

1995

The Tears of God: A Theological Investigation

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

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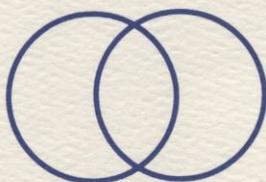
Recommended Citation

Teshuvah Institute Papers, "The Tears of God: A Theological Investigation," edited by Dolores M. Cummingham. South Orange, NJ: The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, 1995.

תשובה

Institute Paper

**The Tears
of
God:**
A Theological Investigation



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Foreword

TO THINK OF Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher is to remember a man of purpose whose work was to use his intellect and his pen throughout a lifetime in service to God, truth, His church, and the ministry of reconciliation.

For almost six decades, he read, studied, pondered, and wrote about a wide range of topics. Yet, this writing and teaching was ever informed by the view that we as children of the one true God, having been made in His image and likeness, must meet and learn from one another in an attitude of mutual respect and dialogue. It was this mode of thinking that gave form to the *Opus Sancti Pauli*, which he directed in Vienna, and no less to his editorship of, and writings in *Die Erfüllung* until the demonic hand of the Gestapo reached out to capture him and silence his prophetic voice. Having escaped them in Austria, and once again in Paris, he came to the United States in November of 1940.

Fewer than 15 years later, he had seen the republication of his *Racisme, Antisémitisme, Antichristianisme* which had been seized and destroyed by the Nazis in Paris, and had written *Walls Are Crumbling*, no mean feat, considering that he had come to this country knowing no English. This book had been written in the midst of the parish work to which he had been assigned during that time.

It could take many more pages than space permits to review his work in founding and editing *The Bridge*, establishing the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, as well as the Graduate Department of Jewish-Christian Studies, as it is now called. Nor does space permit more than a mention of his service in the Secretariat for Christian Unity during Vatican II, and his seminal work in the preparation and formulation of the Statement of the Church's Bond to the Jewish People in *Nostra Aetate*, 4. The years following were filled with lectures, teaching, and writing – about the Council, about the Statement, about its meaning for the new encounter of Christians and Jews. Nor did he limit his interest and concerns to these topics. He wrote and spoke about humankind's responsibility as stewards of creation, about the need for a life in accord with the Decalogue, to mention but two topics.

In 1981, when colleagues of Professor Doctor Ignaz Zangele invited Monsignor Oesterreicher to contribute to a festschrift honoring the former's 75th birthday, the latter wrote *Die Tränen Gottes* which has appeared only in German in that festschrift.

This is but one of his many as yet unpublished works. It is our hope that generations of scholars will tap the rich mine of his life and thought through research and the study of his own library and works, so generously bequeathed by him to Seton Hall University.

This series of papers is entitled *Teshuvah*, "turning." As "turning to God," *teshuvah* is the biblical and rabbinical term for repentance. Here it bespeaks the re-vision, the re-orientation to which Vatican II, in its Statement on the Jews, summons Christian thought and action.

His spirit and work must continue in life to enlighten, inspire, and inform those who have committed themselves to the ministry of reconciliation, as much as those who are yet to come to this endeavor.

To mark May 7, 1995, the day on which a library suite is being dedicated to honor Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher's memory, the Institute has published the English version titled *The Tears of God*.

Dolores M. Cunningham
Editor
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

The Tears of God

THE GOD OF Israel is a God of joy. He would never have called the world of the senses into being – in other words, to exist in His presence – had He not taken delight in shapes, in appearance, and motion, in forms and colors, in the smell of flowers, in the radiance of the sun, the babbling of brooks, in the roaring of the ocean's waves, in the stillness and majesty of the mountains, the speaking and singing of human beings – in short, in the diversity of all creation. He is a lover of the created world, and of its manifold nature, without at the same time being a part of it. He is beyond time and above all things. God is the one who stands ineffably beyond everything finite; He is the transcendent one.

God's transcendence, which gave rise to fear in the men and women of the biblical era, is not the same as that which a metaphysician dreams of. The metaphysician does not want to hear of such a thing as "polarity" in the life of God. The believer, however, rejoices with the prophet who proclaims the incomparability of God:

*Who is there like you, the God
who removes guilt
and pardons sin for the
remnant of his inheritance;
Who does not persist in anger forever,
but delights rather in clemency?*
(Mi 7:18)

With awe and amazement, the believer stands in the presence of the mystery of God, who is "enthroned in the heights" but who nevertheless cares for the inhabitants of the earth: "He fills Zion with justice and integrity" (Is 33:5). He is God who dwells "in the heavens" but yet is the "help and shield" of His people (Ps 115:3,9). His nature makes Him infinitely distant, and yet He is the ever-present one, the one who is the ever-ready Helper. From the burning bush, He shares His mystery with Moses: *Ehejeh ascher ehejeh* "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14). However often philosophers like Feuerbach and Nietzsche may cry out that God is dead, the person who clings to the Scriptures believes with every fiber of his being that God is alive and that He is with His own in good times and bad.

THE HERALDS of the "dead God" were not the first to contradict the message of the Bible. The "Gospel of Creation" was proclaimed in order to bear witness against the worshipers of chaos. The poet-author of the Mesopotamian myth of the origin of the world traces the birth of the universe to a theomachy, a struggle to the death among gods. The world and its human inhabitants owe their existence to a bloody conflict between the goddess of chaos, a monster, and her demonic children.

To this wild and near despairing understanding, which was probably the dominant one in the culture that surrounded the Israelite people, the author of the biblical account responds with a joyful message: all finite things owe their existence to the creative word of a loving God. The first chapter of Genesis is thus not a primitive cosmogony but a hymn to the goodness of the Creator and the underlying goodness of all creatures. Truly, the God of Israel takes delight in everything that His word and loving will have fashioned. He says that His work was good, indeed very good (cf Gn 1 *passim*).

After a rich history, the people of Israel and the revelation entrusted to them came in contact with Greek culture. For the proclaimers of the biblical message, God is the beginning and the end, whereas for the Greek thinker, Protagoras, man was "the measure of all things."¹ For the former, righteousness – standing aright before God – was the most important thing, while for the later, it was reason and a life in conformity with it.

When the inspired authors of the sacred writings of Israel, all of them preachers of a life oriented to God, speak of truth, they use the word *emet* which means stability, certainty, trustworthiness, and fidelity. The view of the masters of philosophical thought is something else entirely. A fundamental axiom of Platonic teaching is the identity of being and truth. *Aletheia*, truth, is "the unveiling of what is properly and enduringly being."² A fundamental thesis of Aristotelian metaphysics is: "The one who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth."³

For the Greeks, the truth was something that could be thought of, something that could be meditated upon, and spoken about. For the Hebrews, it was something that had to be done and lived. "To do the truth in love" – an expression that is to be found in Ephesians 4:15 and in the Common Rule of Qumran 1.5 – would have seemed absurd and even laughable to the Greeks. To the sons and daughters of Israel, however, it was their greatest joy *halach be'emet* – "to walk in the truth and in fidelity."

In the Greek as in the modern world, the human person appears primarily as a searcher who longs to solve the riddle of life, as one who is constantly questioning; in the biblical world, it is the human person who is sought and questioned by God, whose life is to be an answer to God's call, commandment, and love. Ferdinand Ebner

and other dialogical thinkers of this century have reminded us that word [*Wort*], response [*Antwort*] and responsibility [*Verantwortung*] represent the sum of real human existence.

WHENEVER A HUMAN being acts irresponsibly toward God, whenever a human being refuses God an answer, he sins and dishonors God's name. Hardly had Scripture told of God's joy at having created man than it speaks of His concern. When the Lord "saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long, the Lord regretted having made man on earth, and his heart grieved" (Gn 6:5-6). To be pained by something, to be grieved, to worry, to bemoan one's fate are all truly human emotions. But only a child's mind, according to "enlightened" persons, could ascribe such dispositions to the immortal God who "lives in unapproachable light" (1 Tm 6:16).

The sages of Greece and, following them, the great Scholastics have in fact taught us that God, the ultimate source of everything that comes into being, is *actus purus*, or pure act, and that He is unmixed, unlimited being, that He is the perfect one who stands in need of nothing. In their school, we have also learned to see Him as the first mover, who moves everything but is Himself unmoved. I am not trying to undermine this principle when I say that they are only speaking of those external movements that come under the rubric of kinetics. The Aristotelian notion of the unmoved mover cannot be applied to internal movements or emotions. Not only before the Flood but on other occasions as well, Scripture sees in the eternal God a lover who, like every mortal lover, suffers when His love goes unrequited.

Whoever uses the term "unmoved mover" as an all-embracing name for God, whoever thinks that love and the longing for love are deficiencies, must look askance and even be scandalized whenever Scripture speaks of God's feelings, His concern, His heartsickness. There are many who console themselves with the thought that these are but metaphors. They are metaphors, to be sure, but not simply metaphors. To speak of God in images is more than a concession to the sensate nature of human beings; it is the consequence of man's resemblance of God.

Does not a representation of God along human lines diminish His majesty? Of course anthropomorphisms are not the last word. But is there any human speech form that can refer to Him in a way that is appropriate to Him? Is conceptual language – as, for example, "pure reality" – better suited to Him than an image? Do not concrete idioms, thanks to their ability to picture things, hint far more accurately at the fullness of God, who is life, love, fire? It is not my point, however, to play off abstract language against concrete language; rather is it my wish to thank the Lord for allowing us to approach Him with two kinds of language. Neither does the

reference to the differences between Hebrew and Greek ways of thinking mean that they are in every respect mutually exclusive. The great Christian thinkers of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages made every effort to put Greek thought at the service of the biblical message.

THE BIBLICAL BOOK "In the Beginning" describes God's creation as a work lasting six days, each day unfolding between morning and evening: from morning to evening and from evening to morning – in other words, day and night, which are constituents of time and also parts of God's creation. There is, then, no other moment for the encounter between God and the human person than the bright day or the dark night. To the young Moses, God discloses Himself during the day in the glow of a burning thornbush as the ever present, ever ready helper (cf. Ex 3:1-18). To the timorous Jacob, God assures His favor in a dream, with a vision of a ladder of grace stretching from heaven to earth (cf. Gn 28:10-15).

Light and darkness appear again in Israel's hymns:

My tears are my food day and night.
(Ps 42:4)

*For his anger lasts but a moment;
a lifetime, his good will.
At nightfall, weeping enters in,
but with the dawn, rejoicing.*
(Ps 30:6)

These verses are far more evocative than the mere factual statement that, for most people, life is a mixture of sadness and joy. Joy and sadness are not simply a matter of the ups and downs, the ebb and flow of life; they are central to our existence.

Scripture is, of course, aware that sorrow and joy often alternate with one another, that a cheery, vacuous feeling of pleasure can be transformed into despondency, and that deep sadness can yield to a joyful and confident disposition. The Lord is capable of turning tears into laughter:

*Those that sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.*
(Ps 126:5)

In the Lukan version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives new meaning to this fundamental idea:

*Blest are you who are weeping;
you shall laugh.
Woe to you who laugh now;
you shall weep in your grief.*
(Lk 6:21, 25)

APART FROM BIBLICAL revelation, too, sorrow and joy, joy and sorrow are like the primordial rock out of which the world is fashioned. In a little book written by the long forgotten Theodor Haecker and entitled *Virgil: Vater des Abendlandes*, there is a whole chapter devoted to tears. Haecker is particularly taken by the famous half-verse of the *Aeneid*: "Sunt lacrimae rerum" (I,462). These three little words can hardly be translated. Haecker writes: "Things have their tears – the things that in fact are everything, this whole world.... Tears are... a constitutive element of this world, of this aeon. This is what a pre-Christian Roman says, .. and these are not sentimental words but ontological ones."⁴ Haecker's insights go still deeper:

This half-verse... does not merely say (and this would be the first and utterly banal explanation) that certain things are wept over by men, but rather that things themselves have their tears; or, better yet, that there are things which cannot be met by any other response than tears, which cannot really be recognized, which cannot be made sense of, except by tears, and sometimes not even by them:

*Aut possit lacrimis aequare labores –
As if tears could compensate for our labors.*

*Only the bloody tears of the Son of Man, the
Second Person of the Trinity, could do this.⁵*

WHAT HAS BEEN said thus far is intended as preliminary material, as a propaedeutic to the real theme of this investigation – namely, the tears of God. It is at one and the same time the conclusion of His public ministry and the beginning of the drama of the Passion that Jesus, looking upon Jerusalem for a final time, breaks into tears (cf. Lk 19:41). Matthew describes Jesus' public life in this way: "Jesus made a tour through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the

Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness" (9:35; cf. Acts 10:38). All His miracles and His preaching are signs of His mercy. In similar fashion, His tears are signs of His love for humankind, of His compassion for the sufferings of His people and for those of the whole human race.

For Günther Schiwy, Jesus' tears are proof that He was not spared the destiny of the prophets of Israel. Like the prophets before Him, Jesus was deeply shaken "on seeing the city of Jerusalem [which was unaware of God's coming and] which is a symbol both of the Chosen People and, in the end, of every graced human being who falls short of his call."⁶ Schiwy compares Jesus' lament with that of the prophet Jeremiah:

*Let my eyes stream with tears
day and night, without rest,
Over the great destruction which overwhelms
the virgin daughter of my people,
over her incurable wound.
If I walk out into the field,
look! those slain by the sword;
If I enter the city,
look! those consumed by hunger.
(14:17-18)⁷*

Jesus laments and weeps because His heart is oppressed by the knowledge of Israel's somber future. Inasmuch as these tears are His, they flow likewise from the eyes of the people of Israel whose representative and soul He is:

*Cry out to the Lord;
moan, O daughter Zion!
Let your tears flow like a torrent
day and night;
Let there be no respite for you,
no repose for your eyes.
(Lm 2:18)*

It is like an echo of this lamentation when Léon Bloy refers to Israel as "the people of tears."⁸

EXEGETES ENJOY lingering over the contrasts that give the scene of Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem its special character. Rengsdorf writes that Jesus' lament and – as one could probably add – His tears stand "in stark contrast to the rejoicing that surrounds him." Likewise "the lack of awareness" of the disciples is in striking contrast to "the clarity with which he sees the course of events unfolding before

him."⁹ A further contrast is that of, on the one hand, "the magnificent buildings of the Temple" and the splendor of Jerusalem, which Jesus sees with His human eyes, and, on the other, the ruins and chaos that His all-seeing eyes foresee. "With prophetic vision he gazes already upon [Jerusalem's] total annihilation and the terrible fate that the Romans, in 40 years, will prepare for [its] inhabitants."¹⁰

Unless I am mistaken, contrasts are part and parcel of the narrator's art. They give life to narrative and cast light on its inner drama. As an essential part of the biblical idiom, they have a special function: they are not only stylistic devices but also aids for recognition, elements that help in the discovery of truth. When a prophet wants to say that, as far as God is concerned, the observance of prescribed rites or offering of sacrifices, is worthless apart from a life of love, apart from fidelity to His covenant, he cries out unrestrainedly, but with razor sharpness:

*For it is love that I desire,
not sacrifice,
and knowledge of God
rather than holocausts.
(Ho 6:6)*

If one were to translate these words according to their meaning rather than literally, they would read as follows: "Love is what I require first, then sacrifice; the knowledge of God is worth more in my eyes than holocausts."

What is the truth that the contrasts in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem are intended to disclose? Are the tears which Jesus sheds over the coming destruction of Jerusalem to be seen not as something incidental or random but rather as a significant revelation being made to us? As having to do with His real humanness? Yes, but also as having to do with His oneness with God. "Seldom," writes an American exegete, "does Luke reveal such anguished emotion in Jesus."¹¹ Earlier interpreters saw in Jesus' vision and lament not only an anticipation of the physical destruction of the Temple, but also an anticipation of the spiritual destruction of Judaism. They understood that Jesus' tearful lament was connected with the cessation of Israel's role in salvation history. With the rejection of Jesus and His crucifixion, Israel expressed its own rejection and broke its covenant with the living God. And in the destruction of the sanctuary, the Lord himself had spoken His "no" to the people whom He had once chosen and with whom He had made his covenant.

Is that the real teaching of Scripture? The Second Vatican Council pointed out that this theological opinion is contrary to Scripture. "The Church keeps ever before her mind the words of the apostle Paul about his kinsmen: 'They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh is the Christ' [Rm 9:4-5], the son of the Virgin Mary." Still clearer is the refusal of the notion of the rejection of Israel as expressed a few sentences later:

"Jews for the most part did not accept the Gospel; on the contrary, many opposed the spreading of it. Even so, the apostle Paul maintains that Jews remain very dear to God for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts He bestowed or the choice He made" (cf. Rm 11:28-29).¹²

DESPITE THIS CLEAR statement on the part of the Council, a few translators of Jeremiah's lamentation over the ruin of Jerusalem (14:17) have the prophet say that the fall of the Holy City will be "an incurable blow" or "an incurable wound." Martin Buber translates the corresponding Hebrew words as "a very distressful blow," Vincent Hampe as "an unusually painful blow," Tur Sinai as "an altogether painful blow," The Jerusalem Bible as a "crushing blow," and the New English Bible as "a cruel blow." One could go on like this. Of course, I do not know what linguistic reasons might have persuaded a few translators to refer to the fall of the city and the destruction of the Temple as something irrevocable – for that is what is meant by the word "incurable."

This view is not only linguistically inexact but it also contradicts the historical data. The Temple of which Jeremiah speaks is the one that was built by Solomon, the so-called First Temple, constructed in the 10th century B.C., and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. The Temple whose fall was lamented by Jesus is the Second, put up by Zerubbabel on the basis of a decree issued by the Persian King Cyrus in 538 B.C. It was itself burned down in 70 A.D. under Titus, during the Roman-Jewish War.

IT WAS IN the first year of his reign that King Cyrus, moved by the Spirit of God, brought the Babylonian Captivity of the Jewish People to an early end. The decree that granted the people their freedom was worded as follows:

Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: "All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is Judah: Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!"

(Ezr 1:2-4)

This announcement, with which the Book of Ezra begins, also concludes the work of the Chronicler (cf. 2 Ch 36:23). That the selfsame words constitute the end of one biblical book and the beginning of another is unique. Nowhere else in Scripture

is a literary device like this an occasion for revelation: the God who judges is also the God who forgives; the God who punishes is also the God who gives life, who heals, who restores what has been destroyed. The frightful destruction of Jerusalem – the consequence of the unheeded warning of the prophet Jeremiah (cf. 36:11-21) – is certainly a nadir in Israel's history, but it is not its end. The gracious lifting of the exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and restoration of a pattern of life that was intended to help Israel to hallow God's name all clearly demonstrate that the blow of which Jeremiah spoke was in no way fatal and that the wound was not "incurable."

The powerful song attributed to Moses, in which many interpreters see only a "witness against the faithless people" (cf. Dt 31:19), although it is in fact also a witness of God's undying love, has the Lord, Israel's savior, cry out to His people:

*Learn then that I, I alone, am God,
and there is no god besides me.
It is I who bring both death and life,
I who inflict wounds and heal them,
and from my hand there is no rescue.*

(Dt 32:39)

But what is to be said about the Temple that was destroyed by Titus in 70 A.D.? Not the smallest stone of its former glory remains. The West Wall, the so-called Wailing Wall that Jews pray in front of every day, is not a part of the Temple but rather of its enclosure. The Temple itself has never been rebuilt since the time of its destruction. And for the majority of the Jews, the Diaspora – the exile from the land of their ancestors – has not yet ended.

A medieval text that was written in Arabic in the year 1072, and translated into Latin in 1939, declares that the Messiah has already come and that the Chosen People did not recognize him. Hence the title: *De adventu Messiae praeterito (On the Messiah' Past Coming)*.¹³ The pamphlet claims to be a letter from Rabbi Samuel, who could be characterized as a searcher, to his learned confrère and master Rabbi Isaac. Today, this is generally acknowledged to be the apologetic work of a Christian. Whatever the case, the arguments in the text correspond to the theological views current in the Christianity of the time. The (fictional) Rabbi Samuel writes to his friend:

My master, I would like to learn from you (the Torah and the Prophets as well as the other Scriptures are my witnesses!) why we Jews have been placed in a captivity by God that could in fact be referred to as the "enduring anger of God," for it has no end. A thousand years, indeed more than a thousand years, have passed since Titus led

us into captivity. We know that our ancestors worshiped idols, murdered the prophets and failed to observe the Law. And for these offenses God let them be humiliated for only seventy years in the Babylonian Captivity.

The writer repeats his query again and again, and as often as he asks he find no answer: Israel is in exile because it has not received Jesus in faith. Is that really the teaching of Scripture? Are the consoling words of the prophet no longer valid?

*Yet the Lord is waiting to show you favor,
and he rises to pity you;
For the Lord is a God of justice:
blessed are all who wait for him!
O people of Zion, who dwell in Jerusalem
no more will you weep.
He will be gracious to you when you cry out.
(Is 30:18-19)*

The "justice" of which the prophet speaks is not the justice of moral theologians or sociologists, of preachers or politicians; it is God's justice, forgiving, redeeming, healing. It does not give what the Roman principle demands of it – to each his own, what is due him and what belongs to him. It gives to each the goods that God, in His fidelity to Himself, His word and His covenant with His children, has prepared.

To be sure, the Temple has not been reconstructed, but the fact that the Jews as a people, as a community that worships and witnesses the Lord, have survived the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple is a proof of an unbroken covenant. That they have outlasted centuries of dispersion, annihilation, and oppression is a sign nor merely of a natural will to live, but of divine grace. Their survival is not only a fact of history; it is, and should be, a basic truth of Christian theology.

ON THE ONE hand, the flames that leveled the Temple to the ground were the fire set by Roman soldiers; on the other, they were the sins of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, whose sins the rabbis considered to be responsible for the catastrophe. Many a Christian reader will be astonished, or perhaps confused if I say that the widely misunderstood Talmud adduces a number of offenses that are supposed to have brought about the ruin of the Temple, and of the city that housed it. I say "are supposed to" inasmuch as the rabbis, in raising the question of guilt, wish to speak of probabilities and not of definitive truths.

In this catalogue of guilt, a special place is given to the alleged neglect of the education of school children by the parents and teachers of Jerusalem – a neglect that has kindled God's anger. Innocent, unspoiled children, who are signs of unsullied hope, are the life breath and future of a city. The absence of any education in *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God, which is a principle fundamental to Jewish ethics, foreshadows the decline of a place. Indifference to moral decision-making, to the choice between good and evil (cf. Dt 30:15, 19), is cited as another cause of the divine punishment. It is said in the Talmud that the citizens of Jerusalem did not correct one another, and no longer pointed out the path of righteousness to one another; that they failed to give heed to the learned – to those who were conversant with Scripture, and understood God's directions for an upright life; that in a false spirit of uniformity they ignored the difference between big and little, and that with utter shamelessness they committed their sins out in the open.

The rabbis refer to the non-observance of the Sabbath as a sin aimed directly against God. But particularly weighty are the sins against others, the coarsening of interpersonal relations, the "groundless hate" that was spreading in Jerusalem.¹⁴ The meaning of "groundless hate" has been discussed many times. It seems to me that it can best be explained as the contentious party spirit that held sway during the time of the siege of Jerusalem, as the internecine discord that reigned among the citizens of the Holy City: between those who sought a *modus vivendi* with Rome, and the Zealots who, embracing the motto, "Freedom or Death," were ready to fight to the last breath against the army of an emperor who styled himself divine, there were severe altercations that eventually led to the downfall of Jerusalem.

The record of the sins that the master of the post-biblical Jewish tradition adduces as having brought God's punishment on Jerusalem is a harsh one. The rabbis, at least in this context, do not spare the feelings of their audience; they make no concessions to the sensitivity of their kinfolk. Despite all of this, we know that reproach is not, or is, only very rarely, God's final word: His mercy is shown in consolation.

It is recounted that Rabbi Gamaliel, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiba set out for Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus, they rent their garments [in lamentation over the destroyed city]. Later, on the Mount of the Temple, they saw a fox come out of the holy place. Then [three of them] began to weep, but Rabbi Akiba laughed. "Akiba, how strange of you," said the others. "We are weeping, but you are joyful?" "Why indeed are you weeping?" replied Rabbi Akiba. "Shall we not weep," said [his companions], "when, from the place of which it is said:

'Any layman coming near it must be put to death' [Nb 1:51], a fox emerges and so fulfills the verse: "Our heart is sick '... for Mount Zion's sake, where jackals roam to and fro' " [Lam 5:17-18]. Rabbi Akiba responded: "That is the very reason why I laugh." He goes on by citing two biblical witnesses – one that speaks of Zion as a heap of stones, and a second that prophesies the transformation of the Holy City, namely that prophet Zechariah, who lends the Lord of Hosts his lips and has him say": "Old men and old women will again sit down in the squares of Jerusalem, every one of them staff in hand because of their great age" (Zc 8:40); and: "the squares of the city will be full of boys and girls playing" (Zc 8:5). "With joy I see that the words [about the desolation of Zion] have been fulfilled, and now I wait in hope for the promise [about the restoration of Jerusalem] to be fulfilled as well." To this the others said: "You have truly consoled us, Akiba. May you be consoled by the coming of the herald [of salvation]."

(Lam.r. 5:18)

DOES THIS hope-filled legend cast any light on the tears and lamentation of Jesus? The answer is a joyful "yes." An exegete who desires to fulfill his task authentically may not satisfy himself just by bringing New and Old Testament parallels and texts from Greek religious history into his literal commentary on a particular gospel passage, as Shiwy did in his excellent *Weg ins Neue Testament*, he must also consult the rabbinic literature. The spirit and meaning of the New Testament's events require illumination from the Jewish tradition, which was in no way foreign to Jesus, in which, and out of which He lived. To deny or to overlook this would mean turning Him into a mythical figure.

I am convinced that a study of the rabbinic sources can help Christian theologians to develop and further elaborate a theology of the heart, of divine compassion and mercy. The rabbinic sources were, to be sure, transcribed only some centuries after the birth of Christ, but most of the thoughts and feelings that appear in them are not new. The emotions that move the rabbis have, along with their faith and their hope, a long history. From later writings, one can often draw conclusions about earlier times.

To turn to the question that lies at the basis of this essay: What do Jesus' tears mean? Do they really signify that Jerusalem and, with it, the People of Israel have been rejected? That the blow which fell upon the Holy City was "incurable," that Israel's destiny is a somber and even a frightful one? That God's patience is exhausted, that Jerusalem and, with it, all of Israel have been banned forever from God's presence? Ever since the Second Vatican Council these questions are no longer valid, but still the old ghosts have not been laid completely to rest.

The rabbinic commentary on the Book of Lamentations contains another legend, not that of the weeping man but of a living, weeping God. It could lead us to a deeper understanding of the Conciliar "Statement on the Jews."

The enemy had forced his way into the Temple and had burned it to the ground.... The Holy One – praised be he! – spoke to the ministering angels: "Come, let us go together and see what havoc the enemy has wrought in my house." At once the Holy One – praised be He! – and his angels set out, with Jeremiah as their guide. When the Holy One – praised be he! – saw the Temple, he said: "To be sure, that is my house, the place of my rest; the enemies have forced their way into my house and have done there as they pleased." Then the Holy One – praised be he! – wept and cried out: "Woe is me for the sake of my house! Where are you, my children? Where are you, my priests? Where are you, my dear ones? What shall I do with you? I warned you, but you paid no heed to yourselves." Turning to Jeremiah, the Holy One – praised be he! – said: "I am now like a man who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage canopy, but he died under it. Do you not feel my pain and that of my children? Go, get me Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses from their graves. They know what it means to weep."

(Lam.r. Intr. 25)

A too detailed analysis of the text would destroy its delicate texture and rob it of its effectiveness. In order to take it in, a person must read it again and again – indeed, make it the point of departure for prayer. The view of righteousness and love that one obtains from this legend is extraordinary. Of course, it must not be taken literally (the rabbis were anything but naive); still, one must see that reality which can be expressed only by tears.

It is particularly striking that the sorrowing Creator asks His creatures to join in His lamentation – indeed, to help Him in His weeping. How is it possible, many a Christian will ask, that the Lord, who is exalted over all, stands in need of the patriarchs' help, and that without their tears His own are not powerful enough to lament Israel's suffering and to restore its well-being? The thought that the loving God needs human beings as partners – yes, *wants* to need them – is not a foreign one to the Fathers and mystics of the Church.¹⁵

THE GOOD NEWS of the tears that God sheds over the suffering of His people is not limited to *Midrash echa*, the rabbinic commentary on the Book of Lamentations, but also enlivens popular edifying literature. In a Hebrew novel entitled *L'an (Whither?)*, written in the late 1800s, the hero of the novel has a vision in which he sees the return of the European Jews to Zion. But, another and sorrowful vision precedes the one in which their vast assembly occurs:

He stands amid the ruins near the holy wall. He sees a mass of Jews strewn on the ground, wailing aloud. Here are the remnants of the battered towers; from the ruins he hears a voice calling, "Woe unto the father who banished his sons; woe to the children who are banished from their father's household." A heavy veil darkens Jerusalem, the city is mourning. At the gate of the city, at the mouth of a cave, sits old King David, his lyre in his hand, and he chants a mournful song.... But, there, there far away, the heavens are opened, the Holy One blessed be He, sits upon His throne, and sees the earth at His feet. He sees Jerusalem in desolation. Then the throne of Heaven sweeps from its place in a whirlwind and two great hot tears fall into the depths of the sea.¹⁶

The vision continues, but I shall stop here. Nothing can outdo the tears of God – pearls of mercy, proofs of an overflowing, compassionate love. What could two tears, however great and hot, accomplish in a boundless sea? Could they transform the life-denying salt water into life-giving fresh water, or could they drop into a sea of suffering in such a way as to foretell the end of all sufferings? And a final rabbinic story to help explain the tears of Jesus:

Rabbi Isaac, the son of Samuel, said in the name of Rab, a talmudic scholar of the 3rd century: "The night has three watches. At each of these three watches the Holy One – praised be He! – roars like a lion. He cries out: 'Woe to my children! Because of their sins I have destroyed my house and burned down my Temple. [Because of their sins] they are in exile in the midst of the Gentiles.'"

(b.Ber.3a)

The sins of His children, as God laments, have forced Him to drive them into exile. It is as if He were the first sacrifice of their rejection. From my perspective, this picture of God, who suffers with His people, and, in the hour of their punishment, declares Himself in solidarity with them, represents a kind of depth theology. Here, a theology is operative that has not merely been thought out, but has also been experienced on the deepest level. Properly understood, the rabbinic "parables" (in the original sense of the word) demonstrate that, as distant from one another as Judaism and Christianity may be, they are at one in confessing that

God is love.

(1 Jn 4:8,16)

*No matter what our consciences
may charge us with;
for God is greater than our hearts
and all is known to him.*

(1 Jn 3:20)

The tears of Christ are the tears of the incarnate God. They are our tears and those of the Holy One – praised be He!

Notes

1. Cited in Plato, *Theaetetus* 160d.
2. Cf. *Politeia* 560ff. The formulation is to be found in Paulus Engelhardt, "Wahrheit," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 10.914-920 (here 914).
3. *Metaphysica* 1052b 3F.
4. Theodor Haecker, *Vergil: Vater des Abendlandes* (Leipzig: 1935) 121.
5. *Ibid.* 116f.
6. That Jerusalem is the symbol of the human being who is resistant to grace is true only of Lk 19:42. In every other writer, and particularly in the Psalms, Jerusalem is a symbol of the human being who is called by God and is dear to him. But before the Holy City is seen as a symbol it must be appreciated and loved for itself. When the physical and spiritual reality of Jerusalem is disregarded or even disdained, its symbolic character is destroyed. The Crusaders, who drove the Jews and Muslims out of their houses of worship and then set them ablaze, were the greatest despisers of Jerusalem that history has ever known.
7. Günther Schiwy, *Weg ins Neue Testament: Kommentar und Material 1: Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, Markus und Lukas* (Würzburg: 1965) 367f.
8. In the *Sang du Pauvre* Léon Bloy writes: "The proletariat, like tears, belongs to all peoples and all eras. But Jewish tears are the heaviest. They have the weight of many centuries."
9. Karl Heinrich Rengsdorf, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas: Das Neue Testament Deutsch 3* (Göttingen: 1962) 220.
10. Karl Staab, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas: Das Neue Testament Deutsch 1*.115.
11. Caroll Stuhlmüller, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1968) 2.154.
12. *Nostra Aetate* 4, trans. in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: "The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents"* (Northport, N.Y.: 1975) 740-741. The author of this essay is responsible for the "Statement on the Jews" in the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche (Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil* 2.406-477).
13. Rabbi Samuel Marochiani, *De adventu Messiae praeterito* 1 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 149.377).
14. The reasons mentioned here, as well as unmentioned ones, can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, "Tractate Shabbat" 11b and "Tractate Joma" 9b.

15. Even Pius XII, in his encyclical *Mystici corporis*, announced the notion of God's loving His creatures, although with the certitude of a triumphant faith:

Because Christ the Head holds such an eminent position, one must not think that He does not require the help of His Body. What Paul said of the human organism is to be applied likewise to the Mystical Body: "The head cannot say to the feet: I have no need of you" (1 Co 12:21). It is manifestly clear that the faithful need the help of the Divine Redeemer, for He has said: "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5)... Yet, this, also, must be held, marvelous though it may seem: Christ has need of His members.... He wills to be helped by the members of His Body in carrying out the work of redemption. This is not because He is indigent and weak, but rather because He has so willed it for the greater glory of His spotless Spouse.... This is a deep mystery, and an inexhaustible subject of meditation, that the salvation of many depends on the prayers and voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer... [We,] the Church, must offer [them] to our Divine Savior as though [we] were His associates. (*Mystici corporis* 44, trans. by National Catholic Welfare [Washington: 1943] 19-20.)

If I understand Pius XII correctly, when he uses the words "as though we," he is not saying that we are deluding ourselves if we consider ourselves "God's associates." No, our association or partnership is a reality. But how can a reality that transcends all concepts be adequately expressed? Thomas Aquinas customarily adds an "as it were" to statements of this sort; the rabbis, well knowing that all human insight is limited and all human speech inadequate, accompany anthropomorphic usages with "if one may speak in such a way." "If one may speak in such a way," God needs us and longs for our help, in order to build up His kingly rule; we are, as it were, "His associates, His partners."

16. Mordechai Zeev Feierberg (1874-1899), *L'an*, cited by Avraham Holtz in *The Holy City: Jews on Jerusalem* (New York: Norton, 1971) 144.

The essay originally appeared in German under the title,
"Die Tränen Gottes" in an anthology entitled
Untersuchungen zum "Brenner," a festschrift to honor
Dr. Ignaz Zangerle on his 75th birthday in 1981.
It was published by Otto Müller Verlag, Salzburg, Austria.

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