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# SUFFERING CAUSED BY INJUSTICE

## REFERENCES OF THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS

### AND THEIR ACTUALITY

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#### **Abstract**

This study presents by comparison social situations of the Hebrew world from the eighth to the fifth century B.C. and of the contemporary Christian society. Some social problems in the Old Testament refer us to nowadays and the prophets of the Old Testament offer solutions to these problems. One common problem of both ages is the one of human suffering, this time of suffering caused by injustice.

*Keywords:* justice, injustice, suffering, priests, Church

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#### **1. Introduction**

If we analyse carefully the divine message of the Old Testament prophets, one question comes to our mind: are the biblical prophets' books up-to-date for the message that the Christian Church is preaching nowadays? We ask ourselves if the prophets' writings are a document that encloses in its pages a message just for the biblical Israel, which is with no doubt a step of the divine revelation for the chosen people, or if they are still sending the Church an attitude or a pulse that corresponds with our times. How can the prophets' message offer help to the Christian Church, in its serving dimension?

In the next pages I suggest an update of the Old Testament prophets' message in the matter of suffering, especially of the suffering caused by injustice. It is a known fact that human suffering has developed under different aspects along the history of humanity. I think that one aspect is the one caused by injustice.

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## **2. Injustice and suffering. Justice and redemption**

### **2.1. Elements of prophetic timeliness**

Most people who analysed the prophets' books from an exegetic, homiletic or catechetical point of view assert the timeliness of the message sent by the prophets many centuries ago. The aim of this study is to refer to the period of the prophets that wrote the Old Testament (seventh to fifth century B.C.), a time full of social convulsions and religious problems.

Definitely, the prophetic books, in their contents, aim at special situations for the people of Israel of that time, but their message contains truths that are of interest for the Christian Church. The special interest for the content of the prophetic books reveals the timeliness of the message transmitted to the members of the Church, who are fully committed to the Christian way of living.

We surprisingly observe that in totally different historical conditions from the prophets' time, in our society there are similar social situations. Nowadays, Christians face social situations or problems that were criticised by the prophets. As long as still exist the deficiencies condemned by the prophets, the timeliness of the prophetic message is obvious, being an inspired example of attitude and being of real use to the Church. For Christians, and for priests especially, the life and the message of the Old Testament prophets are more than examples and classic illustrations worthy to be followed. Their teaching is part of our mutual spiritual heritage, Judaic-Christian. To support His preaching and to prove His messianic mission, the Saviour Jesus Christ has often referred to the prophets' writings.

Jesus Christ fulfils the prophets' message by His incarnation as Messiah. When He started His mission, in Galilee, announcing in a sort of solemn way the messianic programme, the Saviour read in the Nazareth synagogue a fragment from the book of the prophet Isaiah. In that fragment the prophet referred to the rehabilitation of the poor, setting free the ones in captivity, the needy and the suffering. In the Nazareth synagogue, on a Sabbath day, He read from the book of the prophet: "The Lord's Spirit is upon Me, for the Lord has named Me to preach to the poor, He has sent Me to heal the ones with broken hearts, to preach freedom for the enslaved and the ones held captive in war; the Lord has sent Me to tell you about a year of God's mercy, a day to revenge our Lord; I was sent to comfort the afflicted, to put on the heads of those who mourn the Zion wreath of flowers instead of ashes, oil of joy instead of mourning clothes, glory instead of hope" (Isaiah 61.1-2; Luke 4.16-22). This message announces that the suffering will be eliminated and that the true justice and joy will be restored in the Judaic society and, by extension, in the Christian community that was going to be formed. From its beginning, the Christian Church considered itself as 'the New Israel', continuing and fulfilling the revelation in the Old Testament. The Old Testament biblical books are part of the Holy Scriptures canon and, together with the New Testament writings; they are the essence of the Church's teachings. Therefore, we can say that the spirit of the Judaic religion has not

been used up in the time that it developed, that it has manifested its power, but it is becoming permanent in the Christian way of life [1]. From this point of view, every Christian has to examine and know the message in the writings that the Lord's prophets left us. For example, for those who are in high social-economic positions for a period of time, the progressionist conceptions in the writings of the prophets are an endless source of generous ideas and they are of real use in their attempts of discovering real possibilities of improving human lives.

## ***2.2. Fighting injustice and suffering***

Social justice and the fight for its accomplishment are some of the fundamental features of the Old Testament. The prophets' books are in a very special way full of venomous reproofs for those who commit injustice and who give rise to injustice by doing so. The biblical prophets think that the cause for the injustices that exist in society is the greedy selfishness reaching cruelty of some people. These injustices are not by far the result of some natural law or of a fatality [2]. The prophets rose against this kind of selfishness: "Princes of Sodom hear here - Isaiah the prophet said - remember the teaching of God, people of Gomorrah! ...Your hands are filled with blood: wash yourselves, clean yourselves! Learn to do well, seek the justice, help the one in need, do the orphans justice, protect the widow! ... If you want this and you will listen to me, the goods of the Earth you will eat." (Isaiah 1, 10, 16-17, 19) The words of the prophet urge people, in an imperative way, to do good and just things, to fight suffering whose victims are mostly the poor and the oppressed. Obeying and submitting to God's will bring justice and joy, make the tears on the cheek of the needy disappear and chase away the suffering.

To maintain peace and harmony in society, God's request is the following: "Man, you have been shown what is good and what God asks of you: justice, love and mercy and to go before God humble" (Micah 6.8). All the virtues enumerated in the words of the prophet only demand respect of one's neighbours and constancy in the relationship with the members of the community. It is nothing new or impossible to accomplish; it is at hand for everyone who wants to fulfil God's will. Justice, love and mercy are essential values that strengthen good relationships between people. They are the foundation of a happy life and they diminish or take away suffering. If we put mercy in the relationship between man and God next to all these, we increase the value of our Christian life. We might create an environment in which we could say that we live God's kingdom while still being on earth.

Considering the prophetic message and the Saviour's teaching as foundation, the Christian Church has the duty of crying out against the injustice caused by suffering as the prophets did, at the time that God thought was necessary. They were beyond debate in saying 'no' to luxury and the exaggerated wealth of the people of that time, people that were living only to eat, not taking into account that the way they lived was built on the suffering of those oppressed by them. The same definite 'no' should animate the Christians

of this time when they see the new forms of luxury and wealth, accumulated in dishonest ways [3].

The Church asks its faithful to have a rational life, being aware of the purpose for which they were created, to avoid injustice and oppression of the fellow men and to disapprove with strong belief the abuses that come in contradiction with the spirit of justice. For the prophets, as for the Christian Church, the surrounding world, where the prophets carried on and where the Church unfolds its mission nowadays, is conceived as a history of the divine activity. "In the general Israeli prophetic conception, the world appears as a perfect progressive ongoing of the divine plan, revealed from a perspective whose dimensions exceed human concepts" [3, p. 142].

The relationship between God and the faithful, in case it is an honest and true one, reflects in a palpable way in the justice reports that are displayed between members of a community (John, 13.35). In its efforts to accomplish justice and human interaction between the members of the community, the present Christianity has to see a role model attitude in the prophets, as they inspire our behaviour towards mankind over the centuries. Here is the message from the prophet Isaiah concerning this problem: "Peace will be the work of justice, the fruit of justice shall be peace and hope until the ages of ages" (Isaiah 32.17) or "And I will make fair justice and fair judgement. And the hailstone will demolish the shelter of lie and flood of water will suffuse its escape!" (Isaiah, 28.17) Injustice and lie produce a lot of suffering, especially at the self-consciousness level and generate different standards of living. Because of injustice and sometimes because of lying, some of our fellowmen end up living in the suffering of poverty. These kinds of situations are the ones that the prophets fought against.

In Christ's law, as a fulfilment of the words of the Old Testament's prophets, the Saviour says: "First search God's kingdom and His justice and everything else will come to you" (Matthew 6.33). Saint Paul the Apostle tells us that "the fruit of light is in any kindness, justice and truth" (Ephesians 5.9).

The concern for the man and his problems is not a novelty or a discovery of the contemporary theology. The late Patriarch Justinian used to say: "Our calling to deepen the social side of the Gospel's message and include it into our every day life must be considered not a theological novelty, but a disinterment of an old treasure, left and forgotten between the Holy Christian Tradition and the Holy Scripture's pages. Never before these last decades, said the patriarch in the twentieth century, have the servants of the Christian Church been confronted with problems so vital that question the value of the Gospel's teachings for organising a way of human existence, based on the principle of equal right to well-being and happiness." [4] The message is more up-to-date than ever, because at the beginning of the twenty-first century, marked especially by a prolonged crisis with bad effects for every layer of the Christian life, the problems that concern the life of the members of the community have increased, instead of disappearing.

That is why the Christian Church, by following the examples in the Holy Scripture, reckons that “it has to be present and active in all sufferings and in all mankind’s hopes for the better” [5].

We must regard the timeliness of the prophets’ message and their effort to serve their contemporaries according to this special concern for man, for serving him especially when he is suffering. The theologians and the faithful will always find in the pages of the prophets’ preaching the perfect balance between serving God and serving men, their example being one of courage and moral, religious and social commitment. We can say that justice, love and acts of mercy made with humility, themes often met in the prophets’ preaching, are current needs.

The American theologian Walter Rauschenbusch said that the prophetic mission is not only instructive. The reforms stipulated in the prophetic writings are an expression of the Holy Spirit’s influence on history. The ideas that underlie these reforms show the divine will for helping mankind reach a higher and higher level of freedom and well-being [6].

If we carefully analyse the lives and activity of the biblical prophets, we can see the obvious fact that they were men of their time, preoccupied by all the problems regarding their people. The prophets were fully committed to solving the problems of their people, whether they were individual or community problems. They did not live in a social-political void [7]. They felt that, by being God’s spokesmen, they had a huge responsibility over their heads and that they might be punished if they would not point out the forms of injustice, the suffering of the needy and oppressed and all the other bad things that haunted the society of their time. Probably no one has expressed this responsibility better than Ezekiel, the prophet, who said according to God’s word: “It is you, the son of man, the one I put as a guardian of the house of Israel and you (the prophet) who will hear the word coming out of My mouth, you will advise it in My behalf. When I will say to the sinner: Sinner, you will die, and you will not say anything to prevent the sinner to deflect from his way, then that sinner will die, and I will ask for his blood from your hand.” (Ezekiel 7.8)

The Christian priests, who are the shepherds of the new Israel and who have the calling of being God’s will’s interpreters before men, must be guided in their activity by a similar conscience. They have the moral duty of being fully committed to solving the problems that the sons of our times have. Without doubt, the main concern of the spiritual shepherds of the people is serving their spiritual interests. But, the priests also have the duty to be preoccupied by the daily interests of the faithful [1].

The priests of today must feel the calling of the old prophets, “to cut off and to lay down, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1.10), meaning to use their preaching as a way to fight the suffering caused by fellowmen, the injustice and all the bad things in modern society and to courageously proclaim all that is just, true, honest and worthy of believing [1]. In front of all forms of injustice of the modern world, the altar’s servants have the same responsibility as the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel or Amos.

In the preaching of the prophets concerning the social relations, we discover a deep humanism, a great sympathy for the poor and an unrelenting abhorrence for the greedy and the enriched using dishonest ways. As it often happens, the rich increased their wealth and the common people always got poorer and pushed to suffering up to the limit of the direst poverty. The rich built for themselves big summer and winter houses, furnished them in a luxurious manner, they dressed in expensive clothes and partied, giving expensive dinners. Their women were ornated with rings, bracelets, earrings, perfumes, talismans, neck chains and nose ferrules, as we find in Isaiah (3.18-23). The priests and the magistrates shared insatiably the same luxurious life style. In this tense and unjust background the shouts of protest from the prophets rose: "The Lord judges the elder and the leaders of the people and He says: You, You are the one that have devastated my vineyard and the pay you took from the poor is in your houses. Why have you crushed my people and you hacked the face of the poor?" (Isaiah, 3.14-15) or: "They (the leaders of the people) hate the good and love the evil, they abrade the people from their skin and the flesh from their bones" (Micah 3.2). The prophets hit the people who loved feasts with the sword of the word: "Here is the happiness and the joy, cut ox and stabbed sheep; all eat meat and drink wine: Let's eat and drink, for tomorrow we will die!...This sin will never be forgiven, says our Lord." (Isaiah 22.13-14)

The prophets scolded with the same weapon, the word, the monopolising members of the rural aristocracy, who "had house near house and land near land" (Isaiah 5.8). There was a lot of suffering caused by the injustice things the members of the Judaic aristocracy made against the poor people. If we analyse objectively what is happening in the modern society, all we can say is: It seems to be happening now!

We cannot say that the problems of the contemporary society are identical to those of the time of the prophets; some of them are diminished, some are more serious, some have disappeared and new ones emerged; sometimes the old problems disappear and they are replaced by similar sins. As clergymen, on all steps of the sacramental hierarchy, we have the example of the prophets in how to handle the problems that appear in the community.

If social oppression, injustice, the greed for fortunes and the pursuit of pleasures of the rich will not stop, divine justice will strike that society and it will not be good for it: "For there are nonbelievers in My people... As the coops are full of birds, so are the houses full of delusion... They rose and they got rich, they got fat and have shiny skin and they exceeded any limit; they do not do justice to anyone, not even to the orphan, they do not give right to the poor and they live like princes. Is it possible for Me not to punish these things and not to avenge a people like this one? - the Lord says." (Jeremiah 5.26-29, Micah 3.2)

### ***2.3. God's justice and our justice***

The state of poverty, injustice, suffering and misery of a certain community is the result of not obeying God's commandments. How can we

fulfil divine justice when we are asked by higher authorities to consider sin a virtue in order to become 'civilised', always invoking the human rights theory and forgetting God's justice? Should we listen to people more than God? (Acts 5.29) In certain moments of its tormented history, Israel, God's chosen people, by ignoring God's justice and by believing in their own strength, ended up in slavery, deported in foreign countries for shorter or longer periods of time. A lot of suffering came upon them because of the unjust things they had done and because they did not obey and fulfill God's commandments, which they agreed to do willingly.

The same thing is happening now. We are the slaves of disobeying God. We go through one crisis after another and they cause us pain. Because people ignore God's justice and believe only in themselves, suffering comes upon people. Suffering caused by injustice is found at every level of social life. We suffer because of wrong judgement, because of the disastrous actions of those who lead our destinies on earth, because of numerous acts of malpractice, because we are in a deep spiritual crisis; it might seem that modern man does not need God anymore, that he does not remember His commandments. Man has agitated life between 'on and off'; he replaces God with wealth, luxury, lechery and a life of ease. Man leaves God, the Source of the living water, and he runs to dry fountains (Jeremiah 2.13). Does God have a place in such a world? Definitely not! Then we should not be surprised that we suffer. A world without God is a sick world, always suffering. A world that forgets about God is forgotten by God (Hosea 4.2-6).

Because of the spiritual and social crisis the prophets did not spare the servants of the altar. Because of their disorderly life, the shepherds of Israel were considered causes of suffering. They were criticised for the injustices they made and for the lack of interest in the flock that was entrusted to them: "Goodness gracious shepherds of Israel who have lead themselves! Weren't the shepherds meant to lead the flock? But you eat the fat and you dressed with the wool; you stabbed the fat sheep, but you have not tended the flock." (Ezekiel 34.2-3) In the rush of contemporary life the servants of the altar must not give in the temptation of neglecting God's and people's serving by searching for different preoccupations and serving in this way to Mammon. They must remain sensitive to the suffering of any man and to ease the pain of those who are persecuted by their fellowmen. This is the moral duty of the contemporary priests, an urge that comes from the inside of the religious man, the same as the ethical, social and religious motivation of the battle that the prophets fought against the injustices that caused suffering. The prophets saw the sin and the disobedience as a cause of suffering and the suffering as a result of sin and disobedience both at an individual and at the community level [8]. The individual sin affects the whole community and the community sin brings suffering for every individual.

The prophets knew that Adam's sin, that has affected the whole mankind, had negative consequences in the relationship between man and God and between man and himself.

Through sin, suffering has affected man's soul, body and life style [9]. The suffering affects the whole being of man. The historical man feels suffering as a deterioration of the being, but the historical characteristic of suffering is proven to be once in a life time chance for man, because God, in His endless love and wisdom, redirects it to restore the human being [10]. In other words, when God allows suffering He does that as a therapy that should help us change, correct and turn towards perfection. The suffering allowed by God must be pertained at the reality of God's love and purity (Psalm 37) [11]. A firm calling is needed so that we can return to the religious values. None of the society's reforms won't prevail if we do not start by a moral refreshing. That is why, in order to solve as much as we can, the problems that destroy the contemporary society, we must always have as an example the ardour and the commitment of the prophets.

The protest present in the prophetic message has given reason to be told that there was a religion of the prophets, thing that seems to be in contradiction with the forms of the cult in Israel. It has come to be seen that between God's will and the commitment of the Israeli in their cult there is a real contradiction [12]. Engaged on the way of formality, the cult has become an accessory of the political and social evolution in Israel; sanctuaries became a place of pilgrimage where formality and ritualism of the rich met, with the intention of extolling the political system and the social organisation of the people. In certain moments the situation is more than actual. For example, during the time of political election campaigns our leaders "are" more faithful than ever; but they forget about God and the Church the minute they reach their purpose. Everything seems to be an attempt to deceive ostentatious God and the Church. These kinds of faithful seem to offend justice and divine greatness more than faithful interested in their own correction [13] and in easing the pain of their fellowmen.

Here is where we need to clarify things, following the prophets' example, and more, even the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ who was an untamed adversary of those who filtered the mosquito and swallowed the camel [1], trying to avoid the divine justice. The Holy Apostle Paul said that: "The letter kills and the Spirit give life" (II Corinthians 3.6). The warning is valid for any area and more in the liturgical universe [14].

Christianity cannot be a caricature as some understand it by reducing it to a set of ascetic rules or cheap rituals. Christianity must be a lighthouse that lights the steps of the believers in their everyday life [1], always guiding them towards peace, truth, justice and beauty, as the biblical prophets did the same thing with the Judaism.

### **3. Conclusions**

The presence of suffering in human society is a general fact admitted and deeply felt. Suffering has had different forms throughout history. We can refer to the suffering of the body, of the soul, suffering caused by the living conditions or general suffering caused by human injustice. One thing is certain: no matter



the way it comes, suffering is a consequence of sin. In human history, the sin of injustice has caused a lot of suffering in the human society.

We think that if God's prophets were still alive they would have the same message. There haven't been many changes in the social reports between people. In the world we live in we find ourselves surprised that there are identical situations with those contemporary to the prophets. Suffering caused by injustice in that time is the same as the one nowadays. If the ancient Hebrews ran after Baals, the idols of modern society are numberless proprieties, luxury, endless parties, things the biblical prophets, by the authority of divine vocation, fought against. Exploitation of the people next to us is still going on nowadays, but under different forms. All this involves suffering of the society.

Clergy and the common Christian have the moral duty to fight with words, which are handy for everybody, against injustice and all bad things that cause suffering in the society we live in. As the Old Testament prophets did, we should appeal to people's returning to the real values of faith. It is the first step in comforting and abolishing suffering. In this demarche we have to follow the example of the lives and activity of the prophets from the Old Testament. We should do everything that we can not to get used to injustice and the vices of modern society. God does not want us to suffer. Justice and the righteous man are divine gifts and they must be protected in all circumstances. For a Christian life in harmony, peace and joy, we must first search the kingdom of God and His justice.

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