

Suffering & Redemption in the Abrahamic Faiths

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The mystery and meaning of suffering and death, and the purpose of life lies at the heart of the history of humanity, long before the call of God to Abraham to venture into a land he knew not where he was going, to the birth of Jesus Christ, to the visit of the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. Why do we suffer? Where is God in our suffering? Who is this God that allows us to suffer? What is God's purpose in our suffering?¹ Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in their revelatory texts and in the ongoing process of interpretation through the ages, frame the tragic experiences of life within the redemption of God that all see as the initiative to save humanity from sin, error, and evil. I do not mean to imply that peoples of faith understand that God's main purpose is to alleviate suffering. It is the task of these faiths to understand the meaning of this suffering in light of their revelations.

The undertaking of this paper is to outline some important features of redemption in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Christian view of redemption will draw from the Roman Catholic perspective. In Islam, redemption has no clearly defined doctrine, yet it has a major part to play in purposeful living and the holy struggle (jihad) of humanity that looks toward God. The view of the human person and the role of faith, and the importance of the figure of Adam.² The context of redemption then will provide an opportunity to outline some important elements of the notion of redemptive suffering in each of the faiths, where this suffering provides divine reward and benefit to their adherents.

Judaic Redemption

Redemption in Judaism is commonly understood as a special encounter with God's holiness and unending gifts, that flows from the mercy of the Law. Redemption is both personal and subjective, involving an undying reconciliation with God and with each other. Within this context of reconciliation, suffering can, in one sense be seen, as clearly evil. Dr. Plotkin goes on to assert that because of this, we are unable to make moral judgements about whether or not suffering should exist in the cosmos of a

¹ Ed. Richard W. Miller, *Suffering and the Christian Life*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2013) v.

² Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*. (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1978) 15.

just and loving God.³ Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the biblical response to the problem of suffering and the identity of God undergoes expansive changes. There are significant changes in Ecclesiastes, Job, and many of the psalms. Elsewhere it receives great prominence in the prophets. The suffering of Israel is seen as punishment, and God's intention to *correct* a recalcitrant people. For this reason, the suffering must be borne. The nation turns so that God can turn toward it again, with promises of good things to come.⁴

Gershom Scholen, in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, relates that the history of Judaism, and its influence, has been exercised under the duress of the exile as the primary reality of Jewish life and history. This colors the backdrop between conservative, restorative and utopian forces. While conservatism seeks to preserve that which exists in the historical reality, restorative forces are directed to a return to a past condition which is considered ideal. Utopian forces seek an age which has never existed.⁵ All of these perspectives about the life of Israel and its future lived together and in tension with one another throughout their tumultuous history. Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer states: "In Judaism, we have stressed the communal nature of redemption and the 'not yet' qualities of the future. In my judgment, many Jews have underemphasized the idea that at least a taste of redemption is already here. The idea surfaces in the notion that the Sabbath is a foretaste of the Messianic Time, but many Jews do not put sufficient weight on this concept and spend more time speaking of the past and future than of the present."⁶

The complex and nuanced history of the Messianic ideal in Judaism is understood through the lens of the *suffering servant* of Deutero-Isaiah. The fourth servant song, or Isaiah 52:13-53:12, is the last of the four Songs of the Suffering Servant, and tells the story of a "Man of Sorrows" or "God's Suffering Servant". ... (Isaiah 53:11), "... a man of pains and accustomed to illness ... " (Isaiah 53:3). Some assert that this pericope refers to the people of Israel.⁷

³ Frederick Plotkin. *Judaism and Tragic Theology*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978) 18.

⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

⁵ Gershom Scholem. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) 3.

⁶ Mark S. Kinzer. *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011) 94.

⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub. "The Idea of Redemption in Christianity and Islam." *A Muslim View of Christianity. Faith Meets Faith Series*, ed. Irfan A. Omar. (Maryknoll: Orbis Press) 91.

The Redemption in Christ

Dr. Ayoub, in his chapter, *The Idea of Redemption in Christianity and Islam*, points out that in the throws of Judaic messianism, and the rise of Jesus of Nazareth in what is now known as Palestine, there was naturally no “doctrine” of redemption yet, but there was clearly the redemptive act of the cross. In the Book of Acts, and more clearly developed by Justin Martyr, the suffering servant was identified with Christ. The Gospel of Matthew narrates that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the Temple, which acted as a barrier between the holy of holies and the people was torn, lifting the barrier in the place of true sacrifice.⁸ Redemption through death and the shedding of blood is particularly laid out in the Epistle of the Hebrews.⁹ Later in the Eastern Church tradition, redemption was believed to have occurred not so much by death and suffering of Jesus, but a divine “victory.”¹⁰

The Catholic Church portrays the redemption of Christ as both divine and human: “As we reflect again on this text from the Council's teaching, we do not forget even for a moment that Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, become our reconciliation with the Father. The Cross on Calvary, through which Jesus Christ—a Man, the Son of the Virgin Mary, thought to be the son of Joseph of Nazareth—“leaves” this world, is also a fresh manifestation of the eternal fatherhood of God, who in him draws near again to humanity, to each human being, giving him the thrice holy “Spirit of truth”¹¹

The human dimension of Christ’s redemption considers that “man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer “fully reveals man to himself”. If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belongs to his humanity.¹²

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Jesus is handed over according to a definitive plan of the Father. In this sense, God permitted these acts of the suffering and death of Jesus to occur, expression of the blindness of others. He died for our sins in accordance with scripture. In particular, Jesus’ redemptive death fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest at the end of times. Having thus established him in

⁸ Matthew 27:51.

⁹ Hebrews 9:11-22

¹⁰ Mahmoud Ayoub, 92.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II. *Redemptoris Hominis*. Encyclical Letter, 1979, 7-8.

¹² Ibid

solidarity with sinners, God did not spare his own Son but gave him up..., so that we might be reconciled to God by the death of his Son.¹³

Redemption in Islam

The redemption of Christ, although wholly different than the Islamic view, holds a common thread with Islam in the figure of Adam, where Christ is considered the “new Adam,” healing the rift of original sin caused by his desire for forbidden knowledge. The Qur’anic account of Adam, often misinterpreted by non-Muslims as a distortion of the account of Genesis, shows Adam’s sin and repentance, and Iblis’ obstinacy as the start of the battle of good and evil in their descent to earth. Redemption, for Muslims, is when this battle is finally concluded with the divine victory of the good.¹⁴ Adam in the Qur’an is created from clay through the breath of God. Adam was “saved” because he received words from God. He knew the language that angels did not know. Adam then, for Islam, is not the first sinner, but the first prophet because with him revelation begins.¹⁵

The Quran speaks of the sacrifice that reaches God, piety and righteousness. In this way, *takfir*, or the expiation of sin must be done with the weight of accountability on the individual. Redemption in this way is the initiative that men and women take through the awareness of their sins and their need to repent. The first type of repentance is expressed through prayers, fasts, sharing wealth with the poor, and other means. (Q 9:11) The second is through intercession. For Islam, intercession, unlike the same term for Catholicism, is not meant to benefit those who are deep in sin. Intercession is actually a divine gift. (Q. 2:225) The Hadiths expound more on the role of the Prophet Muhammad, who is said to intercede for the whole world, Muslims, and non-Muslims alike. The tradition of intercession comes in large part from hadiths known as *ahadith al-shafa’ah*. It states that on the Day of Resurrection, it will require the intercession of the Prophet to seek God’s judgement on all of humanity.¹⁶

The idea that the world is preserved, made whole, and redeemed from evil through piety and prayers is especially important in the mystical tradition of Sufism, and the notion of the perfect person, *qutb*. The *qutb* is the one around whom the universe revolves. It speaks of the notion of the continuous evolution toward perfection. This march toward fulfillment, in the battle of good and evil, would culminate with the return of the *Mahdi (Messiah)* who will restore all things to their former purity.

¹³ Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, 599-602.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Ayoub, 94

¹⁵ Ibid, 93. (Qur’an 2:31-33)

¹⁶ Ibid, 94

Although the identity of the *Mahdi* is different in Sunni and Shi'i views, Jesus in the Shi'i tradition will return with the *Madhi*, according to Dr. Ayoub (Q 43:61)¹⁷ The *Mahdi* and Jesus will come to work together where Jesus will kill the anti-Christ, *ad-Dajjal*.¹⁸ Here, the eschatological role of Jesus is worth explaining further.

The Eschatological Role of Jesus in Islam

In speaking of the eschatological role of Jesus in Islam, the most commonly used term for the return of Jesus is 'nuzul 'Isa,' which can be translated as the descent of Jesus in order to fulfill his mission. Because the life and message of Jesus are major themes in the Qur'an, there is some disagreement among scholars about whether or not the Qur'an addresses the eschatological role of Jesus. Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, who asserts that he does have a role in his study of Jesus, relates four different passages in the Qur'an that refer to the eschatological descent of Jesus.

He (Jesus) will speak to humanity from his cradle and in manhood, and he is the righteous. (3:46)

The most important element in this verse is the use of the future tense: "Jesus will speak to humanity." It is argued whether this verse actually refers to the unfinished mission of Jesus after his descent. The message of Islam and of the Prophet Muhammad's emergence was to continue to bring the message that had been taught by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other messengers.¹⁹ The Prophet himself said: "I am the fulfillment of the prayer of my father Abraham, I am the good news of Jesus, and my mother saw in her dream a light that comes from him to enlighten the palaces of Damascus."²⁰ The second part of the verse indicates a more universal mission of Jesus, which is the mission of Muhammad. This mission will go beyond his own followers and include all of humanity. Fulfillment of this message is the "good news" that the Prophet of Islam gave to his community – that Jesus will descend. In this way, Muslim scholars do not see Jesus' message contradicting the universal mission of Islam.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid, 95. Another interesting volume which I did not use in the paper but found very helpful for a wider understanding was *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* by Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Schedina.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Zeki Saritoprak. *Islam's Jesus*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014) 23.

²⁰ Al Jurjani Al-Ta'rifat, 148.

²¹ Zeki Saritoprak, 24.

And there shall be no one of the book left no believing in him before his death...(4:159)

This may convey two meanings according to Dr. Saritopak. The first is the people of the book, who are Jews and Christians, who will be unified in believing in Jesus before his death occurs. This interpretation is based on a perspective in Arabic translation for the word pertaining to his death (*mawtihi*) that may refer to Jesus himself. The second interpretation is that *Jews and Christians who believe in Jesus before his death* is valid if the pronoun refers to individuals. Since this verse pertains to the future, only God knows that future. But since there is a lack of clarity to the interpretation, no one can claim full understanding of this verse. That said, many Muslim theologians and the majority of Qur'an commentators argue that this verse serves as a textual reference to the return of Jesus.

And surely, he (Jesus) is a sign for the Hour, so have no doubt about it and follow me. This is the straight path. (43:61)

To understand this, the context in which it was said needs to be known. This verse is often understood about the descent of Jesus because the pronoun 'he' refers to Jesus based on the story preceding this verse:

When Jesus, the son of Mary, was given as an example [of an object of idol worshipping], your [Muhammad's] people cried out and said, "Are our gods best or is he?" They did not give him as an example but for the sake of argument. They are a contentious people. Jesus was no more than a servant upon whom We have bestowed our bounties and We made him an example for the children of Israel. If We will it to be so we can destroy you and replace you with angels on earth. Surely he is a sign for the Hour. Do not have any doubt about it. And [say] follow me [Muhammad]. This is the right path. Do not allow Satan to hinder you. Certainly, he is an open enemy to you. (43:57-62)

This pericope indicates a heated debate between Muhammad and the polytheists of Mecca as the Prophet defended Jesus. This passage also speaks of the descent of Jesus if the pronoun 'he' refers to Jesus, which many scholars propose. The emergence of Jesus is one of the signs by which the coming *Hour* is known. It is also a sign of the impermanence of nature, of the world, and the coming of the

afterlife.²² In light of this, both Sunnis and Shi'ites, based on particular sayings of the Prophet, believe that Jesus did not die on the cross but was raised to heaven and is still alive. Most Muslims feel that his enemies mistook someone else for him. They believe that Jesus will die a normal death after his second coming because no one can have eternal life on earth. Like all other prophets of God, he will then be resurrected and live in paradise eternally.²³

He [Muhammad] does not speak out of his own fancy. It is nothing but an inspired revelation (53:4-5)

This passage is believed to refer to Jesus's messianic role. There are a number of these types of verses including 61:9. The literal meaning of course is that Muhammad does not speak in vain. Whenever he speaks it is either direct revelation from God (Qur'an), or an indirect revelation (Hadith). In Islam, there is a difference between revelation and inspiration. Revelation comes to the Prophet from God through the angel Gabriel. Inspiration, on the other hand, comes from God to touch the hearts of prophets, saints, and pious people. If a statement related to the Prophet has a reliable chain of narration, that statement is true. This means whatever the Prophet speaks about the coming of Jesus is undoubtedly true.²⁴

One may argue that the Qur'anic verses about Jesus' death and descent are not very clear, but the possibility of an allusion to the coming of Jesus in the Qur'an is very possible. The Qur'an states that Jesus' opponents could not kill him or crucify him. Such an emphasis on God's involvement in Jesus is distinctive. *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, the famous Islamic scholar refers to the descent of Jesus in a spiritual manner. "The domination of his spirit and the mystery of his message over humanity in order that men may live by the inner meaning of the law [shari'a] without being bound by its outer shell."²⁵

Redemptive Suffering

This brief consideration of redemption and judgement in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam brings one to messianism, whether it be the long awaited *Mashiach* of the Jews, Christ of the Christians, or the *Mahdi* of Islam. In Christianity and Islam, the role of the messiah was to suffer for the everlasting benefit

²² Ibid, 28.

²³ Ibid, 33.

²⁴ Ibid, 34.

²⁵ Ibid, 36.

of all. In Judaism, in order to differentiate the messiah from Jesus of Nazareth, the rabbis state that the Jewish messiah is not to suffer, but to be victorious shining light from the lineage of David. In Jewish eschatology, the Messiah is a future Jewish king from the Davidic line, who is expected to be anointed with holy oil and rule the Jewish people during the Messianic Age and world to come. The Messiah is often referred to as "King Messiah" (Hebrew: מלך משיח, *translit. melekh mashiach*) or *malka meshiḥa* in Aramaic.²⁶

The Suffering Servant

The "Suffering Servant" of Deutero-Isaiah (53) is often interpreted by Jewish scholars as the people of Israel who suffered much in their long arduous history through persecution and war. Although the identity of the suffering servant in this 53rd chapter, the fourth song of the "Servant Songs," is ambiguous, it is clear that the previous three songs (42, 49, 50) pertain to the nation of Israel.²⁷ The 53rd chapter of Isaiah is a beautiful, poetic song, one of the four "Servant Songs" in which the prophet describes the climatic period of world history when the Messiah will arrive and the Jewish people assume the role as the spiritual leaders of humanity.²⁸ The suffering of the people of Israel and the redemptive quality of suffering in the saving plan of God is poignantly portrayed in the biblical figure of Job.

In the tragic story of Job, suffering emerges as a conundrum when the demands of justice can no longer explain the actions of God, who is understood to be the origin of justice. Frederick Plotkin states that the "irrationality" of a God we understand to be the origin of love and mercy turns notions of justice on its head, the task becomes to justify God's actions in this case. Who is this God that allows this suffering, and even instigates it?²⁹ In Job's first trial, his children are suddenly killed when the house they are in collapse while they supped with their eldest brother. Job's reaction, who is innocent, and a faithful servant of God, was this: "Then Job arose and tore his cloak and cut off his hair. He fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!" In all this Job did not sin nor did he charge God with wrong."³⁰ Job's invocation is striking, for it is to God that Job

²⁶ Messiah in Judaism (Wikipedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism#cite_note-18

²⁷ Isaiah 53: The Suffering Servant: Cutting through the mistranslations and Distortions of the Enigmatic Text. Aish.com http://www.aish.com/sp/ph/Isaiah_53_The_Suffering_Servant.html

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Frederick S. Plotkin, 10-11.

³⁰ Job 1:20-22.

appeals against God (Job 14:13-14). It is a suffering for the purpose of teaching. But the words of Job for Plotkin are not an answer to his problem and solution to his suffering.³¹

The author of Job announces an order that is beyond order where the suffering of the innocent does not solve the extraordinary burdens of loss and grief, nor portends a return to past happiness, but strikes a movement of resignation to fate. What is exhibited in this tragic hero is the enhancement of the enigma of the serpent.³² Whether Satan is viewed as *malakh Yahweh (God's angel)* (Zech. 3:1ff), or as an independent demon (I Chron. 21:1), the notion that evil is a factor in the divine plan and seen to fill some dynamic role in the relationship between God and humanity is evident enough in these texts. According to biblical law, guilt was supposed to produce suffering. Perhaps this is why Job was needed to understand the "redemptive quality of suffering."³³

The Suffering of Christ

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, early Christians sought to understand these extraordinary events in the light of their faith. The many small, competing communities of the first and second centuries struggled to understand who Jesus is, how he is to be thought about, spoken of, and what his mission is. The earliest Christological disputes never deny or even question that Jesus is God. Very few people in antiquity had difficulty accepting his divinity. The contrary was the case. It seems that many could not accept he was human. The contemporary problem may be that we are not sure that we know what it means to say he is fully divine. It is an extraordinary claim, that the one who is in the form of God (Philippians 2:6), the eternal Son, the eternal Word, the eternal Logos of God, is fully human, in all things except sin.³⁴

A critical test to Christology is the full weight it accords to the agony in Gethsemane. If he is fully human, we need to take that agony with absolute earnestness. Jesus is terrified. He is at a loss as to why God wills this for him. What was to follow in the torture by whip, the arduous climb up Golgotha, and his crucifixion, was begun with an agonized prayer in the garden, a plea and a promise. The Gospel of John seems to underscore this narrative of Jesus' suffering with an account that seems far from the fear, violence, and loss. In John, there is no "agony in the garden", at least not like we see in the synoptic

³¹ Frederick S. Plotkin, 11.

³² Ibid, 12.

³³ Ibid, 16.

³⁴ Michael J. Himes. "The Suffering Christ." *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. Richard W. Miller (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2013) 117.

gospels.³⁵ However, there is passage with resonates more closely to the emotion of Christ's suffering. It is the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Michael Himes suggests that this pericope, although it may not seem to have much in common with the Gethsemane narrative, contains some important parallels. The character of Lazarus is utterly unimportant in this story. It seems John has no interest in Lazarus' dying and being brought back to life. This passage is about Jesus and Jesus' response to what happened to his friend.³⁶

This is the first time in this gospel that Jesus confronts the confounding reality of death. Unlike the synoptic gospels, there is no mention of the death of John the Baptist, the raising of Jairus's daughter, or the restoration of the widow of Naim. In John, Jesus does not confront death until he learns of his friend's death. Himes poses this question: "Is it really Lazarus' death he meets?" Martha and Mary lead him to a cave, sealed by a stone, much like many burial places in ancient Palestine. It is hard to avoid the striking resemblance of this scene to the burial of Jesus that happens soon after this particular narrative. Himes says that this is "the Tomb' – his, yours, mine, and Lazarus's. John says that Jesus is deeply troubled and profoundly moved, even to the point of tears.³⁷ The sisters of Lazarus have an unflinching trust that Jesus could fix this. In fact, they told him that if he arrived earlier, Lazarus would still be alive. "Even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him." (John 11:22) Her message that he is in control, that he can heal, even beyond the throws of death itself is unflinching. Yet, Jesus is deeply upset. Jesus prays to God: "Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I know that you always hear me." That will change in Gethsemane.³⁸

Suffering here is not about sin. It is about fear, terror, and utter bewilderment. It is the universal and debilitating experience of being at loss, helpless, and of not being in final control. This suffering of Jesus, who is both divine and human, is important to grasp in the Christian understanding of redemption. We are certainly not saved because Jesus suffered. His suffering is not a matter of paying a penalty to assuage the demands of God's justice. The image that rises in response comes from the Gospels: "Take up your cross and follow me."³⁹ He shows how to be fully human. He does not tell us what to do, but shows us that living humanity as he did, we are saved. In Gethsemane the will of God is dark, profound, and a mystery to him. What is his response to the mystery of God's will, with the reality

³⁵ Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22: 39-46.

³⁶ Michael J. Himes, 118.

³⁷ John 11:32; 35, 38.

³⁸ Michael J. Himes, 119.

³⁹ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23.

of his fragile humanity, his utter lack of control to his suffering? His “yes” is a struggle to an enormously important conclusion: “Not my will but yours be done.”⁴⁰

Paul writes to the Colossians: “*It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church*” (Col 1:24). I must admit that this passage always sets me on edge. If the suffering of Jesus was total, what could still be lacking? Pope John Paul II responded to this: “*Christ achieved the redemption completely and to the very limit; but at the same time, he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part of the very essence of Christ’s redemptive suffering, that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.*”⁴¹ Here Christ’s suffering is understood in his human suffering in history, and in the Body of Christ, the community that gathers in his name. Thus, Christ, through the church, continues to suffer, carrying a common burden.⁴²

Redemptive Suffering & the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn

For more than a thousand years, The Shi’i community has kept the memory of the death of the grandson of the Prophet, rehearsing and interiorizing its tragic details with growing emotionality. Every year, during the first ten days of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, groups of devotees gather together to lament the martyred *Imam*, to recount the tale of the drama of Karbala’ where he was martyred, and to confirm loyalty to its martyrs. This cult has provided a unique expression of Islamic piety of the experience of redemption through the suffering and passion of a divine hero and holy martyr.⁴³ The martyrdom of Imam Husayn has been seen by the Shi’i community as necessary to the fulfillment of his role as imam. His martyrdom propelled his selfless sacrifice, the measure of truth and falsehood, and the intercessor on the Day of Judgement for all his followers. In Shi’i piety, redemption must be understood within the context of intercession. In Shi’i thought all the imams have shared in this suffering. As a result, they will also share in the divine gift of intercession. In this context, redemption is understood as including both salvation and judgement.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Michael J. Himes, 120.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II. *Salvifici Doloris*. Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, 1983. 24.

⁴² William J. O’Malley. *Redemptive Suffering: Understanding Suffering, Living With It, Growing Through It*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997) 103.

⁴³ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*. Religion and Society 10. Leo Laeyendecker and Jacques Waardenburg, eds. (The Hague: Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1978) Preface.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 15-17.

Dr. Mahmoud Ayoub explores the value of suffering in the sufferings of the Holy Family of the Prophet. It represents the community of suffering (House of Sorrows), the twelve imams, the Prophet and his daughter. In this community, devotees of the imams can enter through their participation in the suffering of the Holy Family. Of special importance is the suffering and death of Fatimah al-Zahra' (the radiant) who, through her suffering, death and final exaltation, has represented for the Shi'i community both its disappointments and hopes.⁴⁵

He begins this by an analysis of the merits of suffering for the pious. The hadiths demonstrate with clarity that the person of faith will naturally experience both the suffering calamity, in accordance with the strength and durability of his faith. Patient endurance will certainly be the reward. A companion of the Prophet, Abu Sa'id al-Khurdri, visited him while he was beset with a fever. "O Apostle of God, how strong this fever is in you!" The Prophet answered, "Yes, so it is. Our afflictions are multiplied in order that our rewards may also be multiplied."⁴⁶

The sufferings of the Holy Family are concentrated in particular in the wrongful killing and martyrdom of the son of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, Imam Husayn. Indeed, all sufferings are a prelude to his. He is the seal of their martyrs and their head. All martyrdoms and suffering after him are only ways of participation in his martyrdom. This depth of devotion is reminiscent in the Christian view of Jesus. Both he and John the Baptist, son of Zechariah, hold a prominent place in the House of Sorrows. Jesus, although not martyred in the Islamic tradition, was still wronged and rejected by his people, and in the end saved through divine intervention. Jesus was the son of the virgin Mary, the *mistress of women*. Mary was pious and poor, and was sustained by God as a sign of his special favor toward her. Fatimah the radiant (Mother of Husayn), the great Mary (al-Maryam al-Kubra), shares these characteristics in Islamic piety. Jesus is therefore, in some way, the brother of Husayn. The two personalities of Jesus and John too often tend to merge into one figure closely analogous to that of Husayn in popular piety.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The division between the Shia and Sunni is rooted in disputes over the proper succession of leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. The Shia maintain that the rightful successor of the Prophet was his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Shia especially revere a succession of scholars (called Imams). The Imam is regarded by Shia Muslims to be both a political and a spiritual leader. Although Shia and Sunni Muslims agree on many doctrinal and ritual matters, the Shia hold past Imams and saints in particularly high regard. Shia put particular emphasis on the death of Ali; he was assassinated in 661, in Najaf, Iraq, which has become an important place of pilgrimage for Shia. **Another very significant figure is Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, who was murdered in Karbala (Iraq) in 680; Shia commemorate this event each year on Ashura, a day of mourning recognized throughout the Shia world, and, particularly, by pilgrimages to Karbala.** <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Shia-Islam>

⁴⁶ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 34-35.

One of the most tragic figures in human history, according to Shi'i piety, is Fatimah al-Zahra, the radiant one, who Dr. Ayoub shares spent her short and tragic life in the House of Sorrows, "becoming its mistress for all time until the Day of Resurrection, the day of her final vindication." Fatimah died lamenting her slain son, "with the angels sharing her grief."⁴⁸ She continues to grieve in the House of Sorrows in Paradise until the day of reckoning when God will enact vengeance on those who wronged her. The followers (Shi'ah) of the imams, through their participation in the sufferings of the Holy Family, become one with the sufferers. They become united with the imams, forming the community of the elect. Like the wronged imams, the followers bear patiently their sufferings in service to the House of Muhammad. The Shi'i community renews yearly the memory of the martyred Imam and his family and friends, renews its own covenant with the imams, a covenant which is identified with the primal trust that God offered to all of creation.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 48-49.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 52.

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