**Thinking with the Old Testament about the Pandemic**

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Television and newspapers have drawn attention to the story of the Derbyshire plague village, Eyam. In 1665-66 an epidemic reached it from London, from where it could easily spread to the nearby big town of Sheffield. The village priest, William Mompesson, and a Puritan predecessor of his who still lived in the village, Thomas Stanley, persuaded the villagers to stay there and self-isolate together, so as to contain the plague (Mompesson was exercising the ministry that Stanley had had to vacate – one wonders how they interacted). The villagers did, and succeeded, but more than a quarter of them died. Their act of self-sacrifice sets a challenging example before us in connection with the corona virus. But a story’s nature is to do more than provide a good example. It can give us ways of looking at ourselves, of asking what we would do in that situation, of thinking about our own experience, our attitudes, and our lives, and about what they mean.

When it’s a factual story like the Eyam story, it embodies the truth that disaster is not the beginning and need not be the end. Eyam’s earlier history and its ongoing history are bigger than that one terrible event. A previous acquaintance with the gospel lay behind the ministers’ leadership and the people’s response in this crisis. And Eyam has endured through subsequent centuries as a living community and an inspiration to visitors, in a broader sense than by embodying an example to follow – though shining in that way is worthwhile. It reminds us to see our unprecedented pandemic as not a beginning, and neither (please God) will it be an end, but part of an ongoing story.

The Hebrew word for a plague or epidemic is *deber*, though in this connection the Old Testament more often uses nouns meaning affliction or blow (*nega*‘, *negep*, *maggepah*, *makkah*), and often describes an epidemic’s arrival by using the parent verbs of these nouns, which mean hit or afflict (*naga*‘, *nagap*, *nakah*). Commonly God is those verbs’ subject, so that he is the one who brings epidemics, but it is not invariably so. Israel knew that sometimes epidemics are just one of those things. The variation corresponds to the way the Old Testament speaks of (e.g.) infertility and illness. Sometimes God closes a woman’s womb; sometimes a woman simply cannot have children. At one level God is responsible for all such events, but the Old Testament is at least as interested in the fact that some of his actions are more deliberate or more significant for his ultimate purpose than others. When he does act deliberately or with particular purpose, the act may then be a chastisement. But the Job story and many other Old Testament stories reflect the awareness that one mustn’t assume that something going wrong must be a response to people doing something wrong (it’s a myth that the Old Testament generally makes a tight link between sin and disaster). The stories know that something different may be going on, and that often we don’t know what it is. Further, whereas Christians often think in terms of God as judge and thus as bringing judgment, that language implies a ruling metaphor from law which fits Western thinking and culture but is not the Old Testament’s default imagery – hence I speak in terms of chastisement rather than judgment.

In his prayer at the temple dedication, Solomon leaves an intriguing space and ambiguity between epidemic and divine chastisement. He entreats Yahweh to listen when people reach out to him in the context of epidemic or some other disaster (he lists a number). He entreats Yahweh to pardon, and to deal with each person in accordance with the state of their heart (2 Chronicles 6:28 – 30). Putting it this way suggests that Yahweh would know that they might need pardon but might not; they might just need deliverance. I allude to the Chronicles version of the prayer (it also comes in 1 Kings 8) because Chronicles later has Jehoshaphat taking up its language when Judah is under attack and the context is not one of divine chastisement; Judah just needs protection (2 Chronicles 20:1 – 12). The accounts of Solomon’s prayer exemplify a difference between the Samuel-Kings and Chronicles versions of Israel’s history. Samuel-Kings knows that in its day Judah is undergoing Yahweh’s chastisement and needs to think in those terms; Chronicles knows that in its day Judah needs encouragement about Yahweh’s grace rather than rebuke. But even the Kings version of the prayer leaves both possibilities open. Psalm 91 compares with Chronicles in affirming Yahweh’s protection from epidemic, though the unequivocal nature of Yahweh’s promises in the psalm raises questions of its own. If you “live in the shelter of the Most High” you will find that Yahweh “will save you from the engulfing epidemic.” After Mompesson’s wife died of the plague, one wonders what he made of Psalm 91 when it came up as the psalm for the eighteenth morning each month, and whether he was tempted to follow the Puritan Stanley in declining to be bound by the 1662 Act of Uniformity that required him to follow the Prayer Book lectionary.

In Jeremiah and Ezekiel Yahweh threatens epidemic twenty-nine times, as an aspect of the disaster menacing Jerusalem that they sought to prepare people for, or preferably to obviate. But there are no accounts of Yahweh fulfilling that threat when Jerusalem fell, as there are of death by sword and famine. Epidemic is not built into a city’s blockade and capture as are famine and sword. But the shortfall of fulfilment also reflects how Yahweh’s word is regularly harsher than his bite and/or is not to be taken too literally.

The Old Testament’s stories about actual epidemic are appropriately terrifying, though they also have instructive and constructive implications. When the disasters consume Israel’s enemies, their significance characteristically goes beyond *schadenfreude*. Even when they happen to Israel’s oppressors and contribute to its deliverance, the stories can have an edge as they address Israel itself.

The first epidemic is the one with which Yahweh afflicts Pharaoh when Abraham facilitates his taking Sarah in his harem. The story in Genesis 12 begins with a famine. The Old Testament’s famine stories make illuminating reading set alongside its epidemic stories (it leads one to think about the anxiety concerning food shortages that has generated raids on supermarket shelves in the context of the pandemic). Famine here goes along with epidemic, in a different way from their association in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In the Old Testament famine sometimes issues from God’s action but is indeed sometimes just one of those things, like infertility. Genesis 12 does not claim to have an explanation for its famine. It is not the only ambiguity in the story. Was Abraham wrong to leave Canaan for Egypt? Was he wrong in being economical with the truth over his relationship with Sarah? Should Sarah have said “No” when he asked her to go along with his economy? (Abraham asked her nicely and said “please” – you do not mess with Sarah). How did Pharaoh know the cause of the epidemic? The epidemic does rescue Pharaoh from accidental wrongdoing, rescue Sarah, rescue Abraham, and thus rescue God’s promise. Overlapping dynamics appear in a story about Abraham’s son Isaac and his wife Rebekah in Genesis 26. That story also begins with an unexplained famine, and includes an eventual warning by the king that none of his people should “bother” Sarah: ironically, he uses the verb *naga‘*, one of the words that can mean to afflict with an epidemic.

Especially illuminating as we think about epidemics and pandemics is the account of the seven-year famine through the entire world of Egypt and Canaan in Genesis 41 – 47. Again Genesis gives no reason for the famine. It is not described as an act of divine chastisement; by implication, it too was just one of those things. But coincidentally (?), it followed on a breakdown in relationships in Jacob’s family that issued in one of his sons being taken to Egypt as a bondservant. And Joseph later saw his being sold into servitude not as a coincidence nor as the result of his brothers’ faithlessness but as something God effected as an act of compassion. Did even the famine itself have that aim in mind, it being the event that made the family reconciliation possible? But the point Joseph makes is that God was involved not in causing it but in arranging for Joseph to be in the right place at the right time as an act of mercy for the world and for the people of God. Joseph oversimplifies things in gracious hyperbole when he says that it was God not his brothers who sent him. But things indeed worked out not only to save the world but to open up the way to the brothers owning the faithlessness of their action and to the restoring of family relationships. And in doing so, it generated the first great scriptural example of someone turning the other cheek.

Without a famine, too, Ruth would never have found Naomi or Yahweh or Boaz, David would never have found his grandfather, and Jesus would never have been a descendant of David. The famine in Bethlehem that opens the Ruth story, like the arrival of the epidemic in Eyam, is neither an end nor a beginning. The story keeps emphasizing that Ruth is a Moabite, which means she herself is a descendant of Abraham’s family: see the unsavoury and/or scatological account of Lot’s daughters’ initiative in Genesis 19. And the end of the story notes that Boaz is a descendant of Abraham via Perez: see the unsavoury and/or scatological account of Perez’s mother’s initiative in Genesis 38. While the sins of parents can take a toll of the next generation or three, the Torah more often comments that God’s commitment extends to a thousand generations. No, our epidemic is not a beginning, and neither (please God) will it be an end, but part of an ongoing story. If epidemic issues from our stupidity, this fact does not mean that God abandons us or declines to weave it into his story.

The great actual epidemic story in the Old Testament follows soon on the Joseph story, in Exodus 6 – 12. That series of disasters does issue from Yahweh’s action. It constitutes a demonstration of the authority and power of Yahweh, though also an attempt to get Pharaoh to do the right thing in letting Israel go and thus to recognize who is the real authority in Egypt. Paradoxically, Yahweh eventually encourages Pharaoh to take no notice of him, to stay stubborn in his thinking, to stiffen his resolve about holding onto the Israelites (whose labour is a state asset); as the traditional translation puts it, eventually Yahweh hardens Pharaoh’s heart. This action contributes to the demonstration of Yahweh’s power and authority when Pharaoh yields and does let Israel go, and the story knows from the beginning that Yahweh will eventually take this action. But Pharaoh’s encouraging himself in that direction comes first, before Yahweh starts whispering in his ear (Exodus 7:13). The epidemic was a wake-up call that this Pharaoh didn’t heed, in the way the earlier Pharaoh heeded the wake-up call in Joseph’s day, and eventually his people paid a terrible price. But Exodus’s telling of the story doesn’t allow the Israelites to wax too superior. Neither before nor after the event are they models of trust in God. It doesn’t stop God persisting in his grace and persisting in his purpose.

Actually, most of the Old Testament’s stories about famine and epidemic that are expressions of divine chastisement are about the Israelites. Second Samuel 21 tells of a three-year famine. Apparently it took David three years to ask whether there might be any reason for it, and Yahweh then explained it (speaking to him, or speaking via a prophet?). It related to an action of Saul’s in putting some Gibeonites to death in contravention of the commitment Joshua had made to them. David asks the surviving Gibeonites what he needs to do to put things right, the Gibeonites want a life for a life from among Saul’s sons, and David agrees. The story has no immediate comment on the rights and wrongs of that response; it focuses rather on the action taken by the mother of two of the victims, who wants to ensure that they get a proper burial instead of their bodies becoming carrion for birds. Her action drives David into providing honourable burial for them and reburial for their father and their brother Jonathan. And then Yahweh let himself be entreated on behalf of the country (2 Samuel 21:14).

If there could be a funny plague story (as *Private Eye* and *The Onion* currently assume), the victims are the Philistines in 1 Samuel 5. They were unwise enough to seize Yahweh’s covenant chest, which the Israelites had been unwise enough to take into battle on the assumption that it would ensure their victory. The effect of the Israelites’ initiative was to galvanize the Philistines, and it seems that Yahweh was only too happy to put the Israelites in their places by letting the Philistines win a resounding victory. However, Yahweh was not inclined to let matters rest there. First the Philistines’ god Dagon mysteriously prostrated himself before the covenant chest, then his head and hands fell off. The story records no agency of these acts; obviously one suspects Mossad.

The story holds back any reference to Yahweh’s agency until the next Ashdodite disaster: “he struck them down with tumours.” Unusually, the two forms of the Hebrew text (the consonantal text and the text as read out) incorporate two alternative words for tumours, a general term and one etymologically linked with dysentery. The latter link fits with the traditional assumption that the affliction consisted in haemorrhoids, which adds to the sense that the story is both funny and horrifying. The Ashdodites recognize that the covenant chest is too hot to handle and pass it on to the people of Gath. The story repeats itself, so that the Gittites pass it on to Ekron. In due course the Philistines get the point and ask their religious leaders what to do; they advise on a compensatory offering to pay Yahweh when they send the chest back home to Israel. The offering includes golden effigies of mice as well as of the tumours, which both adds to the humour and adds to the implication that the affliction is something like bubonic plague. The offering works, but a grim footnote to the story indicates that some Israelites in Beth Shemesh (which happens to be where the wagon arrives) are no wiser than they were at the beginning of the story and pay a price when they commit some further impiety or sacrilege (there is again more than one version of the text).

The Old Testament has one more narrative about an epidemic, in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. It begins with one of the most intriguing differences between the Samuel-Kings version of Israel’s story and the Chronicles version. Second Samuel 24 has Yahweh being angry with Israel and inspiring David with the idea of taking a census; 1 Chronicles 21 attributes the inspiration to “an adversary.” The adversary is a *satan*, but in the Old Testament this word is a common noun, not a name. The adversary is apparently one of Yahweh’s underlings. If we put the two versions together, then the adversary is Yahweh’s agent, as in Job, and by including him Chronicles avoids giving the impression that Yahweh’s strange action was an expression of inexplicable anger. The Chronicles version fits with the different emphasis from Samuel-Kings that we have noted (Chronicles may presuppose that 2 Samuel actually assumes that the anger followed on the census, and may then be right). So David orders the census, against the advice of his staff, who hint that they can see that it suggests reliance on military numbers if not opening up the possibility of raising taxes.

Whether or not the event starts from Yahweh’s displeasure, it issues in such displeasure. David eventually recognizes his waywardness and folly and Yahweh offers him a choice of chastisements, by famine, military defeat, or epidemic. David chooses epidemic: “Let us fall into Yahweh’s hands, because his compassion is great. May I not fall into human hands.” A decision of noteworthy wisdom thus replaces his folly. In a sermon on this “primitive, not to say savage, story,” Austin Farrer notes that while David did not know about resurrection life, by choosing to fall into God’s hands he showed he had an instinct about Yahweh’s nature that would issue in Yahweh’s giving the gift of resurrection life. When we die, we fall into the hands of God. “It is the best that can be promised us, to fall into the hands of the Lord, because his mercies are great: eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered the heart of man what God has prepared for them who love him” (*A Celebration of Faith*, 112-16).

When I first started to think about the subject of this paper, I had in my mind the fact whatever the issue you need to think about, it’s worth asking what are the various ways the Old Testament talks about it. I don’t immediately mean what is the content of the various things that it says but what are the various ways in which it goes about saying them. In the Old Testament people tell stories, they make rules, they relate God’s visions and dreams, they think, they pray. In the New Testament, they write letters, too, and that possibility is worth thinking about in our present context. God in his wisdom, and the Israelite community in its wisdom, had various ways of reflecting on issues, and they were instructive in differing ways. They gave people different angles and made them think in different ways. I explored this point in a piece on “Modes of Theological Reflection in the Bible” in *Theology* 94 (1991): 181–88, and I still believe it thirty years later. But as I thought about the present subject, I realized that it is the stories that are especially striking.

I was a little puzzled that the rules for life in the Torah don’t cover dealing with epidemic and famine. The Torah explicitly refers to them only from the angle that reappears in that paradoxical form in Jeremiah and Ezekiel: it issues warning designed to forestall them, in Leviticus 26:25 and Deuteronomy 28:21. Maybe the Torah’s main broader implication would be that as the people of God we need not just to look for explanations of the epidemic but to reflect and repent, as Jesus says after the fall of the tower at Siloam (Luke 13:1-5). Etymologically, the word penitentiary suggests a place of penitence, and one factor in the complex history of penitentiary reform and development in the newly-formed United States at the end of the eighteenth century was a conviction on the part of Quakers in Pennsylvania that people needed to be sent to penitentiary to reflect on their sins. It leads one to think about another aspect of our pandemic, as countries are compelling people to isolate themselves. It could give us opportunity for penitential contemplation.

Alongside what the Torah does not say about epidemic and famine, Leviticus 19:13-18 would imply that such an event requires us to give concrete expression to loving our neighbour. Kathleen and I have been touched by a student offer to us as vulnerable oldies to do shopping for us, and we ourselves have been thinking about the needs of some friends whose academic gig-economy income has disappeared along with their work, and about how we can help them put food on the table. Leviticus speaks especially of the neighbour who is our enemy, and Proverbs 25:21 has a related comment that would apply in the context of famine or epidemic: it’s a time to feed our enemy. A linked implication of Deuteronomy is its repeated reminder to live on the basis of the community’s being a family – Deuteronomy keeps calling the community to recognize that they are brothers (and sisters).

Beyond the Torah, the Psalms model a kind of crying out to God that is apposite in the midst of epidemic, and Kathleen and I have been crying out that way. Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes model the need to think about the mind-boggling, mind-revolutionizing implications of this pandemic that is unlikely to leave the world the same as it was; business will never be as usual again.

But the stories, which in regular times may seem savage and worrying and embarrassing, in worrying and cruel times especially make us think, in their surprising, ambiguous, question-raising way.