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# THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF MEDITATION AND AN EXAMPLE OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHINA

## 默观在《圣经》中的起源 及其在中国天主教会历史上的发展

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### ABSTRACT

This paper consists of two parts. First, it aims to show how the Bible regards meditation and similar prayer practices. The analysis will start with collecting and explaining the primary Hebrew and Greek terms related to meditation (e.g. *הגה* *haga(h)*, ‘to murmur’, ‘to meditate’; *שיח* *siyah*, ‘to speak’, ‘to meditate’) and their use in the Bible. Some Biblical examples of the meditative prayer will also be shown. These analyses and examples will provide a number of features which constituted meditation or were characteristic to it in the Old Testament times and early Christianity. Such features include (but are not limited to) the following characteristics: 1) Meditation was always directed to God; it was a prayerful relationship with God. 2) Meditation often started with, and even consisted of, the reciting of a Biblical text (or some other pious texts) from memory or reading it in an undertone. 3) Meditation was connected with the constant repeating of the same Biblical (or pious) phrase and committing it to memory. In times when possessing a written scroll was a luxury, people depended on their memory much more than nowadays, and frequent repeating was necessary to learn the words of the Bible by heart or not to forget them. Second, the paper presents one of the prevalent prayers in the history of the Catholic Church in China, the Rosary, which contains clear traces of the Biblical teaching about meditation. The paper will conclude with a concise summary of the connection between the Biblical roots of meditative practices and this prayer which forms a part of the spiritual heritage of the Chinese Catholics throughout their history.



In contemporary English, the term “to meditate” is often associated with thinking about something, pondering something. In this way, its meaning does not depart from its Latin etymological root, *meditor*; *meditari* which also denotes the process of reflection. The connection of meditation with thinking is also evident in the Bible, especially in the use of words such as *μελετάω* *meletáo* (‘think about’, ‘meditate upon’) or *διανοέομαι* *dianoéomai* (‘think over’, ‘consider’)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in Sirach 6:37, where both words are used as synonyms.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the terms denoting meditation in the Bible, as well as examples of this practice, reveal other important features. In the Hebrew Bible, there are two prominent words which are used to express the idea of meditating. The first one is *הגה* *haga(h)*: It appears, for instance, in Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2 which encourage reflecting upon the Law of God, or in Psalm 63:7 where the author admits that he thinks about God during his night-watch. The root of this word, however, is not primarily associated with thinking, but with “sound-emitting”: among its 28 occurrences as a verb in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>2</sup> 14 times it has to be rendered into English as a verb associated with the emission of voice or sound, for example, depending on the context, as, “speak”, “tell”, “utter”, “proclaim”, “mutter”, “moan” or even “growl”. Thus, it is not surprising that also in verses where *הגה* *haga(h)* is generally translated as, “to meditate”, its meaning is nevertheless associated primarily with a sound: Holladay explains it in his dictionary as “read[ing] in an undertone” or “ponder[ing] (by talking to ones[el]f)” (Holladay, 2000, en. 1932).

The second word used to denote meditating is *שיח* *siyah*. Its meaning is also connected with a voice emission, and in a number of occurrences, it is rendered as, “tell”, “speak”, “complain” or even “sing”.<sup>3</sup> This root in its verbal form is used in the Hebrew Bible more often (11 times) than *הגה* *haga(h)* (5 times) to express the idea of meditating as a prayer.<sup>4</sup>

The use of words associated with sound emission to express the notion of a mental process appears to be no coincidence: it simply underlines the fact that in ancient Israel pondering something not infrequently began from saying or reading words aloud or muttering/whispering them in a low voice. The frequent repetition of a phrase or two containing the revealed truth enabled an individual to commit such words to his long-

2 It also occurs three times as a noun in the Hebrew Bible (Job 37:2, Psalm 90:9 and Ezekiel 2:10). The research about the occurrences of the Biblical words and texts have been done with the help of the search engine of the *BibleWorks 8* (Bushell, Tan & Weaver 2008).

3 See, for instance, Judges 5:10, 1 Chronicles 16:9, Job 7:11, Job 12:8 or Proverbs 6:22 in various English translations.

4 *שיח* *siyah*: Psalm 77:4; 77:7; 77:13; 119:15; 119:23; 119:27; 119:48; 119:78; 119:148; 143:5; 145:5; *הגה* *haga(h)*: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 63:7; 77:13; 143:5.

term memory.<sup>5</sup> This fact, in turn, created an opportunity for him to think about their meaning more often and thereby influence his decision-making process.

Repetition of short phrases in prayer is well attested in the Bible. A number of Psalms, whose composition must have had a strong connection with mental prayer, contain regular repetitions in the form of a refrain occurring every couple of verses or even a repeated phrase in every single verse. As the famous example of the latter, Psalm 136 can easily be named: each of its 26 verses ends with a phrase *וְדָסָה קְלוּעַל יְיָ* *ki ləolam hasdo* “for His steadfast love is forever”. Apart from the Book of Psalms,<sup>6</sup> there are other examples of the repetitive prayer in the Bible: In Daniel 3:57-88, the Canticle of the Three Young Men is built on the repeated expression *εὐλογεῖτε...τὸν κύριον* *eulogéite...ton kyrion* “bless the Lord”. Also, it is worth noting that, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus himself prayed by ‘saying the same words’, as recorded by Mark 14:39.

Last but not least, one more crucial feature of Biblical meditation needs to be mentioned. As a prayer, meditation was always directed to God; it was a way of having a relationship with God. In the Old Testament, this focus on God was often expressed by pondering on what God revealed which was labelled in different ways as God’s law, precepts, statutes, wonders, word, etc. Relevant examples can be found, for instance, in Psalm 119 or Psalm 1 which together with Psalm 2 “provide an introduction to the Psalter as a whole” (Limburg, 1992, p. 534). Of course, it is true that the words denoting the process of meditation were sometimes used to express the idea of merely thinking about something (or planning, plotting, etc.),<sup>7</sup> but meditating is never portrayed in the Bible as a fitness exercise or a self-centred spiritual practice. Meditation in the Bible is a way of interpersonal encounter between a human being and God.

To sum up, prayerful meditation in the

5 Obviously, many ancient Israelites could not read, but we can reasonably surmise that they had the opportunity to listen to the words of the Torah in order to repeat them, memorize them and pass them on to their children: Cf. Block, 2015, pp. 107-108.

6 Examples of psalms containing the repetitive prayer: 24, 42 (together with 43), 57, 67, 103, 104, 107, 118, 135.

7 Cf. e.g., Psalm 2:1; 38:13; Proverbs 24:2.

Bible appears as a mental process which not infrequently began with reading / pronouncing pious words aloud in a repetitive manner with a simultaneous focus on God and what pertains to Him.

Now, the question arises how this Biblical heritage was introduced among the faithful in the history of the Catholic Church in China. There is no proof that some religious practices of the Chinese faithful appeared as a result of their familiarity with the Biblical examples of meditative prayer. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see similarities between their practices and the roots of meditation in the Bible, as described above. When we ask which prayer, widespread in China, combined the elements of speaking, repeating and reflecting upon matters pertaining to God, it is the Rosary that comes first to mind.<sup>8</sup> In China, as it is stated in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, there have been “countless texts on the Rosary, [and] the method of its praying, always including introductions to the mysteries, i.e. to the life ... of Jesus” (Malek, 2017, p. 110).

It is not easy to determine who first introduced the Catholic Rosary to China. On the one hand, the prayer of the Rosary was strongly associated with the Dominicans and their tradition (Thurston & Shipman, 1912). This tradition was strengthened in the second half of the 16th century by the introduction of the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary and the subsequent resolution of the Dominican General Chapter in 1574 which “advocated a widespread promotion of the rosary” (Clarke, 2013, p. 30). Consequently, the Dominicans in China, acting in accordance with the resolution, zealously promoted the Rosary already during the Ming dynasty (cf. Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 3181-3186; Menegon, 2009, p. 252). On the other hand, the Jesuits also used the Rosary in their missionary efforts during the same period: For example, Rosary beads were among the objects of piety that the Jesuits gave to Joseph Wang, a Catholic layman and a eunuch in the service of the Chongzhen emperor, to be distributed among the converts in the imperial palace (Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 2816-2832).

In any event, already in the first half of the

<sup>8</sup> According to David Bryan, the Rosary is “Christianity’s most popular method of meditation” (Bryan, 1994, p. 756).

16<sup>th</sup> century (or perhaps even earlier), the Rosary was practiced by Catholics in different parts of China, for example Mindong (Fujian Province), Hangzhou and Beijing (cf. Menegon, 2009, pp. 206-207; Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 2821-2832, 3296-3302).

Last but not least, one more crucial feature of Biblical meditation needs to be mentioned. As a prayer, meditation was always directed to God; it was a way of having a relationship with God.

Of course, the popularity of the Rosary in China can hardly be seen as a result of the reflection of the people on Biblical meditation practices. The reasons for this phenomenon were manifold. From the point of view of many missionaries, teaching people to pray the Rosary was one of the best ways to bring Jesus Christ and the mysteries of His life closer to the people (Malek, 2017, p. 110). From the point of view of the ordinary faithful, the outward appearances of praying the Rosary bore similarities to Buddhist practices they were familiar with, e.g. repetitive recitation (or rather “chanting in semitone”) of a given text, or the use of chaplets/strings of beads (cf. Menegon, 2009, pp. 245-246; Harrison, 2013, pp. 27-28).

Such similarities, however, do not nullify the Biblical roots of the Rosary even if the Chinese faithful practising this form of prayer were not necessarily aware of them. These roots are the most visible not only in the form of this prayer but first of all, in its contents. Most words used in repeated invocations during this prayer are taken directly from the Biblical text (the *Lord’s Prayer* from the Gospel according to Matthew and the first half of the *Hail Mary* from the Gospel according to Luke) whereas other invocations or parts of them have been coined on the basis of the Biblical message. Most importantly, however, it is the meditation on the mysteries of the life of

Jesus, which show us the deep Biblical roots of the Rosary.

The missionaries were aware of the Rosary's importance, but also of the difficulty of combining oral and mental prayer and some of them took steps to teach the faithful to pay attention to this issue. For example, Fr. Jean-Martin Moye MEP (1730-1793) who worked in east Sichuan and Guizhou, wrote special meditations to be said during the Rosary between each "Hail Mary" prayer. He intended to help the faithful not to recite the prayers automatically but to direct their thoughts to the mysteries and learn to imitate the examples from them (Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 4566-4598).

to the place of execution (Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 4398-4409; 天主教台灣地區主教團宣聖委員會 *Tianzhujiao Taiwan Diqu Zhujiaotuan Xuansheng Weiyuanhui* [Special Committee of the Chinese Regional Bishop's Conference], 2000, p. 76).

To conclude: In the Bible, meditation as a prayer is often associated not only with the process of thinking about God and His word but also simultaneously with a repetitive oral prayer. Traces of this practice can be found in a number of devotional activities of Christians around the world. The Rosary is one of the prominent examples of this tradition. The combination of oral and mental elements produced this prayer

When we ask which prayer, widespread in China, combined the elements of speaking, repeating and reflecting upon matters pertaining to God, it is the Rosary that comes first to mind.

Teaching the faithful this type of meditative prayer was without a doubt very fruitful for the growth of the Church in China. It helped people to preserve their faith, especially in times of persecution. Fr. Charbonnier relates that in 1983, during his ministry in Singapore, he was visited by a twenty-three-year-old sailor from Fuzhou in China who wanted to see a priest. It turned out that he was a Catholic, from a Catholic family, but he did not know much about his faith; his growing up in the turbulent times of the Cultural Revolution contributed significantly to this ignorance. What he knew, however, was the Rosary that he was praying with his family members at home every night (Charbonnier, 2007, loc. 76-98).

Nevertheless, the Rosary was not only the prayer of the beginners in faith. It was also practised by the faithful whose very advanced level of spiritual life was proved by their martyrdom. For instance, on 7 November 1814 in Sichuan, Wu Guosheng (吳國盛), one of the 120 Chinese Martyrs canonized by Pope John Paul II in October 2000, was condemned to death for refusing to renounce his faith and it was the Rosary he chose to pray when he was being led

which became extremely popular in China. It was both simple and very profound, rooted in the Bible and adapted to the local forms of expression, appreciated and practised by both fresh converts to Catholicism and by the heroic believers who gave their lives for the faith. It is a reminder that the simplicity of repeating specific fixed phrases in prayer has a long tradition in the Bible and the history of the Church. When done properly, such practices make possible a profound meditative encounter with God.



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