SEMĂNĂTORUL (THE SOWER)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 4, Number 1

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology
in Emanuel University of Oradea, and
International Contributors, October 2023.

GENERAL CO-EDITORS
Hamilton Moore & Corin Mihăilă

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania
2023

Semănătorul (The Sower)
Volume 4. Number. 1 (2023): 137-163
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58892/TS.swr4160

THE RHETORIC OF SUFFERING IN THE BOOK OF JOB; A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF JOB ELABORATED IN RELATION TO SOME CLASSICAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

CĂLIN-IOAN TALOȘ[1]

Emanuel University of Oradea

ABSTRACT: Why do the righteous suffer? The present research aims to examine the answer to this question as it emerges from the spectrum of dialogues in the narrative of the Book of Job. We will examine the dialogues that stand out in its literary perimeter, then, in the end, we will highlight the reason to which Job, the protagonist of the story, gets access to regarding his own suffering. Afterwards, we will probe a number of classical and modern interpretations in order to highlight the fact that the rhetoric of suffering in the Book of Job, like the classical interpretations, points to a high view of God's power and knowledge and a human attitude of resilience and humility in the face of suffering, whereas the modern interpretations examined tend to highlight a low view of God's power and knowledge and a critical and accusing human attitude.

KEY WORDS: suffering, book of Job, interpretation, rhetoric, classical, modern.

I. Introduction

This article is divided into four parts. The goal of this article is to identify the meaning that suffering has for the author of the book of Job in order to later observe comparatively how this rhetoric of suffering was

1 Dr. Călin Ioan Taloș, BA (Bucharest University); PhD (UBB Cluj); PhD (King's College London); PhD (UBB Cluj); Lecturer at Emanuel University of Oradea, pastor of Gilau First Baptist Church. Email: calintalos@emanuel.ro

received by some classical and modern theologians. We will be able to note, therefore, the contribution that theology, in general, has for defining the meaning of suffering in these days when conflicts and victimizations, dramatic sufferings and irremediable tragedies seem to reach worrying heights.

In the preamble we will profile the general meaning given to suffering by contemporary Christianity. After this general sketch of its meaning for us, in the second part of the work, we will comment on the Book of Job, following the rhetoric of suffering as it emerges from the three rounds of dialogue, three rounds between Eliphaz the Temanite and Job, three between Bildad the Shuhite and Job, two between Zophar the Naamathite and Job, an extensive dialogue between Elihu the Buzite and Job, and a decisive round between God and Job. This exegetical approach will be based on *The Jewish Bible, Tanakh, a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Texts* published in 1985. In the third section, we will highlight the way contemporary theology receives the rhetoric of suffering from the book of Job, and finally we will draw the necessary conclusions regarding the book's rhetoric of suffering and its classical and contemporary reception.

General Christian Perspectives on the Meaning of Suffering

Paolo de Petris evokes the strident and epochal interrogation, formulated among others by Rabbi Harold Kushner[2] in the following words:

> Every day we see that the innocent suffer and die young, while the wicked live long and prosper. Why does it happen? How can God's Justice be maintained in view of the fact that guiltless people suffer? What is at stake here is not the mere existence of human suffering, but the fact that it hits innocent people.[3]

2 Harold S. Kushner, *The Book of Job, When Bad Things Happened to Good Person* (USA: Schocken Books, 2012), Electronic Edition.

3 Paolo de Petris, *Calvin's Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God, Calvin's Sermons of the Book of Job,* (Switzerland, Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 16.

In Christian theodicy, several reasons have been noted why God allows suffering in the lives of his believing people. The first reason concerns the human being in its ontological aspect. Man suffers because, by creation; he has a being that is fundamentally deficient. The shortcomings or minuses of his being, generate errors, and errors, regardless of their nature, physical, mental (miscalculations) or moral errors, all these produce suffering. Newsom states that "Tragic rupture is the figure at the heart of human existence."[4] And this ontology of suffering can only be ameliorated by reconnecting man with God, through Christ, who is, ontologically speaking, plenary in all respects and, consequently, without error. The perfection of Christ complements the imperfection and vices of the human being on the condition that this fragile being is connected by faith to God, who is always willing to grant full forgiveness on the basis of the atonement achieved by Christ on the cross and, consequently, to offer spiritual relief to the suffering man. An analogy would be the relationship between a household or industrial appliance which, if it does not have access under optimal conditions to the energy source for which it was designed, is non-functional, useless and sometimes a burden, whereas if it is connected to an energy source, it becomes functional and useful.

A second rationale invokes pragmatism or the pedagogy of suffering. That is, suffering has the potential to produce maturity and wisdom. The spiritual and moral growth of the sufferer, as a result of the presence of suffering in his life, "seems to echo Irenaeus' perspective who regarded suffering as a necessary prerequisite for spiritual growth and development."[5] H. Kushner evokes both the thesis of Maimonides who considered suffering a necessary means of growth through learning and the accumulation of experience, and that of C. S. Lewis who wrote of "pain as God's chisel to shape and perfect us . . . ."[6] Just as a student who, accepting the many hours of privations and hardships that rigorous study

4 Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job, A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257.

5 De Petris*, Calvin's*, 276.

6 Kushner, *The Book of Job,* 253.

entails, finally becomes the beneficiary of the knowledge useful for the profession that will ensure a decent living and performance, likewise, the man who accepts the experience, traumatic at times, of suffering, will manage to detach himself from the naive perspective on reality, from the childishness that made him uncomfortable, obtaining instead maturity, a non-theoretical understanding of some aspects of life and the ability to empathize with the sufferer whom he had no way to understand outside of a personal and severe experience. Or, in other words, the patient who patiently goes through the emotional and physical trauma of a medical operation is the beneficiary of the joy of healing and the restoration of his well-being, so the Christian who goes through the suffering of life benefits from the joy of success, which he would not have had out of vicissitudes and tragedies.

A third rationale for suffering reveals the idea of reward. The point here is that God allows human suffering in this life because He has planned in advance both its function in the puzzle of human interaction and its recognition and reward in the afterlife. Therefore, those who suffer much or intensely here, will be richly and generously rewarded hereafter. Life is like a stage play in two acts between which the curtain is drawn. What is before the curtain of death is the first act of man's life, and after this there is the second act, when things unfold in close logical connection with those in the previous act. Calvin highlights this in the following words:

> The souls of the saints, therefore, which have escaped the hands of the enemy, are after death in peace. They are amply supplied with all things, for it is said of them, "They shall go from abundance to abundance."[7]

As he who proves his competence at work receives his remuneration at the end of the term of employment, so he who proves his faithfulness in suffering is rewarded at the end of life. If life continues in eternity, then everything that happens here has eternal resonance. The Book of Job, however, does not start from these premises.

7 Calvin Apud. De Petris, Calvin's, 67.

II. General Commentary on the Book of Job

The book opens with Job's moral profile, his material condition, the composition of his family or household, and hints of his religiosity (1:1-5).

Later the dialogue between God and the Adversary (*Hasatan*) appears.[8] The latter asserts his skepticism vis-à-vis the reason for Job's righteousness by showing that if Job had not been blessed, he would not have kept his righteousness any longer. Job's righteousness is the happy result of the happy circumstances of his life: health, seven boys and three girls, all healthy, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred pairs of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and correspondingly, many servants (1:3).

Trouble appears in Job's life, as his circumstances change radically. Job loses both his wealth, children and health (1:13-22). The whole tragedy unfolds as a result of divine decision. Will Job remain righteous?

Well, an x-ray of the nature of his faith is constituted by the dialogues.

1. The dialogue between Eliphaz and Job.

Eliphaz of Teman advances the thesis that only the wicked are punished: "As I have seen, those who plow evil. And sow mischief reap them. They perish by a blast from God, Are gone at the breath of His nostrils."[9] (4:8-9)

Further, Eliphaz brings into the discussion the statement that all beings are sinful, marked by mistakes, from angels to those who live in houses of clay (4:18-19). Therefore, all are crushed like a worm (4:19), and the untimely trouble that came is a rebuke from God (5:17) and only the appeal to God with repentance, animated by hope (5:8,16), can fully restore Job's unhappy state (5:18- 27): "He injures, but He binds up." (5:18) Paolo de

8 *The Jewish Bible, Tanakh, a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Texts* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1340. All Bible quotations in this article are excerpted from *The Jewish Bible, Tanakh, a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Texts* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

9 *The Jewish Bible*, 1343.

Petris refers to the German theologian D. Sölle, who, like Elifaz, "states that the most relevant reality is that of suffering"[10] arguing in favor of the idea that suffering is a divine punishment inflicted on sinful man.[11]

Job, on the other hand, insists that he is righteous: "I did not suppress my words against the Holy One." (6:10) He appeals to God asking for an end to this unbearable suffering, not in terms of repentance, but in terms of justice, emphasizing the injustice of being treated like a sea dragon (7:12), even though he is only a simple man (7:17). The sufferer claims, however, the forgiveness of sin (7:21) which he considers, however, only an invention of God (9:20; 10:67), a fabrication. Job does not stop to support his innocence, as it also emerges from the dialogue with Bildad (9:21, 10:7).

2. The dialogue between Bildad and Job

Bildad focuses his speech on the premise that "Surely God does not despise the blameless; He gives no support to evildoers" (8:20). In other words, Bildad promotes the idea that the good do not suffer and the bad inevitably taste bitterness. In this sense, he uses an analogy with the reed. As a reed withers without water, so a man withers without righteousness (8:11-13). Then, in the light of this analogy, Bildad interprets the unfortunate accident of Job's children, emphasizing that it is due exclusively to their iniquity: "If your sons sinned against Him, He dispatched them for their transgression" (8:4). Bildad also has good news for Job: "If you are blameless and upright, He will protect you and grant well-being to your righteous home." (8:6)

Job reiterates his conviction about himself: "I am blameless." (9:21) But he laments of not being able to prove his innocence before God because he has entered into an unequal debate: "How then I can answer Him, Or choose my arguments against Him?" (9:14) And so, Job despises his life (9:21b, 10:1, 18-19).

10 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 27.

11 Idem ibidem.

3. The dialogue between Zophar and Job

Zophar from Naamah has no ears for Job's thesis and claims, with celerity, he calls for his repentance: "If there is iniquity with you, remove it, And do not let injustice reside in your tent" (11:14), otherwise there is no hope but death (11:20).

Job, however, interprets the attitude of the three dialogue companions as one of derision: "I have become a laughingstock to my friend" (12:4) and dismantles both Eliphaz's claim that only the wicked are punished, and Bildad's thesis that the wicked do not escape suffering, showing that in reality things are not like that: "Robbers live untroubled in their tents, And those who provoke God are secure" (12:6). Job emphasizes the empirical truth of this observation: "My eye has seen all this; My ear has heard and understood it." (13:1) As a result, their assertions, contradicted by reality, are unforgivable errors: "But you invent lies, all of you are quacks." (13:4) The dialogue ignites, the relationship ignites, there is a danger of no longer understanding and hearing each other!

Job is lucid, a statement unsupported by reality is a blatant falsehood, harshly accused by God as well. So, pay attention: "He will surely reprove you . . . . ." (13:10) Even if an error is made for the noble endeavor of projecting God in a good light, it is still an error, and God, who is just, will not tolerate it. This view is proven to be true in the last part of the Book of Job: "After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did my servant Job'" (42:7)

Job is approaching the end of his discussion with Bildad and, driven by justice, takes *his flesh in his teeth* (13:14), puts *his life in his hands* and prepares himself to judge with God (13:20-14:22). He pleads his innocence while charging that he is being treated unduly because his life is so obviously fragile as "a driven leaf" and as a "dried-up straw." (13:25) Somewhere in between arguments, Job laments that, though innocent, he is still the weak object of constant suffering and trouble: "Why do you hide Your face, and treat me like an enemy? Will you harass a driven leaf, Will You pursue a dreid-up straw, That you decree for me bitter things

and make me answer for the iniquities of my youth, That you put my feet in the stocks . . . ?" (13:24-27) Job vaguely senses an answer he does not fully pencil in, a clarification he does not yet glimpse. The explanation for the existence of suffering in the life of the righteous is transcendent and ineffable.

4. The second dialogue with Eliphaz

This time Eliphaz's rhetoric is not centered on the reasons for suffering, but rather on Job's ambition to prove his innocence and the quarrel with the Judge, which the Temanite translates as lack of piety and fear of God (15:4). However, this unacceptable lack is itself a sin: "Your sinfulness dictates your speech" (15:5). Eliphaz reiterates the argument with the stained angelic world (4:18; 15:15) which seems to be treated with indifference by Job. "The heavens are not guiltless in His sight", Job, and you, a vessel of clay, a frivolous and entropic being, as man is, do you continue to uphold your righteousness? (see 15:25-16). And he returns saying that the suffering man "raised his arms against God" (15:25); finding no other explanation.

After all this, Job remains steadfast in the statements made in the ring of arguments: "For no injustice on my part and for the purity of my prayer!" (16:17). Job stops the battle of words and resumes his prayers (17:17:3-16): "Come now, stand surety for me!" (17:3)

5. The second dialogue with Bildad

The Shuahite (Bildad from Shuah), hastened to intervene, asks Job to appeal to reason and weigh words. He feels treated with disrespect: "Why are we thought as brutes, regarded by you as stupid?" (18:3) and reiterates the idea that suffering is the implacable destiny of the wicked (18:6-21), and Job, subsequently, he ought not to act without the use of his mind (18:2) and, at the very least, to recognize his fallen moral state.

Instead, Job feels taken from above in God's net, "Though you are overbearing towards me" (19:5) and does not admit the veracity of the speeches of his friends. He notes the ineffectiveness of the relationship

with his friends and expresses his hope for the appearance of a Redeemer: "But I know that my Vindicator lives;" (19:25) and, at the same time, the hope of a post mortem existence and final justification: "This, after my skin will have been peeled off. But I would behold God while still in my flesh, I myself, not another, would behold Him; Would see with my own eyes: My heart pines within me." (19:26-27)

6. The second dialogue with Zophar

The Naamathite (Zophar of Naamah) continues with his own theodicy emphasizing the limited joy of the wicked. Zophar's picture of the world and history pivots around the idea that "The joy of the wicked has been brief" (20:5). This is the theological perspective on the history of Zophar. Be it so, that "the lot God has ordained for him" (20:29) be so implacable and universally applied?

Job objects. He again appeals to the facts. Look at the wicked: "Why do the wicked live on, prosper and grow wealthy? Their children are with them always, and they see their children's children. Their homes are secure, without fear; They do not feel the rod of God. . .They let infants run loose like sheep, and their children skip about." (21:7-11) Even though they had expelled God explicitly, "They say to God, 'Leave us alone, We do not want to learn Your ways; . . . What will we gain by praying to Him?'" (21:14,15) Then, Job refers to the collective memory that rhetorically manages the information that: "For the evil man is spared on the day of calamity, On the day when wrath is led forth." (21:30) In other words, the collective mind has preserved the information of sparing the wicked in the day of calamity. It can also be said, therefore, that "The joy of the wicked has been brief, The happiness of the impious, fleeting?" (20:5) Therefore, the Naamithite's argument fails because of the flimsy foundation of his argument.

Job does not credit Zophar's thesis. God causes some to die materially satisfied, "The marrow of his bones is juicy" (21:24), and others to die "embittered." (21:25) What should the rationale behind this eternal

and unaltered divine resolution be? The mystery gets bigger and the pain deeper.

7. The third dialogue with Eliphaz

The Tenamite, Eliphaz, brings in his third intervention the heavy arsenal. Labels and high-tonnage accusations are finally being dumped on poor Job. The list of moral errors is long and heavy: malice (22:5), dispossession (22:6), lack of compassion and flagrant negligence (22:7), influence peddling (22:8), cruelty (22:9), heretical theology with incredible deviations regarding the knowledge of God, conceived as being tributary to the limit: "You say, 'What can God know? . . . the clouds screen Him so He cannot see As He moves about the circuit of heaven.'" (22:13-14) All this includes Job in the ranking of those outside the law and moral conventions of his time: "Have you observed the immemorial path that evil men have trodden . . . ?" (22:15)

Does Eliphaz advance hypotheses or does he bring facts to the dialogue classroom? It seems not. It is certain that these stigmas constitute the prerogative of a rhetoric that ends with the call to spiritual conversion: "Be close to Him and wholehearted; good things will come to you thereby" and "If you regard treasure as dirt, Ophir - gold as stones of the wadi and Shaddai be your treasure and precious silver for you. . . ." (22:21, 24-25)

The sobs of the tormented Job are muffled by the acute suffering (23:2). However, and not even now, Job does not give up on the endorsement of his innocence and fiercely seeks to judge himself with God. But where is he? In all cardinal directions, sunrise, sunset, midnight, noon, God is imperceptible and hidden (23:7-8). The empirical discovery of God is an impossible mission. Or, it is so clear, Job does not make friends with God because, simply, he was never a stranger to him: "I have followed in His tracks, Kept His way without swerving, I have not deviated from what His lips commanded; I have treasured His words more than my daily bread." (23:11,12) Instead, the fear of the Lord is the deep vibration of his soul (23:15).

Maybe, if God himself did justice every time and on time, things would be better, people would know what to fear about: "Why are times of judgment not reserved by Shaddai?" (24:1) But because the divine sanction does not manifest itself on time, we have people who move borders, thieves, robbers, evil profiteers, ignoble criminals, adulterers and extortionists (24:3-4, 9-23). All these multiply their deeds Job affirms, "Yet God does not regard as a reproach." (24:12) Job is indignant and demands contrary evidence, otherwise his thesis stands: "Surely no one can confute me, Or prove that I am wrong." (24:25) Eliphaz deepens into silence.

8. The third dialogue with Bildad

Bildad the Shuahite returns to the blemished character of man starting from the point that even the moon and the stars are not without flaws and shortcomings before the eyes of God, how, therefore, could any man display absolute candor and original innocence (see 25:6)?

Job reacts to Bildad's inconsolable words, accuses them as such, and energetically notes the creature's trembling before the God who makes the impossible possible and the incredible a reality: "He it is who stretched out Zaphon over chaos, who suspended earth over emptiness," (26 :7-8) while retaining its transcendence without negotiation (26:9). The reader can deduce the explanations why the man with such convictions keeps his heart pure and keeps his mind far from evil.

Job is not convinced by the arguments of his companions and continues to affirm his innocence: "I persist in my righteousness and will not yield; I shall be free of reproach as long as I live." (27:6) In these dialogues, so far, Newsom notes, "Job destroys the genteel closure of the wisdom dialogue. Job does indeed pass violence through language and language through violence."[12] As for the divine justice and the condemnation of the wicked, Job is convinced that the man who commits the crime is doomed, only in the end, to destruction: "evil man's portion from God . . . ." (2:13)

12 Newsom, *The Book of Job,* 168.

Job asserts God's omniscience and boundless power to ultimately justify that fear induced by divine attributes is the beginning of wisdom, and "Fear of the Lord is wisdom; To shun evil is understanding." (28:28) Thus, knowledge of God is the foundation of morality in Job's thinking.

The three companions no longer continue the discussion in contradiction with Job. It would have been, in the third round, Zophar's turn, but it's too much for him, and he withdraws. Perhaps Job's uncompromising intransigence causes Zophar to give up arguing with his fellow sufferer.

For Job, however, it is not enough even after the nostalgic commemoration of the good times when he lived in the midst of the family, as in the center of public attention, admired by the young and respected by the old (29:2-8), feared by the administrative and political elite in that area, close to the needs of the poor and the orphan (29:9-12), always ready to do justice to the wronged, after noticing his own naive perspective on life (29:18), Job laments the state he has reached (30: 1), morbid and despised by the most repulsive of his fellows (30:1-13), he laments God's decision to bring him to the lowest of conditions, although his care not to sin was always awake and lively: "I have covenanted with my eyes Not to gaze on a maiden." (31:1)

Why does God allow evil to good people? "Calamity is surely for the iniquitous; Misfortune, for the worker of mischief" (31:3) states rhetorically and ironically, even the man of suffering. Did not God know his ways? (31:4) Job knows his good deeds and claims justice: "may God weigh me . . . ." (31:6-40). The three companions no longer answer him, the round of debate ends with a Job prepared for justice. Respectful to gray-haired people, and attentive, a young man, who had attended the rounds of the debate, intervenes now, bringing with fierceness, but sapience, an unexpectedly penetrating theological light.

9. The intervention of Elihu of Buz

He is reacting to Job's fixation on pleading not guilty before God (32:2). Elihu also vehemently objects to Job's companions for the obstinacy with which they condemned him, without bringing sufficiently solid coun-

ter-arguments in response to the justified fixation, to a certain extent, of their friend in the valley of suffering (32:3). The young man had respected the seniority of the three by refraining from intervening until now, but now he considers it the time to express his thoughts (32:4). Elihu showcases that Job's three companions had failed to convince the latter: "I saw that none of you could argue with Job." (32:12). Only after notifying them of their defeat in the debate does Elihu address Job, and he does so without reserve and to the point, not beating about the bush and putting his finger in the wound.

The criticism of the Buzan (Elihu from Buz) targets Job's repetitive plea regarding his guilt (33:9-10) and sanctions his accusation against God whom he believes is committing an injustice: "But He find reason to oppose me, Considers me His enemy." (33:10) Elihu points out that God does not seek reason to hate man, because, here the facts speak, it is known that He does not punish man according to the gravity of his multiple and malignant transgressions, or in proportion to the severity of his wrongdoings. That if he did it, the man would no longer live, and he does not do it because he takes pity on the guilty one. This is how the person in question, honestly and openly, has the opportunity to admit without hiding: "I have sinned . . . But I was not paid back for it." (33:27) If God takes pity on the guilty and does not punish him according to merit, how can Job say that God hates him? There must be another lever in the spring of divine judgment to explain His decision!

Job, for his part, maintains his plea "I am right, God has deprived me of justice." (34:5) Job feels ignored in the midst of the suffering from which he feeds his grudge and his weeping every day (34:7).

Elihu, in response to the implications of Job's arguments, emphasizes with conviction: "For God surely does not act wickedly, Shaddai does not pervert justice." (34:12) Can someone with a limited mind criticize a limitless mind? God is the boundless thought; He is the source of all that exists. If He were to withdraw, all would succumb to nothingness, "All flesh would at once expire, And mankind return to dust" (34:15), He opposes kings and identifies their iniquity (34:18); men are the work of

His hands and He disposes of their lives (34:20). God knows everything without having to make long observations (34:23). He gives peace, and He withdraws from the immanent so that no one can fully know him (34:29). Elihu's plea has the following charge: "Job does not speak with knowledge; His words lack understanding." (34:35)

Elihu's second objection focuses on Job's despair. In this case, his thesis is that innocence, walking in righteousness, is no longer useful today: "What have I gained from not sinning?" (35:3)

Elihu's answer hits the nail on the head, namely that sinful conduct does not embarrass God; it does not change his character, nor does not affect him morally but, instead, it has an effect on his fellow men: "Your wickedness affects men like yourself; Your righteousness, mortals." (35:8) In other words, living in innocence has implicit utility because moral uprightness leads to morality. Well, it's one thing to live in a country with people subject to rules, and it's another to live your life in one without laws and principles. In the former, there is order, in the latter, there is chaos. So, morality has social value, that's why doing good is important, and doing evil is harmful. Elihu enshrines the value of righteousness and underlines the importance of waiting until the end for God's intervention. There is, in Elihu's conception, an optimal calendar, unknown to us, of divine intervention. But the fact that God does not intervene with sanctions does not mean that God does not justly punish lawlessness: "He rescues the lowly from their affliction and opens their understanding through distress." (35:15) The fact that God does not intervene by saving the righteous does not mean that he never will: "He draws you away from the brink of distress To a broad place where there is no constraint; Your table is laid out with rich food." (36:16)

But Elihu's eloquent answer to Job's charge of unrighteousness is in verse 22 and 23. Since "God is great in his power" and incomprehensible in his thought, how can a limited mind judge the innermost reaches of the infinite mind? It's absurd. Only if God were Job's equal could he be judged and charged for the errors of thought peculiar to limited creatures. But that is not the case. God is in another ontological and epistemolog-

ical category, man will never be able to understand him, therefore it is a regrettable error to accuse God of something, an unforgivable error: "See, God is beyond reach in His power; Who governs like Him? Who ever reproached Him for His conduct? Who ever said; 'You have done wrong?'" (36:22-23) Now, this very fact, this very error is debunked by Elihu. Job, in asserting that God does not do him justice, and considering that justice is on his side, errs in treating God as a human whose thinking he can scrutinize and whose intellectual faculties he can comprehend, when, in fact, God does not correspond to it. God is part of another epistemological chart and another ontological catalogue. He is immeasurably great: "See, God is greater than we can know." (36:26) God is in the ontological and epistemological position where he knows and can do everything, while man is in the position where he knows only partially. This necessary conclusion does not authorize man to criticize God for allowing suffering! In Elihu's conception, Job mistakes when he pretends to stand in judgment with God and laments the divine decision that turns him into an innocent recipient of tragedy and pain. In the introduction to the book entitled "Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas" Yafee is quoted as emphasizing Maimonides' and Aquinas' different perspective on Job thus: "Maimonides understands the story to be a parable about an imaginary figure who is perfectly blameless, if somewhat unwise. Thomas, on the other hand, understands it to be the description of a historical person who is perfectly wise, if somewhat sinful."[13] Craig Bartholomew finds Job protesting vehemently and incessantly. He refers to Alvin Plantinga for whom Job's problem can be understood as either lamentation for not understanding why God allows suffering in the innocent person's life, or anger that God allows cruel and unrelenting suffering.[14]

13 Matthew Levering, Piotr Roszak, Jorgen Vijgen, eds., *Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 11, note: 33.

14 Craig Bartholomew, *When You Want to Yell at God: The Book of Job* (WA, Bellingham: Lexham Press, Electronic Edition, 2014), 29-30.

In support of the thesis of God's superiority, Elihu brings to the fore cosmological evidence from the domain of creation. God is the author of some physical processes and phenomena that man has not even managed to copy: the circuit of water in nature (36:27, 37:6), the electromagnetic phenomenon of lightning (36:29), the existence of light (36:30), the temporal sequence of lightning and thunder (37:3,4), the arbitrary function of electrostatically charged clouds (37:13), the suspension of clouds (37:16), atmospheric heating (37:17), the orbital motion of the planets, and the constants of the cosmos (37:18). Therefore, God is not Job's equal.

10. Dramatic divine communication

Just as Elihu was speaking to Job about clouds, lightning and thunder, a wild storm arose. And from the middle of the storm God speaks to him. He employs subtle irony and rhetorical questioning (38:3,4). God evokes some of his creative deeds that he brings as evidence at the trial to highlight the fact that he is superior to poor Job and that his thinking transcends his understanding: the creation of the earth and the galaxy (38:4), the setting of the earth on nothing (38:6), the creation of the earth's atmosphere (38:9), the creation of days, the making of light (38:12-14, 18-19), the waters (38:16), entropy and death (38:17), natural phenomena (38:22-30), the formation of constellations (38:31-33), the creation of universal physical laws (38:33), information and energy (38:36-37), the construction of biological organisms with all their psycho-morpho-physiological processes (39:1-30; 40:15-41:34).

11. Job's final answer

Elihu's objections and the doubling of them by God's speech in the midst of the storm convinced the mortal Job of his limitations and of the fact that he had erred in not considering that God does not enter into the catalogue of finite beings: "I know that you can do everything, That nothing you propose is impossible for You." (42:2) Job finally admits that God is superior to him in terms of understanding things and that he committed the error of trying to include the non-finite in his finite judgments:

"Indeed, I spoke without understanding Of things beyond me, which I did not know." (42:3b) Both the dialogue with Elihu of Buz, and the one with God, led Job to have a high view of God's power and knowledge and, in effect, to adopt the position of resignation and modesty. The thesis of Job's innocence remains unsettled, but the conclusion of God's absolute superiority occupies the central place in the perimeter of the debates of the book of Job. Job is righteous, but suffering may come into his life for reasons that, to the unfathomable and perfect mind of God, are fully justified. The Job at the end of the narrative is a metamorphosed Job.

The reader has the opportunity of a relatively complete picture. He has access from the beginning of the narrative to the idea of God, even though Job, even now, after the completion of the labour of his suffering, does not have the whole picture of the puzzle.

Job finally understands that he analyzed something for which he had no analysis criteria. God cannot be judged for the suffering allowed, because in order to be able to judge him, Job should have been at least his equal, while he admits that he is not: "I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know." (42:3b) Now, this is the idea of the theodicy of the book of Job, God is neither unjust nor without knowledge of the cause of suffering; on the contrary, He is both aware of the cause of suffering and good in His decisions and actions. Man cannot judge the resolution of His actions through the lens of his limited faculties of knowledge.

The feeling that Job experiences is that of self-loathing, and, consequently, he concedes to retract what he asserted in his plea and repents: "I recant and relent." (42:6) Job does not receive divine justification for the suffering inflicted. His rationale remains an unknown, but he may instead correctly infer that God, who is perfect in power and knowledge, has both perfect justifications for the suffering administered and beneficial goals or rewards in proportion for the man who faithfully and justly manages his affliction. In essence, there is a great difference between created man and the divine Creator; limited man does not know the reason for suffering, like so many other things, but God knows it fully, as, more-

over, he knows all things fully. However, this very difference imposes on limited man the quality of refraining from the action of criticizing and accusing God for the decisions taken. Even though Job knows neither the justifications nor the ultimate purpose of his suffering or its planned and beneficial results, they exist and he now fully accepts them.

III. Classical and modern interpretive positions

1. Hermeneutics of polyphonic horizons of interpretation in A. Newsom, Carl G. Jung and H. Kushner

In recent years, the Book of Job has been received through the filter of the meaning it has for the reader's generation and socio-cultural and existential context. For example, Carol A. Newsom proposes to approach the Book of Job through a "Bakhtian and polyphonic reading" with the aim of "reading Job as a book of our own age."[15] However, Newsom wants to emphasize that this approach avoids giving the book a single interpretive direction, in the sense that it "does not flow in only one direction, however" and, at the same time, is careful not to allow itself to be captured by a "mere relativism."[16] Instead, this approach follows polyphonic dialogism, in the idea that it proposes a hermeneutic approach according to which:

> one engages in the discipline of seeing how one's position appears from the perspective of another, listening to the objections that one must answer, seeing what one's own position hides from itself, and being open to the possibility of modification in light of dialogical engagement.[17]

Under this aspect, Newsom emphasizes the existence in the dynamics of dialogues of "the variety of forms of moral imagination,"[18] these

15 Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job, A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 261.

16 Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 262.

17 Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 262.

18 Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 262.

constituting "the fundamental aesthetic and cognitive means by which persons and cultures construct meaning, value, and significance."[19] Newsom believes that this writing leaves open the possibility of any moral perspectives and personal goals or doctrinal loyalties in the open dialogue on the problem of the suffering of the unrighteous, for which it advances a significant series of essential questions vis-à-vis the quality of human existence.[20]

Assuming a psycho-analytical hermeneutic horizon, Carl Gustav Jung conceives God as a "divine darkness."[21] God is represented in terms of a psyche that engages the self and the ego in a self-reflexive synergistic coupling,[22] according to which the ego reflects on an "unconscious"[23] self-tributary to limitations and inherent errors. The image of God, in Jung's vision, as it emerges from his commentary on the Book of Job, is that "of a God who knew no moderation in his emotions and suffered precisely from this lack of moderation . . . . Insight existed along with obtuseness, loving-kindness along with cruelty, creative power along with destructiveness."[24] Job, therefore, "clearly sees that God is at odds with himself [. . .] As certain as he is of the evil in Yahweh, he is equally certain of the good."[25] Later, Jung remarks the following: "Yahweh is not split but is an antinomy - a totality of inner opposites - and this is the indispen-

19 Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 262.

20 Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 263-264.

21 Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, William McGuire, eds., *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volumes 1-9, Translated by Gerhard Adler & R. F. C. Hull, Second Edition (USA: Princeton University Press; England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), Complete Digital Edition, 14254/Vol. 11, [561].

22 Read at al., *The Collected*, 14342/[640].

23 Read at al., *The Collected*, 14368/[659]; see [758].

24 Read et al., *The Collected*, 14253/[560].

25 Read et al., *The Collected*, 14260/[567].

sable condition of his tremendous dynamism, his omniscience and omnipotence."[26] From this angle of reading, suffering is a failure of divinity.

To the question "why bad things happen to good people." Harold S. Kushner believes that Job is the recipient of an "enigmatic answer."[27] He breaks down the contents of twenty-five chapters of the book into three statements, among which he notes with dismay a real antagonism: God is all-powerful, God is completely good, and Evil exists in the life of the good Job. Therefore, Kushner points out, "Since it is logically impossible for a completely good God to let an innocent man like Job suffer if He could prevent it, one of those three statements must be false."[28] Therefore, Kushner continues, "To be told that he is sinless and is suffering for no reason would shake his faith in God's rule over the world."[29] Kushner's hermeneutics betrays a subjective horizon of interpretation, that is, everyone understands suffering through the prism of the abrasive experiences of their own lives. This hermeneutic has the following formulation: "God is like a mirror. The mirror never changes, but everyone who looks at it sees a different face». Some people read the book of Job and find that it confirms what they already want to believe [. . .] In the end, every one of us reads his own book of Job, colored by our own faith and personal history."[30] This is the case of "equivocal preaching" - of Maimonides, according to which "God is just, but not in the same way that earthly beings are just"[31]; of Spinoza who did not see in the book of Job a Jewish perspective of the problem of suffering; of Isaac Luria according to which "suffering is part of the messiness of an unredeemed world, a world too fragile to contain God's pure holiness"[32] a world from which God with-

26 Read et al., *The Collected*, 14261/[567].

27 Harold S. Kushner, *The Book of Job, When Bad Things Happened to Good Person* (USA: Schocken Books, 2012) Electronic Edition, 11.

28 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 76.

29 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 78.

30 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 243-244.

31 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 254.

32 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 263.

draws to make room for things other than God,[33] things like pain, suffering and the tragic; of Martin Buber, who considered suffering as an effect of God's hiddenness through which human sinfulness is signaled; of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who denies God's absolute omnipotence, but affirms divine mercy and compassion.[34] Kushner rather represents Luria's thesis, in which God's self-absence takes place ("tzimtzum, God's contraction or withdrawal"[35]) of our humanity with all that is most characteristic among them of its suffering and of nature with its fierceness. God is animated by goodness, but nature, blind and insensitive to our feelings, is devoid of morality and good intentions: "God is moral, Nature is not."[36] In other words, because God makes room for nature, with all its limitations, vices, and strengths, within the perimeter of our existence, by narrowing the scope of His own presence and actions, suffering appears in all its ugliness and sometimes indiscretion. In other words, God is not fully sovereign. Not because it is not absolutely sovereign, but because He chooses to be so in order to allow humanity and nature to fully express themselves. The criticism that can be addressed to Kushner is that he promotes a desperate, sometimes dystopian theodicy, an existentialism deprived of hope. Since God is self-limiting and narrowing His room for maneuver in the horizon of human existence and the world, He consequently allows the existence of evil and suffering, to our despair many times. For example, the Sabeans committed crimes because Job did not have the resources to defend himself, in other words Job was left alone in the ring of aggression and trouble. Here, God no longer rules, but adverse circumstances and the human lack of anticipation and response. However, Kushner points out, although God is not in the midst of the suffering that, only by way of consequence, he has generated, God is in the "miracle of human resilience in the face of the world's imperfections,

33 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 260.

34 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 274.

35 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 260.

36 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 294.

even the world's cruelty."[37] God is not absent when He withdraws, leaving the void created by His absence to be occupied by evil and suffering, but is present in the fibers of human resilience through which man manages to cope with both. Kushner repents of the initial culpability of God and recognizes that the strength to endure suffering bore the mark of God. He expresses himself as follows: "I repudiate my past accusations, my doubts, even my anger. I have experienced the reality of God. I know that I am not alone, and, vulnerable mortal that I am, I am comforted."[38]

The multiple justification of suffering in the theology of J. Calvin

Paolo de Petris invokes Calvin's theological judgement, which highlights the following: "the suffering of innocent people had to do with God's hidden justice . . . ."[39] De Petris continues to remark: "Calvin's Sermons on Job could be understood to have a timeless dimension, and would be "a work for all men in all ages" and that suffering is a condition of human existence.[40] Suffering, in Calvin's vision, as De Petris notes, is man's means of thoughtfully adopting humility before the omniscience of God, to whom he is always an open universe, while for him, God remains a hermetic and inaccessible world:

> Against the humanist's optimistic vision of a human nature, capable of knowing truth and achieving knowledge of God independently of God's revelation, Calvin posed the opposing conception of a humanity contaminated by sin and alienated from God.[41]

From the perspective of De Petris, the hermeneutics of J. Moltmann's theology of the cross, suffering is understood and accepted by the fact

37 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 300.

38 Kushner, *The Book of Job*, 302.

39 Paolo de Petris, *Calvin's Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God, Calvin's Sermons of the Book of Job* (Switzerland, Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 2.

40 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 44.

41 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 63.

that God himself assumes it through the incarnation of the Son and His sacrifice[42]. But this is possible only on the basis of two realities: 1. God is tri-personal, which allows God to be both unlimited and suffering; The Father is unlimited while the Son is subject to specifically human limitations, the sufferings and traumas inherent in it, and 2. There is an impressive soteriological justification for His incarnation and death. Thus, just as the suffering of God has a fundamental justification, so the suffering of the innocent must have one, regardless of the fact that it is still hidden and inaccessible to us. From Calvin's perspective, De Petris continues to notice, the purpose of suffering is multiple: suffering is a "punishment and a sanction"[43], "suffering as correction and admonition,"[44] "suffering as a test"[45] and "suffering as medicine."[46] But, however grievous the evil of suffering may press, God has the power to convert evil into good.[47]

The merit of Calvin's exegesis is to outline high goals and rational justifications for human suffering, and this is all the more valuable today, as we know that the recent secularist horizon of interpretation of suffering deprives man of any meaning. As De Petris states, "Calvin's Theodicy turns out to be of great topicality, since one of the most difficult threats confronting the modern secularized world is not the existence of suffering, but its apparent purposelessness."[48]

Thomas Aquinas also draws on the rhetoric of suffering from the book of Job in his work entitled *The Literal Exposition of Job*. Serge Thomas Bonino[49] indicates that Aquinas "signals the first structural limit that

42 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 24.

43 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 248.

44 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 257.

45 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 263.

46 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 265.

47 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 267.

48 De Petris, *Calvin's*, 281.

49 Serge-Thomas Bonino, *The Incomprehensible Wisdom of God in the* "*Expositio super Job"*, translated by David L. Augustine, in Piotr Roszak, & Vijgen, Jorgen, eds., *Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.:

affects our knowledge of God: the imperfection of our knowledge of creatures, which constitutes our point of departure."[50] Aquinas outlines the limits of human knowledge regarding the world of creatures which, based on the contrast between creatures and the Creator, explains the obvious inadequacy of human knowledge to the knowledge of God as follows: "But since the human mind cannot totally and perfectly understand creatures in themselves, much less can it have perfect knowledge about the Creator himself."[51] As Bonino observes, "The structural incomprehensibility of God to the intelligence of spiritual creatures . . . is a matter of an incomprehensibility by way of excess that results from the transcendence of God compared to all of His work."[52] Therefore, God's justice in the context of Job's suffering, although it cannot be grasped by human thought, certainly has an explanatory foundation. The sufferer, therefore, has no reason to consider himself either God's equal or superior to Him, in his attempt to analyze the quality of divine judgment regarding suffering. However, this conclusion is drawn deductively from the premises that invoke God's perfection: "The perfection of his power and the perfection of his wisdom guarantee the perfection of God's justice."[53] Therefore, concludes Bonino, "God's incomprehensibility forbids every presumptuous challenge of the divine government, every perverse desire to place ourselves above God as a judge."[54]

Conclusion:

The book of Job shows that the meaning of suffering is reserved for the transcendental. From the first group of dialogues, one can remark that the

The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 106.

50 Bonino, *The Incomprehensible,* 107.

51 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job, Latin-English Opera Omnia,* translated by Brian Mullady (Emmaus Academic, 2016), Chapter Eleven, paragraph 5.

52 Bonino, *The Incomprehensible,* 110.

53 Bonino, *The Incomprehensible,* 124.

54 Bonino, *The Incomprehensible,* 124.

suffering would have hamartiological justifications. Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar invoke sin as the cause of suffering, while Job argues the opposite of this thesis.

In the book of Job, suffering does not justify blaming God for the tragedy that He allows. Since God cannot be comprehended, He cannot be accused. Another fact emerges from Job's dialogue with Elihu of Buz, that of the transcendent divine mind and thought. According to this fact God's decision transcends the human mind, the divine cannot be encompassed by the human, and therefore God cannot be blamed by man for the suffering he allows in the life of the one without malice. On the other hand, if the righteous man suffers now, it does not mean that God will allow suffering to persist in his life forever. Likewise, if the wicked man has not tasted the bitterness of suffering, it does not mean that he will not be punished for his wrongdoings.

As can be seen from the four rounds of dialogues of the book of Job, the perspective on the meaning of suffering is polyphonic. The three companions agree on the thesis that suffering is inflicted by God on the wicked man, therefore the sufferer has shown ethical and spiritual alienation from God. Elihu of Buz distinguishes himself by arguing in favor of the thesis that God's mind surpasses human thought in all aspects, therefore, mortal man cannot accuse what he cannot understand! Job resorts to this thesis towards the end of the dramatic narrative of the book. Interpretive polyphony in the modern period is equally evident. Newsom advances the thesis of a comparative polyphony of interpretations so that some of them can be corrected through dialogue with others, and he does so without defending the thesis of a single exegetical conclusion. Jung, for his part, conceives the divine mind as a human psyche, which distances him from the thesis of the transcendent thought of God as it was enshrined by Elihu of Buz and, finally, from the words of God that were heard in the storm. Jung's perspective would not logically allow Job's repentance at the end of the dialogue rounds. A man who treats God as a mentally unstable man has no reason to repent. On the other hand, H. Kushner chooses to identify with one of the directions of Jewish in-

terpretation according to which suffering is the result of restricting the presence and limiting the power of God from the space of our reality to free nature and man with all their unique and often regrettable particularities. But, according to this view, even if God is neither at the origin of suffering nor in its tragic fire, He is present in the heroic resilience of man that He actualizes.

For the classical commentators on the book of Job, in this case Aquinas and Calvin, suffering has meaning, even if it remains the great unknown in the equation of the life of the sufferer. Suffering inscribes God in a special ontological category. Only He knows the full duration and purpose of suffering. Man, through his lack of intellectual understanding of its particular meaning, always remains inferior to the Creator who created the physical world and its current phenomena. For both classical theologians, suffering creates the circumstance to adopt the attitude of humility before God and resignation before His plans. Lawrence Boadt signals this clearly: "no one relates to God on a basis of justice or equal rights."[55] And John Gray underlines: "Humanity . . . is not the measure of God's universe."[56] Instead, God remains the measure of all things, including the measure and purpose of suffering. He has the prerogative of knowledge and power, and we are left with the privilege of admiration and humility.

The last dialogues of the book, as well as the classical interpretations (Calvin and Aquinas) of the Book of Job, project a high view of God's power and knowledge, while the modern interpretations, a low view of God's power and knowledge, the former invite to belief, resignation and modesty, whereas the latter tend to induce aversion to the divine decision and rebellion against His will.

55 Boadt, *The Book of Job*, 15.

56 John Gray, *The Book of Job*, 115.

Bibliography:

Aquinas (St.), Thomas. *Commentary on the Book of Job* (Latin-English Opera Omnia). Translated by Brian Mullady. Emmaus Academic, 2016.

Bartholomew, Craig. *When You Want to Yell at God: The Book of Job.* WA. Bellingham: Lexham Press. Electronic Edition, 2014.

Boadt, Lawrence, ed.. *The Book of Job, Why Do the Innocent Suffer?* New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.

Gray, John. *The Book of Job.* Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010.

The Jewish Bible, *Tanakh, a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Texts.* Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Kushner, Harold S. *The Book of Job, When Bad Things Happened to Good Person.* USA, Schocken Books, Electronic Edition, 2012.

Newsom, Carol. A. *The Book of Job, A Contest of Moral Imaginations.* Oxford University Press, 2003.

Levering, Matthew, Piotr Roszak & Jorgen Vijgen, eds.. *Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas.* Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020.

Petris, De Paolo. *Calvin's Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God, Calvin's Sermons of the Book of Job.* Switzerland, Bern: Peter Lang, 2012.