

## SING A NEW SONG!

### HOW SHALL WE SING A NEW SONG IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY?

By recognizing the need  
for a rethinking of the doctrine of original sin  
and the recognition of the biblical law-court pattern of prayer  
as a spiritually healing form of prayer for deeply troubled persons

### CHRISTIANS AND THE LAW-COURT PATTERN OF PRAYER

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We will explore the law-court pattern of prayer, which is evident in about fifty Psalms, in Jeremiah and in Job. Christians need to re-think the non-biblical doctrine of original sin (Augustine, 354-430 C.E./A.D.) and to consider adoption of the biblical law-court pattern of prayer, which is based on the covenant and the experience of biblical people of innocent suffering and that G-d sometimes breaks the covenant. Even Christians do experience innocent suffering and G-d as an abusive "Father," but, they are afraid and do not know how to express this ordeal. The models in the Bible may surprise Christians but could turn out to be of real help and a way to some form of healing. Several passages will be discussed.

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My father was a dedicated, loyal servant of the LORD through the Lord Jesus, as a *Diakon*, deacon, *Prediger*, preacher, teacher and un-ordained pastor for German Evangelical Lutheran congregations Yugoslavia in former Austro-Hungarian areas in Yugoslavia and then also in Poland during World War II. He was a wonderful and courageous person. In his relationship with me, though, he was very strict and behaved in an authoritarian manner. No wonder he was also prone to obedience to authority and other authoritarians like most other fathers and mothers of his generation.

He was totally absorbed by the doctrine of original sin and told me from the very beginning of my life: "Walter, Du bist nichts als ein aufgestellter Maudreck," Translated, politely, "Walter, you are nothing but a piece auf mouse doo doo ... stood up on end."

On the one hand, I believed him as a child and even until this day I can not shake the belief that I am nothing, that I am a piece of dirt, totally sinful and unclean, unable to to anything right. Many fellow humans, and especially fellow Christians (including students, colleagues, powerful officials in *ecclesia* and *academia*) have made sure, throughout my life, that I never forgot this fact.

On the other hand, even as a very small child, I had the deep suspicion that I was not just a piece of mouse doo doo and totally sinful and unclean. By the time I was twelve years old my father had made sure that I had read the whole Bible. Every morning began with Bible reading, a hymn and a prayer. An excellent custom. But the many questions which bubbled up were never answered and, usually, ruthlessly put down by, "You must believe." I could not believe. It had to make sense to my heart and to my brain.

So a journey began. I had to find freedom from any ignorance, stupidity, hypocrisy, especially, in the areas of Bible, Christianity and Judaism. Of course, I discovered that the Bible and Jesus (except for Paul) have a quite different message concerning me, and all other human beings, than what my father told me. I became a disciple of Jesus, which, I discovered (and painfully so), is a very mixed blessing, especially among Pauline Christians. With you, I am sure that I do not have to go into detail about the meaning of this sentence.

During four decades of ministry I discovered that most Christians have a problem with the doctrine of original sin ... and also with many other teachings of the Church, e.g., Trinity, human sexuality, etc. It simply is not true that all of us experience ourselves as totally sinful and unclean and that there is no such thing as innocent, unjust suffering. It simply can not be true that we deserve the horrendous suffering which is imposed on us by nature and committed against us by some humans.

The examples are endless and we all know them:

- . Your five year old is sexually molested by a trusted relative or by an abusive father or mother.
- . Your pregnant wife is gang-raped, tortured and left for dead in some God-forsaken place.
- . Your spouse turns cold and you are no longer important. Something, or some one has become more important.
- . Your children turn against you and even your dog runs away.
- . You work hard, you do everything right and then everything just goes up in smoke.
- . Men become cannon fodder in the endless wars and the survivors suffer miserably as veterans.
- . Etc ...

There is no use in prolonging this list. We are all too familiar with the horrors and the chaos of our human life.

Can all of this be explained with the doctrine of original sin, including the Christian teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism throughout the centuries and the Shoah/Holocaust in the twentieth century?

Too many of us know and experience the fact that we have thought and done the right thing and that we are often suffering un-justly, that there is such a thing as unjust suffering. Most of us also know - in our gut - that, in the end, all of this injustice, actually, comes from God. But, we do not dare to accuse God, because we have been brainwashed to think that we can never do anything right and that we deserve all of our suffering.

- . What wrong has the new-born baby committed that it deserves to be thrown into the garbage by her mother and that it will suffer eternal pain because it is not baptized?
- . What wrong has the five-year old committed that she deserves to be sexually abused by a loving uncle or even by her own father, who, goes to church every Sunday?
- . What wrong has the pregnant woman committed that she deserves to be gang-raped, tortured and killed?
- . What wrong has the loyal man committed who is dismissed from a job without any explanation and then his wife leaves him, the house burns down, and then he is run over by a drunken driver?
- . Etc ...

You have a vast store of experience and, I am sure, that you can provide even better examples than I.

There is a tradition in the Bible which has been totally neglected by us Christians, by us Constantinian Christians, namely, the tradition of the law-court pattern of prayer.

Actually, a multitude of teachings in the Bible are neglected by us Constantinian Christians but we professionals prefer the teachings of the religious establishment. Many theological students have told me - during almost thirty years of teaching at a seminary: "We are being trained as functionaries of the establishment and not as students and preachers of the Word from God."

Except for the Apostle Paul, the whole Bible and Jesus speak of the fact that we not only can do the right thing, in the relationship to others and to God, but, that we are commanded and that we are expected to be holy and perfect and participate in the Holy Spirit and in the will and the intentions of God in our daily lives. *That* is the spirit which Jesus radiated, in word and deed, and charged his disciples to do the same ... and to go and make disciples and invite everyone into this community of spirit and deed and to worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

We all know the relevant passages, e.g.,

**Leviticus 19:3**

קדושים תהיו	<i>qəḏōšīm tihyû</i>	Holy - must you be
כי קדוש אני	<i>kî qādôš ʾanî</i>	because - holy - I am
יהוה אלהינו:	<i>yhwh ʾēlōhēkem</i>	YHWH/the LORD - your deity
	<i>rd ʾādōnāy</i>	

**Matthew 5:28**

Ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι	Be perfect, therefore,
ὡς ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν.	as your heavenly Father is perfect.

It is very strange, although these passages are very familiar to Christians they, basically, do not believe them. In the end for many Pauline, Augustinian Christians this biblical message, although familiar, is strange and sounds wrong, even heretical, because of the un-biblical doctrine of original sin which is the orthodox teaching of the Church.

Biblical people, on the other hand, lived their lives based on the covenant. They had the experience of being just and upright. Why then all this un-just suffering? There can only be one conclusion: This unjust suffering comes from God and it is God who must be held accountable on the basis of the covenant. God must also be ethical, moral and God must be confronted when God is experienced as behaving like an abusive “Father.” The way the biblical people did this is by prayer, i.e., by the use of the law-court pattern of prayer.

Job, Jeremiah and the psalmists (in more than fifty psalms) confront and accuse God of breaking the covenant and of behaving like an abusive father.

As some of you know I have been dealing with Job, in a scholarly manner, for more than three decades. What some of you do not know is that I have been studying Jeremiah and, especially, the Palms, for just as long.

For the last few years of teaching at LSTC I have added courses with the title, “Arguing with God.” During my last quarter at LSTC, Spring 2001, I taught an elective entitled, “Arguing with God. Examples from Psalms, Jeremiah and Psalms.” Thirty students enrolled and 28 completed the course.

I am convinced that all rabbis, priests and pastors would benefit from such a course and similar studies. I am willing to teach this subject to any interested persons until I become decrepit and die.

In stead of giving you a lecture on the topic in the remaining time I will give you a taste of how I teach.

Please, turn to the various handouts. First, please, turn to the

. **Profile** for the course: “Arguing with God.” (Spring 2001)

Read the Profile at your leisure.

Please, turn now to the bibliography.

The book by **Laytner** is an excellent introduction to the law-court pattern of prayer from Biblical times until today.

The book by **Blumenthal** will jolt you out of any complacency. Please, study it very carefully. I suspect that you have never read a book like this one.

The book by **Lampman** contains a collection of articles which continues the recent emphasis on the *innocent* victim, of course, an impossible thought in Constantinian Christianity..

The book by **Billman-Migliore** is a serious effort to re-instate laments into the Christian experience. But, this can not be done because Pauline-Augustinian-Constantinian Christians have never used the law-court pattern of prayer, because they do not allow any *innocent* suffering because of the doctrine of original sin.

I have written a detailed review (unpublished) of the Billman-Migliore book and a copy is available from me. The book is a valiant but failed effort. It could only succeed if the doctrine of original sin and with it the structure of Constantinian Christianity is abandoned.

Now, I would like to, briefly, illustrate the law-court pattern of prayer with a few examples.

Please, turn to the

. **Overview** of the passages in Jeremiah as outlined by Laytner.

Laytner presents the structure of the law-court pattern of prayer here in a quick overview: Address, Object of Address, Argument, Petition/Plea and Divine Response.

. **Jeremiah 20:7-12, 13f.**

This text is one of the most heart-wrenching biblical examples of the law-court pattern of prayer. Please, turn to my handout and to my translation. Read, carefully, the comment by Heschel.

. **Job 42:5-6**

The Book of Job, finally, makes sense to me with the recognition of the intricate poetry in these verses and the knowledge that the verb *nḥm*, in the Niphal, means something like “to be sad, to feel pity.” Anyone who seriously studies the biblical occurrences of *nḥm* in the Niphal will be forced to come to a similar conclusion.

I will now read the passage in my translation and you may read my Abstract at your leisure.

You may also turn to my article “Confidence and Despair: Job 19,25-27 in the Light of Northwest Semitic” (in W.A.M. Beuken, ed., *The Book of Job*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, CXIV. Leuven: University Press, 1994) 157-181) where I, in-correctly, translated *niḥamti* as “I am comforted.” *Niḥamti* does not mean “I repent” in spite of the fact that it has been translated that way by many scholars.

. **Psalm 88:1-19**

This is the most heart-wrenching psalm and it is wrong and inconsiderate to lessen the horror our forbear in the biblical faith experiences by turning to any kind of soothing talk.

I intend to end my presentations with the last word of this psalmist, *maḥšāḳ*, i.e., *ḥōšek*,” and in this manner I want to honor all *innocent* sufferers in the past and today.

Now, I will read Psalm 88 in my translation.