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**JOB – THE SACRED IMAGE OF CHRIST IN THE OLD
TESTAMENT**

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Abstract

The theme of suffering is recurrent in the texts of the Book of Scripture, touching upon a most complex theological topic and undertaking some of the most unexpected significances: suffering as a punishment for evil doing, suffering as a future reward, suffering as an experience of God's presence, suffering as medicine both for the body and for the soul, suffering as proof of faith, suffering as a form of purification both of the body and of the soul, suffering because of or for another, Christ's suffering, suffering as a confirmation of the Christ etc. Illness, pain and the fear of suffering make up a common semantic space in many of the texts in the Book of Scripture. Therein the legitimate question coming from those who less understand the mystery of faith and of man's relation to God: if God is good, why does He consent to the suffering of the innocent?

Keywords: suffering; illness; sin; punishment; retribution; passion;

1. INTRODUCTION

Recurrent in the history of humankind throughout centuries, the Scripture itself seems to address this issue. Why all the suffering and illness? The Psalms embody the failure of the religious man when witnessing the happiness of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous:

And I have said: "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence,

For all day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning; (Ps. 72, 13-14) But as for me, unto Thee, oh Lord, have I cried, oh Lord; and in the morning shall my prayer meet Thee.

Why, Lord, do You reject me and move Your face from me?"(Ps. 87, 14-15) Clearly, the traditional account can no longer be considered, i.e. that suffering is a consequence of sinning, particularly because there are quite numerous cases where suffering is not always the result of a life led away from God. Not always does suffering manifest a punitive feature, since it can also articulate itself as a sign of God's love (Alexandrescu, 1937, p. 45) or as a part of God's plan for humankind.

Time and again, this is revealed in the Old Testament, especially through the history of Abraham, Joseph and Moses, and, for the most part, through Job's story. One thing is certain, though: holding God

responsible for all the suffering is an answer that will only lead us to a dead end, one of the greatest mistakes that humankind can make.

Only by moving away from this false trail do we reach the correct justification: suffering is but the failure of Man's love to God's own love. Experience has shown that only love is powerful enough to guide man to assume his suffering and, therefore, overcome it (Popa, 2003, p. 3). And, from this point of view, suffering cannot be detached from the virtue of faith and hope. Suffering experienced within faith can only hope for the promise of the future divine kingdom (Chiodi, 2006, p. 339).

2. SUFFERING AS A CONSEQUENCE OF SINNING

According to the texts in the Scripture, one can undoubtedly conclude that God loves mankind and He has persistently proven Himself an ally and a partner of Man: He has been repeatedly sympathetic of and compassionate towards Man by showing such commitment in His promises that He sent His only son to suffer for humankind.

Unquestionably, for some (Sartre, 2003, p. 78) talking about God's love for Man is unwise (I Corinthians 1, 23: But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles). Well, it is particularly this "folly" that the Scripture tells us about when stating: The Lord blesses his sons, the same as He blesses those who are afraid of Him (Ps. 102, 13). Zion said: "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me!" Can a mother forget her nursing child and have no compassion for the son of her womb? But even if that were possible, I will not forget thee! (Isaiah 48, 14-15, 66).

In the Scripture, the first one to benefit from God's leniency is Cain. Although suffering could be interpreted as a form of punishment for the sin of having committed murder, God considers Cain's behaviour and punishes him through love by not abandoning him; on the contrary, God makes Cain known by a mark on the latter's forehead, which, on the one hand, is a form of punishment, while on the other, it saves Cain from the violence of other people (Genesis, 4).

Similarly, the same interpretation can be carried out when talking about the faithfulness of the Jews to God, or of every single man, for that matter, since the same old theological structure can be applied to the authoritarian reward – punishment relationship.

God's interference in people's lives happens only to make justice, even if The Law of Talion should be the case. By making justice, God preserves his relationship to the chosen people (Gagliardi, 2010, 48). This dynamics is beautifully illustrated in the episode concerning the 10 punishments of Egypt in the Book of Exodus. What makes God interfere is exactly the shed tears of the enslaved people. The grievance of the people, oppressed by Egyptian slavery, sets in motion a wide salvation mission to which God himself participates effectively (Exodus, 2, 23-25). The 10 punishments of Egypt stand for the divine punishment both of the pharaoh and of the Egyptian people against Israel being released from their service. This is a clear example of the biblical pattern meant to reconcile suffering: suffering, pain is the punishment for the committed sin (Ballabio, 1999, p. 125).

This mediation of suffering as a form of punishment, intended to break the divine law, has been recurring all throughout the history of the Jewish people. Starting with the punishment of 40 years' wanderings into the wilderness of Sinai, for idolatry, and ending with assuming responsibility for Christ's crucifixion (Mt. 27, 25), suffering is understood in close connection with the sin as a form of defiance and infringement on the divine law. And yet, the story of Job or the complaints in the Psalms and Isaiah are somewhat different

3. JOB – A GENUINE ACCOUNT OF FAITH KEPT IN SUFFERING

The Book of Job is the genuine account of a man touched by an enormous physical pain on top of which there lies the feeling of loneliness, forsaking by God and by friends and family. At a first sight, the story of Job might suggest itself like a particular, singular situation which nonetheless assumes a universal anthropologic value (Chiodi, 2006, p. 339).

Like Adam, Job stands for the universal Man. In everyone's solitude there is a fight between good and evil, light and darkness, love and hatred. The word Eybah, which translates "enmity" (Preliceanu & co, 2006, p. 294) belongs to the same family of words as that of the word "love", Ahabah. Therefore, both

Job's and Adam's stories are not so much about the mystery of suffering as they are about the mystery of God's endless love for man (Popa, 2003, p. 3).

Besides, what the Scripture actually accounts about Job is his power of faith (Grelot, 1986, p. 117). With reference to Job's trial because the devil challenged God, the following question inevitable rises: Will Job still believe once all the suffering is gone? Deprived of all logic, the answer does not fall in any retribution theories recurrent in the entire history of the Old Testament: suffering is itself the reward for the sin (Chiodi, 2006, p. 339).

In the end, it is exactly this judgment that Job comes to contradict: he grows to believe in God and love Him disinterested, having no expectations in return (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 55). To Job, as it is the case with all the sapiential books in the Old Testament, (Proverbs 1, 7; 9,10; Ps.110, 10), this is the principle of wisdom.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa tells that the fear of God which arises out of faith is a tremendous source of righteousness, making the one in suffering wiser by remembering the things passed so as to beware the future ones. By mastering the soul and chasing out all our evil thoughts, fear is born of light-heartedness and so all wrongdoings are stifled (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col.479C).

A former righteous and prosperous man, grieving over because of all the evils come upon him, Job is an outstanding example of someone who suffers because of their human condition. His pain is infinite all the more because the reason of his suffering is unknown to him (Ballabio, 1999, p. 125).

He is not a mere righteous person who, in the name of his innocence, revolts himself against suffering, but he is aware of not being righteous before God. He is aware of the fact that he cannot feel guilty for a particular thing alone, and that is exactly why he keeps invoking his innocence, although he does not reject the theory of retribution according to which sin and suffering are connected. He feels God's presence in his life, which makes him doubt himself and start asking about his sins by constantly looking into his conscience, and so his suffering becomes a good opportunity for him to know his own vanity (Chiodi, 2006, p. 440).

Nobody can ease his pain: neither his family nor the society - symbolically personified by the three friends who share the Old Testament philosophy according to which Job's previous sins have led God to punish him: i.e. there is no punishment without a sin, or, if someone suffers it is because they have previously committed a sin (Grelot, 1986, p. 27) By embodying this particular traditional philosophy, Job's friends hold the utilitarian belief that virtue brings about happiness and sinning, suffering (Spinsanti, 1990, p. 14).

Therein, The Book of Job can be considered a genuine icon of suffering which is assumed, a catechesis on the need to be faithful to God, against all compromise, a figment of Christianity and a prophetic anticipation of Christ.

Although it was not until the fourth century that, for the most part, the Orient (Popescu, 1935, p. 75) started considering Job a "symbolic icon" of the Christ, thus heralding the Gospels (St. John Chrysostom, 2012, p. 27), setting an example for all Christians and embodying an angelic life gained by virtue of suffering, (St. Gregory the Theologian, 1857, col.1179B-C), in a prophetic manner, one might say that not only does Job anticipate the image of the Christ (Larchet, 2008, p. 156) who is pierced on the Cross but he also timidly hails the joy of resurrection: I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the end He shall stand on this earth. My flesh may be destroyed, yet from this body I will see God. Yes I will. (Job 19, 25-27).

Consequently, even if he dies without having a full understanding of suffering and its role in a man's life, it is due to his prophetic dimension that Job becomes a part in God's Plan regarding His pledge in the Old Testament (Gagliardi, 2010, p. 47; Spinsanti, 1990, p. 187) and the place where God reveals himself to man. Moreover, through the New Job, embodied by Christ himself, God shall reveal the accomplishment of his Plan concerning man: with Christ, the "Road of the Cross" becomes "the Road of Resurrection" (Popa, 2003, p. 4).

In the Latin world, the problem of Job and particularly his identification with Christ is first referred to by Zeno of Verona (S. Zenonis Episcopii Veronensis, 1845, col.439-443) who preaches a series of homilies about suffering and later by Gregory the Great (St. Gregory the Great, 1849) for whom Job is

the central figure in his “Morals” and which represents the symbol of all righteous men in the Old Testament who have waited for Messiah.

Job marks a movement away from the anthropology of suffering to one that is genuinely theological. Job is such a strong believer that the mystery of his own question “why do the righteous suffer?” cannot be reasonably understood by the means of a theological theorem and remains the mystery that undermines all reason. “Which is this infinite mystery” – Saint Gregory the Theologian asks himself (St. Gregory the Theologian, 1857, col. 866). And he replies: In fact, in the Scripture there is a similar mystery and time is not enough to enumerate all the whispers of the Spirit which lead me to it. And yet who could count the sand of the sea, or the drops of water, or the depth of the abysses? Who could fathom God’s wisdom which spreads itself everywhere and which He used to create all the things according to His own will and mind? In fact, as the Saint Apostle says, it is only enough to admire difficulties rather than explain them, to contemplate and then move further: Oh, the depth of God’s knowledge and skill! How unknown is his judgement and how obscure his way! And again: If truth be told: Who has known God’s thoughts? Or who was his advisor? (Rm. 11, 33-34) Who had access to His wisdom? Job asks himself (15, 9) who is the wise man to understand all these things (Os. 14, 10) or rather to measure against what is unfathomable, and exceeds all measure (St. Gregory the Theologian, 1857)?

4. CONCLUSION

According to The Book of Job, the same faulty tradition of the Old Testament retribution is persistent in other texts of the Old Testament; one such illustrative example bearing a prophetic intention is to be found between chapters 52 and 53 by the prophet Isaiah. The text speaks of a person, the Lord’s servant who, by performing a sacerdotal act, uses his own life and suffering as a salvation for many (Chiodi, 2006, p. 351; Beauchamp, 2002, p. 267).

The righteous man is doomed just like a sinner. For that reason, the death of the righteous one reveals the sin of his accusers blaming him: his death is a gift made by God’s “Servant” for everyone’s salvation. Surely He has borne our grief and bore our suffering. Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not his mouth; He is brought like a lamb to the slaughter and like a sheep before her shearers is dumb so He opens not his mouth (Is. 53, 4-7).

Hence, there is a connection between sin and suffering, but, both in the Book of Job and in Isaiah 53, he who suffers does not suffer for his sins; there is a clear reference here to delegate suffering, i.e. bearing suffering for another. Once this point of view changes, everybody is surprised to discover a type of pain that overthrows all evil and suffering, not as a form of punishment but as a salvation spiral for all of us (Chiodi, 2006, p. 353).

Isaiah’s prophecy is taken over by the Holy Gospels which describe the accomplishment of this prophecy through Jesus Christ. “The Servant” who suffers for the sins of humanity is Christ, the one who relinquishes His life for our transgressions. His Passion and Death become a universal gift and a grace.

The life and experience of the righteous Job is valuable to illustrate the fact that, on the one hand, God is not the doer of all evils that come upon him, and on the other, we are presented with the way a man suffers without being guilty and the way he assumes suffering in his relationship with God.

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