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Religious Texts

1. If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book [the Torah] … then the Lord will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions…. Although once you were as numerous as the stars in heaven, you shall be left few in number…. The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone…. The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt … and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer. (Deuteronomy 28:58-68)

2. Therefore says the Lord of Hosts, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes! I will turn my hand against you, I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city…. I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel, he shall blossom like the lily. (Isaiah 1:24-26 and Hosea 14:6-7).

Literary Texts

3. [Dante enters the Inferno]:
“Through me you enter into the city of woes, Through me you enter into eternal pain, Through me you enter the population of loss…. Abandon all hope, you who enter here…."
The sighs, groans and laments at first were so loud Resounding through the starless air, I began to weep: Strange languages, horrible screams, words imbued With rage of despair…. (Inferno 3:1-21)

4. Satan’s Holy Trinity: The Accuser, the Judge & the Executioner—from an engraving by William Blake.

5. [Hester Prynne has been punished by the Puritans of colonial Boston for adultery, and wears a shaming Scarlet Letter], a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill in which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves [so that] … by degrees her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion…. Hatred [for her] by a gradual and quiet process [was] transformed to love…. None so devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked through town…. She came not as a guest [into homes] but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble…. There glimmered the embroidered letter with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick-chamber…. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy, or we may rather say, the world’s heavy hand had so ordained her…. Many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.—Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter.
Suffering in Religion and Literature

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6. He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth…. [but] he was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised and we held him of no account…. He was wounded for our transgressions, he poured himself out to death, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-12).

7. A man awoke from a long sleep, in which he was tied up. He woke numb and cold, inside a carved hole in a rock. Through all the long sleep his body had been full of hurt and it was still full of hurt…. He could move if he wanted … but he had no want. Who would want to come back from the dead? But now something had returned to him, like a returned letter and in that return he lay overcome with nausea…. Slowly, slowly he crept down from the cell of the rock … and he saw his thin legs that had died and pain unknowable … filled him…. To be back! To be back again after all that!… He took the perfumed linen sheet, wrapped it around him as a mantle, and turned away to the wanness of the chill dawn…. [And he thought anew on his former teachings and life]: “I gave more than I took and that also is woe and vanity, the greed of giving…. Now I crave to be alone and leave all things to themselves, … [let] the rich be rich…. Do not run to excess in giving, that is a fly that bites…. I asked them all to serve me with the corpse of their love, and in the end I offered only the corpse of my love, ‘This is my body, take and eat’—my corpse…. If I had kissed Judas with live love, perhaps he would never have kissed me with death. Perhaps he loved me in the flesh…. ” –D. H. Lawrence, The Man Who Died.

8. [Prince Myshkin, who suffers from epilepsy and by his naivété becomes known as “the idiot”, feels the pain of Nastasya Filopovna, who in turn suffers from having been abused as a teenager by her caretaker, Afanasy Totsky.] [Myshkin is] standing before the portrait of Nastasya, gazing at it…. “It’s a wonderful face, but she has passed through terrible suffering, hasn’t she? Her eyes tell one that, those points around the eyes…. [Later, on meeting her in person, he proposes marriage to her, saying] “You want a lot of looking after, Nastasya
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9. From what point of view … can we say that a man is profited by injustice or intemperance or other baseness, which will make him a worse man [who suffers in his baseness]…. What shall he profit if his injustice is undetected and unpunished? He who is undetected only gets worse [and suffers more], whereas he who is detected and punished has the brutal part of his nature silenced and humanized; the gentler element in him is liberated and his whole soul is perfected and ennobled by the acquirement of justice, temperance, and wisdom, more than the body ever is by receiving gifts of beauty, strength and health, in proportion as the soul is more honorable than the body. —Plato, Republic 591

Filoppovna, I will look after you.” [And reflects to a friend,] “To bring peace back to her and make her happy, I would give up my life.” [When questioned whether he really loves her, he responds,] “It makes no difference that I’m going to marry her. That’s nothing, nothing, … I am only just marrying her.” [On which, the narrator comments,] He really seemed to look on his marriage as some insignificant formality, he held his own future so cheap. [Myshkin concludes]: “In her pride, she will never forgive me for my love—and we shall both come to ruin.” [and they do!]
--Dostoevsky, The Idiot.

10. [Achilles reflects on human fate]:
The immortals spun our lives that we, wretched men live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows. There are two jars that stand on the floor of Zeus’ halls and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings. When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man, now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn. When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only he makes a man an outcast—brutal, ravenous hunger drives him down the face of the shining earth, stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men.—The Iliad 24:613-621.

11. Zeus has opened the way of wisdom to mortals, proclaiming as sovereign law:
By suffering comes understanding.
So accrues to the heart, drop by drop, during sleep
The wage of dolorous memory;
And even without willing it, wisdom comes.
From the gods who sit at the celestial helm
Grace comes violently—Aeschylus, Agamemnon 176-183.