was going almost to disclose his (case), had We not strengthened her heart (with faith), so that she might remain a (firm) believer.

<sup>11</sup> And she said to the sister of (Moses), 'Follow him' so she (the sister) watched him in the character of a stranger. And they knew not.

<sup>12</sup> And we ordained that he refused suck at first, until (his sister came up and) said: 'Shall I point out to you the people of a house that will nourish and bring him up for you and be sincerely attached to him?'

<sup>13</sup> Thus did We restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is true: but most of them do not understand.

#### Glosses

*ayah* 6: Pharaoh's chief vizier or minister.

*ayah* 10: 'strengthened her heart': literally, 'tied her hearts' or 'put restraints on her heart'.

# "LONGING" – TRADITIONS OF READING

## JEWISH TEXTS

### Introduction and Context

All the texts come from the third section of the Jewish Bible (Tanakh): *Ketuvim* ('Writings': consisting of the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), which date from different periods, from the time of King David (c. 1000 BCE) to about the second century BCE.

The first two texts come from the book of Psalms (Tehilim), which the Babylonian Talmud (c. 600 CE) attributes to ten authors.

The first text (Psalm 63) is by David, king of Israel; its title assigns its composition to a particularly difficult time in his life, when he was living as an outlaw in the Judaeian desert, fleeing from the attempts of King Saul to kill him. David had been privately anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, but although the prophet had told Saul that God had taken away the kingship from him, Saul was still in power (see 1 Samuel 15-27). Consumed by an irrational jealousy of David, who had served him well, Saul had already tried to kill him on several occasions, which probably accounts for the bitter tone of the psalm's final verses.

The second text (Psalm 123) has no obvious author. It is one of fifteen psalms that bear the mysterious title 'A song of ascents' - *shir hama'alot*. The word *ma'alot* comes from the root 'l-h, 'to go up', 'to ascend'. Some of the possible interpretations include: 'a song to be sung when going up to Jerusalem', 'a song to be sung by the Temple musicians on the fifteen steps between the outer and inner Temple courts', 'a song sung to a tune known as *ma'alot*', and even 'a series of songs, each one of which is sung louder than the preceding one' (i.e. they rise in volume).

The third text comes from the book of Daniel, whose date is disputed: tradition sets it in the early sixth century BCE, but modern scholars prefer a date of the mid-second century BCE. The first half tells the story of Daniel, exiled with thousands of other Jews by the Babylonians after they had destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 BCE. Daniel rises to the Babylonian king's favour after interpreting his dreams, and survives an attempt by jealous courtiers to kill him (the famous 'Daniel in the lions' den' story). The second half of the book consists of obscure prophecies about the final redemption of the Jewish people. The text here comes from a long prayer by Daniel, in which he describes the course of Jewish history up to his time, emphasizing that the loss of the Temple is due to the people's sins, and implores God to bring the Jews back to their land and to restore the Temple. Orthodox Jews recite this passage every Monday and Thursday as part of a penitential sequence called Tachanun ('Supplications').

## Points to Consider

- What is the object of longing in each of these texts?
- Consider the 'author' or 'voice' of each text. How does their identity affect their longing?
- Do the different metaphors used express different types of longing?

## The Text in Tradition and Today

Judaism might be characterized as a religion with two great longings or yearnings—the longing of the individual for God, and the longing of the entire people for redemption (*ge'ulah*), in the form of a time when God heals all wounds, mends all that is broken, and becomes known to all people.

The desire to approach God as closely as possible (classically termed *devekut*, 'clinging' or 'cleaving') goes back all the way to Moses, who begged God, 'Please, show me Your glory' (Exodus 33: 18), which the mediaeval commentator Abraham ibn Ezra interprets as a request to understand the true nature of God. God responds that 'man may not see Me and live' (*ibid.*, v. 20), but proceeds to make His glory pass by, shielding Moses as He does so—which ibn Ezra interprets as signifying that Moses reached an unprecedented and unparalleled knowledge of and closeness to God.

Jewish mystics ever since have aspired to gain the same level of knowledge of God, while acknowledging that the Divine can never be truly known by humans. Other biblical visions of the Divine, such as those of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, were studied for clues in the quest for God, and a central issue in kabbalah, the mediaeval mystical path, was speculation upon the nature of God. Love of God and the longing for Him were central to both mystical and mainstream elements. Maimonides (1138-1204), the great philosopher and jurist, wrote:

A person should love God with a great, exceeding, and very strong love, until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Then he will be constantly obsessed with this love, as if he were a lovesick person whose thoughts are never diverted from the love of a particular woman, and he is constantly obsessed with her, whether he is sitting, standing, or eating and drinking. Even more than this is the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him, and are constantly obsessed with [that love], as He commanded us: '[And you shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart, with all your soul [and with all your might]' (Deuteronomy 6: 5). This concept was implied by Solomon, when he stated as a metaphor: 'For I am lovesick' (Song of Songs 2: 5). Indeed, all of the Song of Songs is a parable describing this love.

The vivid and sensual metaphors in the Psalms presented above (Texts 1 and 2) reappear in mediaeval mystical poetry, such as the song *Yedid nefesh* ('Beloved of the Soul'), by Elazar Azikri, a 16th-century kabbalist in Safed, the

'town of the mystics' in northern Israel. It is still sung in many synagogues on Friday night:

Beloved of the Soul, Merciful Father,  
draw Your servant to perform Your will.  
Let Your servant run like a deer,  
let him bow down before Your splendour;  
for Your love is sweeter to him  
than honeycomb drippings and every pleasant taste.

Splendid, Beautiful, Radiance of the World,  
my soul pines for Your love.  
Please, God, heal her now  
by showing her Your lovely radiance;  
then she will be strengthened and healed,  
and will become Your servant for ever.

The national longing for redemption, for God's final deliverance of the world, is focused on the restoration of the Temple, the 'link' between heaven and earth, and the source of divine blessing and harmony for the entire world. The present condition of the Temple-less world, both as a whole and for the Jewish people in particular, is one of both physical and spiritual exile and disharmony; some early and kabbalistic sources even speak of a corresponding 'exile' of God Himself, which will also end with the final redemption.

Different branches of Judaism see redemption in radically different terms: from a very concrete hope for the resumption of sacrifices, the return of the Jewish people to their land, and world peace, inaugurated by the messiah—a human figure appointed by God (a view that characterizes much of the Orthodox world), to a more symbolic interpretation of a time of worldwide peace, reconciliation, and knowledge of the divine brought about by human effort under divine inspiration—a messianic age rather than a particular messianic figure (at the Reform and Liberal end of the spectrum). Opinions about the precise nature of redemption have varied enormously, from earliest times to today, often in the face of rabbinic warnings against engaging in too much speculation (on the grounds that attention should be directed to working now to bring redemption, rather than concentrating on the end result). The Jewish people is seen as a partner with God in healing the world, often termed *tikun olam* (literally: 'repair of the world'), by creating justice, fighting oppression and idolatry, and spreading the knowledge of God.

This longing for the rebuilt Jerusalem and Temple, as an integral part of universal redemption, is a major theme of daily prayers in the Orthodox tradition:

Find favour, Lord our God, in Your people Israel and their prayers.  
Restore the service to Your most holy house [the Temple], and accept  
in love and favour the sacrifices of Israel and their prayer. May the  
service of Your people Israel always find favour with You. And may

our eyes witness Your return to Zion in compassion. Blessed are You, Lord, who restores His Presence to Zion.

(From the Amidah prayer, recited three times daily)

Ultimately, these two forms of longing—that of the individual for God and that of the community for redemption—are one, as recognized by the great modern mystic, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935):

When the knowledge of God is suffused by a great love, when it is pervaded by its true illumination, according to the capacity of each soul to receive it, there radiates from its absolute light a love for the world, for all worlds, for all creatures, on all levels of their being. A love for all existence fills the hearts of the good and kindly ones among creatures, and among humans. They yearn for the happiness of all, they hope that all may know light and joy. ... When these love-possessed people see the world, especially living creatures full of quarrels, hatred, persecutions and conflicts, they yearn with all their being to share in those aspirations that move life towards comprehensiveness and unity, peace and tranquillity. They feel and they know that the nearness of God, for which they yearn, can only lead them to joining themselves with all and for the sake of all. When they confront the human scene, and find divisions among nations, religions, parties, with goals in conflict, they endeavour with all their might to bring all together, to mend and to unite.

(From *Orot Hakodesh* [Lights of Holiness], vol. 2, pp. 456-457)

### **A Christian perspective on the Jewish Text**

Do these texts imply that longing is always a product of *lack*? Psalm 63 talks of being parched and weary, and of people out to take the Psalmist's life; Psalm 123 talks of the Psalmist having had his 'fill of contempt'; Daniel 9 speaks from out of the desolation of the city and the ruins of the Temple. My worry here is that a positive thing (desire for God) might seem always to *need* a negative thing (suffering or lack) to stimulate it—which perhaps gives the negative as much power and status as the positive. But couldn't one say that the best sort of longing—or desire—is just for the sheer good of what it longed for, and not always the result of a prior evil?

## **CHRISTIAN TEXTS**

### **Introduction and Context**

This passage comes from the very last chapter of the Revelation to John (or the 'Apocalypse', which is the Greek word for revelation), and therefore from the very end of the Christian Bible as a whole. It expresses the vulnerable Christian community's intense and hopeful anticipation of coming blessings as God's plan of redemption is brought to final fulfilment.

The Book of Revelation's author—John—was in exile on the island of Patmos, off the west coast of Asia Minor. There was an acute awareness of the threat of persecution in the air at the time. This book, in the form of a very unusual sort of letter which is full of the symbols and figures and numerical codes common in Jewish apocalyptic literature, has a twofold practical purpose: first, to encourage and give hope to those of its early Christian readers who were feeling insecure; and second, to enliven the commitment of those who were becoming complacent. The author expected that what he was writing about would happen soon. Even though the Christian communities had been waiting for Christ's second coming for some decades (the book was probably written around 95-96 CE), this does not take away the book's sense of imminence.

The book is dominated by the figure of Christ. He is both the Lamb 'as though it had been slain' (5: 6), and a warrior going forth to conquer and rule, whose name is The Word of God (19: 11-16). He appears vividly as a direct speaker in these closing verses of the book. The vision of a 'garden city' in chapter 22—the new Jerusalem, which has come down from heaven—incorporates elements of the original paradise in the Garden of Eden (cf. Genesis 2), but also the hope for restoration we see in Ezekiel 47: 12, in which a river flows from the Temple, and trees flowering monthly grow on its banks, with fruit for nourishment and leaves for healing.

### **Points to Consider**

- What is being longed for here?
- What is so attractive to John and his circle about the things longed for?
- Is the longing related to fear or deprivation in this passage—is it an expression of suffering? Or are there other more positive reasons to account for the longing we find here?
- If the imminent fulfilment of these expectations can no longer be assumed, does it change the impact of the passage, and how we read it? Are there different kinds of imminence?

### **The Text in Tradition and Today**

Archetypal images are used here—of the cosmic mountain of ancient myths, and a sacred stream that flows from it. This is an idealized mountain, with an idealized city atop it. This passage raises important issues about how hope and longing for better things are resourced in both religious and non-religious traditions. Do we need our appetite for a new heaven and a new earth to be whetted by being shown ideal images that contrast very strongly with our present situation? Or are such flights of the imagination a form of escapism? Should our hopes be tempered by a more cautious consideration of what seem like more realistic goals?

The word for 'come' in the Greek (*erchou*) is one of the simplest prayers in the Christian tradition, and is one that we also find elsewhere in the New Testament, preserved in its Aramaic form *maranatha* (cf. 1 Corinthians 16: 22: 'Our Lord, come!'). The word would perhaps have been used in its Aramaic

form by Jesus himself, and the first disciples, and probably played a central role in the eucharistic liturgy of the early Christians. This raises important questions for Christian tradition about the role of longing in worship. Might prayer be the best way to give voice to longing?

How is longing stopped from being selfish? By presenting us with the image of a city, this passage may require an acknowledgement that our desires are not meant just to be individually realized, but socially or collectively. They are also inseparably, for Christians, bound up with a personal *relationship*, the relationship with the risen Jesus Christ, who judges as well as answering the desires of humanity.

## ISLAMIC TEXTS

### Introduction and Context

*Surah Yusuf* (Joseph) is unique amongst Qur'anic *surahs* (chapters) in that no other medium-length or long *surah* is devoted almost entirely to telling one story. Indeed, the *surah* says right at the beginning that this is 'the most beautiful of stories', and the *surah* has a rhythm and sequence of moods that make it a favourite amongst dedicated reciters.

In a lovely children's retelling, it is known as the story of the 'Three Shirts'. The last of these shirts is the one by which Prophet Jacob regains his eyesight after losing it out of sorrow and longing for his son, Prophet Joseph. Jacob's moving prayer in the first half of *ayah* (verse) 86 is often repeated by Muslims when in distress or anguish. In a famous tradition, the second caliph of Islam, Umar bin al-Khattab, recited this *surah* as he led the prayers and sobbed so loudly as he repeated this *ayah* that his weeping could be heard at the back of the congregation.

*Surah al-Qasas* ('The Story') is the only one that comes close to rivalling Joseph as a single-story *surah*. This one is about Moses and Pharaoh. The key *ayah* that is related to the theme is no. 10.

### Points to Consider

- What kind of love does Jacob have for Joseph, especially in the light of *ayah* 13?
- Is putting up with censure by others a necessary test in the endurance of true love and longing, as illustrated by the reaction of Jacob's other sons?
- In 'The Story', *ayah* 7, what is the effect of the statement 'when you hast fears about him, cast him into the river', upon the reciter and listener?
- In 'The Story', *ayah* 10, what is the nature of the void in the heart of Moses' mother?

## The Text in Tradition and Today

Jacob's longing for Joseph and that of Moses' mother<sup>1</sup> for him are both metaphors for the soul's longing for God during separation.

'Joseph', *ayah* 13: Many translations miss the word 'further' or its equivalent, although it is obvious in the original and conveys the important meaning that simply being parted from Joseph was enough to cause Jacob great grief.

'Joseph', *ayah* 82: 'Ask the town' clearly means, 'Ask the *people* of the town'.

However, this *ayah* has given rise to considerable controversy among the commentators over whether or not this metaphor is included in the 'literal meaning' of the Qur'an and of the Arabic language in general. The controversy is around the level of literalism that is to be applied in understanding the Qur'an, since every word in it is divinely arranged. Why didn't God simply say, 'Ask the people of the town'?

'The Story', *ayah* 7: If you fear for a baby's safety, the last thing you are likely to do is throw him into the river, even if he has a basket for a boat. The almost paradoxical nature of this command evokes the importance of total trust in God. For me, it is an example of the 'heart-stopping paradoxes' that some Sufis speak about. A modern version of this command might be, 'When in trouble, take the plunge and don't worry about it—God will look after you!'

'The Story', *ayah* 10: Most commentators understandably take the 'void in the heart' to refer to Moses' mother's total distress at separation from her suckling babe, albeit due to her willing submission to God's command in this matter.

There is also a mystical reading of this *ayah*: Moses' mother's heart is void of everything besides God; she would burst with the proclamation of the ultimate divine secret, were it not for God strengthening and restraining her heart, that she may be a true believer and not divulge the secret.

The state of Moses' mother's heart in *ayahs* 7 and 10 gives an indication of her exalted spiritual station; she is a true saint who endures considerable emotional tests with love, faith and contentment.

'The Story', *ayah* 9: Pharaoh's wife (traditionally named Asiya) exclaims that Moses will be a source of joy to her and her husband. This is true in the short term, as they have a baby boy in the household. But the truth of her assertion is long-term also in her case, as she has faith in Moses, unlike her husband, and is thus saved from his unbelief and admitted into God's everlasting pleasure, as detailed elsewhere in the Qur'an (66: 11). There is even a mystical view, usually dismissed as heretical, that her assertion, as a prayer, is true also for the pharaoh, who also achieves salvation and redemption, along with Satan! This teaching is attributed to the great Sufis Hallaj and Ibn 'Arabi, both of whom were, and remain, extremely controversial within the Muslim community.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Islamic tradition, her name was Safura, but she is not named in the Qur'an, where the only woman mentioned by name in the entire Scripture is Maryam (Mary), mother of 'Isa (Jesus).

## **A Christian perspective on the Muslim Text**

It is interesting that a traditional reading of both of these Qur'anic passages sees the parent's longing for the child as an image of the soul's longing for God. Isn't it more natural to think of *God* as a parent, who longs for *us*? And is child-like dependency a good metaphor for our need of God? I wonder what new insight comes with asking us to explore our relationship to God by bringing parental feelings of love and longing into the picture.

*Does God long for us?*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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