Capítulo 6 - Escrevendo e reescrevendo o holocausto: a memória ferida
Where is God after Auschwitz?
Jacques Doukhan
signos verbais, à semântica e à lógica sintática. E que Emmanuel Lévinas define como sendo da ordem de uma “linguagem que precede as palavras, muda ou próxima do grito. Um grito entendido como reinauguração de toda significação.

Como testemunha da segunda geração formulando um dativo ético, devo aceitar este estado de suspensão temporária, existindo apenas no transcurso do meu ato de testemunhar, voltando obstinadamente mim mesma, à procura do fluxo da vida, anterior a qualquer configuração estética. Para isso preciso de um interlocutor que autoriza ou condescende. Não ao texto, mas a mim como autor de minha vida. Outorgo a vocês o estatuto de quem pode conceder-me, ou não, existência, validar-me ou não, na experiência do que não sei e do que dificilmente saberei.

Assim transformo o dito em dizer e testemunhar em tarefa infinda.

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Psicanalista

Where is God after Auschwitz?

Jacques Doukhan, D.H.L., Th.D.

Indeed the question is legitimate and disturbs our intelligence as God seems to be silent in the heart of our suffering. This is a very old question. The psalmist already heard it: “Where is your God?” (Psalm 42:3). Does this question mean that God died? Is He absent? For the psalmist this was precisely what it meant. In the Psalm the question is put in the persecutor’s mouth who mocks his victim, suggesting that we deceived ourselves, that the God in whom we trusted is not here for us. However, the immediate answer to that question is a call to remember (v. 3) and, by implication, a call to worship (v. 4) and to hope in God (v. 5). This invitation may sound paradoxical or monstrous. How can we worship a God who keeps silent in the presence of the killing of the innocent? In fact, the only decent answer to that insolent question, “Where is God?” is the unbelievable story that God is there, but that He can only be found at the unexpected place: He is identified with the child hanged on the gallows at Auschwitz. For as the old rabbinc principe goes: “God is always on the side of the victim (even if the persecutor is right).” But here, He is more than just siding with the victim; He is the victim. From the dramatic description of Isaiah 53, which laments on the Suffering Servant, to the scandalous testimony of the Gospel, which wonders ar the crucified Messiah, Jews and Christians have been confronted with this difficult question. Interestingly, both traditions have ventured the same strange answer: “He is there, on the gallows”.

The silence of God

“What is a place in hell for anyone who keeps silence before a moral question,” said Abraham Lincoln. And there is here more than a mere moral question. “Where is God after Auschwitz?” Holocausts are repeated, from Auschwitz to Rwanda, from Cambodia to Croatia. And God does not react. He is silent; He always was. And we do not understand. If, indeed, God existed, then the good God would not allow it; or what kind of God is this who loves, has the power to stop, and yet does not intervene? This question is thrown at the faces of the believers or brews within themselves as much as they remain human and honest. Traditionally, religious people have tried to give an answer to this strange silence. They had to explain, to justify
God, for religion and its values were at stake. All kinds of theories have been elaborated. Theologians called these systems “theodicy”. Some interpreted suffering as a necessary “test” which we must accept because it is God’s will. Afterwards we will understand. For the time being, they preach that we must endure by faith. Thus they have created in the minds of many believers what has been denounced by others as “the opium of the people”. It is true, indeed, that religion has often been used as a drug to erode human sensitivity and thereby produces those “heroes” of faith who display an eternal smile throughout all the ordeals. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lor d” (Job 1:21). By faith they submit themselves to God. They recognize that all this suffering comes from God and therefore it is for their own good. Thus God’s silence is no more a silence. It makes sense and pertains to a definite plan. The believer trusts then and dives into a wonderful peace which frightens some and inspires others.

In fact, the Bible, this fundamental textbook of religions so criticized and yet so poorly read, attests on this point one more misunderstanding. Instead of prescribing a beatific trust, or even an enduring submission, the Bible testifies throughout its pages to the great shout of the prophets who never accepted this suffering condition. Abraham, the nomad who did not stay in his tent when he heard that the fire was about to fall on the city; he went out and cried at God and discussed with Him (Genesis 18). Jacob, the dreamer, did not stay sleeping on his stone, but he risked his life and wrestled with God and boldly begged for God’s protection (Genesis 32:24-32). Moses, the great leader, who left his blessed communion on the mountain and stood up against God to obtain life for his people (Exodus 32:11-13). Job, the miserable, who did not just complain about his wounds but threw himself against God and yelled at Him his confusion and his revolt (Job 9:22-24; 10:1-3). The prophets did not just preach and exhort the people to be righteous; they also shouted at God and cried at His feet, revolted and tormented from the pain they suffered or they saw in their prophetic vision (Jeremiah 10:8). From the heart of the Hebrew Bible, from the Psalms which crossed the whole history of Israel, this cry resounds several times, forever suspended in the void: “How long?” (Psalms 94:3; 74:10; 89:47; 6:4, etc.). Also in the New Testament the same anguish seizes the “man of suffering” who cries on Jerusalem and on the world and dies on a “Why?” The Bible does not promote submission. On the contrary, the closer we draw to this God, the more we feel that all this evil is abnormal and does not make sense (see Psalms 10:1; 42:10, 44:25). For God is really outside of this tragedy. As for those who accuse Him of being a part of it, people like Job’s friends who mean well and take God’s defense are rejected and denounced by God Himself: “You have not spoken of me what is right” (Job 47:7).

God is innocent

According to the Bible, God is innocent because suffering is described as the natural result of human iniquity. Suffering was not a part of God’s initial plan. Originally God’s creation was “very good”. Humans are responsible for their own misfortune. The Genesis narratives indicate this reality from the start. As soon as men and women disobey, all original harmony is broken. Animal kingdom surges against humans (Genesis 3:1, 13,15), man against woman (Genesis 3:12, 16,17), nature against humans (Genesis 3: 18,19), and humans against God (Genesis 3:8-10, 22-24). The ecological balance was upset because of human beings. The same principle is perceived in the biblical conception of the Promised Land, which can vomit out its sinful inhabitants (Leviticus 18:25, 28). The iniquity of Israelites who murder, rob, and commit adultery (Hosea 4:2) influences the character of the country, which is “mour[n][ing], and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away” (verse 3). All suffering is interpreted here as a direct effect of sin. This link of dependence between humans and their environment, between people and their posterity, constitutes one of the fundamental principles of the Bible. “One of the main ideas of the Jewish tradition”, said André Neher, “is the importance of everything, of each action, of each word, of each thought of man. Nothing is indifferent. Everything has weight. Man in reality knows that very well. But he wants to escape from the terrible responsibility”.

Lastly, God is declared innocent by the Bible, because the present world is seen to be in the hands of a stranger. In fact, the first act of evil is

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1 All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version unless specifically indicated.

initiated by someone who is neither God nor a human person. The Bible refers to the Serpent which embodies the external power of evil in biblical tradition as well as in ancient Middle Eastern culture. Yet this power is not a mere mythological figure, but a historical reality. Right there in the book of Job where suffering is at its worst, God discloses the root of evil. Speaking to Satan who had come to ask God for permission to crush Job, God Himself recognizes, “he is in your hands” (Job 1:11, 12; cf. 2:4-6). The same statement is made by Yeshua in the New Testament who clearly identifies Satan as “the prince of the world” (John 12:31) and the only author of evil (Matthew 13:28, 29). This is why the Bible presents suffering as unfair and irrational. In fact, the first real suffering of human beings, the first experience of death, confirms this observation. Abel, justice and innocence personified, is killed. He dies for nothing, for he has committed no mistake; and his death does not serve any purpose, because he disappears without a trace. The name he bears, Abel, “vapor,” reveals the empty, illogical character of his tragic destiny.

The best illustration of suffering, of course, is Job. A key word in the story is hinam, meaning “gratuitous”. Job’s suffering is judged binam by God Himself (Job 2:3). Against his three friends, who plead in favor of the justice of God in order to explain suffering, Job asserts that there are no reasons for suffering. The innocent together with the culprit are stricken. Here suffering is unfair (see Job 5:7). In this perspective, suffering has no reason to exist. Suffering does not serve any purpose, does not lead anywhere, and makes no sense (see Psalms 10:1; 42:10; 44:25).

The solution to suffering

But justified or not, suffering is always suffering, and explaining it at a human level does not solve anything. That is why in the end, the Bible deals with the problem of suffering in two ways.

First, God’s answer to suffering is His own suffering. God suffers already because of humans. God suffers when people commit iniquity that separates them. One has an insight already into this idea through the questioning of God in search for the first humans, when He cried, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:10). God suffers for being unable to find lost humans. Then, before the Flood, the text is still more explicit. “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord...” (Genesis 6:5, 6). The Lord says also: “Thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities” (Isaiah 43:24).

The Bible is filled with the lamentations of a God anguished because of His people’s sin (Isaiah 1:2, 3). Abraham Heschel comments on this last passage of Isaiah: “The words of the prophet bear not on the anger of God, but rather on the suffering of God. The prophet pleads with us so that we may understand the condition of a father who has been abandoned by his children”. God also suffers when He sees humans engaged in sin, not only because sin will separate them from Him, but also because He knows all the suffering that this iniquity brings. At the same time, God suffers from His incapacity to stop humans. “Where are you?” He asked in the garden. It seems as if humans were now slipping away from His control. God will not do anything that infringes on people’s free will, and thus He suffers from seeing what people do with their free will (see Isaiah 63:9; Psalm 23:4). But God goes even further. He suffers for humans. He carries and endures the sins of humans. The Hebrew word nasa, which means “to carry,” is also used in the sense of “to forgive” (Hosea 1:6). The image here suggests that the forgiveness of sin necessarily involves the suffering of God, who chooses to carry the sins of His people. This idea is admirably translated in the famous passage of Isaiah 53, where the suffering servant is described as bearing the sins of the people, thus providing for them forgiveness. “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed....He bare the sin of many” (Isaiah 53:5-12). This particular principle gives the sacrificial system its significance. The animal carries the sins of the people and thus ensures the forgiveness of sins (Leviticus 4:15, 20). The biblical idea of forgiveness is thus attached to the idea of suffering. And as God is the only one capable of forgiving (Psalm 32:1, 2), suffering that consists of carrying sins in view of forgiveness should be understood as the suffering of God Himself.

Second, God’s answer to suffering is deliverance from it. Certainly this act of His can already be observed in life and through history. God is already the Saviour down here. He became for humans a Saviour. His ever-

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presence has protected them. In His love and clemency He has delivered them (see Isaiah 63:8, 9).

The Bible is full of these miracles of God, which override all rules and make humans automatically fall on their knees and worship. The sick are healed (Genesis 20:17; 2 Kings 20:5), the dead resurrected (2 Kings 13:21), the powerful enemy overcome (Exodus 15:1 ff.). Sometimes in the Bible, man is blessed by a supernatural visit, which surprises him and illuminates his path, making him feel high and happy.

But soon after, the healed becomes sick again (Genesis 48:1), the resurrected ends up dying (John 12:9), and Israel, after all the miracles, is oppressed and dispersed (Daniel 1:1, 2). Job perfectly illustrates the process. Beyond the miracle that has restored Job to his first estate, death awaits him. The book of Job ends not with the miracle, but with the death of the hero (Job 42:17). The problem is therefore not solved within our present existence and history, something that Job had understood. To Eliphaz, the present has the key answer to suffering (Job 15 — for Job it’s found only in the future (Job 19:25-27). The future carries the real solution to suffering.

The prophet Isaiah prophesies about the New Jerusalem: “And the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (Isaiah 65:19). To reach this point, however, God starts all over again. The new city is not the result of people’s progress. Instead, it is created by God. So that suffering and death will be no more, humans and the universe must go through the miracle of creation.

Significantly, when God finally answers Job’s questions about suffering (Job 31:35), He does it through a long speech about Creation (Job 38-41). For only Creation is the solution, the hope of something radically new and different. There is not another solution to suffering. Easy to say, but what shall we do in the meantime? In the meantime, the only way out is to resist and to fight. To resist and to fight suffering in view of the future, precisely because of what we see beyond Paradoxically, the experience of suffering, because it confronts men and women with death and the absurd, awakens within them through their revolt the nostalgia for life, for happiness, and for the other City. Instead of pleading against God, suffering on the contrary draws Him nearer to us; because He is the only Innocent to suffer, the only One who is able to suffer with each one of us, the only One, indeed, who holds the key to this suffering and will eliminate it totally.

After Auschwitz, says Elie Wiesel, we cannot speak about God any more; we can only speak to God. Only a prayer, the prayer that would call Him to come down and stop suffering is the decent and appropriate response after Auschwitz.

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