
“LORD, THE ONE YOU LOVE IS SICK” (JOHN 11.3)

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ILLNESS

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(Received 20 May 2012, revised 1 July 2012)

Abstract

Man has always had to fight for his survival. From a certain perspective, human history is a long series of human attempts to progress in the search for better and more stable life conditions. However, since many obstacles and many dangers threaten his life, man is confronted daily with very many threats against his existence and with the ultimate threat of death.

If one is flesh, then one is definitely and continually under the threat of death and decay. Our own body can become a source of threats against ourselves when the pathologic processes change its structure and integrity. All human beings are under a threat that is rather within the being than outside it.

By experiencing the decay of his own body, man knows that his existence in this world is problematic even beyond any external threats. Within his being, man bears the necessity of his end and thus fear shoots ever deeper roots into this profound experience of corruptibility that makes man feel the sting of death even when he creates life.

In the words of the Bible, the Son of God “became flesh” (John 1.14) to redeem man from this condition to the immortality for which he was created. Confronting man with his death is the key of the process that imposes a new way in which he relates to his own truth and life, which can only be lived to its fullest as a gift from Above.

Keywords: fear, death, loneliness, pain, healing

1. Preliminaries

This study approaches the issue of illness and suffering, starting from two biblical episodes, two concrete life experiences. The first episode is in the book of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 38, and it presents the experience of king Ezekias, who was at a certain moment very close to the hour of death. The second is in the book of Genesis in chapter 35, and it presents the birth of Benjamin, the second child of Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob/Israel. In the subtitle we mentioned ‘a perspective’, having in mind a precise point of view on the topic, that of the Holy Scripture, but also a general view. This topic has been approached by many disciplines, especially by Psychology and Sociology.

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The interest in this topic in the secular milieu has so far not had a corresponding theological approach. This year, the topic was discussed at the International Symposium at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Alba Iulia under the title: 'The Human Condition Between Suffering and God's Love. Disease Therapy and Palliative Care'.

The present study is structured in two parts. After an introduction, the first part approaches the issue of man's fear of illness and death, starting from king Ezekias' hymn in Isaiah, chapter 38. The second part analyses the event of birth as symbolisation of man's passage from death to life through the Sacrifice of Christ the Savior. The last part presents the conclusions.

The study aims at bringing a contribution to the understanding of *biblical anthropology* through the organic analysis of two concrete life experiences, of two biblical episodes rich in deep theological meaning.

Man has always had to fight for his survival. From a certain perspective, human history is a long series of human attempts to progress in the search for better and more stable life conditions. However, because many obstacles and many dangers threaten his life, man is confronted daily with very many threats against his existence and with the ultimate threat of death [1].

In modern times when scientific progress has reached very high levels, man's confrontation with the dangers menacing his life becomes harder and harder, because what helps him live better can turn into the cause of his end. If the impenetrable fortress built to protect, falls down on its inhabitants, it becomes their tomb.

Living in a body, man is always under the threat of death and decay and structurally is subject to fear. For man, the experience of his own frailty is a conscious one. That is why the perception of threat and the fear reaction are experienced not only at the level of inborn reflexes, but also at the level of self-consciousness. This makes fear a deeply human emotion [2].

Our own body can become a source of threats against ourselves when the pathologic processes alter its structure and integrity. Diseases change man's body, taking him close to the danger of death, the event of maximum terror for man. Thus, the human being is subject to a fundamental vulnerability law he cannot avoid. The decay and destruction of his own body is something that can be postponed, but it is inevitable. The Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig writes: "All mortals carry in themselves the fear of death, every birth adding a new reason for fear, because the number of those who have to die increases" [3]. Therefore, the experience of fear is part of the human being, representing at the same time one of *the significant moments of its truth*. When he is afraid, when he is overwhelmed by fear, man sees himself as he really is: frail, feeble, and vulnerable. And when man discovers himself this way, all his illusions of omnipotence and immortality vanish, and he can finally admit that in the world he lives in a precarious and fragile state. This is the reason why the Holy Scripture says that the fool cannot recognise danger and does not feel threatened by anything (Proverbs 7.22-23, 14.16, 22.3).

Any experience of man's fear, regardless of the background or situations in which it manifests, is based on this state of continuous threat. Anna Oliverio Ferraris defines death as follows: "The last danger, which, more than the others, shows our uncertain condition", and continues: "The anticipation of one's ending is such that there is no radical difference between the metaphysical anxiety closely connected to the human condition and the pathological anxiety: in both cases, the individual suffers because of his own corruption and inability to oppose it [with] a solid defence" [4].

If man is afraid, it means that he is, or thinks he is, at the mercy of something that threatens his existence at all levels: physical health, spiritual and psychological integrity, the possibility of being near his beloved beings that can do him good. Whether he is facing the war or a bad dream, a wild beast or an illness, a devastating fire or is in front of God, what matters is *man's relation to life*. The mother of all fears is the fear of death, "the king of terrors" (Job 18.14), it is the fear of the ultimate loss that is at the root of every terror [1, p. 28].

All human beings live the experience of a threat which comes not only from the *outside*, but from the *inside*, that of the somatic alteration of one's own body. The experience of the alteration of the body through illness proves how problematic life in the body is, even beyond any exterior threat. The necessity of man's end, of death, is imprinted in his body, and fear, terror, anxiety settle in the experience of his corruptibility, which makes him feel the death shudder even when he engenders life.

Now, *placing man before death* represents the key to man's correct relation to his own truth, and this helps him live his life in the body as a gift from Above [1, p. 29].

2. Man's fear of alteration of his own body

The Book of the prophet Isaiah presents an episode, a concrete life experience which can help us understand what was mentioned in the introduction. This episode is in 2 Kings 20.1-11 and in 2 Chronicles 32.24. A terrible and incurable death struck king Ezekias; prophet Isaiah, the son of Amos, came to the king and told him: "Give orders concerning your house: for you shall die and not live!" (Isaiah 38.1); other editions say: "Write your will, for shortly you will die!" In this situation, the king addresses the Lord and the Lord has mercy on him and prolongs his life 15 years (Isaiah 38.5).

This pericope consists of a prayer, a thanksgiving hymn, and it reveals the feelings of the king who knew the hour of death was approaching, but also the feeling of liberation and the joy of salvation when he receives deliverance from the terrible illness [1, p. 157].

Ezekias was about 20 when he was struck by the illness [5]. His young body, full of life, suddenly turned into a terrible threat. The danger and the threat did not come from the outside, from invaders – the Assyrians represented for him the greatest threat – but hid in his body. In order not to die, the king had to defeat an enemy that was not in front of him, but a terrible enemy that had hid

inside him, up to identifying with himself. The king knew that he could not escape safe and sound out of such a confrontation [1, p. 157].

When man is overwhelmed by a disease, he is reduced to an agonizing psychological isolation, often aggravated by an inevitable social and ambience separation (the sick person's place is in hospitals, in asylums, in sanatoria, or in dimly lit rooms, far away from the eyes of the world). Life slipped through the young king's fingers while suffering and fear increased in him.

This dramatic experience is expressed in an admirable way in our episode through the desperate gesture of the young king and through the words of his prayer; he turned his face to the wall and burst into tears, telling the Lord: "Remember, o Lord, how I have walked before you in truth with a true heart and have done that which was pleasing in your sight" (Isaiah 38.3). This shows that the king was not punished for any sin of his early youth and also that, sometimes, not even the most blameless moral conduct can keep us away from such difficult situations.

The king's gesture is significant: his turning the face to the wall represents a way of interrupting contact with everything around him, it is a sort of refusal of reality, in order to isolate himself in a deep solitude. An identical reaction is described in the case of Ahab, the king of Israel, in the episode of Nabuthai's vineyard in 3 Kings 21.4: "The spirit of Ahab was troubled; he lay down upon his bed and covered his face and ate no bread." This gesture may have meant his need to be alone with God, but it has deep psychological connotations and represents a psychological reaction to the perspective of death. The progressive separation from life that illness causes, with its slow erosion of the body, also harms the spiritual core of the man stricken by this trial. The famous etiologist Konrad Lorenz made an interesting experiment about adopting this position. Studying the behaviour of the animals isolated from the other members of their species, Lorenz noticed in these a series of behavioural disorders as a response to the social environment. These behaviours proved to be very similar to the ones discovered by R. Spitz in the case of the children obliged to live in placement centres. A common characteristic was their attempt to avoid any contact or stimulus as much as possible. The pathognomonic sign of this psychological attitude consists in a bent or inclined position, the look directed to the wall [6].

The king Ezekias expresses his experience of approaching death in an admirable way: "in the end of my days I shall go to the gates of my grave" (Isaiah 38.10) and he shall part with the remainder of his days; the life of the king is like a shepherd's tent, which is soon pitched; the king is like a weaver who, while weaving the story of his own life, notices that the thread is over or someone has cut it. The image of the tent expresses very well the acute sense of precariousness and frailty of the sick person. While man sees his body corrupted by sickness, he loses the last guarantee of his safety and realises that life in the body is temporary: the king does not mention a house with a solid foundation, but the thin bands of the tents of the desert's Bedouins [1, p. 160].

The suggestive image of man's body compared to a tent also appears in the thinking of Saint Paul the Apostle [7]. In the fragment 2 Corinthians 5.1-10, Saint Paul introduces the antithesis between "our earthly tent" (the physical body), which will "dissolve", like a tent, and "the building" or "the house" we have from God, eternal...in Heaven. The image of the tent reveals man's life as a pilgrimage. "Death represents the end of man's earthly pilgrimage, it is the end of the time of grace and mercy God offers man in order to accomplish his earthly life according to the divine salvation plan, and to decide his eternal destiny" [8]. Our tent was, for a short time, settled in a place; for a short time, the thread of our life accomplished a nice weave, but this thread is soon cut many times before completing the weave. The biblical thinking, not only of the New Testament, but also of the Old Testament, always regarded the event of death with gravity, which, parting or separating the soul from the body, determines the end of the status of homo viator of the human being. Fully liberated from the coordinates of time and space, man enters the dimension of eternity, where he finds forever that fundamental decision of being with God, a decision he made while he was still in time [9].

Man weaves his existence on Earth, but someone else cuts the thread of his life. Even in the case of the biblical patriarchs, who died 'advanced in days', death meant a negation, not something positive, but man's privation from the joy of life. The violence that is part of the experience at the end of life is admirably expressed in verses 13 and 14, where the king feels crushed by the affliction; surrounded by illness like a wild beast, he peeps, groans, and bemoans like a bird cornered by a predatory. Man lives his slow but certain end in a lucid and conscious way; he cannot but cry his heart out [5, p. 290]. The image of the lion is in visible contrast with the image of a bird lacking defence, which moans without words [1, p. 160-161]. In this desperate situation, God is called to be in favor of the afflicted one. The sick person appeals to God against God Himself [5, p. 290]. To whom should the king petition if God decided his illness and his ending? And yet, the king succeeds in making a prayer: "O Lord, for it was told you concerning this; and you have revived my breath; and I am comforted and live. For you have chosen my soul, that it should not perish: and you have cast all my sins behind me." (Isaiah 38.16-17)

God listened to the prayer and saw the tears of the young king. Certainly, the promise that God makes him is limited (15 years of life), but at the same time, it is considerable for someone who is close to the hour of death. The king gets an interesting sign from God that He will be granted the miracle of healing: "behold, I will turn back the shadow of the degrees of the dial by which ten degrees on the house of your father the sun has gone down. I will turn back the sun the ten degrees" (Isaiah 38.8). It was a sundial; in the middle there was a bar, whose shadow, moving with the sun, indicated the exact hour [10].

God could not let Ezekias go down in the kingdom of silence, where He cannot be praised, so that the horror of nonentity that overwhelms man before dying, is at the same time the horror of God, who sees closing forever the mouth that can praise Him. The same is expressed by the psalmist: "Return, O Lord,

deliver my soul; save me for your mercy's sake. For in death no man remembers you; in hades who will confess to you?" (Psalm 6.4-5) "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to corruption? Shall the dust give praise to you? Or shall it declare your truth?" (Psalm 29.9) "Shall anyone declare your mercy in the tomb? And your truth in destruction? Shall your wonders be known in darkness? And your righteousness in a forgotten land?" (Psalm 87.11-13)

Ezekias' prayer or hymn ends in a triumphant cry of re-offered life, which melts the anxiety which characterised it: "The living shall bless you as I also do; for from this day shall I make children, who shall declare your righteousness" (Isaiah 38.19). The transformation of fear in relief and of the cry of pain in a hymn of praise is the element that is also to be found in other places of the Holy Scripture in order to signal the end of danger and of the state of threat. The experience of liberation from danger, if it is lived in truth, clearly means the experience of a deliverance coming from Above. This is the reason for which the exaltation that follows the end of the threat tends to become recognition of God's mercy. Thus, the fear of death can turn into a reverential fear and in faith in God or in concrete gestures that express a state of joy. Whoever sees his encounter with death postponed needs to exteriorise his joy and be a confessor of the salvation granted [1, p. 270]. The king, who had to go to Sheol in the prime of his life, can sing praise to the Lord in the years that were added to his pilgrimage in the land of the living.

3. The event of death, as paradigm of the passage from death to life

We stated at the beginning of the study that life in the body is the most obvious sign that man carries in his being the seed of death, and that it represents an experience he has already had, although he is alive. The biblical account affirms that man's life is destined for an ultimate deliverance from the reality of death. In this section we will analyze briefly the birth of Benjamin, described in the Book of Genesis in chapter 35.

Death is the 'great Enemy' and the sovereign of each terror (Job 18.14). Therefore, the Holy Scripture says that: "The last enemy that will be abolished is death" (1 Corinthians 15.26; Acts 20.14, 21.4). This 'despot' needs to be defeated so that man's slavery should cease (Hebrews 2.15). Only then will man, who was created for life, be able to accede to an existence according to his stature, presented from the beginning in the Bible, that of having been created "in God's image" [1, p. 279].

The human person becomes really free when he escapes the fear of death and enters a life whose horizon is eternity. The deliverance from threat coincides with the deliverance from fear, and this will be *definite* and *complete* when the *last enemy* will be abolished.

The Holy Scripture rarely mentions women who die when delivering a baby. There are only two such cases: Rachel, the wife of patriarch Jacob/Israel, and the daughter-in-law of priest Eli, the wife of Phineas. In the case of the last one, giving birth and the death that follows occur after hearing the news of the

seizure of God's ark of the covenant by the Philistines and of the death of her father-in-law and of her husband (1 Kings 4.19-22).

The trauma caused by these dramatic events makes her go into labour and her death is the last link in a chain of death and abandonment from God. The memory of this tragic event is reflected in the name that the people who remained gave the child: Ichabod (where is God's glory?). It refers to God's glory, which was sometimes visible in the desert, through the fire (Exodus 24.17) and now through the Ark of the Covenant [10, p. 315].

About the wife of patriarch Jacob we are told explicitly that "her labor was extremely difficult" (Genesis 35.16), but nothing else is added to explain her tragic end, which appears even more enigmatic if we take into consideration that God Himself granted Rachel the possibility of giving birth to a child. Before this moment, Rachel was barren, just like the other wives of the biblical patriarchs (Sarah and Rebecca). In her case the Lord intervened to "open her womb" (Genesis 30.22). Thus he brought into the world her first son, who "took away her disgrace among men" (Luke 1.25) and whom she named Joseph, the name itself representing the hope for another son: "Let God add to me another son!" (Genesis 30.24)

When this hope is fulfilled in the birth of Benjamin, the very gift of fertility that God offered in order to free her from death: "Give me children; and if not I shall die!" (Genesis 30.1), and which is, at the same time, the concrete sign that God remembered her (Genesis 30.22) becomes for Rachel the cause of her end.

This game of sterility and fertility, which has marked Israel's history from its beginning, reveals here the sense of death and life united in a unique mystery. The mother of the people of Israel (Matthew 2.18, Jeremiah 31.15) dies precisely because of the gift of life she received from God. She, whose dead womb was in blossom through the gift of fertility acquired from God, is killed by this very gift. We are here before a biblical text that has a great deal of symbolic abundance and it is no surprise that the wound of this death, apparently incomprehensible and contradictory, remained open in the conscience of this people, bleeding again in the crucial moments of its history, moments evoked in the texts indicated above [1, p. 280].

The Lord Jesus Christ also uses in His *discourse at the last supper* the image of the woman who gives birth in order to indicate the sadness and joy of the hours to come: "When a woman gives birth, she has sorrow because her time has come. But when she has delivered the child, she does not remember the anguish anymore, because of the joy that a human being is born into the world" (John 16.21). The joy of the disciples is linked to the death of Jesus; it is a joy that comes from suffering [11].

The figurative and metaphorical meaning that Jesus uses in this fragment is rooted in the Old Testament description of the pains of labour that Israel itself would have to endure before "the Lord's day" or before the arrival of the Messiah. In Isaiah 26.17-18 we read: "And as a woman in labour draws near to be delivered and cries out in her pain; so we...have brought forth the breath of

your salvation". This text is followed by the promise that the dead will rise and an invitation is addressed to 'the dwellers on the Earth' to rejoice, for the anger of the Lord will last very little. The man-'devouring' Earth will again be 'mother-Earth', which will no longer hide the dead [5, p. 237].

The symbolic image of the pains of labour will also be used in the veterotestamentary period of Judaic thinking. The Qumran literature (1 QH III, 8 ss.) mentions a woman, pregnant with her first child (a boy). After awful pain she gives birth to "the Wonderful Counselor", who is the symbol of the child promised in Isaiah 9.5-6 [11].

The account of the birth of Benjamin starts with mentioning a 'departure': "And Jacob removed from Baethel and pitched his tent before the tower of Gader, and it came to pass when he drew near to Chabratha, to enter into Ephratha, Rachel's water broke" (Genesis 35.16). Our pericope presents a significant accumulation of terms that express death and life in an interesting succession [1, p. 281].

The life promise of God is here under the threat of a tragic ending: the second birth of Rachel was difficult, but death swooped upon this event that should have brought joy to the parents. The birth was difficult, Rachel strove to give birth and finally died. As she gave up the spirit, she named the child "Ben-Oni", that is "the son of my pain", but his father named him "Benjamin", that is "the son of the right" (Genesis 35.18).

Life was 'invaded' by death, and the one who was giving birth to a child died. However, her son lived through his mother's death and beyond her, and his life symbolises the passage from death to life. The son that is born is at the centre of the account. Now we will analyze this birth in detail and try to understand the significance of the name.

When a child is born, it is necessary for his mother to go through a limit-experience. And it is not only the suffering and the risks of giving birth, but also that aspect of renouncement of a certain state in order to have access to a greater joy. The child that is born indeed enters a life condition that is autonomous from his mother. And this very 'separation', this 'renouncement' of the mother, this 'relative loss' allows the child to have his own life. These things allow the woman to have a child, not in her womb, but outside her, separate and different from her. This renouncement is a kind of death to the mother [1, p. 281].

Everything that is specific to a birth in the case of Rachel is amplified. At the moment of giving birth the mother dies, her existence dies away in bringing a human being into the world.

The name given to the child, *ben-oni* (the son of my pain, the son of my disgrace, of my mourning) is symbolic, and it is changed immediately by the father to Benjamin (the son of the right, of power, or of luck), because the right was considered the part of the privileged, of the lucky ones.

The exegetes agree that the gesture of patriarch Jacob represents his attempt to intervene in his son's destiny. He will give the child a different name, a name of good omen, through which he wants to deliver his existence from the ominous burden of his mother's death [1, p. 282]. Patriarch Jacob set up a

'pillar' on Rachel's tomb and in the end everything reduces to this inanimate sign of the pillar on Rachel's tomb on the way to Ephratha.

The child that was born represents the extension of his mother's life, and through his birth he is delivered from the unbearable burden of having caused Rachel's death. The one that delivers him is his mother, who accepts to die even in memory, so that the son may live. Thus, Rachel dies without claiming anything for herself. From this perspective, even the expression "Be of good courage!" pronounced by the midwife that helped her give birth, gets a special significance. The fear deep inside every man is overcome, because death does not exist anymore. At the moment of her death, Rachel expresses a state of despair which is, at the same time, an affirmation full of hope. The exegetes remarked the resemblance between her gesture and the cry of Jesus on the cross: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (Mark 15.34)

Hence, Rachel can be completely delivered from fear, because by dying, she defeats death. Actually, Rachel does not 'die', but 'gives life'. The end of her life becomes a paradigm of the gift of the love of Jesus, Who loved His people "to the end" (John 13.1), that is, up to the last consequence of love, which is the Sacrifice on the Cross [1, p. 284].

4. Conclusions

We presented in this study the miracle of king Ezekias' healing and the miracle of the birth of a son from a mother who dies the moment she gives birth to her son, and we understood that these two events have the value of *sign*, which has to raise us to a certain understanding [12]. The most important significance is that *man is made for life*. And yet, his condition of creature shows him to be constantly under the threat of corruptibility and death. His fear of illness and death is the sign, and at the same time 'the denunciation' of his fragility and the radical proof that man is made for life and tends towards life; this also indicates the fact that man needs salvation, an intervention from God.

Therefore, man's fear appeals to the divine *transcendence*, and due to fear man discovers his own truth, and the Lord is given the possibility to intervene. When the divine intervenes into the world, fear disappears in order to make way for the praise to the Lord. Fear, as we all know, is an inborn emotion of man, but fear can also be *learned*. The personified divine wisdom addresses people: "Come, you children, hear me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 33.11).

The life of the man who believes in God is made of this continuous overcoming of fear, but this experience is not *salvation* completely; it is only a dilatation of the last terror, of death. Only when the last enemy is annihilated, will the deliverance from fear be a complete one, showing also the praise to the Lord as complete. Man's life, threatened by illness and death, approaches salvation in a progressive process of abandonment and deliverance from fear, which coincides with the acceptance of God as power that defeated death.

In and through faith, we are offered the victory in advance, and the man that believes in God experiences the fact that, if he allows himself to be guided by the Lord, the threat is illusory and he has no reason to fear. Everything was defeated, because everything was transformed by the emergence of the divine in the immanence of human history.

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