

Suffering: A Thelemic Perspective

An examination of Suffering in the Book of the Law and its commentaries.

by
Greg Wotton

Nathan Colborne
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"Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law."

Introduction

What is Thelema

The religion we call Thelema was founded in 1904 with the receiving of *The Book of the Law* by the magician/prophet/poet Aleister Crowley. This book is said to have been dictated by a preternatural being called Awaiss, the minister of Hoor-Paar-Kraat. The recipient of this book, Aleister Crowley, then spent most of the rest of his life studying the text which he had received over three days of ritual and trance. This book, and its various commentaries and secondary texts, form the basis of the Thelemic faith which is continually growing today.

Like any religion that is over 100 years old, it has gone through many changes. The four major embodiments of Thelema today are the orders of the O.:T :.O :. (Ordo Templi Orientis), the Temple of Thelema and the A :.A :. (Astrum Argentum) as well as the Gnostic Catholic Church. Each approaches the Law in a different way and each, of course, has slightly different interpretations of what it means to follow these laws.

The primary basis of the religion is the "Law of Thelema" which states "Do what thou Wilt shall be the whole of the Law. — Love is the Law, Love under Will". Thelema (*qelhma*.) itself is a Greek word for Will and the religion makes clear distinctions between the personal will and the True Will. Stating that all people are manifest for a particular purpose, a divine Will dictated before birth. One must discover this Will and follow it unerringly, hence the Book states "Thou hast no right but to do thy Will" (I:42).

Although the book itself is only a few pages in print there have been thousands of pages written in commentary. The primary commentary is *The Law is for All* which was compiled several years after the delivery of the text (c. 1920) at the Abbey of Thelema in Sicily. Later texts, including *Liber Aleph* and the various “holy books” expanded on what it meant to follow the Law of Thelema and to be a Thelemite. Most of these texts rely heavily on mystic symbolism and it is a prerequisite that any student of Thelema have a basic education in Western Occultism. Crowley, having been an initiate of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was already very familiar with Qabalah and Hermeticism and used these as a basis for further examination of the Book which he received.¹

The Three Books

The Book of the Law was delivered over three days, each session taking about an hour. During each day there was a manifestation of a different deity and these define the three chapters or “books”. The Book calls itself the “threefold book of law” (I:35). The first deity is the Goddess Nuit who represents the divine Feminine and is associated, through the nature of the Book, with the Sephiroth of Binah the third sphere on the Qabalistic Tree of Life.² Binah is the receptive, feminine, the ultimate mother and lover. This sphere is often associated with the Stella Maris and the Hebrew God-Name is Elohim, the divine Creatrix of *Genesis* 1:1.

The second chapter is dictated by the divine father who is represented by Hadit. Hadit is, in the Qabalistic Tree of Life, connected with Chockmah, the supernal Father, the divine Masculine. This Sephiroth is assigned the Hebrew God-Name which we call the Tetragrammaton.

¹ It is said that study of the Qabalah builds symbol sets in the conscious and subconscious mind creating a kind of equitable language. Therefore the one can communicate with the other through these symbols. In the case of *The Book of the Law* many of the concepts and instructions have a Qabalistic basis, obviously pulling on Crowley's understanding of the subject in order to transmit complex concepts and ideas in a concise manner.

² Each Sephiroth on the Tree has a corresponding Godname, Archtype, Archangel, Angelic Order and even type of manifestation. For a more detailed discussion of the Sephiroth and the Qabalah in general see such texts as *The Mystical Qabalah* by Dion Fortune, *An Introduction to the Study of Qabalah* by W.W. Westcott, and *The Kabbalah Unveiled* trans. by S.L.Magregor-Mathers.

It is the personal name of God written יהוה. This is the father figure and to a certain respect represents the balance of himself and his bride. The two together create the top of the triad of which almost all religions understand as part of the divine.

The third and last chapter is dictated by Ra-Hoor-Kuit or Horus the Younger. The avenger God of Egypt who is assigned to the sphere of the child, the Sephiroth Tiphareth. Of the various names assigned to this sphere perhaps the most important to our purposes is Yeheshua³ This is the same name which some later associated with the Messiah. It is the child of the supernal mother and father.

During the essay certain quotes will be attributed to one God or another. It is because of this dictation by these three Egyptian manifestations of the divine that such references are made.

The Place of Thelema

Thelema is an esoteric religion having its basis in the Western Mysteries. The whole religion makes use of that which has gone before, including Hermeticism, Qabalah, Rosicrucianism and, of course, magick.⁴ It means that the symbols, as given to the mind of the magician, uses the subconscious images as they've been trained. Hence it is that so much of the book is couched in Gematria, Qabalah, Tarot and Egyptian symbolism. Without these tools the Book and the religion as a whole make little sense. Like looking at Quantum Math without ever having studied Physics.⁵

It may seem strange that a religion be based on occult concepts but this was also true of the modern manifestations of neo-paganism and Wicca. Crowley thought of Wicca as “Thelema

³ Yeheshua is the sign of the child, it is only one letter different than the Tetragrammaton and is, in fact, called the Pentagrammaton by some scholars. The difference between the two is apparent when viewed in Hebrew: יהוה versus יהושע.

⁴ Magick is the spelling that Aleister Crowley used to differentiate “The art and science of causing change to occur in conformity to the Will” from vulgar stage tricks.

⁵ It should be noted that the web archive at www.magiciansguild.cjb.net has a number of valuable public domain documents on introductory Qabalah, Tarot, Alchemy and Rosicrucianism.

for the masses” and aided Gerald Gardner in his creation of the modern Wicca tradition through his book *Witchcraft Today*. Both religions are based on the occult principles of the Western Mysteries and it is from them that they gain their symbols, traditions and rituals.

Suffering and Ordeals

Although the term “suffering” occurs but once in the text (I:49) the text continually mentions ordeals and tests. Ordeal is defined by *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* as being “A difficult or painful experience, especially one that severely tests character or endurance”. The same text has this to say concerning suffering: “To feel pain or distress; sustain loss, injury, harm, or punishment.”. It should be a fairly simple extension to allow that ordeals are a form of suffering, perhaps ritualistic or fated, but synonymous enough to assume that the former includes the latter.

Thelema and the Ordeals

If we consider the ordeals a form of ritualistic suffering or even of initiation then we can see that the entire Book is about the transformation of the gross to the subtle, the alchemical dross to gold. It is the ultimate goal of Magick, Alchemy and Rosicrucianism to achieve a level of enlightenment which is dissolution into Godhead. To disappear into the One of the universe. In order to do that we must evolve, we must be initiated, we must be tried. Nuit puts it strongly and poetically when she says:

There is a word to say about the Hierophantic task. Behold! there are three ordeals in one, and it may be given in three ways. The gross must pass through fire; let the fine be tried in intellect, and the lofty chosen ones in the highest. Thus ye have star & star, system & system; let not one know well the other! (I:50)

The Hierophant refers to Key V of the Tarot and represents an enlightened individual or priest. The path to that enlightenment is one of tests and ordeals, of trials and rituals. There is no easy way to the top of the mountain.

But if these ordeals are forms of ritualistic suffering should we not have some clue as to what they are ahead of time? The above quote is the best we have, and that is only one step in the evolution of the Thelemite. I:40 tells us that there are three grades within the word of the Will, III:62-67 tell us that there are four greater ordeals and these are all separate from the Hierophantic task set out above. So what are the ordeals? This question is asked in the first chapter and Nuit answers:

33. Then the priest fell into a deep trance or swoon, & said unto the Queen of Heaven; Write unto us the ordeals; write unto us the rituals; write unto us the law!
34. But she said: the ordeals I write not: the rituals shall be half known and half concealed: the Law is for all.
36. My scribe Ankh-af-na-khonsu ...
38. He must teach; but he may make severe the ordeals.

The Law is for All in the commentary on I:34 we are told that the ordeals have manifested in a variety of ways and most of them appear unique to the individual. They are unlike normal ordeals which can be predicted but rather stem from subconscious need rather than the true wisdom of the physical teacher. Therefore did Nuit not give the ordeals, for they are hidden and each individual must discover them for themselves. They might even say that the Holy Guardian Angel⁶ was directly responsible for the choosing of the ordeals.⁷

Ordeals, in general, are seen as a sort of gateway. If you consider the perceptions of the book as outlined at the end of book three. Ra-Hoor-Khuit says that the book may be strange or even repulsive until one has moved through the various ordeals. III:62-67 state that the book improves it's character from nothing through silver, gold, stones of precious water and finally

⁶ A representation of the "Higher Self". This may be thought of as the Higher Consciousness of Theosophy or the Superconsciousness of Freud.

⁷ Aleister Crowley associated himself with the Prince Priest Ankh-af-na-khonsu and often assumed that he himself would be administering the ordeals. By 1920, and the writing of *The Law is for All* we might expect that he was beginning to question his own role in the ordeals of the students at the abbey. He makes mention of these ordeals be set out subconsciously and that may have been an early step to realizing that he was more catalyst than actual teacher/trainer.

sparks of the intimate fire. Of course it is not the book that changes but the observer to whom the book is manifest from scratch each time it is read.

Conclusions

From what we have seen above there are specific ideas associated with suffering within the Thelemic context. It seems that the ordeals are to be embraced rather than fought against. Each ordeal is an opportunity for growth for who knows when that ordeal will be one of these initiatory processes outlined in their Holy Book?

Thelema is a "Mystery Religion" meaning that most, if not all, people go through some sort of initiation in order to be considered part of the faith. This act of initiation places one in the current which will dictate the ordeals ever after. As we can see in the 0=0 initiation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (refer to Regarie's *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*) one is expected to preserve once they have accepted the mantle of initiate. It is a covenant with the Higher Self that it will arrange the ordeals, the necessary training, and that the candidate, the neophyte, the new initiate, will accept and rise to the challenge.

There is a teaching in the Mystery Religions that a sword cannot be made without the forge fires and the striking of the hammer and anvil. That any person who seeks perfection must, therefore, accept the hardening and shaping process as necessary in order to achieve their goals. As Liber Legis tells us, each ordeal results in a continued advancement of the individual. Each step in the process must be undertaken and endured in order to reach the goal of perfection.

Because of the Egyptian flavour of Thelema it was perhaps inevitable that many of the rituals would be written around the Egyptian pantheon. Of great prominence are the "Signs of LVX" which portray the three poses of "Osiris Slain", "Isis in Mourning" and "Osiris Risen".⁸ The suffering of Isis after the murder of Osiris sets her on a journey by which she learns a great deal.

⁸ These signs can be found in a number of places including *The Equinox* Volume I Number 2 as well as *Magick in Theory and Practice* by Crowley. As a common Thelemic ritual procession, these signs are reproduced often.

The suffering of losing her husband and seeking his body results in her own evolutionary process by which her powers are increased under the tutelage of her uncle Horus the Elder. This story again reflects the Thelemic attitude towards suffering for the result of Isis' quest is the risen God Osiris, a representation of the Sun and thus enlightenment.⁹

The fact that initiation is normally part of one's involvement in Thelema we can also say that all suffering which comes afterwards has been accepted and agreed upon by the individual. If each ordeal is designed to improve the individual, to separate the subtle from the gross, then it is in accordance with the individual's desire to reach perfection. One cannot reach Godhead while one is still impure.

Overall we can see that suffering is neither permanent, nor unnecessary to the Thelemite. They see each ordeal as a step towards a goal of personal perfection. Because suffering is transient it is easier for them to say that Existence is Joy! Each challenge is an opportunity to take another step towards Godhead, towards the embrace of Nuit, towards the realization of Hadit. Suffering is a gift of the higher self to be attacked, wrestled with, and conquered.

"Love is the Law, Love under Will."

⁹ In the Mystery traditions, including Thelema, the sun is the Solar Logos and represents a point in space where the Unknowable God (Ain Soph), Limitless Light pierces into our own universe. Thus the sun is, literally, an archon of God. Since the sun is the single source of life on our planet this is not an insignificant symbol of the Divine.

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I would like to thank Frater V. for making available a collection of unpublished papers concerning the Thelemic Golden Dawn, another modern Thelemic organization. I would also like to thank those who allowed me brief peeks at the unpublished papers of the Temple of Thelema.

¹⁰ *The Equinox* contains collections of writings, articles, essays and even the various "Holy Books" concerning Thelema. It is the official publication of the O.T.O. and saw its first printing in 1909. Although volume III is published as a periodical each issue contains c.250-300 pages. Reprints are available.