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The Significance of Suffering in Biblical Anthropology – Based on Cultures of the Middle East: *Res sacra miser* – a Suffering Man is Sacrosanct

Znaczenie cierpienia w antropologii biblijnej
na tle kultur Bliskiego Wschodu.

Res sacra miser – człowiek cierpiący rzeczą świętą

ABSTRACT: The basis for the biblical answer to the question of why man suffers is found in the ancient civilizations. In the civilization of Egypt, suffering was associated with the violation of the principles of Maat. In Mesopotamia there existed two sources of suffering, one was the wrong decisions of human beings, and the other was the work of demons. In the Greek civilization, in mythology, the source of suffering may be the rebellion of man. In philosophy, one tries to rationalize suffering and lead a person to such a state where he would experience as little of it in life as possible. Inspired authors know suffering, which is recorded in the nature of the living world, and man, through the gift of reason, should prudently avoid it. Most often, however, these authors see the source of suffering in sin. In the history of theology, there has also appeared the question about the possibility of the suffering of God. Under the influence of the Greek philosophical ideas of controlling passions and accepting the attitude of *apatheia*, the possibility of God experiencing suffering was rejected. God was pushed into the sphere that is only driven by love to a limited degree, and yet God is love. It went unnoticed that there are two ambivalent sources of suffering, one is born of evil, and the other is the highest bond of love. Those who love are most fully united in suffering, therefore, God was open to this narrative when His Son suffered and is also open when man suffers.

KEY WORDS: suffering, suffering in the Bible, expiation, test of faith, pedagogy of suffering, suffering of God

ABSTRAKT: Tłem dla biblijnej odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego człowiek cierpi, pozostają dawne cywilizacje. W cywilizacji Egiptu cierpienie wiązano z naruszeniem zasad, które uświęcone przez tradycję porządkowały życie osobiste i społeczne. W Mezopotamii za źródła cierpienia uznawano błędne decyzje człowieka i działania demonów. W cywilizacji Grecji mamy dwa nurty – mitologiczny i filozoficzny. Autorzy natchnieni natomiast znają cierpienie, które jest zapisane w naturze, a którego rozumny człowiek powinien unikać. Najczęściej jednak widzą źródło cierpienia w grzechu. W tym kontekście pojawiła się trudność z wyjaśnieniem cierpienia człowieka sprawiedliwego. Jedną z odpowiedzi odnajdujemy w idei próby wiary, inną w myśli, że cierpienie ma charakter wychowawczy, gdyż oczyszcza i pozwala otworzyć się na innych. W historii teologii pojawiło się również pytanie o to, czy cierpi Bóg. Pod wpływem greckiej filozofii panowania nad namiętnościami i postawy *apathei* odrzucono tę możliwość. Jednak w ten sposób zepchnięto Stwórcę do strefy, w której ogranicza się kierowanie miłością, a przecież Bóg jest miłością. Nie zauważono, że są dwa ambiwalentne źródła cierpienia – jedno rodzi się ze zła, a drugie jest szczytem miłości. Najpełniej osoby kochające łączą się w cierpieniu, a więc Bóg był otwarty na tę relację, gdy cierpiał Jego Syn, i jest otwarty, gdy cierpi człowiek.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: cierpienie, cierpienie w Biblii, ekspiacja, próba wiary, pedagogia cierpienia, cierpienie Boga

At some point in his life man poses the questions: Why do I suffer? Why do my loved ones suffer? Where does suffering come from in the first place? Let us respond to these questions drawing on the wisdom of ancient civilizations since they too experienced the feeling of joy and happiness, but they also partook in pain, the feeling of misfortune and suffering. How did previous generations deal with the existence of suffering? The answer to this question can shed light upon the dilemmas which contemporary man faces at the present as he also tries to cope with the suffering that is part of his life.

A fruitful life means not only an able mind and body, success in life, the feeling of satisfaction, but also the conscious acceptance and dealing with suffering that one encounters. There is nothing closer to man than suffering – not even love. Only a few take their own life out of love, yet throngs of people have died experiencing suffering. It may be said, that man may just as well be referred to as both *homo sapiens* and *homo patiens*.¹ Perhaps there is a dependence between love and suffering? Perhaps the fullest love can only be expressed in suffering? Perhaps he who has not suffered in life, has also not experienced that which is most beautiful, complete unity in love?

¹ Cf. M. Filipiak, *Biblia jako tekst religijny i kulturowy* (Bible as a Religious and Cultural Text), Lublin 1993, p. 43.

Egyptians in the face of suffering

The Egyptian civilization arose at the shores of the Nile River and was shaped by its relatively regular floods. Similarly, the Egyptian social consciousness was formed based on the possibility of harnessing the potential of water, which the Nile provided. Happiness and prosperity were based on social harmony because it guaranteed the proper harnessing of the river floods. This harmony, the divine principles of the functioning of social relations were deified in the figure of the goddess Maat. Therefore, the source of suffering is a life in opposition to Maat – to divine harmony.

How should divine harmony be part of a man's private life? It is necessary to keep the body and the spirit as able as possible because only then does a man remain useful to his loved ones and society as a whole. Health is also the basis for building our happiness. And how do we keep in good health? We must maintain a healthy lifestyle! This means maintaining the balance between insufficiency and overabundance (neither asceticism nor promiscuity is good); all of the evil that a fool encounters, comes from the overindulgence of his belly and penis. An ideal life is one of moderation, based on optimizing one's needs, while a condition of maintaining health is a balance between the components of man: *ka* – responsible for physical needs, *ba* – responsible for desires and passions, and *akh* – responsible for higher aspirations and ambitions. On the other hand, the heart should be a place where compromise is achieved.²

Egyptians developed medicine because according to them it led to harmony. If a man was ill, it was up to the physician to restore balance (both physical and spiritual) in the organism. There is a preserved document in which the head Egyptian physician Uzahor-Resenet expresses his gratitude to the ruler of Persia for his care over a school of physicians:

His Majesty King Darius, who reigned in Elam on all countries and on all Egypt, has sent me to Sais in Egypt. He has instructed me to reorganize the houses of the life that had fallen into decadence.³ I have done as His Majesty has instructed me: I have filled them with students from noble families – there were no sons of the poor among them. I left them in the care of the wise men (...). His Majesty has instructed me to furnish them as best as possible so that they would

² Cf. W. Bator, *Religia starożytnego Egiptu* (The Religion of Ancient Egypt), Krakow 2004, p. 305.

³ In houses of life adepts were educated in various disciplines, which also included medicine. Cf. S. Pernigotti, *Kapłan* (Priest), transl. M. Witkowski, [in:] *Człowiek Egiptu* (Man of Egypt), S. Donadoni (ed.), Warsaw 2000, p. 178.

be able to learn and work. I have provided them with all that is necessary, all tools, in accordance with rules from previous times. His Majesty has commanded thus because he knew the benefits of this art, which is aimed at keeping alive all those who suffer.⁴

In the social dimension, the pharaoh was responsible for the presence of Maat – it was he who implemented order with his laws, which if they were not upheld could lead to chaos in interpersonal relations, and as a consequence to the suffering of many men. Each person, as best as he could, should also implement Maat, in order to overcome suffering in the social space, that is why the owner of a tomb boasts: “I have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, aided the castaway.”⁵

The Egyptians considered the surrounding reality as good and as a source of joy, that is why they considered a brief life as one of the most severe forms of punishment resulting in suffering. An even greater punishment was to be negatively judged by Osiris due to not maintaining the principles of Maat and to be sentenced to the darkest regions in the land of the dead to remain there forever.⁶

Mesopotamia – two sources of suffering

The inhabitants of Mesopotamia sought the answer to the question where does man come from. One of these was that the gods created people since work was too difficult for them, thus man was given the gift of reason, in order to carry out the work of gods.⁷ Therefore, the hardships and suffering connected with work were part of human nature since that was the will of the gods. Suffering also has its source in the existence of evil. And where did evil in the world come from, which brought with it pain and suffering?

⁴ Cf. J. Thorwald, *Dawna medycyna. Jej tajemnice i potęga. Egipt, Babilonia, Indie, Chiny, Meksyk, Peru* (Ancient Medicine. Its mysteries and its power. Egypt, Babylonian, India, China, Mexico, Peru), Wrocław 1990, p. 30.

⁵ Cf. S. Morenz, *Bóg i człowiek w starożytnym Egipcie* (God and Man in Ancient Egypt), transl. M. Szczudłowski, Warsaw 1972, p. 117.

⁶ Cf. W. Bator, Cierpienie (Suffering) [entry], [in:] *Religia Encyklopedia PWN* (Religion. PWN Encyclopedia), vol. 3, Warsaw 2001, p. 13.

⁷ Cf. K. Łyczkowska, K. Szarzyńska, *Mitologia Mezopotamii* (The Mythology of Mesopotamia), Warsaw 1986, p. 69.

This question which filled the minds of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia found its mythical explanation in the beginnings of the world. Initially, there was only Zurvan. Everything was in him and he was everything. Endless time and infinite space were in him and they were one, indistinguishable, identical. There were no features distinguishing the elements of being, while good and evil had not yet emerged out of unity. Then an idea entered Zurvan's head, a desire, to no longer be one, but to multiply and become two. He desired a son. He offered sacrifices and pondered what this offspring should be like: filled with all that is good, all splendor, happiness, and wisdom. And out of this prayerful thought, he conceived a Son of Light – Ormuzd. As he struggled thus, thinking, his joy was interrupted with doubts, which arose from the division of his being: he thought of characteristics in opposition to the previous ones, meaning darkness, anger and misfortune. This thought and this doubt gave rise to a second, unwanted son. And thus he conceived the Lord of Darkness – Ahriman.⁸

In this way, disharmony appeared in the world, which is a source of suffering. The world is filled with good and evil spirits and these have influence upon the people. As a consequence, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia limited the root of suffering to two sources: one was due to the wrong and bad decisions of man, the other was independent of man – the perpetrators of this suffering were demons. If a man was beset by physical suffering, then its cause had to be diagnosed. The diagnostician (*barû*) occupied himself with figuring out the causes of an illness (a diagnosis textbook was available). As soon as the diagnosis was made, treatment had to ensue. It was the task of a physician (*asû*) to treat illnesses with herbal mixtures, ointments, poultices, massages, and the isolation of the ailing. When the illness had spiritual roots, its causes were sought out outside of man, in the world of evil spirits. Finding the cure for this kind of an illness was the domain of an exorcist (*āšipu*), who treated the ill, using words, spells and amulets.⁹

A certain court official claimed that he came to Assur because: "I am ill. I do not even go to the marketplace. If I had gone there I would have died along the way (...) Let the king send me an exorcist and a physician."¹⁰ The *šurpu* was a known ritual, referring to the ritual of burning magical objects, to which both the illness and curses by which the believer was afflicted were transferred. During this ceremony, the suffering man requested to be free of "automatic

⁸ Cf. M. Składankowa, *Bohaterowie bogowie i demony dawnego Iranu* (The Heroes, Gods, and Demons of Ancient Iran), Warsaw 1984, p. 13.

⁹ Cf. I.L. Finkel, *Zarys historii medycyny starożytnej Mezopotamii* (An Overview of the History of Ancient Mesopotamia), Poznań 1997, p. 16 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Thorwald, *Dawna medycyna. Jej tajemnice i potęga...*, op. cit., p. 131.

sins” meaning those that were done unconsciously, in order to in this way, be liberated of misfortune or the black magic that harassed him.¹¹

The civilization of Mesopotamia gave rise a trend of religious and philosophical thought which was created by Zarathustra. The foundation of his thought was the dualism of good and evil which begins in the divine dimension where there is a constant struggle between Ashura Mazda the god of good and Angra Mainju the god of evil. This fight spills out onto the human dimension, and within each of us, there is a struggle between good and evil. The final victory belongs to the good, but along the way, there is much suffering, caused by resistance of the forces of evil.¹²

The end of the world and death were treated as liberation from the necessity of suffering and changes, as a passing into the state of eternal happiness.¹³

Greece – searching for the sense of suffering

Generations of philosophers have struggled with the questions concerning the sense of suffering. Aristotle distinguished between suffering connected with death, meaning suffering in the face of “a loss-causing evil” and all other forms of suffering referring to a lesser evil.¹⁴ Suffering connected with death should be conquered by the virtue of courage, while in all the remaining cases, by the virtue of patience.¹⁵

According to Aristotle, man should control his feelings (*pathos*), among which he included, in the broad sense: “desire, anger, fear, bravery, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, jealousy, mercy – and, in general, all that is accompanied by pleasure or distress.”¹⁶ As far as feelings are concerned, Aristotle postulated moderation: “ethical courage concerns the experience of passions and acting, in which overabundance is a mistake, while shortage – an object of reprimand, while the mean is an object of praise, something appropriate.”¹⁷ Among passions, there are those which are inherently evil, meaning joy at the misfortune

¹¹ Cf. G. Ravasi, *Hiob. Dramat Boga i człowieka* (Job. The Drama of God and Man), part 2, transl. K. Stopa, Krakow 2005, p. 383.

¹² Cf. I.J.S. Taraporewala, *The Religion of Zarathushtra*, Teheran 1980, pp. 23–30.

¹³ Cf. M. Składankowa, *Bohaterowie bogowie i demony dawnego Iranu*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁴ See: Aristotle, *Etyka nikomachejska* (Nicomachean Ethics), Warsaw 2012, III.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Czachorowski, Suffering [entry], [in:] *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii* (The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy), vol. 2, Lublin 2001, p. 190.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Etyka nikomachejska*, op. cit., 1105d.

¹⁷ Cf. ibidem, 1106b.

of others, envy, hatred, and others requiring to be overcome and in those cases, the rule of the golden mean does not apply.¹⁸

The Stoics suggested that happiness is achieved by living in accordance with Nature, meaning the law of reason. Reason allows us to recognize virtues, which we should follow and passions, which should be limited. The four principal virtues lead to happiness: sensibility, courage, moderation and justice. Those who do not follow these virtues are susceptible to experiencing suffering. Passions, which should be controlled, may also be a source of suffering. A wise man limits and even eliminates passions: pleasures (*hedone*), sorrows (*lype*), desires, (*epithymia*) and fears (*fobos*). In this way, we achieve a state of apathy (*apatheia*),¹⁹ in which we minimalize experiences associated with suffering.

Seneca states that: “It is of utmost importance to be able to in a joyful mood, deal with displeasures. Accept all that happens to you as if you had really wanted it to happen to you. And in truth, you should want to, if you truly understand that all things happen according to God’s will.” Seneca encouraged one to be distant from joy and suffering, explaining:

It is the most important thing – to reach with our thoughts above things dependent on fate and to remember that we are human to know about happiness that it is brief, and about misfortune that no one is misfortunate unless he considers himself to be so. That is the most important thing – to be prepared for death.²⁰

Therefore, the nature of things must be understood and if they are unavoidable they must be accepted peacefully, so if death is part of human nature we must accept this fact and be prepared for final departure at every moment of our lives. We try to avoid suffering, but if it should come, we endure it patiently.

For Epicurus and his students, the most important goal in life was to attain happiness, which they connected with achieving long-lasting pleasure encompassing the entire life. Since happiness most often means the lack of

¹⁸ Cf. M. Czachorowski, Apathy [entry], [in:] *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii* (The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy), vol. 1, Lublin 2000, p. 287.

¹⁹ This term means insensitivity, understood as a lack of passions in different shades in each school of philosophy. The Stoics understood it as a radical elimination of passions (affects) thought to be the evil of the soul, which causes it to be miserable. The Cynics, on the other hand, see apathy as a sort of indifference in the face of all things, which people value. The Megarian Stilpo views apathy as the ability to not feel needs. Pirron understands apathy in the most radical way: it means utter insensitivity. Cf. G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej* (The History of Ancient Philosophy), vol. 5, Lublin 2005, p. 28.

²⁰ Cf. F. Copleston, *Historia filozofii* (The History of Philosophy), vol. 1, Warsaw 2004, pp. 358–363.

pain, then it is attained by steering clear of suffering. The road to happiness leads through a wise, honest and just life. Epicurus claimed “a noble man enjoys perfect harmony of spirit, while an evil man lives in constant anxiety.” Then it is necessary to get rid of all fears, which are the source of suffering as well as desires, which multiply our needs and also become a root of suffering. On this path, we are aided by three virtues: simplicity, moderation and temperance. In extreme cases, our needs must be limited to a minimum, meaning food, drink and rest. At the same time, our food should be simple, while drink unrefined.

The Epicureans paid attention to health since it was a fundamental condition for not experiencing suffering. Another thing man needs for happiness is to be in a community with other people, therefore he needs friends. That is why Epicureans claimed “friendship is the greatest of all goods which wisdom provides us with to ensure happiness throughout our lives.” Epicurus was a supporter of a peaceful family existence far removed from the hustle and bustle of the world.²¹ A wise man should then live in hiding, surrounded by faithful friends, limiting his needs to a bare minimum.²² In this way, man achieves a state of serene calmness (*ataraxia*) and is happy. However, such a lifestyle did not guarantee a complete removal of suffering, hence Epicurus reproachfully states: “If God wants to abolish suffering and cannot, then he is not omnipotent. If he can, but does not want to, then he is wicked. And if he wants to and can then why does suffering exist and He does not abolish it?”²³ The attitude of *hybris* was some kind of a response to this problem. It meant self-exaltation above the gods, which brought misfortune to people.²⁴ However, the accusation against God that He is responsible for suffering in the world, repeats itself throughout history.

While philosophy strove to defeat suffering as a form of evil, in Greek mythology, the deities experienced suffering and were also its source for others. The Greeks created a myth about Prometheus who had a great influence on the European way of thinking, all the way to contemporary times. In this myth, Prometheus steals fire from Mt. Olympus, which he would later gifts to humanity. As punishment, he is chained to a rock on the Caucasus where a hungry

²¹ Cf. J. Jundziłł, *Wzorce i modele wychowania w rodzinie rzymskiej* (The Patterns and Models of Upbringing in a Roman Family), Bydgoszcz 2001, p. 28. The rabbi Shemaiah encouraged his students to lead a peaceful life advising them: “Love work, hate lordship, and seek no intimacy with the ruling powers” (Pirke Awot 1,10).

²² Cf. J.-J. Duhot, *Szczęście u Greków* (Happiness According to the Greeks), [in:] *Encyklopedia religii świata* (Encyclopedia of the Religions of the World), vol. 2: *Zagadnienia problemowe* (Key Issues), Warsaw 2002, p. 1788.

²³ Cf. F. Copleston, *Historia filozofii*, vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 369–373.

²⁴ Cf. W. Bator, *Cierpienie* [entry], op. cit., p. 13.

vulture constantly pecks out his liver, which then grows back, therefore he is subject to unending suffering.²⁵

In the European way of thinking this myth is still alive and well, although it has been transferred to the image of God from the Bible. Man is often shown as the one who steals truth about the laws of Nature from God, for which he is subject to suffering. This contradiction between divine wisdom (principles of the functioning of the world) and the theft of this knowledge from God, is a burden for European civilization. It is as if the civilization is a result of stealing divine laws! The time has come to change our way of thinking: civilization is a gift from God resulting from His first blessing: “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28), meaning, utilize your mind to discover God’s laws rooted in Nature and use them to overcome suffering, and make life more pleasant.

In subsequent parts of the myth we can read that Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus married Pandora who was sent by Zeus, and opened a box, where all the evils and miseries which afflict humanity were trapped, meaning: old age, hard work, illnesses, madness, vices, and passions.²⁶ In this part of the myth, we discover the profound truth, that the limitation of man is part of his development. Man must accept this limitation of the development of civilization, but on the other hand, those who transcend the mind, open themselves onto the next stage of cognition, which is the path of faith. From this perspective, a ‘redeemed’ man sees his own life and the life of the entire human community as eternal and then he transcends the limitations of suffering creating a civilization that in turn transcends mortality.

The Biblical response to experiencing suffering

Suffering as part of nature

In the world created by God, suffering is part of its nature. There are storms, hurricanes, cyclones, volcano eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and many other forces of Nature that are a source of suffering. What should be the attitude of

²⁵ Cf. V. Zamarovský, *Bogowie i herosi mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej* (The Gods and Heroes of Greek Mythology), Warsaw 2003, p. 389 ff.

²⁶ Cf. W. Markowska, *Mity Greków i Rzymian* (The Myths of Greeks and Romans), Warsaw 2002, p. 109 ff.

man in the face of natural threats? Man was created in the image and likeness of God, so he possesses the gift of reason, which should lead him to shape life and the surrounding world in such a way so as to be as little susceptible to suffering as possible.²⁷ The mandate received from God “Subdue the Earth” (Gen. 1:28) is just such a calling. The scholar Sirach encourages us: “Love your soul and comfort your heart, and drive care far from you” (Sir. 30:24).

However, it is impossible for man to completely avoid the threats present in the surrounding world, that is why he turns in prayers towards the Divine Providence, to protect him from suffering. Man should ask for the gift of reason, to appropriately shape Nature, to not damage it, let it become a source of his happiness and not a cause of suffering.

Suffering as a result of sin

One of the first responses about the sense of suffering is provided by biblical tradition in the very first chapters of the Book of Genesis. From the biblical text, we find out that God planted “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (*ra'*, Gen. 2:9), and then forbade access to it under the penalty of death (Gen. 2:17). This text puts the responsibility for breaking this law solely upon the shoulders of man. God created both the perpetrator of the temptation (serpent), as well as the object of desire (the forbidden fruit); therefore, he is somehow responsible for the evil present in the world (Gen. 6:5, *ra'*).²⁸

The possibility of choosing evil is part of the world condition so that man in recognizing good in the shadow of evil could shape his will and improve in recreating God's image in himself. Therefore, forming the image of God in man is a process in which man has God and his will as role models, but in a mirror, there is a reflection of His counterpart – evil. Every time man rejects God's design and gives into evil, sin appears, which distorts God's design in man, in the same way, that good is distorted in the reflection in the shape of

²⁷ This is how J.J. Rousseau commented the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 with his *Letter on Providence*: “It was not Nature's way to crowd together twenty thousand houses with six or seven stories each. If all the inhabitants of the city had been dispersed more equally, the damage would have been much less, maybe nil.” Cf. J.J. Rousseau, *List do Woltera o Opatrzności* (Letter to Voltaire on Providence), [in:] idem, *Umowa społeczna* (Social Contract), Warsaw 1966, p. 522 ff.

²⁸ Cf. A. Tronina, *Księga Hioba* (The Book of Job), Nowy Komentarz Biblijny (New Biblical Commentary), vol. 15, Częstochowa 2013, p. 570 ff.

its counterpart. As a consequence, sin gives rise to suffering, because disorder, disharmony and chaos enter the world (Gen 3:14-19).

The story of the relationship between Cain and Abel shows how sin destroys the foundations of love that should exist between brothers. Each man can discover himself in the relationship between Cain and Abel since we are all brothers because God is our Father. Cain, who is unable to bear the imbalance that is natural for mankind, chooses a path of jealousy, envy and hatred, and these parts of human nature are the cause of all conflicts and wars among people.²⁹

Yet, the appalling question still remains, where do jealousy, envy and hatred in man come from, if he was created in the image and likeness of God? Is the distortion of this image of God so great, that it causes the evil elements of human nature to surface in man? Or perhaps man as a free being has in his nature the possibility to activate these elements and at the moment of the original sin, they were put in motion and penetrated human nature? If it is possible to imagine a man without jealousy, envy and hatred then this means, that these are not the constructive components of human nature, but rather are the effect of negative use of human freedom, which is part of human nature.

Therefore, God in creating man granted him freedom; every time man in his choices takes the side of evil, this freedom is a source of suffering. In sinning, I can hurt myself or other people. In instilling suffering through sin, I deserve to be punished, which is recalled by the scholar Sirach: Do no evil, so shall no evil overtake you. Depart from wrong and it shall turn aside from you” (Sir. 7:1). Therefore, suffering can be a compensation for harm done to another man. A man should then attempt himself to compensate for the evil committed so that he could benefit from God’s mercy.

After righting the wrongs caused by sin, it is time for penance and a prayer filled with requests for the forgiveness of sins. An illustration of the connection between sin and suffering is the story of David. His love of Bathsheba becomes a source of David’s sin – he condemns her husband Uriah the Hittite to certain death. The prophet Nathan makes David aware of his sin, for which there must be just punishment. It comes in the form of illness of the child from David’s relationship with Bathsheba, which ultimately results in the child’s death. Despite the fact that David took up penance (2Sam. 12:16), God still demanded that he suffer due to the child’s death, to repent for his sin. The substitute sacrifice remains in the background, an innocent child takes the sin of the father upon himself – this is the figure of the innocent Christ suffering for the sins of men.

²⁹ Por. E. Haag, *Sens cierpienia w Starym Testamencie* (The Sense of Suffering in the Old Testament), “Communio” 50 (1989), no. 2, p. 5.

David then assumed that his sin had already been forgiven, therefore after the death of the child, he abandoned his fasting and returned to everyday life, however, God once again reminded him of the sin and the necessity for penance, through the rebellion of David's son Absalom. David humbly accepts his son's rebellion, even allows himself to be cursed and harmed by Shimei, counting on God's mercy in exchange. David then said: "Perhaps the Lord will see my affliction and repay me with good for the cursing I receive today" (2Sam. 16:12).³⁰ David changes himself from a rebellious ruler he becomes humble and open to God's mercy. He experiences this mercy and Absalom's rebellion is put down, while Bathsheba's son Salomon ascends to the throne.

In establishing a covenant with Noah, God, after the flood exhibited affirmation for the creation contaminated with sin (Gen. 9:8-17), for which a salvation plan is in place but still the sun continues to rise in the same way on the evil and the good, while the rain falls upon the righteous and the unrighteous (Mat 5:45).³¹

It must be remembered that biblical thought refers to all signs of life, including signs of evil, misfortune, and suffering, to God as the first cause of all that happens and all actions. God can grant health but also strike with illness, give children or not. Evil is not an exception in the entire reality created and dependent on God as the Creator.³² The evil caused by man can, therefore, return to him in the form of punishment that manifests itself as suffering. When the Hebrews fled Egypt, God intervened on their behalf, besieging the Egyptians with plagues. Certainly, these plagues were a form of suffering for the Egyptians, but in the background, we have the earlier exploitation of the Hebrews. In context we hear God's message directed to man in which he proclaims:

if you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His eyes and pay attention to His commands, and keep all His statutes, then I will not bring on you any of the disasters I inflicted on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you (Ex. 15:26).

³⁰ Cf. S. Potocki, *Problem cierpienia w historycznych tradycjach Starego Testamentu* (The Aspect of Suffering in Historical Traditions of the Old Testament), [in:] *Męka Jezusa Chrystusa* (The Passion of Jesus Christ), F. Gryglewicz (ed.), Lublin 1986, p. 29.

³¹ Cf. E. Haag, *Sens cierpienia w Starym Testamencie*, op. cit., p. 14.

³² Cf. M. Filipiak, *Aksjologiczne treści antropologii biblijnej* (The Axiological Content of Biblical Anthropology), Lublin 1991, p. 110.

God desires good and desires to heal all human wounds, but man in choosing evil and stubbornly persisting in it seems to be demanding divine intervention, to put an end to all these afflictions by just punishment. The prophet Amos reminds Israel on behalf of God:

I beset all your cities with cleanness of teeth and all your towns with lack of bread, yet you did not return to me. I also withheld the rain from you, I laid waste among you, yet you did not return to me (Am. 4:6-7).

A context for God's intervention and the punishment sent down from above was the great social injustice that was prevalent in the Hebrew community at that time. God, through suffering, invited people to change their lives and reject all evil.

Suffering as a test of faith

However, in life, we also encounter situations where misfortune befalls the righteous, while happiness comes to the impious. Job of Uz, a man who was respected and wealthy, suddenly, as a result of subsequent catastrophes loses his children, servants, house, fortune – basically everything.³³ As if that was not enough, he himself is afflicted with leprosy. Moreover, his friends in trying to console him, accuse him of leading a sinful life. Therefore, on top of physical pain, he experiences spiritual suffering through not being understood even by his friends. Job finds no fault within himself and regretfully calls to God: “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes” (Job 21:7-8).³⁴ Finally, we learn that Job was subject to a test of faith and thanks to his faithfulness was given further blessings from God. In this trial, Job learns humility in the face of God, who directs the fate of all reality, in which suffering also plays a part.³⁵ Job regains his home and household, animals and properties, his wife, children, beautiful daughters and, in addition, long life.

³³ The tragic figure of Job may come from the tradition of Persian dualism of the struggle between good and evil where man is the arena, however, now the inspired author must find a solution for the suffering of Job in a monotheistic reality, where God is responsible for all reality in which man experiences suffering. As a consequence, the evil spirit assumes the role of a servant, who tests Job.

³⁴ Cf. G. Ravasi, *Hiob. Dramat Boga i człowieka*, part 2, op. cit., pp. 267–280.

³⁵ Cf. J.W. Bremer, *Hiob wobec sprawiedliwego i miłosiernego Boga* (Job in the Face of a Just God), Krakow 2017, pp. 113–120; John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Rome 1984, p. 11.

Jesus invites us to be just as faithful in overcoming the offers of the devil of easy prosperity, supernatural power and unlimited authority (Mk. 1:12-13; Mat. 4:1-11; Luk. 4:1-13) and demands that we ask in the prayer of *Our Father* for the grace of not succumbing to temptation and the ability to withstand the test of our faith (Mt. 6:9-13, Luk. 11:2-4).³⁶ Even the first people were subject to a test. The inspired author narrows down this trial to the prohibition of consuming the fruit from the tree of “knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:8). This test was unsuccessful for man, since the fruit was picked and eaten, and this resulted in unfortunate consequences in the relationship between the first people with their Father, the Creator.

What was this test? Man in the symbol of the tree of knowledge of good and evil had all his competencies drawn out as God’s child. He was to carry out his calling “to subdue the Earth,” in compliance with God’s will (Gen. 1:28), but man’s response to God was: I shall do so, according to my own will, and he proclaimed himself equal to God, meaning he committed the sin of pride. A consequence of this decision was suffering, which since that time has been part of human nature.³⁷ Man was removed from the place where he experienced God’s tender care, where life was to end not with death, but with passing on to eternity. In a new existentialist situation, man must deal with the shortcomings of his nature, which due to sin, is subject to suffering, along with the closing of the perspective of eternal life.

The idea of a test comes back in the Book of Genesis, where we read: “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And He said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of” (Gen. 22:1-2). After he makes the decision to offer his only son in sacrifice, a decision marked by great suffering, Abraham heard the words of an angel sent by God: “By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your only son, I will surely bless you” (Gen. 22:15-16). Let us hope for the strength of Abraham and the resilience of Job when we are faced with our own test of faith!

³⁶ Cf. R. Maritain, *Notatki na temat „Ojciec nasz”* (Notes on the Subject of „Our Father”), Krakow 2000, pp. 73–80.

³⁷ Cf. S. Potocki, *Problem cierpienia w historycznych tradycjach...*, op. cit., p. 20.

The pedagogical aspect of suffering

Suffering may also carry with it a pedagogical aspect: “For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, as does a father a son in whom he delights” (Prov. 3:12). The author of the Book of Revelation thinks likewise, explaining to the community of the Church in Laodicea: “Those I love, I rebuke and discipline” (Rev. 3:19a). God disciplined his people during the journey through the desert towards the Promised Land, which the Deuteronomist reminds us of:

Remember that these forty years the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness, so that He might humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commandments. He humbled you, and in your hunger, He gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had known, so that you might understand that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (...). So know in your heart that just as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you (Deut. 8:2-5).

In another historical context, during the Seleucid domination over Judea, we hear the reflection of an inspired historian: “the calamities that happened, not as being for the destruction, but for the correction of our nation” (2Macc. 6:12). Paul speaks in a similar way during the persecutions of the Church:

Not only that, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance – perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us (Rom. 5:3-5).

In suffering, there is a particular calling for virtue, which man must develop. This means a virtue of resilience, in face of that which afflicts and hurts us. In doing this, man instills hope within himself, which maintains in him the conviction that he will not be overcome by suffering, his dignity and his sense of living will not be taken away. And it is this very sense that manifests itself along with God’s love, which is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

Seneca (d. 65 A.D.), a Stoic scholar, notes: “Therefore, God hardens, reviews, and exercises those whom He tests and loves: those whom He seems to indulge and spare, He is keeping out of condition to meet their coming misfortunes”

³⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, op. cit., p. 23.

(Thoughts 4:7)³⁹. Ascending the rungs of reason, Seneca noticed that man becomes better at suffering and becomes richer in his humanity because he is prepared to accept the challenges that Fate puts in front of him. In addition, as is suggested by Władysław Tatarkiewicz in analyzing the feeling of love, moments experienced as suffering may be the happiest moments of our life. In his treatise *O szczęściu* (On Happiness), he writes that in love that is joyful, we experience:

the feeling of wanting, since we are separated from the person we love, anxiety since we are far away from them, sadness since we must part with them, boredom since we must stay in the company of others, and often a sensation of insatiability when we are together. In their absence, the world becomes, as Żeromski says “empty, barren, deaf, dull, full of darkness and boredom.” Yet, this period in our lives filled with these sensations – longing, anxiety, sadness, boredom, insatiability – we often experience as the happiest time of our life.

Later, the philosopher asks why is it that negative feelings are seen as happy moments? This happens because these sensations are associated with the “consciousness that we have something in life which is worth being anxious about,”⁴⁰ because the opposite of suffering is not happiness, but a feeling of pleasure.⁴¹ Happiness, on the other hand, is the experiencing of joy from something we possess. That is why acquiring this possession, even in suffering, is a positive experience that leads to happiness. Therefore, there is an aspect of suffering that is part of happiness and not its opposite! When does this occur? When suffering is combined with love; without it, suffering acquires negative characteristics and becomes an experience of evil. “Love is the fullest response to a question on the sense of suffering. A response provided by God in the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.”⁴²

Previously, this form of experiencing suffering was proposed by God to the prophets so that they would be the prediction of the experience of suffering by His Son. Jeremiah brings to God the complaint of the Righteous (Jer. 11:18-23;

³⁹ Cf. Seneca, *Mysli* (Thoughts), Warsaw 1995, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *O szczęściu* (On Happiness), Warsaw 1990, p. 97 ff.

⁴¹ „The angel of pleasure wants to teach us to enjoy various things. He wants us to taste life in its fullest. Experiencing pleasures – as we can see through mystical theology, which is recalled by St. Augustine – is an integral element of spiritual life. Ultimately the goal of our life is to delight in God in everlasting life.” Cf. A. Grün, *Posłańcy nieba. O aniołach, dzięki którym życie nabiera lekkości* (Messengers of Heaven. On Angels Thanks to Whom Life Acquires a Sense of Lightness), transl. K. Markiewicz, Poznań 2016, p. 15 ff.

⁴² Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, op. cit., p. 13.

12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18, 18:18-23; 20:7-18), while God orders him to take part in the suffering, to be together with this just man in experiencing suffering.⁴³ Jeremiah finds the sense of his own suffering in experiencing the presence of God in this suffering. Suffering which transforms into the experience of happiness only becomes possible when man sees its sense and undertakes it in the name of love. Jesus, in proposing this path to happiness, expressed in His blessings, refers to these two dimensions, inviting us to undertake the challenge of suffering in life. The horizontal sense of suffering can be found in the feeling of being a just man. The vertical sense is the reward that awaits us in heaven, and, in the connection filled with love towards Christ. Therefore, not every form of suffering changes into an experience of happiness, but sometimes:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you (Mat. 5:10-11).

Just as parents discipline their child out of love, forming his personality in order for him to be able to put into effect future plans, so too God raises us through difficult experiences, so that man may meet the requirements of relations within a community and reach the destination of his journey, meaning eternity. A child, when he is motivated to acquire knowledge, perform daily duties, often experiences this as something negative, but when he attains a goal, he feels fulfilled by the fact that the time devoted to it resulted in new opportunities.

In the same way, moments of suffering in life, which are put in front of us by God, seem difficult to bear, but when we overcome them, we may see the pedagogical presence of the Lord, as we have become less arrogant towards other people, we respect them more, and understand that their shortcomings require from us patience and more often than not, forgiveness. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes us aware that God punishes us “for our good, so that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields a peaceful harvest of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:10b-11).

⁴³ Cf. E. Haag, *Sens cierpienia w Starym Testamencie*, op. cit., p. 8 ff.

Suffering in the service of Divine Providence

Suffering might also be the result of an act of Divine Providence. God cares over the fate of people and the world (Ps. 146:7-9; Isa. 44:24-28; Wis. 6:8; 12:13) and in a special way defends those who are persecuted. In a symbolic way those who are the most discriminated against are mentioned, the poor, the widows, the orphans. The prophet Isiah proclaims: "Woe to those who enact unjust statutes and issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of fair treatment and withhold justice from the oppressed of My people, to make widows their prey and orphans their plunder" (Isa. 10:1-2). If we are those who harm, we must take into account the fact that God will defend those who are harmed and then we may experience suffering. Let us not forget, that a prayer for the discriminated reaches the ears of God and calls on Divine Providence to defend their rights (Ps 69:70).

The prayer of the Hebrews in Egypt was answered by God and the process of their exodus from Egypt was put into motion as was promised by the Lord. Unfortunately, their path was blocked by the Egyptians and that is why these oppressors were besieged by misfortune in the shape of plagues (Ex. 9:1-10:29).⁴⁴ God, therefore, in defending the discriminated can send us a sign in the form of suffering to encourage us to change our evil ways. Then we do not rebel against the actions of Divine Providence, but we change our way and beg for God's mercy. Let the humility of the prodigal son be an encouragement for us on our path towards the Merciful Father! (Luk. 15:11-32).

God may also invite us to be part of a project in which He desires to convert and change another person and He needs us in this project, which may be connected with the necessity to give up on our own dreams and plans, and in turn, we may experience it as a certain form of suffering! Let us remember that in the mysterious plan of God, which led to the creation of man, there was an aspect of free will, which means that he was granted freedom since only a free being is able to love God, but also to reject this love. Man affirms divine love and answers to it – thus God becomes 'richer' through man's love. Even if man rejects divine love, in this rejection, God's greatness is also revealed since he allowed man to act in this way. This can be translated into interpersonal relations. The greatness of man reveals itself in his love towards another man, but even discarded love that causes pain is better than a situation in which man has never experienced love! Paradoxically, rejected love and even hatred is better

⁴⁴ Cf. M. Filipiak, *Biblia o człowieku. Zarys antropologii biblijnej Starego Testamentu* (Bible on Man: An Overview of the Biblical Anthropology of the Old Testament), Lublin 1979, p. 179.

than indifference. Indifference shuts man off from all relations with another man, while hatred which is overcome may be a turning point in building even more beautiful bonds since they were enriched by the experienced suffering on the path to change!

Expiatory significance of suffering from the perspective of eternal life

The Old Testament scholar struggles with yet another question: what is the sense of the death of a young, good person? The Book of Wisdom answers thus: "He pleased God, and was beloved, and living among sinners, he was translated. He was taken away, lest wickedness should alter his understanding, or deceit beguile his soul. For the bewitching of vanity obscures good things, and the wandering of concupiscence overturns the innocent mind" (Wis. 4:10-12).

It seems that the scholar dealing with the death of a just man opens up onto the hope of eternal life.⁴⁵ The righteous is taken away from a sinful world and preserved for a new life.

Similar hope is experienced by the praying Psalmist when he tells God: "You have taken account of my wanderings. Put my tears in Your bottle, are they not in Your book?" (Ps 56:9; cf. Isa. 25:8). The Psalmist entrusts his misfortune to God, but there will come a day when God rewards him for the tears in the book!

On the other hand, the prophet Deutero-Isiah in the grand vision of the Servant of Yahweh sees the value of suffering, especially of sinners:

Surely He took on our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, struck down and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isa. 53: 4-5).⁴⁶

The image of man who, in experiencing suffering, completely trusts God, is depicted in the prayer contained in Ps. 22. Here, is a suffering man, who goes through suffering alone and experiences total rejection and contempt by all people, but yet he still carries inside him hope for divine intervention. He does

⁴⁵ Cf. B. Poniży, *Księga Mądrości. Od egzegezy do teologii* (The Book of Wisdom: From Exegesis to Theology), Poznan 2000, p. 198.

⁴⁶ Cf. J. Paściak, *Izajasz wieszczem Chrystusa* (Isiah as the Prophet of Christ), Katowice 1987, pp. 100-142.

not completely understand his suffering, but he does not lose his connection with God, moreover, he trusts that his salvation will become a sign inviting all people to come to God, who is their Father. On the Cross, Jesus prays with these words of longing for the Father: “My God! My God!,” and although this cry ends with a question “why have You forsaken me?,” these are words of potential elevation above the feeling of loneliness – these are words, which in themselves, as the words of a prayer, contain a positive answer.⁴⁷

The love between the Son and the Father does not stop, it reaches its pinnacle, complete unity. The Father leads the Son through death, receiving the Spirit and once again giving Him to the Son so that the Christ could be resurrected and unite with the Father. The Holy Trinity is filled with love, which is fully expressed by the experience of the suffering of Christ.

Therefore, the Old Testament struggles with the sense of suffering were only fully completed by the death of Jesus who, in suffering, gave up His life for our sake, in order to grant us eternal life.⁴⁸ As His agony approaches, Christ consoles His disciples:

You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman has pain in childbirth because her time has come; but when she brings forth her child, she forgets her anguish because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy (Jn. 16:21-22).

The introduction of man into the realm of eternal life is the goal of Christ’s path of suffering, however, its motif is explained by Christ during the nightly theological dispute with Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” (Jn. 3:16). Human suffering only then acquires sense, when the perspective of life does not end in temporality, but possesses an eternal dimension, and also when we suffer due to our love of another person, in which we discover the image of God. These two vectors are necessary to bestow sense upon human fate as far as the suffering he experiences. Is one of these vectors enough to provide sense to human suffering? No! Because when we try to attain eternal life without love we may find “the gates to heaven closed,” which

⁴⁷ Cf. S. Mędala, *Stary Testament a męka Chrystusa* (Old Testament and the Passion of Christ), [in:] *Męka Jezusa Chrystusa* (The Passion of Jesus Christ), J. Gryglewicz (ed.), Lublin 1986, p. 40 ff.

⁴⁸ We can only fully understand the actions of Divine Providence if we open ourselves to eternal life. Cf. B. Pylak, *Boża Opatrzność a zło w świecie* (Divine Providence and Evil in the World), Lublin 1960, p. 25 ff.

without love would become its direct opposite. When we desire to find sense only in horizontal love to another human being without opening ourselves onto eternal life, then the death of a loved one renders our life senseless. Only in the perspective of eternity filled with love do we fully comprehend Christ's calling "Do, not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul" (Mat. 10:28). A man who loves is prepared to die because his love does not die, it is eternal, it has overcome death on the Cross, and its presence allows us to not fear the death of those we love!

A Christian strives to live in such a way, as to not bring suffering upon himself or others, he may also ask Divine Providence to protect him from suffering, but, at the same time, remembers the words of the Master: "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mk. 8:34). Therefore, for a Christian, suffering may also be a call to follow Christ:

For if anyone endures the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God, this is to be commended. How is it to your credit if you are beaten for doing wrong and you endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. For to this, you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His footsteps (1Pt. 2:19-21).⁴⁹

Suffering as a calling means we participate in Christ's suffering, in His gift of salvation. Paul explains to the community in Rome that:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery that returns you to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. And if we are children, then we are heirs: heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ – if indeed we suffer with Him, so that we may also be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:14-17).⁵⁰

All those who suffer are invited to "suffer in Christ" (1Pt. 4:13). This was the path to which Our Lady had already been invited by the words of Simeon, who prophesizes saying that: "a sword will pierce your soul" (Luk. 2:35). The

⁴⁹ Cf. M.I. Alves, *Sens cierpienia w Nowym Testamencie* (The Sense of Suffering in the New Testament), "Communio" 50 (1989), no. 2, p. 23 ff.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 24.

prophecy comes true in the image of the Virgin Mary standing under the Cross upon which Christ is dying.⁵¹

A Christian does not even fear death since he knows that he will enjoy eternal life. Starting with the very early Christians all the way to contemporary times, the fullest expression of love between man – God’s child and Father – the Creator, is readiness to sacrifice our life on behalf of this love and die a martyr’s death! There are more and more generations of those who love the Father and are ready to endure pain and suffering to come together as much as possible with God, who is love (1Jn. 4:8-16). The author of the Book of Revelation in a vision of the New Jerusalem – the Holy City – sees a multitude of the saved, for whom God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).⁵² In experiencing suffering, Job did not yet have the perspective of eternal life, so he demanded compensation from God here on Earth. At that time, the *Sheol* was a place where one awaited to be saved by God. Job, however, has such deep faith that he believes that even if he had died, God will not keep him in the land of the dead, because He is just (Job 19:25-27).

Does contemporary man possess such deep faith as the one exhibited by Job? Losing our path towards God in suffering ends in an existentialist rebellion against the world and God – but it is in suffering “he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of his entire life and vocation. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man transcends the body in a way that is completely beyond compare.”⁵³

Suffering of God?

On the pages of the Bible, God appears as a Father who cares for his children who were created in His image and likeness. However, how should the children understand their likeness to the Father if “No one has ever seen God” (Jn. 1:18). Through the act of embodiment of the Son, God gave us His image, since He is the image of an invisible God (Col. 1:15). Jesus, the Son of God, ensures the doubting Philip that he who sees the Son also sees the Father (Jn. 14:9).

⁵¹ Cf. M. Guzewicz, *Postawy wobec cierpienia w Biblii. Od Abrahama do Maryi* (Attitudes in Face of Suffering in the Bible. From Abraham to the Virgin Mary), Poznan 2005, pp. 39–42.

⁵² Cf. G. Ravasi, *Biblia jest dla ciebie. Mały kurs teologii biblijnej* (The Bible Is for You. A Short Course of Biblical Theology), Poznan 2011, p. 34 ff.

⁵³ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, op. cit., p. 26.

In Christ, we find the image of God, who is love (1Jn. 4:16). We learn this love and we desire as good children should, to carry out the Father's will. This will was revealed in the Word of God, which we contemplate and implement in our relations with other people because in them we find the image of our common Father. In contemplating the love of the Father, we open ourselves to the truth, that this love is so great, that in it, the Father was ready to send his own Son to suffer to deliver us from evil, grant us fullness of life, and restore this bond of love between the children and the Father! We have lost this bond when we left the house of God (Paradise) and we said: we do not want to live under Your care, in accordance with Your will, we want to live on our own! Did the Father suffer due to our departure?

In philosophical reflection, we bestow upon God such attributes as perfection, infinity, immovability, immutability, non-susceptibility to wounds. Denial of the possibility of God's suffering – that is a temptation that immediately comes to us, especially since the beginning of the III century, Hippolytus and Tertullian had to speak out against the Patripassians, who accepted “the passion” of the Father. Patripassianism was a form of modalism: according to it, since the Word is another name for the Father, then it was the Father who was embodied and suffered.⁵⁴ The fear of falling into heresy made us immobilize God and deny the fundamental truth that “God is love” (Jn. 4:16)! Suffering is, after all, the greatest bond of love; when we suffer along with our loved one, we are bonded so closely with their pain, that our bodies simultaneously feel the suffering, while our souls achieve a pinnacle of unity, to such a degree that we are willing to die for those we love! Only a person who loves joins in the suffering of a loved one! In all other cases we stop at sympathy – a form of empathy that motivates us to help a suffering person – however, our body does not experience physical pain until we display love for the suffering person.

Such an image of joint suffering is provided by Our Lady standing under the Cross as she participates in the pain of her Son. Should God then only be able to experience sympathy? Could God look with indifference upon his Son's suffering? Could God not love us enough to experience our suffering, the

⁵⁴ The Patripassians were a religious community of Unitarians from the II century, which was established by the students of Praxeas, Noetus, and Sabellius. Inspired by the views of Modalists, they taught that the Father was self-conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, became Jesus Christ, suffered on the Cross and died. Cf. H. Masson, *Słownik herezji w Kościele katolickim* (A Dictionary of Heresies in the Catholic Church), transl. B. Sęk, Katowice 1993, p. 235; F. Varillon, *Cierpienie Boga* (The Suffering of God), [in:] *Sens choroby, sens śmierci, sens życia* (The Sense of an Illness, the Sense of Death, the Sense of Life), H. Bortnowska (ed.), Krakow 1984, p. 403.

greatest bond of love with each and every person? It was the embodiment of the Son of God that opened God up to the relation of love, in which, in the human body of Jesus, God can fully experience unity with man and show him love through the experience of the highest form of love, which is unity in suffering.

In this image of experienced suffering there is a reflexive form – not only do I suffer along with my loved ones, but I also allow them to participate in my suffering. When my body is weak and requires support, I in my weakness depend on the love of those who love me, allowing them to care for me and participate in my suffering. In the same way, I open myself up to God’s care and His love in my suffering, I allow God to love me in my physical or spiritual imperfection. Unfortunately, very often man suffers feeling rebellious: why has this befallen me? And the fruit of this rebellion is an accusation directed at God, that He is unjust because He created a world in which suffering exists. Only if there exists an open reflexive relation of love towards God, can God enter into the life of a suffering person, more often than not, by calling upon those who would love the person who suffers. Do not reject God’s love in suffering, nor the love of those called by Him to care for us. Do not refuse God, if He invites us onto the path of relieving other people’s suffering, especially if we are invited to participate in the suffering by calling us to love the person who is experiencing pain, misfortune and loneliness.

We are all called to undertake the hardship of supporting those who suffer. Recalling the words of Jesus, the Evangelist Matthew noted:

Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you visited Me (Mat 25:34-36).

In response to the righteous who would ask Him when did they do all of this for Him, the Son of Man shall say: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me” (Mat. 25:40).

In another image, we receive a lesson of opening ourselves onto the selfless love, onto the suffering of a harmed man. On his way to Jerusalem, a man was beaten and needed help (Luk. 10:30-37). God sends a priest this way, who serves Him in a temple, unfortunately, he passes by in utter indifference not answering his calling. God then calls upon a Levite, who is a lesser servant in the temple, but he too passes without providing aid. For both of them, ritual rules constituted an obstacle in opening themselves to the calling of God to

participate in the suffering of man, which is also experienced by God since his image is in that very man! Finally, a Samaritan is invited onto the path, he stops and comprehends his calling – not only does he help this unfortunate soul, but his care goes further to establish a personal bond with the one who suffers. If we assume that a beaten Jew was lying along the road to Jerusalem, while the Samaritan was a soldier going to the Cyprus fortress, then the clarity of overcoming human barriers and opening up onto love even of your enemies becomes a living illustration of the Jew-Samaritan relationship, since at that time those two communities had nothing but contempt for each other. However, the suffering of one released the most beautiful of feelings in the other and led to the giving of love, despite social and cultural barriers. “A man (...) cannot discover himself in full, other than by the selfless giving of oneself.”⁵⁵

Early Christianity named the belief that God can suffer and take part in Christ’s passion – “Theopaschism.” The Fathers of the Church intuitively felt that God has the ability to suffer! Of course, God suffers differently – He accepts suffering voluntarily, at His own initiative, out of love, not as forced upon Him from the outside or as a result of ontological deficiencies.

The reason that the truth contained in the views of the supporters of Theopaschism was forgotten, was Greek philosophy with its idea of *apatheia*. The mentality of the Greek elites did not allow for the presence of suffering in the divine world of happiness. Greek philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Neoplatonism) was in direct opposition to the universal in ancient times mythological notions of suffering and changing deities. That is why the Fathers of the Church developed a paradox formula of “the Impassible who suffered for us.” God, who is impassible in His nature, suffered in the embodiment of His Son, in His human nature. This was especially emphasized by the theologians of Antioch. The Alexandrian ones, on the other hand, explained that divine nature assimilates the suffering of Christ in His human nature.⁵⁶

The boldest of early-Christian writers in depicting God suffering out of love was Origen. In his profound ponderation of the testimony provided by biblical texts, he wrote: “In his love, God suffers (*sympaschei*), He is not impassible.”⁵⁷ In pondering the suffering of the Son of God, he adds:

⁵⁵ Cf. The Second Vatican Council, *Konstytucja duszpasterska o Kościele w świecie współczesnym* “*Gaudium et spes*” (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*), Vatican, 1965, p. 24.

⁵⁶ Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Pascha Chrystusa w dziejach człowieka i wszechświata* (The Passover of Christ in the History of Man and the Universe), vol. 3: *Zarys chrześcijańskiej teologii paschalnej* (An Overview of Christian Paschal Theology), Lublin 1991, p. 268.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Selecta in Ezech.* 16. PG 13,812.

What is the suffering that He suffered for us? It is the suffering of love (*caritas est passio*). Does the Father Himself, God of the Universe, full of long-lasting compassion and mercy (Ps 102:18) not suffer in some way? Or do you not know that in His concern for human affairs (*quando humana dispensat*), He bears human suffering (*passionem patitur humanam*)? God takes upon Himself your misfortunes, as the Son of God takes on our sufferings. The Father Himself is not impassible (*Ipse Pater non est impassibilis*). He suffers with the suffering of love (*patitur aliquid caritatis*) and becomes such as He cannot be due to the greatness of His nature; for us, He bears human suffering (*humanas sustinet passiones*).⁵⁸

God's suffering is suffering which comes from His love, which can experience pain together with man.⁵⁹ He participates in the suffering of man and suffers because of him. Origen speaks of the passion of the Son suffered for us, but goes on even further, indicating the mysterious suffering of the Father. He notices the profoundness of this paradox: on one hand, impassibility (*apatheia*), on the other, His passibility (*pathos*) in the entire process of the Economy of Salvation.⁶⁰ Indeed, if there exists a mutual connection between loving Divine Persons, it is impossible for one to suffer and the other to remain indifferent.⁶¹

The Son of God does indeed pass through death, and in that sense, Jesus feels loneliness upon the Cross, but the hope for the return of the Spirit which is leaving Him, overcomes the sensation of loneliness. The suffering of loneliness releases a feeling of an even greater joy of meeting along with the deified human nature of Christ. It is also the joy expressed by the Father at the fact of healing the relations of love between Father the Creator and His child – the created man. Man was invited to partake in the joint journey along with the Father, towards his home, while Christ and His Gospel became the guide. He was our brother in whom love was expressed to its fullest, since He loved us so much that He was prepared to sacrifice His life for us, even then, when we were sinners rebelling against Him and our Father. What then is following Christ to the Father? A way of rebuilding relations of love? The suffering of separation

⁵⁸ Cf. *In Ezech. hom.* 6.6. PG 13,714-715.

⁵⁹ The expression *ho pathon Theos* comes from St. Gregory of Nazianzus who, in using it, expressed his thoughts on undergoing passion by a Being, who naturally does not experience suffering. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 17 (PG 35, 980); Or. 38 (PG 36, 325).

⁶⁰ Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Pascha Chrystusa...*, op. cit., p. 270.

⁶¹ Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Bóg cierpiący? Rozważania nad chrześcijańskim pojęciem Boga* (Suffering God? Thoughts on the Subject of the Christian Concept of God), "Collectanea Theologica" 51 (1981), no. 2, p. 5.

is overcome, every time man builds relations of love with the Father, expressing them in his relationship with another man, made in the image of the Father.

Conclusion

The XX century has been called the era of reinforced concrete, glass, plastic, atom and electronics. Here are the great works which provided an impulse for humanity to subdue the Earth in such a way as to contain less poverty, rejection, exclusion, and suffering. However, the very same century brought about two world wars and much human suffering! This century also led to an unprecedented development of cities, but at the same time, to the greatest destruction of the natural environment. Man, thanks to using the gift of reason reduced suffering in many domains of life, where progress in medicine and electronics played a particular role, but on the other hand, the very same man experiences even more suffering brought about by the degraded environment. It is time for building a new man, who not only uses his mind to overcome suffering, but ascends to a higher level of cognition, which is the path of faith – because only upon this path does man discover the perspective of eternal life, which allows him to overcome the suffering of passing, ageing, experiencing illnesses and premature death.⁶²

Man cannot simply stop at these two stages of cognition, on knowledge and faith; he must move forward to the next stage, which is the path of love! Only a man who loves is able to discover the true sense of suffering because he lives for the person he loves and is willing to suffer for them. In this way, man attains the highest level of familiarity with another man when out of love he suffers along with him! A man who does not love, can only sympathize with another man, can help him, can relieve his suffering, but not suffer along with him! Suffering together is the pinnacle of the relation of love, where the pain of one person is the pain of another, where both the spiritual and the physical pain of the suffering person whom we love is experienced. He who has never loved, cannot come to understand the Cross, where divine love has manifested itself most fully in suffering. Therefore, suffering is present in the world to release love, to transform the entire human civilization into a “civilization of love.”⁶³

⁶² John Paul II devoted an encyclical to the complementary nature of reason and faith. Cf. *Fides et ratio*, Rome 1998.

⁶³ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Rome 1984, p. 30.

The reflection of the Church on suffering has been dominated by influences from Greek philosophy, where the concepts of *apatheia* and *anthraxia* leading to the control over one's feelings were transferred into theology. In this theological trend, an image that emerged is one of an impassive God, removed from suffering, ultimately sensually indifferent to the experience of suffering.⁶⁴ The assumed axiom, that suffering in its fullness is a result of evil, shut off the possibility of theological reflection upon the image of God the Father as "suffering along" with His Son, in His Passion, and, as a consequence, upon the image of God "suffering along" with man. It was not again made possible until we became aware that there are two sources of suffering and they are ambivalent – one truly can be attributed to evil, the other is a pinnacle of the bond of love. The one that is a result of evil must be overcome! The one that is the utmost form of love must be experienced! For nothing bonds one man with another, more than suffering together with the one we love. This is the greatest expression of interpersonal relations.

Is such a relationship impossible between God and man? Did not our theological reflection, based on philosophy, "forbid" God from loving man, all the way until experiencing suffering? Let us remember that the opposite of love is indifference.⁶⁵ God cannot remain indifferent to the experience of suffering, He desires to take part in it because He loves us! Let us allow God "to suffer along" with our fate.

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⁶⁴ We should also take into account the views of the Fathers of the Church who allowed for the "co-suffering" of the Father in the Passion of Christ, but ultimately the threat of heresy brought about the domination of a view depicting God as an impassive and transcendent, who is more of a king and a judge than a loving Father. Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Pascha Chrystusa...*, op. cit., p. 268 ff.

⁶⁵ The desire to not commit to love was well known to the ancients; they included it separately among the seven cardinal sins, referring to it as *acedia* – the indifference of the heart. Cf. J. Pieper, *O miłości* (On Love), Warsaw 1983, p. 55.

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