

READING



**JOB PUTS GOD
ON TRIAL FOR
THE SUFFERING
OF THE INNOCENT**

BY IGNACIO CARBAJOSA

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JOT DOWN

**Borges described the book that tells the story as “sublime.”
Claudel wondered, “Who ever pleaded the cause of man with so much energy?”
Here is why the Biblical story challenges our reason as modern women and men.**

BY IGNACIO CARBAJOSA

“If there is one book in the world that deserves the word sublime, it is the book of Job.” Jorge Luis Borges pronounced these words at a conference held at the Argentinean-Israeli Cultural Institute in 1965.¹ The same adjective was used by Paul Claudel of the Académie Française, who in his monograph on the Book of Job said that among the books of the Old Testament, “Job is the most sublime, the most moving, the most audacious, and at the same time the most enigmatic, the most discouraging, or rather, I would dare to say, the most revolting.” In justifying his adjectives, the French author added, “Who has ever pleaded the cause of the human person with such intrepid energy? Who has found in the depth of his faith the space for a cry like this, for so much clamor, for such blasphemous speech as did Job?”² The cause of the man of Uz, which is the cause of all of humanity, becomes an agonizing cry directly to God: why does He allow the suffering of the innocent?

Ever since this work became part of the Jewish canon, and thus of the Christian one, it has inspired a multitude of authors and has become perhaps the most “re-written” book of the Old Testament, above all since Leibniz, in the first half of the 18th century, gave rise to a branch of philosophy called theodicy, dealing with the problem of the goodness of God, the freedom of the human person, and the origin of evil. If God is one, good, and omnipotent, why does evil exist? Does God, who is omnipotent, perhaps allow evil? If so, we would have to doubt His goodness. Perhaps

He wants to avoid evil, but cannot? That puts in doubt His omnipotence.

One of the passages in literature that best presents the drama of evil and above all, of the suffering of the innocent, is found in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. In a dialogue between Ivan and his brother Alexei, the first, an unbeliever, wants to keep his brother, a novice, from following in the footsteps of the *starets* [elder and spiritual advisor] Zosima. To this end, he talks about the most powerful objection to the existence of God: the suffering of the innocent. The evil suffered by adults would be an important objection, but in the final analysis, “They have eaten of the apple and know good and evil [...]. And still they continue to eat of it.”³ This means that they have their own responsibility for the disorder in the world. But the pain of children [...] is unjustifiable.

Dostoyevsky’s pen, which gives voice to Ivan, does not spare us the recounting of atrocities committed against children, so that the objection to divine justice, and even to its very existence, will not be abstract. In pages that are very difficult for the reader, Ivan describes brutalities employed by the Turks to suffocate revolts in their country. In front of the eyes of their mothers, they throw newborns in the air and impale them on their bayonets. They make a child laugh in his mother’s arms, and point a pistol at him close enough so that he can grasp it. And in that moment they blow his head off. All this just for entertainment.

The long series of injustices ends with a story whose protagonist is a Russian general, a wealthy landowner.

¹ See: <http://absta.info/centro-virtual-estudios-judaicos-jorge-luis-borges-y-el-judas.html>.

² P. Claudel, *Le livre de Job*, Plon, Paris, 1946, p. 1.

³ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. Ignat Avsey, Oxford’s World Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 298.



If God is one, good, and omnipotent, why does evil exist? Does God, who is omnipotent, perhaps allow evil? Perhaps God wants to avoid evil, but cannot? That puts in doubt His omnipotence.



One day the son of one of his servant women, while he was playing, threw a rock and wounded the leg of one of the general's hunting dogs. Having discovered who the guilty party was, the next day the general organized a hunt, and in front of all the servants ordered the boy to undress and forced him to run. At that moment, the general unleashed his pack of dogs to chase him down. The child was torn to pieces by the animals in front of his mother.

Ivan, in the role of Job (the biblical book will appear explicitly among the favorite readings of the *starets* Zosima), refuses to accept "theories of retribution" that establish a link between sin and punishment. With children they do not work. Nor can he accept the more refined theories that see in the suffering of the innocent a contribution to eternal harmony at the end of time: "I must have retribution [...] And that retribution must not be at some unspecified place and some unspecified time, but here and now on earth, where I myself can witness it. [...] It was not for that, that I suffered, that I, evil sinner that I am with my agonies and misdeeds, might be exploited for the benefit of someone else's future harmony."⁴

Dostoyevsky could not have imagined that the 20th century would have far exceeded the atrocities com-

mitted against the innocent described in his novel. The Nazi concentration camps and the Stalinist purges suffice to silence us. This was a punch in the stomach of classic apologetics, to the point that in the second half of the last century the question of whether it is possible to even do theology and how to do it, after Auschwitz became an undeniable commonplace.

One understands, then, why Job became a protagonist in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, transformed into the spokesman for a humanity that elevates itself all the way up to God to question Him about injustice. This is the way Kierkegaard presents Job in his work *The Repetition*: "Speak, therefore, memorable Job! Repeat everything you said, you mighty spokesman who appears before the highest tribunal as unafraid as a roaring lion! [...] I need you, a man who knows how to complain loudly, so that it echoes in heaven."⁵

Our own José Jiménez Lozano, winner of the Cervantes Prize, gave voice to Job to lament this unjust world, in his poem *Arreglo de cuentas* [*Settling of Old Scores*]:

We simply live. Have you any idea
how burdensome it is to bear the days? >>>

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *The Repetition*, in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, transl. M.G. Piety, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 59.

Job's three friends could not stand his demand to put God on trial, accusing Him of injustice, so they set themselves up as God's defenders even though they actually did nothing other than preserve the image of God they had in their minds.

» Have you perhaps shown yourself other than in a burning bush?
And at Auschwitz, where were you?
Jealous of our poor pleasures, you observe,
absent in the sadness,
cruel as the ice boots
or as the implacable August sun.
Aren't you the one who directs the mechanisms of the world?
But the little sparrows die of the cold,
and children of hunger
while the powerful are anointed in your name,
and you remain silent.
"The Lord is away, he is not receiving
or answering calls" say your angels.⁶

At this point it is necessary to observe that if the man who pushes the Almighty against the wall is "Western" man, whose reason does not tolerate injustice, the God this man addresses is equally a "Western" God, the Judeo-Christian God, who proclaimed the goodness of all of creation, defends justice and loves human beings,

who created us in His image and likeness. One can then understand the paradox that C.S. Lewis brilliantly formulated in his work, *The Problem of Pain*, when he said that Christianity "creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving."⁷ So right is Lewis' point that in the Mesopotamian parallels of the Book of Job, we can already see the aporias presented by the theory of retribution that links suffering with divine punishment, but we do not yet see any direct confrontation with the god of the moment to demand an explanation.

In front of the cry of a man who suffers unjustly and who demands meaning from heaven, in every epoch there have arisen "defense lawyers" for God, willing to run to His aid. Yesterday and today. Job's three friends were well-intentioned when they gathered to console that downcast man. But they could not stand his demand to put God on trial, accusing Him of injustice, so they set themselves up as God's defenders even though

⁶ J. Jiménez Lozano, "Arreglo de cuentas," in *El tiempo de Eurídice*, Fundación Jorge Guillen, Valladolid, 1996, p. 200.

⁷ Cf. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Harper Collins, New York, 1996, p. 15.

they actually did nothing other than preserve the image of God they had in their minds, one responding to a cause-effect framework in which there is no space for asking questions, for a “why,” much less for an answer from God. Kierkegaard said that a person like this “wants to see God as in the right, even while believing that he is in himself in the right.”⁸

“Are you suffering? You must have done something wrong. If not you, your children” (cf. *Job* 4:7-8, 8:4-6). According to the position of Job’s friends, God moves “within the limits of reason,” and from there He cannot leave. He mustn’t leave. If He left, He would not be predictable, we would be exposed to everything, we would have to ask Him questions the answers to which we do not know. “Why is there pain? Why is there injustice?” Accepting the innocence of Job would mean opening a dangerous crack in a closed universe. “My thoughts urge me to answer, because of the agitation within me. I hear censure that insults me,” Zophar responded to Job (*Job* 20:2-3).

The positions of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, like any other weak, preconceived position, can only be sustained by censoring the reality that comes to us: Job proclaims his innocence. In addition, his virtuous behavior is public and well-known. But there is no space for facts that do not fit into our framework: any reality that counters our measure must be re-interpreted. Thus Eliphaz projects the cause-effect logic onto Job, describing for him the sins that must have provoked divine anger (cf. *Job* 22:6-9). He makes them up, like those who propose an explanatory hypothesis from an evident effect! Borges understood well what was at stake in the battle between the two positions, that of Job and his friends, when he summarized the goal of the biblical book: “We cannot apply any human epithet to God. We cannot measure Him with our measuring stick.”⁹

If we ask people how God responds to Job’s cry, the reaction would be embarrassed silence.

Thus we should not be surprised by the parallel María Zambrano draws between Job’s friends and the rationalism that has characterized our time: “The friends who counsel him, stiff and sure of themselves and their righteous role—that of the just one who can never be beaten—reason. Their lines of reasoning re-appear throughout the course of the history of triumphant reason, the reason of those who stand up straight, of those who have capitalized the work and the suffering of their innermost depths; deaf to these depths, with the deafness of those who transform to stone the splendor that pours forth from the blood and walls in the spaces of encounter so that the *logos* may not descend there.

Prophets, or at least precursors, of the reason that reveals itself, thus making itself inextricable.”¹⁰

Who is right in this dialectic that extends for 35 chapters (*Job* 3-37)? It is obvious that our modern sensibility inclines toward Job, but what does the book say? The affirmation of God in the last chapter, when He speaks to Eliphaz—“My anger blazes against you and your two friends! You have not spoken rightly concerning me, as has my servant Job” (*Job* 42:7)—contains a revolutionary judgment in the Mesopotamian context of the work. How can God turn against those who claim to defend Him? In a flash, God demolishes the theory of retribution that bounds the suffering of men and women to the errors they committ. With this judgment, He frees reason from a centuries-long restraint and restores all its natural space, that of the why, that of the search for meaning.

We, the children of this revolutionary inversion, look with admiration at Job, who raises himself up to the height of God and demands an explanation from Him. Actually, the biblical character goes beyond that. He demands to haul God before a tribunal... for which, obviously, he does not find a judge (cf. *Job* 9:14-35; 13:1-23). And despite this, he prepares his defense and ➤

⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *The Repetition*, op. cit., p. 66.

⁹ Cf. <http://absta.info/centro-virtual-estudios-judaicos-jorge-luis-borges-y-el-judas.html>.

¹⁰ M. Zambrano, “El libro de Job y el pájaro”, in *El hombre y lo divino*, Fondo de Cultura Economica, Mexico City, 2012, pp. 391-392.

In the rebel Job we see represented all the dignity of human reason, which cannot hold back in front of an injustice, in front of an insufficient explanation, in front of suffering that undermines our original intuition that everything is good.

» lists the accusations (cf. *Job* 23:1-9; 29:1-31, 40). It is surprising that the Bible contains pages like these, in which the creature brings an action against his creator. It is paradoxical, considering what we read in the initial pages of the sacred book, in which God, with His Word, creates man and woman in His image and likeness, resting after a work that “was very good” (*Gen* 1:31), and in the following pages, in which the Creator formed the first man out of the mud of the earth.

In the rebel Job we see represented all the dignity of human reason, which cannot hold back in front of an injustice, in front of an insufficient explanation, in front of suffering that undermines our original intuition that everything is good. The entire defense of Job is built on a paradox. The human being is an *almost* nobody in the totality of creation. If we contemplate the immensity of the universe, what is this late-born being but a negligible point in the vast extent of galaxies? Yet even so, this being is the self-awareness of the universe. In the human person, in our reason, nature gains consciousness of itself, consciousness in terms of knowledge and the need for meaning and justice, to the point of rising up and demanding an explanation from the creator.

“And so, did Job err?” Kierkegaard asked himself. “He certainly erred *in toto*, because he could not have appealed to a higher court than the one that judged him. Or was he in the right? Certainly, he took reason as a temple, precisely because he erred *before God*.” The fundamental difference between Job and his friends is that the man of Uz conceives of God as someone who is alive (the Being to whom every being is in debt), whom he engages in a battle, expecting an answer for a lacerating question. For their part, Job’s three friends reduce God to a formula that quashes all questions.

Again, María Zambrano draws a parallel with our Western world. For the Andalusian writer, Job formulates his reasons, hurling them at God in a lament: “these very reasons that philosophical thought enunciates without the least complaint, because it has no cause to do so. The god of philosophy is not a ‘who’ but a ‘what.’ It may be marvelous, but it is not the god, a lord, a friend, an adversary, and one who abandons. As a thinking being—in the traditional philosophy of the West—the human person does not have a god to complain to, a god of one’s innermost depths. The innermost depths were subjugated from the very beginning, silenced in the course of philosophizing.”¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

The Book of Job holds other surprises for us. First of all, God must answer the question about injustice and suffering, and in fact, His answer keeps Job waiting: it appears only at the end, occupying the last four chapters of the work (*Job* 38-41), before the epilogue. If the divine judgment on the words of Job's friends was surprising, no less so is the long awaited turn of God before a public that is all ears. We might expect an opening speech such as, "And God smote Job with a lightning bolt from the stormy skies." It would be the answer that many would attribute to God, especially those who reduce the Bible to a mere expression of Mesopotamian religious literature. But then I would not be here writing this article, nor would Western philosophy and theodicy be what they are today.

God accepts Job's challenge. He picks up the glove. In combat mode, he invites Job to gird up his loins (cf. *Job* 38:3). He descends to the level of the creature, puts Himself at his height in order to fight hand-to-hand. Job subpoenaed him to appear in court. God does not sit in the defense box, but at a school desk: "I will question you, and you tell me the answers!" (*Job* 38:3). He invited Job, who in the roar and din of his defense raised himself up to the height of God, to come to the teacher's desk and answer the questions of the Omnipotent, transformed for a few minutes into a disciple of a "wise" examiner.

With profound irony, God begins a series of questions that require no answer and that continue for a full four chapters. In front of Job, who at moments makes himself little, God lists one by one all the marvels and mysteries of creation, asking the man of Uz their origin, which he doubtlessly knows, given his will to ask modifications of the divine logic:

Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its size? Surely you know?

The fundamental difference between Job and his friends is that the man of Uz conceives of God as someone who is alive.

Who stretched out the measuring line for it?
Into what were its pedestals sunk,
and who laid its cornerstone,
while the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (*Job* 38:4-7)

With the closure of this examination, which goes on for all of Chapter 41, the divine speech ends. What did God say to answer the question about injustice and the suffering of the innocent? It is strange that the book of Job has remained in the popular imagination as the paradigm of unjust suffering. But if we ask people how God responds to Job's cry, the reaction would be embarrassed silence. Someone might even ask, "Does God even answer in this book?" This is not a case of the ignorance of simple people. The specialists, too, are perplexed by God's "answer." What is the sense of answering questions that concern freedom in the moral order with a highly detailed description of the wonders of nature?

A certain number of Biblicists hold that God does not answer Job, probably because the chapters dedicated to the divine speech originally had nothing to do with the questions and drama of the man of Uz. In the long and complex process of configuring the present work, these chapters "landed" in their current position from another location. "The divinity that appears in the clouds gives no answer to the tormented soul, and the poetry about nature, beautiful and objective as it may be, does not heal a wounded heart" (P. Volz).¹² "The problem that forms the central theme in the original book of Job is not touched upon; and if it were not for the attachment of this magnificent series of poems to the Book of Job, no reader would for a moment have associated the poems with the theme suggested by Job's experience." (M. Jastrow).¹³ "I [do not see] anything different from what Job's friends had been saying for a long time; [...] three hours of nat- ➤

¹² P. Volz, *Hiob und Weisheit* (Die Schriften des AT in Auswahl III, 2), Göttingen, 1921, p. 1.

¹³ M. Jastrow, *The Book of Job*, J.B. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1920, p. 76.

God accepts Job's challenge. He picks up the glove. He descends to the level of the creature, puts Himself at his height in order to fight hand-to-hand. God does not sit in the defense box, but at a school desk. "I will question you, and you tell me the answers!"

» ural sciences." (L. Steiger).¹⁴ "YHWH answers moral questions with Physics" (E. Bloch).¹⁵ Some have even gone so far as to define the divine speech as "irrelevant." "It seems like something truly irrelevant, like waving a rattle in front of a crying baby, to distract it from hunger" (R.A.F. MacKenzie).¹⁶

A few exegetes are attracted by the fact that the divine speech was effective in reaching Job. Gerhard von Rad gathers the (perplexed) reactions of his colleagues and ends with this judgment: "What is not so certain is whether the contemporaries [of the work] had the same reaction [...]. In fact, Job himself comes to understand the meaning of the speech much more rapidly and without many complications, compared to a modern reader."¹⁷ In other words, is it not perhaps our modern mentality that keeps us from grasping God's answer to Job? Were those who read this work two thousand (or a thousand) years ago as perplexed as we are? The thing we have to accept, if we want to respect the thread of the book's discourse, is that Job felt corrected by the divine

speech: "By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (*Job* 42:5-6).

Given that Job felt corrected, we must ask him the question: "In what sense did the divine speech respond to your assertion?" If we shift our gaze to cinema and not biblical exegesis or literature, we can find a distant echo of that answer that comes from far away, from the land of Uz. In the director Terrence Malick's ambitious film *The Tree of Life* (2011), the script follows the statement of Job. From the very first image, which presents a line from the biblical book ("Where were you when I founded the earth? [...] While the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?") (*Job* 38:4-7), followed by the drama of a family that loses a son, the whole film is interlaced by questions surrounding the mystery of pain, injustice, and death. But the surprising thing about Malick is the attention he dedicates in his film to the divine speech in the Book of Job, which dares to deal with that mystery.

The first minutes of the film, paralleling the Book of

¹⁴ L. Steiger, "Die Wirklichkeit Gottes in unserer Verkündigung", in M. Honecker-L. Steiger (cur.), *Auf dem Wege zu schriftgemässer Verkündigung*, München, 1965, p. 160.

¹⁵ E. Bloch, "Studien zum Buch Hiob", in M. Schlösser (cur.), *Für Margarete Susman: Auf gespaltenem Pfad*, Darmstadt, 1964, pp. 85-102.

¹⁶ R.A.F. MacKenzie, "The Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job," *Bib* 40, 1959, p. 436.

¹⁷ G. Von Rad, *Sabiduria en Israel*, Madrid, 1985, p. 284; (*Wisdom in Israel*, Xpress reprints, London, 1997).



Job, show the fatal event that strikes a mother who had promised faithfulness to God (“I will be faithful to you. It doesn’t matter what happens to me”). She loses her second son while he is still young. She, too, receives “consolation” from her “friends” (in this case her mother): “Life continues, people pass. Nothing stays the same. You still have two others. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.” This is when Mrs. O’Brien cries out “Don’t you think I’ve been faithful to You? Why? Where were You?” The drama has begun. The next move is up to God.

Now we see the first frame that begins the great scene of creation that lasts over fifteen minutes. We can understand those who left the cinema at this point, or, having arrived a bit late, thought they had walked in during the intermission. Malick’s genius demands a minimum of hermeneutical context to be digested. To be effective, God’s answer to Job, ancient or contemporary, requires a malleable and visual art like film.

When we are still suffering with the mother who lost the fruit of her womb, Malick “forces” us to witness the great parturition that is the creation of the world. He does not tell us about it: he explains it to us. He makes us protagonists, forces us to experience it. Fifteen minutes nailed to our seats. Watching. Without even one word. The only accompaniment is *Lacrimosa*—the music from the *Requiem* composed by Zbigniew Preisner in memory of his friend, the director Krzysztof Kieslowski. This is the same methodology God uses with Job: He passes before his eyes all the mysteries of creation, without interruption, for four chapters.

The dynamic of pain led Job to turn in on himself. In turn, the power of reason, which never ceases to seek reasons for things, elevated Job, deaf to all that sur-

rounded him, to the height of God. When Job arrives in the presence of the Almighty, He causes him to raise his eyes so that he can “realize” what surrounds him: His creation. What is interesting about creation? In what sense can its contemplation correct Job? What new information does it add to the discourse of the man of Uz?

Malick’s images come to our aid. They are effective, just as the images drawn by the divine questions must have been for Job. They strike us, move us, amaze us. In fact, this is the primary vocation of reality: to issue a “pro-vocation,” to attract attention. First of all, we are wonderstruck that things *exist*, exist without

our having requested it. They are not simply in front of us like scenes that accompany our thoughts. Here, modern myopia is great, and this makes the perplexity of the scholars in front of the divine response in the Book of Job understandable.

The *positivism* that dominates our gaze considers things as a mere *positum*, something that is there, unmoving, and at best I am interested by the transformations, the dynamic laws that regulate its evolution. But “conquering” reality does not coincide with mere perception of that reality as *positum*. “In this modern era,

which can be defined as the era of the crisis of reality, we have not taken into consideration our attitude toward it,” says Zambrano. “Our attitude toward reality is something different from the conditions that knowledge requires, beginning with the simple perception of reality.”¹⁸ It is a matter of our freedom, as *attitude* toward reality. In fact, continues Zambrano, “if the attitude to reality conditions the knowledge of it and even relatively its effective presence, it is because human freedom manifests itself in this as in everything—even in this—being able to say no, or yes, in front of it. [...] The reality that in a certain sense >>

The first minutes of the film by Terrence Malick show the fatal event that strikes a mother who had promised faithfulness to God.

¹⁸ M. Zambrano, *Filosofía y Educación: Manuscritos*, eds. Á. Casado and J. Sánchez-Gey, Málaga, 2007, p. 141.

And Job yields, is moved, feels overwhelmed, dominated, by a Presence that sustains the presence of things. Why do we moderns resist the dialogue that is introduced by wondrous reality?

» in and of itself appears overwhelming, inexorable, given the human condition, must be sought.”¹⁹

Zambrano describes the first step of that search—attention—as “a kind of inhibition, a withdrawal of the subject in order to allow reality to manifest itself.”²⁰ This is a true exercise of freedom. It is then that reality presents itself not so much as a *positum* but as a *datum*, participle of the verb *to give*, which implies a giver. Reality manifests itself to us. We can acknowledge this in those moments of lucidity or attention when reality no longer seems opaque, when we have not taken it for granted, when it is not “here by default.” It happens to us, and this surprises us. Only that which is given—that which we do not make with our hands—can evoke our surprise.

In fact, *datum* has the same root as *donum*, “gift,” that stupendous reality that provokes in us a movement of gratitude. Ever since we were little, our mother educated us to complete the parabola that the word *gift* implies: “What do you say?” “Thank you.” This is the exercise that God, the patient father, uses with Job. Therefore, it is necessary for God to pass in front of Job all the wonders of creation, those that leave us

with our mouths open, that is, struck by something that is not a mere *positum* but a *donum*, and that leads us to the threshold of gratitude. This is the same exercise that Malick proposes to us. Job, the observer in the film, and we ourselves, cannot cross this threshold without a decision of our freedom.

And Job yields, is moved, feels overwhelmed, dominated, by a Presence that sustains the presence of things: “By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you” (*Job* 42:5). Why do we moderns resist that dialogue introduced by wondrous reality and testified to by Job? The very word “God” is problematic for us. That which is not absolutely present as our elementary human experience, even if only in power, cannot be immediately acknowledged. Here, once again, our freedom comes into play. The French hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur connected the interpretation of exterior signs to personal interpretation. “Who am I?” is a question we cannot elude. Every action, like any interpretation, involves an attitude, even implicit, in front of that question.²¹

Actually, Ricoeur followed Jean Nabert in asserting that human beings are always trying to understand

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²¹ Cf. P. Ricoeur, “L’herméneutique du témoignage,” in *Lectures 3: Aux Frontières de la philosophie*, Paris, 1994, pp. 107-139.

themselves because they realize inexorably that there is a disproportion between that which exists (the empirical and real “I”) and that which they could or should come to be (the pure “I,” which is the place where the Absolute manifests itself). Nabert defines this recognition of self “the original affirmation.”²²

Job draws close to the historical manifestation of the divine not in a “neutral” way, like an abstract “I,” devoid of everything *a priori*, that judges all that surrounds him detachedly. The original Hebrew of Job’s answer to God says literally, “I listened to you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you” (*Job* 42:5). With the expression “I listened to you with my ears,” Job testifies to the mysterious presence of the Absolute in his consciousness, in the “original affirmation,” through the answer to the question: “Who am I?” This is the reason of the man of Uz that rises, challenging God to fight, that searches for meaning *in dialogue*, that moves, recognizing the Absolute from the very beginning. At the same time, all the contradictions he is experiencing cause him to cry out, to demand, to beg a historical sign from the Absolute, that He show Himself: “Would that I knew how to find Him, that I might come to His dwelling! I would set out my case before Him, fill my mouth with arguments; I would learn the words He would answer me, understand what He would say to me.” (*Job* 23:3-5).

For Nabert, the pure “I”—which recognizes the Absolute in his consciousness—“orders the consciousness to look beyond itself [in history, in the world], to recognize beyond itself testimonies of the divine.”²³ The pure “I” bears within the “criteriology of the divine,”²⁴ so as to be capable of discerning the historical manifestation of the divine in contingent signs. Expressed in Job’s words, “I would learn the words He would answer me, understand what He would say to me” (*Job*

23:5). The manifestation of God in creation does not “force itself” on Job violently. In an unexpected and nondeducible way, it encounters what Nabert calls “the desire for God,” which corresponds to the original affirmation or perception of oneself.²⁵ “By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you” (*Job* 42:5): “by hearsay,” an original experience, transforms into a judgment on the historical manifestation of God (“my eye has seen you”). In turn, the divine manifestation expands Job’s reason, re-awakens his innate “criteriology of the divine,” to recognize in creation the first contingent sign of the Absolute. And Job feels corrected.

But the pain? And the injustices suffered? And the child devoured by the dogs in Dostoyevsky’s novel? The question is not exhausted. The wound is still open. Now, however, it is transformed into the wailing of a child in front of his mother. In fact, Job gets off his uncomfortable teacher’s chair and takes his place at a student’s desk. Now he is the one to direct his questions to God: “Listen, and I will speak; I will question you, and you tell me the answers.” (*Job* 42:4). And here the book ends. We can imagine Job’s questions, but not the divine answers. In this sense, we find ourselves in front of an open book—the entire Old Testament

is an open book—in search of completion.

Our Western tradition, built on the New Testament, continues to ask, raising its voice in front of evil and injustice, but it cannot do so by excluding that one lacerating cry of a new Job, nailed to a cross, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned Me?” Mediating between the time of the Book of Job and our days is the announcement of the surprising Christian claim: God became man and entered into history. Jesus of Nazareth did not bring a theoretical “solution” to the problem of suffering. He took it upon Himself, dying on a cross. Modern theodicy must face this paradox that history has left us as an inheritance: an event, ➤

But the pain and the injustices? And the child devoured by dogs in Dostoyevsky’s novel? The question is not exhausted.

²² Cf. J. Nabert, *Éléments pour une éthique*, Paris, 1971, chapters IV and V.

²³ J. Nabert, *Le désir de Dieu*, Paris, 1966, p. 213.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, Book II, chapter IV.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.



Jesus of Nazareth did not bring a theoretical “solution” to the problem of suffering. He took it upon Himself, dying on a cross.

» set in time and space (the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus), and not a reflection, presents itself as the key for comprehending the problem of suffering and evil.

But is it possible for the absolute to manifest itself in history, in contingent facts?

Our modern reason once again experiences an almost instinctive resistance to this hypothesis. Two fathers of modern thought, Immanuel Kant and Gotthold E. Lessing, provided a foundation for this strange thing.²⁶ We have already seen how the exercise of freedom involved in the original affirmation opens us to the testimony that the Absolute gives of Himself in our consciousness. Starting from this, the possibility that this Absolute manifests itself historically in contingent signs is a hypothesis to which reason *must not* close itself.²⁷ We will pass to the field of historical verification (guided by that “criteriology of the divine” that constitutes us). Founded on the philosophy of Nabert, Ricoeur supports the possibility of the Absolute manifesting itself in history and, in fact, makes this the basis for the overcoming of evil. In fact, for Ricoeur, evil can be eradicated only through “absolute actions,”²⁸ that is, contingent facts in which a free

conscience recognizes its own liberation, or, in the words of Nabert, in which “that which is not justifiable according to appearances and human judgment, is not the last word on existence.”²⁹ But can these absolute actions truly measure up to the suffering of the innocent?

Reaching this point, we take off our sandals, like Moses walking in a sacred place (cf. *Ex* 3:1-5), because we are witness to a personal, irreplaceable, unsurpassable dialogue (that is not a matter of “absolute knowledge”³⁰) between the sufferer and the “witness to the Absolute,”³¹ who is also suffering, that shows (but does not demonstrate) here and now, the presence of the divine that overcomes the unjustifiable. As in the Book of Job, we transform into the protagonists of the dramatic interplay of two freedoms, face to face. It could be two people with the same disease in the same hospital room, one desperate, the other surprisingly serene, or any one of us, watching the execution of twenty-nine Copts in the Sinai peninsula, who refused to renounce their faith, one by one, last May 26th.

Since the author of the Book of Job wrote those sublime pages, his story, in which we are protagonists, has been re-written thousands of times, and will continue to be written on an infinite number of future occasions. **I**

²⁶ Cf. I. Kant, *La Religión dentro de los límites de la mera Razón*, Madrid, 2009, p. 128; (*Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 2009). G.E. Lessing, “Sobre la demostración en espíritu y fuerza,” in *Escritos filosóficos y teológicos*, Barcelona, 1990, p. 482; (*Philosophical and Theological Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005).

²⁷ Cf. J. Nabert, *Ensayo sobre el mal*, Madrid, 1997, p. 138.

²⁸ P. Ricoeur, “L’herméneutique du témoignage,” op. cit., p. 137.

²⁹ J. Nabert, *Ensayo sobre el mal*, op. cit., p. 145.

³⁰ Cf. P. Ricoeur, “L’herméneutique du témoignage,” op. cit., p. 137.

³¹ Cf. J. Nabert, *Le désir de Dieu*, op. cit., Book III, chapter I.