THE SON OF MAN MUST SUFFER

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THE TITLE 'Son of Man' is used in the gospels of Jesus by himself, not by others. Outside of the gospels the title occurs once in Acts and twice in the Apocalypse. The title is obscure in english, and it was obscure in greek; this seems to be the reason why it was not employed outside the palestinian church, if the New Testament usage is any key to its frequency. No other title of Jesus has been submitted to such a searching examination, and it is not to our purpose here to relate the divergent conclusions which have been reached. For our purpose it is sufficient to notice that in the New Testament this title was Jesus's favourite designation of himself, and that it was original with him. When we attempt to trace earlier uses of the title, we run into difficulties.

'Son of Man' renders literally a hebrew and aramaic phrase which signifies an individual member of the human species; the hebrew and aramaic words translated by 'man' are collective nouns, like the english 'cattle', and something must be added to designate the individual. The added word is 'son' for a male and 'daughter' for a female. As a pure matter of semantics, the phrase could be rendered 'the man' or 'this man', and could be, when one uses it of oneself, a polite circumlocution for the personal pronoun. Yet no interpreter of the gospels thinks this is all the phrase means. It has overtones which are difficult to analyze.

The uses of the title in the gospels fall into three classes, The first class includes those passages which allude to the second coming of the Son of Man. This use does not concern us here, interesting as it is. The second class is used with reference to what we may call the human condition of Jesus; here the title is linked with some feature of his humanity, either his community with mankind in such things as eating and drinking, or the incarnational character of his mission exhibited in such activities as speech or miracles. The third class includes passages in which the title is associated with the passion and death of Jesus. This third class is really a specific group within the second class, for nowhere is the humanity of Jesus more manifest than in his passion and death.

Doubts about the genuine humanity of Jesus were one of the oldest heresies, probably as old as the New Testament writings. The Church dealt much more solemnly and much more frequently with doubts about his divinity; but the doubts about his humanity have been more subtle and more persistent. The name given to this ancient heresy is docetism; the name is derived from a greek word, and defines the heresy as the doctrine that Jesus only seemed to be human. In the extreme forms of the heresy, the incarnation was a vast optical illusion or a vast pantomime. In the more subtle forms of the heresy, christians whose belief is otherwise orthodox hesitate to attribute to Jesus those aspects of the human condition which are in more refined societies thought gross or unseemly. Jesus, it is felt, could not have engaged himself in the human condition to a depth which a cultivated lady or gentleman would find beneath their dignity. But Jesus himself preferred a title which emphasized his common humanity; as for his dignity, he put himself in the position of lackey and was charged with preferring low company, a charge which he cheerfully accepted.[1]

A phrase occurs in Jesus's predictions of his passion: 'The Son of Man must suffer'.[2] It is intriguing that if this sentence is lifted from its context, the aramaic phrase permits the translation 'Man must suffer'. In submission to suffering, Jesus did nothing which distinguishes his own condition from the general human condition; for suffering belongs to the general human condition. Our task here is not to discuss why this is so; we are satisfied with the fact. Two of the great systems of ancient greek philosophy, stoicism and epicureanism, built their morality around man's response to pleasure and pain, and many thinkers since have dealt with the problem - as a rule, not too successfully. No one can expect to live without at some time experiencing sharp physical and mental pain. When this happens, one is aware of the loneliness of pain. No matter how much compassion and kindly ministration one receives, there is a block to communication. Others cannot share the pain, even if they have suffered similar pain themselves. The voices of one's friends seem to come from a great distance, too great for one to hear or answer them clearly. One feels low, even de-humanized; one is ashamed of one's weakness and self-pity. It is at this point, of course, that one doubts that Jesus ever suffered as we do. He must have had some hidden resource which made his suffering less degrading. It

[1] Mt 9, 10–13; Mk 2, 13–17; Lk 5, 27–32.

[2] Mk 8, 31; Lk 9, 22.

may take a little thought to see that ideas of this kind are disrespectful to him; in a way they challenge his honesty.

When we think of the suffering of Jesus, we think first of his passion; and possibly we think of nothing else. We think of the passion, perhaps, as an exquisite and prolonged agony of physical and mental pain, beyond anything endured by ordinary man. In fact, the passion of Jesus, like so much of his life, was commonplace in the world in which he lived. The hellenistic-roman world was civilized, but it was harsh in war and in the administration of law. It did not notably exceed in harshness the later european world until quite recent times; and indeed one may ask whether the modern european world has entirely risen above barbarism in these areas. Our own generation is no stranger to the cruelty of man to man. The death inflicted upon Jesus was a routine punishment for certain types of crime. Appalling as it seems to us, and its cruelty was recognized in ancient times also, it was not an unusual punishment.

Nor is there any reason to think that Jesus was unusually delicate and sensitive to pain. As he is described in the gospels, there is ample reason to think that he was not. The average man of those times seems to have been less well nourished and less well developed in physique than modern civilized man; but the peasant had a sturdy body which was accustomed to prolonged physical exertion and lack of adequate food. There was no comfort in his life, and some things he could endure better than we can. The weak did not survive infancy; those who did survive were those who could resist disease and infection and who did not tire quickly. We should not take anything away from the pains of the passion of Jesus, but he could stand them better than most of us could stand them. Violent death at the hands of one's fellow-men was a more common risk in that world than it has yet become in ours; and I suspect that the mental attitude of the ancient man towards this hazard was not much different from our own quite casual acceptance of the risks of the motor car.

A difficulty in studying the response of Jesus to pain is that the gospels are extremely objective narratives. They never get into the minds of the people who appear in them, neither into the mind of Jesus nor of any one else. They relate the external signs of thought and emotion. If the ancient near east was anything like the modern near east, emotions were disclosed with a candour which the modern european finds embarrassing. The passion narratives tell us nothing of the response of Jesus to the passion. We have only the account of

Gethsemane, which tells us that the anticipation of the passion was so entirely human that, as I have remarked, the modern european finds it embarrassing. I have read numerous homiletic expositions of Gethsemane which attempted to plumb some mystical depths of Jesus which caused him such exquisite anguish that it burst forth in his behaviour. That Jesus should have quailed at the anticipation of pain is something these writers cannot bring themselves to say. It would be too human; but it is not sinful. No doubt there were mystical depths in this experience which the gospels do not relate, and which it might be impudent to attempt to analyze; but the behaviour of Jesus in this crisis needs no such explanation. What might need explanation is the composure which the gospels describe in him after the agony of Gethsemane. Here is seen a man who is well aware of the pain involved in his decision, but who has refused to allow the pain to divert him from his course, or even to force him to show any weakness. In some way we manage to make this composure the result of something else than a tremendous effort of will. When we think of Jesus as being above emotional pressure, we also think of him as being above character.

The mental pain of the passion can only be deduced from the narrative; we can guess some of it, but no doubt the homilists are right in believing that there is more here than we can reach. The Gethsemane narrative shows clearly that Jesus was as well acquainted with the loneliness of pain as anyone of us. That his mental pain could not be shared with any one is easily deduced; for no one else knew the issues involved. That he should have sought the mere presence of others at this time ought to be revealing. It is not a pleasure to feel the violent hatred of others, and to know that there are people who are convinced that your death will make the world a better place to live in. It is likewise no pleasure to know that those who are closest to you seem completely unaware of the weight which you carry. When this happens to us, we call it our private hell.

We noticed above that when we think of the suffering which Jesus endured as Son of Man, we are likely to concentrate on the passion so intensely that we do not notice other things in the gospels. These other things should not be exaggerated; in the preceding paragraphs it will be thought by some readers that I have worked too diligently to reduce the passion of Jesus to the commonplace. To a degree this is true; for unless the sufferings of Jesus are something like our own, I do not see how his experience of suffering can be meaningful for us. If he was made of some super-flesh which was insensitive to pain, or

if he was endowed with a super-soul which served as an anaesthetic, he would not really share our sufferings. The community which he has with us may be more easily observed in other episodes which are obviously nearer to the commonplace.

The life of Jesus as described in the gospels does not appear to be one prolonged and uninterrupted agony of pain. He does not appear as the wealthy nobleman who is compelled to spend some years in the pigsty. Distressing as it may be, when he dealt with palestinian peasants he dealt with his own kind of people, the people with whom he was most at home; and I fear that delicate is one of the last words we can apply to him. There is no reason to delay on the quality of palestinian village life, since a certain crudeness was truthfully commonplace in palestinian villages. Such things as primitive and crowded housing (or frequently no housing), sub-standard nourishment, a working day of twelve hours or more, a total absence of anything we would call amusement or recreation, a wardrobe of a cloak and a tunic, constant harassment by one's betters, day to day subsistence on the margin of destitution: these were the life of the villager, and the villager would not count them among his sufferings. Here Jesus seemed to fare no better and no worse than his class. But it seems legitimate to conclude that he was also familiar with the few simple pleasures which belonged to the villager, and that he appreciated them. The villager is both clannish and gregarious; he enjoys the company of his own, and in the almost total lack of privacy in the village it is better that he should enjoy it. Nothing in the gospels suggests that Jesus did not enjoy his human associations; at least nothing indicates that he was ever thought withdrawn. The many illustrations drawn both from the palestinian landscape and from the life of the palestinian villager show again that Jesus knew this life and that he appreciated it. In these illustrations, both in and out of the parables, he spoke to the people he knew about the things they both knew. In the traditions of ancient near-eastern wisdom, the wise man was he who could draw a profound lesson from familiar sights and objects. All these things suggest that Jesus was thoroughly integrated with the world in which he lived, and that he enjoyed life up to its full capacity.

Within this village life, however, Jesus was an exceptional figure. This we easily conclude. It was not merely that he was a rabbi - at least that was the term which best identified him; this caused no concern except that he taught without having been a disciple. But we are puzzled that the villagers did not seem to grasp the fact that

he was exceptional. This, apparently, was grasped only by those who became his dedicated enemies. His exceptional mission created problems, and several times his words refer to this inevitable result of his mission.[1] They are the problems in human relations created by one who departs from conformity, who refuses to accept the conventions and acts to change them. We have already mentioned that it is no pleasure to be the object of hatred. No one can enjoy this except one who has achieved a kind of congealed self-righteousness. The self-righteous man can enjoy being hated because he can return it with such a good conscience. Self-righteous is not a word which can be applied to Jesus. That he was indifferent to hatred is an illegitimate assumption. That he was unfeeling at the knowledge that he was the object of a campaign of calumny is impossible unless people meant nothing to him. The worst construction was put upon his words and actions. The gospels describe a vigilant espionage and an unremitting whispering campaign which effectively tore down most of what he built.

At the risk of knocking off some plaster, it must be noticed that Jesus responded to this hostility with feeling; and this is a sure sign that it penetrated.[2] The exchanges between Jesus and hostile groups are not conducted on a high level of politeness; we are, as we have noticed, in the villages of Palestine, and in these villages insults are not veiled. 'Whited sepulchres' and 'brood of vipers' are somewhat stylized in the english bible, but they are not flattering, and they certainly do not meet the standards of etiquette of parliamentary debate. They betray the fact that the person who uses them has been hurt, which is more or less the point we are trying to make. Again the reaction of Jesus is normal.

The relations of Jesus with his disciples furnish another insight into the pains which arose from the mission of Jesus. Most modern commentators on the gospels believe that the galilean ministry of Jesus, which seems to have occupied the greater part of his public life, issued in no large and deep penetration into the popular mind. Measured in terms of numbers of adherents gained, the mission was a failure. The point may be argued, but it is not necessary for our purpose to discuss it. If we turn our attention to the effect of the words of Jesus on that group which was closest to him, which he had chosen as his disciples, which had more opportunity to grasp his

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[1] Mt 10, 34–36; Lk 12, 51–53.

[2] Mt 12, 1–4, 34; 15, 1–20; 23, 1–39; Mk 2, 23–3, 6; 7, 1–23; Lk 6, 1–11; 11, 37–52.

message than anyone else, the picture of a large band of understanding and devoted followers is difficult to maintain. If such a large band existed, then his chosen group must have come from that element among his listeners which had understood him least. The dullness of the disciples is quite clear in Mark, so clear that both Matthew and Luke have softened it somewhat. There can be no doubt that the picture of Mark is more original, for Matthew and Luke have preserved many of the sayings and conversations in which the dullness of the disciples is manifest.

Here, as in the disputes with the pharisees, we see that Jesus responded to the situation with feeling.[1] The disciples are called slow-witted, stupid and unbelieving, and on one classic occasion their leading personality is said to be on the side of the devil and not of God.[2] In anyone else such language would be an expression of impatience. Let us at least say that Jesus knew the movement which grips one who has spent much time and labour on something which he believes is important, only to have it ignored or frustrated by simple mindlessness. This again is no pleasure; indeed, it is one of life's keener disappointments, and in some instances it can reach almost tragic dimensions. If Jesus was above such movements of feeling, the gospels do not suggest it. His reaction to the disciples is vigorous, scarcely less vigorous than his reaction to the pharisees. After all, he had reason to expect more from the disciples; and we all know that those who are closest to us can hurt us more than those who are remote.

We have remarked above that the candid expression of emotion is characteristic of the simple culture; the more refined culture believes that public or even private display of strong emotion should be restrained. This restraint seems to the simple peasant to be not restraint but insensibility. Because the gospels arise from a simple culture, neither Jesus nor any one else is often said to manifest emotion; the listeners could assume that emotion was shown. Rarely is Jesus said to weep, never is he said to laugh, rarely is a word used which suggests a movement of anger.[3] The most candid passage under this heading is the Gethsemane narrative. Jesus is never described in terms which suggest that he was unfeeling or unresponsive. No doubt we are correct in attributing to him a fine emotional balance which never permitted his emotions to go out of control; but we are

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[1] Mt 15, 15; 16, 5–11; 17, 20; Mk 7, 18; 8, 14–21.
[2] Mt 16, 23; Mk 8, 33.
[3] Mk 3, 5.

much less surely correct in thinking that his behaviour exhibited what we consider emotional balance and control. If he was an authentic villager – and nothing indicates that he was not – when he felt pain it could be easily discerned.

Here also we may appear to be reducing the sufferings of Jesus to the commonplace; and again in a sense we are. When we talk about these problems in personal relations, we are talking about a fact of common experience; and the unique quality of the person and mission of Jesus does not make the problem any less common. Such personal problems can range from minor irritations to motives for murder. They form a major portion of our lives. It is rare that we are exposed to great danger or to intense pain; what passes for suffering in our lives is not so intense that we live in a constant emotional crisis. At the same time, we rarely know moments of complete emotional repose. This is exactly the picture of Jesus which the gospels give us. The picture, as we have said, is not of a man who feels no pain, who is so far above pain that he does not deign to notice it, but of a man who, however keenly he feels it, does not allow it to affect his decisions and his course of action. And, as we observed in speaking of the passion, we seem reluctant to attribute this to the power of will. We are ready to grant the will-power of Jesus, but we have our doubts about the power of his emotions.

In all of this there appears no cult of pain and suffering for their own sake. Jesus assures his disciples that they will experience pain by following him.[1] To take up the cross was a figure of speech which had a quite different impact in the first century from the impact it has in the twentieth, when a 'cross' may be anything from an incurable cancer to rain on a picnic. Jesus does not suggest that his disciples should seek pain; he rather makes it clear that if they remain disciples they will not have to seek it, it will seek them. He nowhere demands that they should submit to pain with more restraint than he showed himself. They need not make themselves unfeeling. What they must not do is let suffering divert them from their commitments. Suffering is a temptation just as pleasure is a temptation; and it is a question whether deliberately cultivated suffering is any less a a temptation than deliberately cultivated pleasure. It is not impossible that the disciple might choose a deliberately cultivated tolerable pain in preference to the incalculable pain which is risked by the full commitment of discipleship.

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[1] Mt 10, 17–39; Mk 13, 9–13; Lk 21, 12–17.

A consideration of the attitude of Jesus towards his own suffering would be incomplete without some reference to his attitude towards the suffering of others. Here brevity is in order, for no one has ever doubted the compassion of Jesus for his fellow men. We may not always realize how deeply this compassion was rooted in a sharing of the common unglamorous suffering of mankind, and it has been our purpose to emphasize this point. Jesus has no quick cure for suffering, and he does not promise a world in which there will be no suffering; nothing but the coming of the reign of God will bring this to pass. Nor does he present any rationalization of suffering; after the gospel, as before, suffering is still one of the great irrational factors in human life. Jesus shows how one can live with it, not how one can think it out of existence. Indeed he shows more, for it is by this very human condition that man, incorporated in Christ, will rise to a new life. All of these are rather obvious theological statements; but they do not change the fact that Jesus showed compassion. We have no record of his saying to anyone in pain, 'But it is so good for you'.

We turn to the parables, which show so much awareness of the importance of the little things in life. We see the anguish of a woman so poor that she must sweep the whole house to find a lost coin.[1] We share the weariness of the shepherd who finds at the end of the day that his count shows one missing sheep.[2] We learn of the bewildered desperation of the husbandman who sees that his wheat crop turns out to be mostly weeds.[3] We have the shocking contrast of the starving beggar dying at the door of a man who eats to his heart's content.[4] We are told of the man who lies robbed and bleeding in the ditch, and sees those who could help him pass on their way.[5] We hear of the sheer terror of the man who is hopelessly in debt with no way out.[6] We have a vivid picture of men whose livelihood is the wage of the day, standing in the market place from dawn through most of the afternoon, and there is no work for them.[7] These are not the human tragedies of which great literature is made. But they are the stuff of life, the life which Jesus knew and could describe with feeling which is apparent in the somewhat sober prose of the gospels.

The compassion of Jesus is luminously evident in the miracle stories. These are almost without exception accounts of how Jesus dealt with individual existing problems of suffering. The gospels here present him as the person in whom the reign of God enters the world

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[1] Lk 15, 8–9. [2] Mt 18, 12–13; Lk 15, 3–6. [3] Mt 13, 24–30.
[4] Lk 16, 19–22. [5] Lk 10, 30–31. [6] Mt 18, 23–30. [7] Mt 20, 1–6.

and moves against the powers of sin and death. Suffering belongs to the reign of sin and death, and suffering cannot be attacked unless its roots are attacked. When Jesus is asked to cure a paralytic he first forgives sins; the theological implications are apparent, and no explanation is necessary.[1] Several times also he expresses simple human compassion for a fellow human being who is in pain. He is indignant at the pharisees who believe that a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years can wait one more day for a cure until the Sabbath rest is ended.[2] The anger of Jesus at this point is most revealing, for if the question is weighed in the scale of absolutes the complaint of the pharisees is quite reasonable. The Sabbath is important, and one day does not seem to add much to eighteen years. Yet it is the sheer reasonableness of the pharisaic position which angers Jesus. This is to put things before persons, to treat human suffering as a calculable factor – in short, to use it. When people are suffering, there is no reasonable cause for delay which can be urged.

The same theme appears in stories of the disputes of Jesus with the pharisees concerning the Sabbath observance. He allows the Sabbath to interfere with no human need, even if the need be small. When the disciples nibbled at the raw grain in the fields, there is no doubt they were hungry; modern civilized man rarely if ever experiences the perpetual hunger of the poor. But they were not, in the terms of their own life, starving; nevertheless, the pettiness of the pharisiaic observance again arouses the anger of Jesus. Such an attitude shows more interest in the welfare of draught animals than in the welfare of people.[3]

Nothing drew more severe words from Jesus, words in which anger is evident, than words and actions which bring suffering to others.[4] Scarcely less severity is shown to indifference to human suffering which one has not actively caused; we are reminded of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, in which the rich man is damned for literally doing nothing. Perhaps this particular species of moral fault should be more prominently listed in our catalogues of vices. The great test recounted in Matthew is entirely concerned with what one has done or failed to do to alleviate the suffering of others.[5] The more obvious and vicious crimes against the human person do not appear in this

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[1] Mt 9, 2–7; Mk 2, 1–12; Lk 5, 17–26.
[2] Lk 13, 10–17.
[3] Mt 12, 1–8; Mk 2, 23–27; Lk 6, 1–5.
[4] Mt 18, 32–34; 23, 4.
[5] Mt 25, 31–46.

list; after all, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and it could be presumed that they had learned some basic lessons which were taught in judaism. But they had not learned what this passage tells them, that if they have committed no crime against their neighbour, it is still not enough. The failure here is simply the failure to take action against suffering when one encounters it; and this lesson can still be proclaimed in the Church.

Let us sum up if we can these scattered reflections. Our emphasis has been less on the great and the tragic sufferings in the life of Jesus and more on the commonplace in his sufferings. It is in the commonplace rather than in the great and tragic that we are more aware of his community with us. In his sufferings we discern the gospel theme that suffering is a part of the reign of sin and death; it is evil, not good, and the heart of the mystery of our redemption is that we are saved through something which is involved with sin and death. The gospel does not require us to praise suffering or to affirm that it has a goodness which it does not have. Suffering is a part of the human condition, that condition which in biblical language is called a curse.

We observe that Jesus was neither unusually sensitive to suffering nor unusually insensitive, as far as we can deduce from the gospels. We observe that the christian attitude does not require an unfeeling response to suffering. Jesus responded emotionally not only to the great and tragic suffering of his passion, but also to the lesser pains of life. We have paid particular attention to this where the pains are the result either of the malice or of the thoughtlessness of others; for do not our own sufferings come mostly from these? And in the last analysis, we suffer far more from the thoughtlessness of others than we do from their malice. In both instances we see that Jesus let people know what they were doing, and let them know that he did not like it. I am not sure that calm acceptance is altogether the apt phrase to describe this attitude. One may, and no doubt will, distinguish his response to merely personal suffering and to the suffering involved in his mission; but to others this distinction will be meaningless.

Yet this is the same Jesus who tells us that the greatest christian act is the love of one's enemies; and unless his life was altogether inconsistent, we must believe that this reaction to hostility and stupidity was not inconsistent with love. We often fear that such a reaction is inconsistent with love; yet is it love to permit people to inflict pain on others? One might argue that the gospels make very little

difference between inflicting pain and permitting its infliction. We have observed that it is in this area of conduct that Jesus speaks with greatest severity. Whatever be one's attitude towards one's suffering, one is never free, it seems, to be indifferent to the suffering of others. Jesus does not promise that we can create a world free of suffering, but he does seem to expect that we shall deal with it when we meet it as if we could. The christian's response to the suffering of others is scarcely more tolerant than his response to sin.

The christian can do something with suffering which he cannot do with sin, and that is to take it from others upon himself. This is what we believe that Jesus himself did, and we believe that he empowered us to do it. In fact he offers no other solution to the problem of suffering in the world. Christians may ask both the Church and themselves how much this power has been exercised in the past and how much it is exercised in the present. One knows that most schemes for a better life and a better world are proposed with little attention given to vicarious suffering. They proceed as if man's suffering had no connection with man's sin, as if we could move against suffering without getting as deeply involved in it as Jesus was; and for that reason one has reservations about their success. When the gospels are read closely and thoughtfully on this question, they appear to be the most practical documents we possess.