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The Creation of Woman: John Paul II and Emmanuel Levinas

SUMMARY. The story of Creation of the woman in the Bible is controversial subject throughout the centuries. The history of philosophy and theology shows the development of different doctrines and teachings about this subject. In the teaching of saint pope John Paul II the very fundament of women's dignity is actualized in the XX century. Parallel with Christian view, some aspects of Jewish approach by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas will be analyzed. The theology of the Creation proposes some answers to feminism discussions and problems.

KEYWORDS: Women, Creation, John Paul II, Emmanuel Levinas.

Introduction

What is the beginning of a human being? What is the beginning of humanity? Where is the beginning of man and woman? What is humanity?¹ People have always searched for answers to these questions.

Does the story of Creation provide an answer, or maybe these questions appear when the divine Creation is forgotten? Maybe they appear when we confront ourselves with this unusual narrative?

Probably it is not so simple to read, listen and comprehend this ancient story for people today since we have our own ideas and opinions about this subject. It seems that we know the events better, as if we were present there. In truth we believe that we have "invented, fulfilled and managed" it all ourselves. However we sometimes do not understand why we can't handle it. Indeed the story of Creation can provoke very different reactions in us. It might be a smile, indignation, anger, incomprehension,

¹ Cf. Louis Fèvre, *Penser avec Levinas* (Lyon: Chronique Sociale, 2006), 127.

resignation. This demonstrates to us that the people today can't accept it literally or maybe they can't accept it at all.

Today we shall deal with two personalities who provide us with authentic and objective reading of the ancient narrative. Following the theme of the conference and trying to put some limits to the broad subject of Creation, we shall focus on Revelation of Creation of woman and its possible interpretations.

Our goal is to get a better knowledge of the commentaries about the Creation of woman and the theology of body by the holy pope John Paul II as well as philosophical meditations about the biblical version of Creation of woman, about the special place of woman in the story of Creation by the philosopher Emanuel Levinas.

We shall try to compare the texts, quotations and conclusions of the pope and the philosopher. Both of them were inspired by phenomenology. This common background provides similarity in their style and method of thinking. Emanuel Levinas was a student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, but Karol Wojtyła was a student of Roman Ingarden.² Although the broad horizon of his thinking can't be reduced to classification of religion, John Paul II represents Catholicism and Christianity. He is open to other religions as we can see from his initiative to organize meetings and prayers with representatives of different religious traditions³.

Emanuel Levinas represents Judaism, however the experts have pointed out that his philosophical style differs when he gives the commentary to Talmud or writes about Judaism. In relation to the texts of Talmud Levinas himself says that he interprets them not as rabbi or talmudist, but as philosopher: "Very conditional (relative) Talmudist"⁴. He always pays great respect and shows humility towards the specialists of Talmud who are listening to him. His aim is not to enter the field of Theology, but to discover the philosophical perspective to the texts of Talmud.

1. Creation of woman in the teaching of pope saint John Paul II

In this part we shall focus on the selected texts in which John Paul II deals with the question of Creation of woman. One can but admire the rich heritage of texts left to us by the holy pope! Encyclicals, homilies, speeches, exhortations, books, poetry... He has written about various subjects and his heritage has been the subject of detailed research. For example, a voluminous work has been devoted to "theology of the body"

² About the common approach and about the meetings in Castel Gandolfo, cf. Salomon Malka, *Levinas: la vie et la trace* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 228–230.

³ Cf. Address of John Paul II to the representatives of the christian churches and ecclesial communities and of the world religions. Basilica of Saint Francis, 27 October 1986, accessed October 31, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi-final.html.

⁴ "J'ai une très grande responsabilité à l'égard de ce texte devant une assemblée où il y a tant de talmudistes authentiques [...]", cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977), 126.

of John Paul II, which we shall use in our research. The theme of Creation of woman is considered also in apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, in his catechesis and several other works.

He writes:

How very significant is the dissatisfaction which marks man's life in Eden as long as his sole point of reference is the world of plants and animals (cf. Gen 2:20). Only the appearance of the woman, a being who is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones (cf. Gen 2:23), and in whom the spirit of God the Creator is also alive, can satisfy the need for interpersonal dialogue, so vital for human existence. In one's neighbour, whether man or woman, there is a reflection of God himself, the definitive goal and fulfilment of every person.⁵

When God creates Eve the situation is different – she does not come into the world of otherness. Her friend and comrade, who is alike, is waiting for her. However Adam has no idea of her origin. The Creation of Eve is also related to the primordial loneliness of Adam as well as his deep sleep, his rib which is used for the Creation of Eve.

No man has experienced such loneliness as Adam.⁶ Even a spaceman who is lost in the space has memories about his childhood, family, friends and colleagues. Adam does not have this experience. He even does not know that there is somebody in this world similar to him. Somebody whom he can call – other. Human being.

Saint John Paul II describes the meaning of the word *tardēmāh*.⁷ In Hebrew it means “deep sleep”. It substantiates the condition that a man has no conscious participation in the Creation of woman⁸. In the Greek translation of LXX the word *ekstasis* [ecstasy] is used, which literally means “going out of oneself”. It is interesting that this word is used in the phenomenology of religion describing the mystical experience – ecstasy – which is related to the psychological feeling of delight. It is also used in philosophy, especially in phenomenology to describe various states of consciousness, particularly state of transcending or moving beyond the consciousness. To be out of oneself in this context will mean to be beyond man, in a way – to be a woman:

“Not only can we infer that Adam was “ecstatic” upon discovering the women, but ecstasy literally means “to be outside oneself”. And what is it that comes “outside” of the man? Woman. To go “outside oneself” also seems to connote the “sincere gift of oneself.””⁹

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 35, accessed October 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

⁶ Cf. Yves Semen, *La sexualité selon Jean-Paul II* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2004), 87.

⁷ In English: *torpor*.

⁸ Cf. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Man and Woman He Created Them"* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007), 104.

⁹ Cf. West, 104–105.

Can I ask to oneself, in the deepest compassion – what the woman feels, how she feels. It is an invitation to find the difference and otherness.

The inability to experience ecstasy can mean also some other aspects: it can point to the inability love the other person, communicate and understand the other. Frequently we remain isolated: we do not go out or into ecstasy not willing to leave the zone of our comfort and prejudices. We hesitate to enter the field or territory of joy and delight and so remain on the side of safety and precaution, protected and not taking the risk. Thus we do not gain many divine gifts not been able to die to ourselves.¹⁰

The relation between man and woman can be compared to dying to oneself. In order to open towards the otherness and difference we have to accept that we are limited. It is not possible to become a copy of the other person, even if we passionately desire to imitate them, to feel, speak, think and act exactly like they. By that God wants to reveal the unique value of each person to us!

What kind of “assistance” does Adam find in the woman? She is created from the rib – flesh. Does it mean that this is a more subtle, different matter? And by that can we ask again about the sameness and otherness, human nature – its uniformity and essential mutual similarity?¹¹

John Paul II pays our attention to the difference of psychophysical structure of man and woman. This difference involves mutual supplementation¹², unity of persons which we contemplate in the Holy Trinity, thus approaching *comunio personarum* – communication of persons in marriage and Covenant where the highest level is union, fusion – contemplating God face to face (*visio beatifica*).¹³

2. Emmanuel Levinas’ “And God created woman”

Where is the birthplace of femininity? Which is the moment when it becomes clear that the other half has to be added – something that is missing in masculinity, something that reveals itself in Creation as fullness of the divine image – to complete the wholeness.

Paradoxically Levinas goes beyond the habitual borderline of masculinity and femininity by showing the place of tenderness, delicacy and caress in masculinity. Do

¹⁰ Cf. John 12:24.

¹¹ Cf. John Paul II, “Man Is Created in the Image of God”. General Audience, Wednesday, 9 April 1986, accessed October 31, 2020, <http://www.totus2us.com/teaching/jpii-catechesis-on-god-the-father/man-is-created-in-the-image-of-god/>. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7, accessed October, 31, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

¹² Cf. intersubjectivity in phenomenology by E. Husserl vs. marriage – two become one body.

¹³ Cf. John Paul II, *Man is a Subject of Knowledge and Freedom*, General Audience, Wednesday, 23 April 1986, accessed October 31, 2020, <http://www.totus2us.com/teaching/jpii-catechesis-on-god-the-father/man-is-a-subject-of-knowledge-and-freedom/>.

the courage, strength and wisdom appear in the arsenal of tropes and attributes of the notion of the feminine? They do – if not directly, literally or strikingly then by all means as analogy or necessity.¹⁴

The fact or version of Creation of woman in Revelation – only few sentences in the Bible – can be reduced to three basic elements: woman is created separately; she is created after Adam or the first man; she is created from his side or “rib”. The Revelation reminds us that Adam did not find suitable helper which was similar to him. During the Creation of woman he is in the state of peculiar sleep, but after the Creation of woman he praises God for the wonderful gift by which he is saved from the primordial loneliness.

For Levinas, the feminine enters from philosophical perspective, *post factum*, from different *phenomena*, from deep introspection into consciousness. It is not necessarily related to the story of Creation: we can understand the context – the neglecting and even mocking attitude towards the content of the narrative of Creation of his time. However the biblical aspect is present in a muted way, between the lines, so that everybody can understand it. Therefore the whole consideration and deduction of femininity in the texts by Levinas is like a conclusion or summary of the order of Creation. It gains sense and justification in the narrative of Creation.

Analysing the specific philosophical terminology of Levinas the scholars and experts come to the conclusion:

Levinas’ characterization of the beloved as feminine marks an exception to the dominant tendency in the philosophical tradition to speak exclusively of men. This is often done without acknowledging the differences between the sexes, which are sometimes construed as secondary to the primal identity of the human, notwithstanding that that identity has invariably been understood in male terms. [...] In defence of Levinas, it should be pointed out that he also describes women in extremely positive terms as “master superiorly intelligent, so often dominating men in the masculine civilization she has entered” (TI 264). Indeed, at times Levinas seems to suggest that what he is calling “femininity” and “masculinity” cannot be reduced to actual differences between the sexes, but emerge rather as “way to be” for both the sexes [...].¹⁵

However this ambiguity has to be seen in its dynamics, in the context of the progress of the development of philosophy. The dignity of woman in the society and in different institutions is gradually consolidating, and the common is gradually becoming self-evident. The innovativeness of John Paul II is a testimony to it. Do the various

¹⁴ Cf. Poirié, *Op. cit.*, 20–21.

¹⁵ Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, *On Levinas* (Belmont (US): Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 43–44. The abbreviation TI = “Totalité et infini”. Atterton/Calarco says: “Of course, this leaves unanswered the question why Levinas should use the name “feminine” to refer to one group of attributes that is supposedly shared by both sexes.” (Ibid., 44).

aspects of the feminine allow us to see the link with the concept of Creation of woman as it is formulated in the biblical genre? As we have seen already Levinas peculiar notion of the “femininity” has several essential features. Along with the statement by Atterton several aspects should be mentioned:

Habitation provides the condition for the subject to relate to the outside world in a different manner. There is a feminine element in the home. Levinas says, although he explains that what's at stake here is not the empirical presence of a woman in every house. The feminine is welcoming the subject and, as Levinas' analyses show, the welcoming Other makes it possible for the subject to participate in the ethical.¹⁶

Levinas – philosopher or Talmudist?

Philosophy does not deal with the problem of Creation of woman in the same manner as Theology which interprets the facts, texts and historical versions of Revelation offered in the Bible. However the question about the origin of man is also philosophical. It does not lose its mystery even when more and more distant stages of human appearance in the world are discovered.

Whereas in the readings of Talmud Levinas reminds that he is not traditional or classical interpreter or commentator of Talmud. Even if there are such elements in his reading, he approaches the text of Talmud as philosopher, as thinker, who is free and does not remain in the broad ocean of Talmud.¹⁷ A great deal of Levinas texts about woman and femininity do not contain any reference to biblical story about the origin. Feminism “jumps” into his views without necessity to support it with the narrative of Creation or to use this story as foundation for his conception of woman. Probably it is a matter of broader research – how does Levinas understanding of feminism, femininity and woman is rooted not only in phenomenology, but also in the attentive reading of Bible and Talmud. May be we shall find some remarks in the texts we have chosen from Levinas and let us keep this broader perspective for the further research the feminine.

Levinas' books devoted to the readings of Talmud are published by publishing house *Les Éditions de Minuit*. The second collection (out of five) of the readings of Talmud texts – *From Sacred to Holy* – reminds about an episode in colloquium where fr. Stanislas Breton during his lecture asked to borrow Old Testament for quoting, but

¹⁶ Ieva Lapinska, “Relationship with the Other as Grounds for Value System”, in *Identitāte un citādība*, (Rīga: LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts, 2012), 221. Lapinska refers to Katz, C. E. See also the voluminous edition of researches in Levinas especially about the feminine: Claire Katz and Lara Trout (eds), *Emmanuel Levinas* (London / New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁷ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2005) 10 and 12.

Levinas refused to give it saying that: “It is a sacred text!”. He compares the relation between the sacred and holy with relation between totalitarianism and closeness or proximity. Sincerity, friendship, love and divine presence is related to holiness. Sacred is linked to reverence, discipline, unconditional obedience and order. Sacred text infuses with “fear and trembling”. However if this text becomes holy it invites to be in dialog with the Holy. We can ask ourselves – shall this text be refused to us if we do not take it in our hands with particular piety, reverence and dignity. We can say the same about any text, so that we do not lose its content, understanding and essence.

In his book *From Sacred to Holy* the title of the fourth reading is “And God created woman...”. First Levinas offers a fragment from Talmud which he is going to comment on.¹⁸ In the process of reading the text of Talmud we are surprised about the unusual links which bind the habitual story of Creation of woman with surprisingly unusual quotations from the Holy Scriptures. In a literal translation “You enfold me from behind and before, and lay your hand upon me”¹⁹. The root of the Hebrew word, which in English is translated as “created”, appears to be “constructed” or “erected”. The construction of the sentence here is inverted in comparison with translation. It is not something unusual in Semitic way of expression and “to construct” in this context means “to arrange”, “organize”. Therefore we can say that woman is “arranged” or “organized”.

The commentators of Talmud explain: “From behind – the last created, from before – the first one to punish.”²⁰ This reminds the imperative of responsibility so characteristic to Levinas for which so many arguments can be taken from the ethical exactingness of Talmud.

One of the most surprising statements by Levinas in his analysis of the story of Creation: “The humanity – it is not freedom. The humanity – it is Obedience.”²¹ Indeed, he writes “Obedience” with a capital letter to stress the peculiar, deep and spiritual meaning of obedience. However this statement is equally related to man and woman.

Levinas pays attention to the differences of translations: he prefers the rabbinical translation, where next to the word “side” appear other meanings – “face” and “tale”. Rabbis are discussing where was the “side”. Levinas points out that woman was created from the human unlike Adam, who was created from the “dust”. It is by no means secondary or second-hand, but a genuine act of Creation. It is complete equality between the masculine and feminine. The role of woman is house, home, shelter. Man cannot survive without it.²² Creation makes him responsible.²³ It is interesting that Levinas in

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977), 122–126. Cf. *Berakhot* 61a.

¹⁹ Ps 139:5: “Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me.” Cf. Hebrew Interlinear Bible, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/OTpdf/psa139.pdf>.

²⁰ Cf. also Lev 10:12.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, 130.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, 134–135.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136.

his interpretation of Talmud is using the notion “original sin”²⁴ without any hesitation. Obviously in the context of European and Western culture this notion has become self-evident.

3. Comparison

In the third part of investigation our task is to compare the commentaries and textual analysis of both thinkers so that we can conclude – what is common and what is different for both of them. No doubt that a comparison of thinkers in some aspects is an exciting activity and sometimes in this process the comparison becomes an end in itself. However the comparative method has several goals which derive from the structure of the method. To compare means to estimate, decide which is better and which is worse; which is more and which is less correct. In this case however we should restrain ourselves from such evaluations and find, discover the novelty of each thinker which he offers to our conception about the Creation of woman.

The different

In the beginning we can indeed conclude that their approach is different. Their goals are different – as fulfilment of the vocation. However in the search of truth the thinkers want one and the same – to discover the truth and to announce it to their contemporaries.

Holy pope John Paul II fulfils this task by strengthening his brothers of faith, inviting all people to Christ and revealing the unusual and at the same time true perspective of the habitual things.

Levinas as philosopher and interpreter of Talmud, for the contemporary reader – participant of colloquium – in the particular sense which was described earlier – discovers the meaning of the ancient texts for today. The problems he offers to solve are immediately proposed for discussion in the colloquiums and we can get acquainted with them in several publications.²⁵

What was the aim of Levinas? Animation of Talmud for those who has no other way to get acquainted with this complicated and seemingly chaotic text? To show to the Jews, his brothers in faith that it is also possible to perceive well known things and texts in a different, more uncommon, untraditional and surprising perspective? The

²⁴ Ibid., 138.

²⁵ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 9, n. 1. It can be one of the directions of future research – to find out what the listeners and the experts of Talmud think and show their reaction to Levinas approach: how they define their surprise and different reactions, how they accept or decline explanation of the Talmud, and what are their arguments.

studies of Talmud particularly outline the openness to the questions, the denial of numbness and static approach, the “dialectical” elusiveness of the truth. Does the apophatic theology of Dionysius Areopagite not remind us about the same things? God always differs from the ways we try to define him. Therefore the whole truth which the inspired author of the narrative about the Creation of woman wanted to express in this text will remain a mystery to us, reminding about the limits of our knowledge. Nevertheless the fact that we can see and discover makes us to admire the wisdom of the Creator.

John Paul II and Levinas are in agreement that confronting oneself with the inspired text as a treasure given to the mankind, we have to accept it as a gift with gratitude and piety. However we can't escape noticing the difference in the choice of the basic material, sources of both authors. The text of the Old Testament is more complicated and unapproachable than it can seem from the first glance. The subtle details, which only exegetes can notice, supplement the “infinity” of contexts of Talmud interpretations. Therefore the directions of interpretations already show the difference – both in positive and negative sense – between the fields of thought where each of these thinkers dwell. The commentaries of John Paul II are mostly related to the theology of body and vocation of woman. Levinas starting with different aspects of equality of the hierarchy and gender arrives at pointing out the meaning of responsibility so characteristic to him and reminder about the ethical vigilance.

The Common

The phenomenological approach unites both authors. Although seemingly different, however in their conclusions related to the humanity and ethical values, both authors are in agreement. God in his Creation of man and woman according to His image and likeness has inserted in us the thirst for the divine perfection which in our limited humanity always inspires to strive to divine ideals, to noble and high goals, to the perfection of our persons. Therefore we supplement one another in our way to the divine.²⁶

²⁶ Cf. *Theosis* – the doctrine of the Eastern Church Fathers.

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MOTERS SUKŪRIMAS: JONAS PAULIUS II IR EMMANUELIS LEVINAS

S a n t r a u k a

Biblijos pasakojimas apie moters sukūrimą amžiams bēgant traktuotas priēštingai. Filosofijos ir teologijos istorijoje atsispindi skirtingų doktrinų ir mokymų apie jį raida. Šventojo popiežiaus Jono Pauliaus II mokyme šis pasakojimas itin svarbus, grindžiant moters orumą. Šiame straipsnyje, be krikščioniškojo požiūrio, analizuojami ir kai kurie žydiškojo požiūrio aspektai, išdėstyti filosofo Emmanuelio Levino veikaluose. Kūrimo teologija siūlo kai kuriuos atsakymus į feminizmo diskusijas ir keliamas problemas.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: moterys, kūrimas, Jonas Paulius II, Emmanuel Levinas.

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