

## Does God Cause Suffering? Suffering and the Roles of Job, Israel, and Jesus

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### Question: Does the Christian God Cause Suffering?

When we see human beings suffer, something in us cries out, 'Why?' The vexing question of suffering is derived from the larger question of human evil. Thus, I would prefer that people read my articles on 'Evil and the Christian God' prior to reading this paper, but I will try to make this article independent of the others.

The issue of suffering – like the issue of evil – touches on views of human free will and God's sovereignty. If you believe that God is absolutely sovereign and human beings have no free will at all, suffering becomes a direct action of God, and you would have to conclude that God is partially evil for bringing evil and suffering into the world. Some would say God is 'mysterious' in an attempt to ward off the logical conclusion, but this option is not particularly compelling. But even if you believe in human free will, suffering is a complex topic. Since most of the questions in the Bible having to do with human suffering and divine action are in the Old Testament, I will focus on the roles of Israel, Job, and Jesus.

### Israel: Chosen to Live by God's Word and Expect a Happy Ending

A common belief that people had in ancient times was that history is circular. Israel inherited a story and a confession that taught them that their God is wholly good and will one day defeat evil. Evil in the universe could not last forever, precisely because God is good and will one day be victorious over it all. This is the connection between ethical monotheism and messianism: a radical this-worldly belief that the good God would defeat evil and renew the world. This is the 'happy ending story.' God made the Jews absolutely unique in this way as well, among all their neighbors, if not all the peoples of the world.

The far more natural conclusion that people reached was that there was no such 'happy ending.' The 'god' or 'gods' that the ancients could best discern was/were both good and evil, since the world we live in plainly has both good and evil. What is the origin of this duality? The easiest explanation: the 'god' or 'gods' who made it all. The direct implication of that idea was that history was circular, locked in an eternal battle between good and evil. Every other religious system demonstrates this link. In Hinduism, a person cycles through various lives by being reincarnated. Eventually, if that person is ever good enough, she reaches some other state, perhaps. But it's about individual attainment. Evil doesn't go away per se. The Wikipedia article *Problem of Evil in Hinduism* says, 'This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara's resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one's moral actions sown in a past life... On the higher level of existence, however, there is no evil or good, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, is beyond such dualistic notions.' That takes away rather quickly one's incentive to do social justice work, which has borne out in Asian history because Hinduism and Buddhism do not, on the whole, lead to social justice reform movements. Or, perhaps you can attain Nirvana and transcend suffering by meditation (Buddhism) or asceticism (Jainism). But this is also individual. Evil per se doesn't go away here either. There are only cycles, or circularity in history. In Zoroastrianism, or yin-yang type thinking, good and evil are co-equal, or eternal principles locked in eternal combat. This too gives rise to a circular story filled with inevitable pendulum swings at best. Popular historian Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gifts of the Jews* notes that the Jews alone bequeathed to us a sense of history because the Jews alone sensed a type of progress or linearity – as opposed to circularity – to human history. The God they knew was moving in history towards a goal. One stage in human history was not the same as all the others. There was no true repetition in history. The lesson is simple and clear: Reasoning about the character of 'god' (i.e. *theology proper*) is directly related to the type of story one expects to live in (i.e. *eschatology*).

It is also connected to a consistent *epistemology* about how one can discern God's activity. How did Israel distinguish God's actions from the ups and downs of all history? Or from every natural disaster resulting from the damaged creation? Through God's spoken word. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is one of the dominant patterns of the entire Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. This God acts by speaking. He said, 'Let there be light,' and there was. Ten times God spoke in Genesis 1 to bring about life and bless life.

1. <sup>1:3</sup> Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.

2. <sup>1:6</sup> Then God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'
3. <sup>1:9</sup> Then God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so.
4. <sup>1:11</sup> Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'; and it was so.
5. <sup>1:14</sup> Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; <sup>15</sup> and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so.
6. <sup>1:20</sup> Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.'
7. <sup>1:22</sup> God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
8. <sup>1:24</sup> Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so.
9. <sup>1:26</sup> Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' <sup>27</sup> God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. <sup>1:28</sup> God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'

To Abraham, God said, 'I will redeem my people Israel from bondage' (Genesis 15:13 – 14), and then He did it. Every time God acted, He spoke about it first beforehand. As God engaged with human beings, He always spoke to some human beings first, who then proclaimed that word, and eventually God would fulfill His word. This gave rise to what Israel called 'prophecy.'

Amos summarized this pattern in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Many people ignore that verse and this pattern, partly because (once again) they are too influenced by Augustine's monergism (God causes all), or Aristotle's idea of a primal cause that causes all other effects (God set up all dominos and then pushed the first one), as they defend a view of God's sovereignty that makes God the direct cause of everything that happens, both good and evil. Yet Amos did not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God's will and God's character.' This is absolutely important, because human beings have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not spoken about. But God is not *causing* human evil – abuse, negligence, or whatever – of any sort, in any way. Rather, God has granted human beings a genuine will with genuine choices, so human beings are responsible for evil. Even natural disasters are best understood as the result of Adam casting God, the life-giver, out of the creation, and thus creating the phenomenon of human death and creational chaos. 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him [i.e. *Adam*] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:20 – 21). I will address the chastisement by which God shaped Israel over the course of its pre-Christ history, below; that treatment of Israel was, again, God's great exception among all people and was a foreshadowing of what would happen in the very flesh of Jesus; it was not representative of how God 'chastises nations,' which I do not believe He actually does. In general, God said that He will crush evil and defeat it (Genesis 3:14 – 15), and rescue humanity from it, and this what He is doing right now through Jesus.

This is the doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through His word*. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His word. So, it is a mistake to say that God caused any and all circumstances – especially moral evil – at any point in time, because God does not claim such a responsibility in the Scriptures. That kind of naïve doctrine of the *sovereignty of God*, which makes God the effectual cause of everything, is very different from a doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. The doctrine of the *sovereignty of God*, which sees God as causing the totality of history and human choices, is quite foreign to the biblical characterization of God. Suffice to say here that if we assign evil to God's causality, then we have assigned evil to God's character. And if we do that, then we have made God arbitrary and evil. And if that is the case, then the basis for prayer to God, trust in God, and hope for God's decisive victory over evil, is all gone.

In fact, as the long history of God and Israel unfolded, shades of complexity entered into Israel's discernment of how God acts in order to achieve what He had promised. Two major examples suffice to demonstrate my point. First, the selection of David as the king of Israel and his eventual enthronement present a puzzling picture. God, through

the prophet Samuel, said to the young David, 'You will be king over Israel' (1 Samuel 16:12 – 13). However, it took years for David to win over every tribe of Israel to his leadership (2 Samuel 5:1 – 4). During that time, everyone had their own motivations and interests: Saul became paranoid and jealous of David, the people of Israel wavered this way and that between two regimes, Jonathan was a loyal friend to David who knew God had blessed David, Michal married David prematurely, probably with starry eyes, David himself had his own hopes and terrors, Gentiles had their own ambitions, etc. By the time David was thirty years old, despite much suffering and turmoil, he became king. God's word had been fulfilled. But we are hard pressed to read the account of Samuel and say precisely what God did to bring about this outcome. The same pattern held; God was faithful to His word, but we are not sure exactly how He acted to bring this about. That was one complexity. This dynamic did not cause Israel to doubt that God would fulfill His word, but they did seem to question their own ability to discern exactly what God was doing in the process of His fulfilling it. The second example is the Babylonian takeover of the southern kingdom of Judah and the city Jerusalem. God had certainly said that He would not protect the kingdom of Judah from the Babylonians because Hezekiah, king of Judah, did not trust God but rather trusted his own diplomatic ties with Babylon (Isaiah 39; 2 Kings 20:12 – 19). That was the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak; Hezekiah's mistake was the last of a long litany of sins that the Israelites had committed. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk announced that Babylon would successfully overcome Israel, and Babylon did. So the Babylonian invasion fits the pattern: God spoke about it, and it happened. However, Zechariah would say afterwards that the Babylonians, and subsequent Gentile empires, brought about too much destruction, more than God intended: 'I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster.' (Zechariah 1:14 – 15) This example shows that it was possible for the Gentiles to inflict *more destruction* than God intended. Even though God by His word brought chastisement upon the people of Israel, the Gentiles who played that role still had their own will and went far beyond what God wanted. Now the complexity deepened in another direction because Babylon had done *more* than what God had intended in His announcement.

I raise those two examples above to highlight how the Old Testament is not at all interested in proving the doctrine of the sovereignty of *God*. It labors to prove the doctrine of the sovereignty of *God's word*. How can we discern God's activity from the activities of all other beings, including sinful beings? By God's word. God announces what He will do before He does it. Though the basic epistemology Israel had to discern God's activity became complex, it still did not take away from the basic conviction that God is known – or more precisely, rather, God's *actions* are known – through His word. This Old Testament pattern laid the theological and epistemological foundation for God's Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1 – 5; 14 – 18). We would know not only God's activity, but God's very self, through His Word in human form, and the verbal description of that Word about himself. God is not revealed through the circumstances of our lives, and not even through miraculous events or the lack thereof. God is revealed solely in Jesus Christ. Israel's long experience listening for God's word prepared them to appreciate Jesus and his significance. Since God acts by His word, and because He has promised to be victorious over all evil, He must change *us* by His word.

### **Israel: Chosen to See the Evil Internal to Human Nature**

At this point, we can move onward to consider the development of Israel's spiritual insight and preparation prior to the arrival of Jesus. I believe that the single most important thing that God was teaching Israel was this: the human condition needed an internal transformation at the hands of God. Although God had created humanity in His own image, and human nature was inclined towards Him and towards goodness, Adam and Eve's fall into sin had tarnished the image of God, and damaged human nature. This resulted in shame and blame with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8 – 13), jealousy, bitterness, and murder as Cain killed Abel, (Genesis 4:1 – 16), and the defiant corruption of all human relations as Cain began a civilization marked by patriarchy, cruelty, and polygamy (Genesis 4:17 – 24). This resulted in massive violence and bloodshed, which God needed to wash away from the ground – thus the Flood and, afterwards, God's permission to set up a provisional system of human justice (Genesis 6 – 9). However, humanity once again set up an oppressive order in defiance of God at Babel (Genesis 11). God's assessment of the human problem, however, is found shortly afterwards, right before the Flood. God identified the problem as *internal* to humanity:

Genesis 6:5 Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup> The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

Theologian T.F. Torrance remarks, “Mankind is out of gear with nature, and anxiety characterizes their life. But the consequences of broken fellowship with God extend deep into human life and keep spreading. The first brothers fall out with each other, and one slays the other. And so the story of the theological narrative goes on. It is a double story. On one side it is the story of the atomization of mankind, for the internal rupture results in individualization and conflict. On the other it is the story of human attempts at re-socialization, great attempts to mend the broken relations, to heal the internal rupture, to bind divided humanity together again, as at Babel. But all the attempts to heal man partake of our fallen nature and cannot but give new orientation in sin to the broken relationship with God, so that all attempts break themselves on the divine judgment and result in further disintegration. Mankind is unable to re-socialize itself, unable to heal its internal rupture for that which really makes man *man* is the bond between man and God.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, ever since Adam fell, human beings have demonstrated a strong tendency to blame other people and even God for our problems. Adam himself pointed the blame everywhere but himself, as he said to God, “This woman whom You gave to me...” (Genesis 3:12). Two recent studies confirm this: Cordelia Fine’s book *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* and Carol Tavris and Eliot Aronson’s book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. The titles alone say quite enough about our capacity for self-deception, and these authors document the lengths to which we will go to bias perceptions in our own favor. Thus, if human beings are evasive about the responsibility for their actions, how much more would we be evasive about the corruption of our nature? And if God was committed to honoring human choice, how would He persuade humanity to diagnose ourselves correctly and willingly desire the internal transformation to which God called us?

God’s response was to operate through a chosen people, Israel, for the sake of all humanity and the whole world (Genesis 12:1 – 2). God initiated an irrevocable covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah and some of their descendants, and others who joined them, which involved an agreement by which God promised to be their Lord and they promised to be His people. However, not all of Abraham and Sarah’s descendants were automatically included in this covenant arrangement, and this is significant: By offering the Jews an identity as a people called Israel, God both marked out an identifiable community through whom He worked, and allowed individual Jews to have a choice as to whether they would be a part of this people. At every point, the Jews who stayed within the covenantal identity called Israel were *choosing* to be part of the God’s covenant. Other Gentiles also chose to join biblical Israel by being circumcised and adhering to the Mosaic Law. And, from all appearances, especially after the Babylonian Captivity, some Jews chose not to downplay kosher laws, intermarriage taboos, and holy calendar, and declined to return to the Promised Land.

The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understood Israel to be a partial restoration of humanity-as-God-intended-it. Like Adam and Eve, they were given God’s commands (the Mosaic Law) and placed in a new garden (the Promised Land) to worship God around a specific but temporary manifestation of His presence (first in plain view as the Shekinah Glory-Cloud, then within the Tabernacle, and then within the Temple). They were a new people in a new garden centered around a new Eden. However, as Israel’s story unfolded, it became clear that they were not different from the rest of humanity, but rather, the same. The first person to see that Israel would ultimately need to be internally transformed by God was Moses. As part of his closing words to Israel, Moses said that Israel would one day repeat the sin of Adam and Eve, cast out the presence of God, and symmetrically, be cast out of the garden land into exile (Deuteronomy 27 – 30). Moses insisted that Israel needed to be transformed internally, and that this would happen after the exile, as part of the return from exile:

Deuteronomy 30:1 “So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, <sup>2</sup> and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, <sup>3</sup> then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. <sup>5</sup> The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your

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<sup>1</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (InterVarsity Press: 2008), p.39.

fathers. <sup>6</sup> Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your **heart** and the **heart** of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul, so that you may live.

Every subsequent interpretation of Israel’s history in the Nevi’im portion of the Hebrew Scriptures – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of Twelve Prophets – agreed that Israel would fail morally and spiritually.

King David was both an ordinary Israelite and a ‘new Adam’ who had been given a dominion similar but different to the original Adam. David ruled over the beasts of the field, noted in 1 Samuel 17:34 – 36, and triumphed over a great enemy, Goliath. Yet as much as David, too, is portrayed as a new humanity of sorts, he also came to the same conclusion about himself, that he was part of the old humanity. When he committed adultery and then murder to cover it up, King David also concluded that he had an internal problem that required an internal transformation:

<sup>Psalms 51:9</sup> Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean **heart**, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

With this acknowledgement coming from the most celebrated and revered of all the kings of Israel, no descendant of David could claim a spotless pedigree. Each heir of David was a living contradiction: somehow a bearer of hope but yet part of the human problem. The line of David the ‘new Adam’ needed a truly ‘new Adam.’

Jeremiah and Ezekiel in particular had the most insight into Israel’s internal condition. On the cusp of exile into Babylon, the new Babel, they understood that Israel would geographically be identified with the masses of Gentile humanity. This relocation to Babylon corresponded with faced with the reality that Israel, too, needed an internal transformation along with the rest of humanity. They did not need better circumstances or better laws; can one improve much on the garden land and the Mosaic Law? Jeremiah and Ezekiel, looking out at urban injustice and oppression of the poor in particular, could only conclude that Israel’s problem was internal, just as Moses indicated, not external. Israel’s only hope, therefore, to fulfill the human side of its relationship with God and be the people God truly intended, was for God to internally transform them. Hence:

<sup>Jeremiah 31:31</sup> ‘Behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will put My law within them and on their **heart** I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

<sup>Ezekiel 36:24</sup> For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> Moreover, I will give you a new **heart** and put a new **spirit** within you; and I will remove the **heart** of stone from your flesh and give you a **heart** of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My **Spirit** within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Israel’s recording of human history and the historical-literary pattern going first from garden, to sin, to exile, and then to the revelation of the sinfulness afflicting the human heart can be represented in this form:

<b>Humanity</b>		<b>Exiled from the garden land</b> (Gen.3:22 – 24), eventually in <b>Babel</b> (Gen.11). <b>Hearts</b> are in need of change (Gen.6:5).	God promised to bless the world through Israel (Gen.12:1 – 3; Isa.42:1 – 4) and, at least for some, restore them from exile (Isa.49:1 – 6).
<b>Israel</b>	Moses predicts <b>exile from the garden land</b> , sees the need for God to transform <b>hearts</b> (Dt.30:1 – 6).	<b>Exiled from the garden land to Babylon</b> (2 Ki.25, Jer.29). <b>Hearts</b> in need of change (Jer.9:26, 13:23; 17:1).	God promised to change Israel’s <b>hearts</b> , and restore them from exile (Dt.30:1 – 6, Jer.31:31 – 34, Ezk.36:26 – 36).

<b>King David &amp; his heirs</b>	David was <b>exiled</b> from home (2 Sam.15 – 16), had asked God to give him a new <b>heart</b> (Ps.51:10). This is effectively a prediction of the failure of the entire line of David.	The Davidic dynasty was <b>exiled from the garden land</b> into <b>Babylon</b> (2 Ki.25) along with Israel because of their corruption (Jer.23, Ezk.34, Mic.3 – 4)	God promised to raise up a pure and holy King, the Messiah (Isa.9 – 11; Jer.23, Ezk.34), to rule as king over Israel and the world.
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Israel was selected to be a case study example of how all humanity is in fact the same, even when some (Israel) are put in an ideal environment and given the best laws that humanity knew until that point. Israel was ‘chosen’ to fail, in a moral sense. They demonstrated to the rest of the world that our problem is fundamentally internal. God does not simply favor Israel. The reason for God’s choice of Israel as a chosen people was that they were chosen to have an awareness of, and to create a literature about (see below), their need for internal transformation and healing. That internal transformation would become available at the time they were ready to encounter their God in human form, in the human person Jesus of Nazareth.

While Jesus maintained the use of the word ‘heart’ as the source of human evil, explicitly in Matthew 15:18, Mark 7:19 – 21, and while Paul also said that the ‘heart’ must be circumcised in Romans 2:28 – 29, the New Testament writers used a word that had broader resonance: the *flesh*. Paul understood Israel’s experience prior to Jesus as one of constant struggle with its own ‘*flesh*.’ By choosing this word, Paul was not agreeing with Plato and other Greek philosophers that our physicality was inherently bad, that our souls look forward to the day when it is freed from the prison of our physical bodies. Rather, Paul insisted, as any good Jew would, that our physicality was inherently good, since the good Creator God made us and said that we were good. Paul used the word *flesh* to mean what human nature had become because of the fall: corrupted both physically and spiritually. In Romans 7:14 – 25, Paul describes the plight of the Jew under the Mosaic Law. Although the Law was good and holy, and while Israel understood the Law as a blessing, Israel nevertheless could not fully come to terms with it. Whether Paul was speaking of his personal experience as an individual Jew or Israel’s corporate experience under the Law is an interesting question, but irrelevant for the purposes of this discussion, for the one is connected to the other. Either way, Paul’s conclusion was the question, ‘For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my *flesh*; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not...Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ That question led him to understand the work of Jesus: ‘For what the [Mosaic] Law could not do, weak as it was through the *flesh* [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of *sinful flesh* and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh so that the requirement of the Law [i.e. new humanity] might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’ (Romans 8:3 – 4). Paul’s also said that Jesus was raised into a new kind of human life (Romans 6:4) because he put to death ‘our old self, in order that our body of sin might be done away with’ (Romans 6:5).

John’s Gospel puts the matter the most bluntly. John said, ‘The Word became *flesh*’ (John 1:14). ‘Flesh’ is the most negative term with which to describe humanity, for it reflects humanity’s *substance as impacted by sin*. John could have legitimately said that the Word became ‘man’ (Greek *anthropos*) or ‘a body’ (Greek *soma*) without such profoundly negative connotations. But John seems intent on provoking the discussion. The Hellenistic Jewish commentator Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, a contemporary to Jesus and the apostles, wrote: ‘It is impossible for the Spirit of God to remain and to pass all its time, as the law-giver himself shows. “For,” says Moses, “the Lord said, My Spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are *flesh*.” For, at times, it does remain; but it does not remain forever and ever among the greater part of us; for who is so destitute of reason or so lifeless as never, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to conceive a notion of the all good God. For, very often, even over the most polluted and accursed beings, there hovers a sudden appearance of the good, but they are unable to take firm hold of it and to keep it among them; for almost immediately, it quits its former place and departs, rejecting those inhabitants who come over to it, and who live in defiance of law and justice, to whom it never would have come if it had not been for the sake of convicting those who choose what is disgraceful instead of what is good.’ (Philo, ‘On the Giants,’ *Commentary on Genesis*, V.19 – 21) Philo appears to be capitulating to the Hellenistic philosophical conclusion about human *flesh*. If John was aware of Philo, which I believe he probably was, he is refuting the essence of what Philo was saying, and doing so on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures – for Philo was negating the prophecies that God would one day dwell by His Spirit within, and thus constitute, His new and true humanity.

Jesus' own self-understanding involved taking on Jewish *flesh* and repeating and redeeming Israel's *story* to finally create a truly new humanity. His baptism in the waters of the Jordan River and forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 3:13 – 4:12; Luke 4:1 – 13) are interpreted against Israel's own experience coming through the waters of the Red Sea and wandering for forty years in the wilderness. The fact that Jesus quoted three times from Deuteronomy lends more support to this claim, since Israel's time in the wilderness was marked by listening to Moses give the message we now call Deuteronomy. And, to make a deeper point, Israel's own episode of coming through water and eventually inheriting a garden land after the wilderness wandering is reminiscent of Adam and Eve being created by God after the primordial waters of creation were pushed back and inheriting the garden of Eden which God made for them. In that sense, Jesus is also repeating and redeeming Adam and Eve's story, because the story of Israel is already connected to the story of all humanity. But whereas Adam and Eve fell into temptation, and whereas Israel did the same in the wilderness, Jesus endured temptation under very strenuous conditions: not in the garden but in the wilderness, and not in community with others but alone. This initial victory represents Jesus' eventual victory to cleanse human nature itself through his life, death, and resurrection. In his resurrection, Jesus would emerge as a God-drenched, God-soaked, new human being who is able to share his Spirit – the Holy Spirit of his new humanity – with those who receive him.

This articulation of the atonement is called 'physical redemption,' which is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church. Physical redemption holds that Jesus had to physically redeem the humanity of one sin-scarred human being – his own – in order to offer his Spirit of his new humanity to everyone, for the redemption of all sinful humanity. I place it here in contrast to the atonement theory called 'penal substitution,' which is held most strongly by those in the Augustinian – Reformed camp. Penal substitution states that Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God's wrath on the cross in order to forgive sinners. This is important to reconciling God's justice (demanding that sin be punished) and His mercy (demanding that sinners be forgiven). The difficulties I have with penal substitution are many, but the two most relevant here are as follows. First, in penal substitution, Jesus absorbs the *punishment* for sin, but it is less clear what he is doing about the *source* of sin internal to us. Usually, the issue of engaging with the source of our sinfulness is relegated to the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification, but there are problems associated with dividing up the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit this way.

Second, penal substitution advocates have difficulty explaining what God is actively doing about *all* human evil. The chief problem they encounter is the question of why God apparently grants salvation from sin to some but not all. For, in order to explain why everyone does not avail themselves of the forgiveness offered by Jesus, penal substitution advocates have to say either that the scope of the atonement was limited by the Father to begin with, or that Jesus' work on the cross was 'sufficient' for all but 'efficient' only for some, which then sunders the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to sinners, since the Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ only, apparently, to the 'elect.' This divides the members of the Trinity one way or another, which makes it impossible for us to say to any particular non-Christian, 'God loves *you*,' because of the uncertainty injected into the theology: We would simply not know whether God in fact loves the person right in front of us. In the same vein, penal substitution makes it impossible for us to say, 'God cares about *all* human evil.' This is simply an extension of the problem. For penal substitution offers very little explanation for what Jesus is actively doing to address *all* of human evil. Once again, some argue that one can attribute 'forgiveness' to the atoning work of Jesus, and 'transformation' to the subsequent work of the Spirit in the believer, and therefore they have a God who is acting to undo human evil, but only in the 'elect.' I believe biblical exegesis proves that dichotomy false,<sup>2</sup> but regardless, the fundamental problem which I have raised, remains: What about the 'non-elect'? Has God so arranged the mechanics of salvation so that He is only saving *some* of humanity, which means that He only wants to undo *some* human evil? If so, then it becomes disingenuous for a Christian who subscribes to penal substitution to claim that God wants to undo, heal, and transform *all* human evil, injustice, and brokenness at its very source: within each and every person. The theology simply does not support it. My basic contention is that penal substitution actually

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<sup>2</sup> The Spirit therefore *applies* the achievement of Jesus in putting to death the old sin-corrupted human nature and giving birth to a fresh, new, God-soaked, God-purified human nature. Paul, in key passages like Romans 5:1 – 11 and 8:1 – 17, Ephesians 1:3 – 14 and 2:1 – 10, and Colossians 1:13 – 14, says that the basis of God's forgiveness of us is not because a punitive transaction whereby – as in penal substitution – Jesus absorbs the punishment for our sins due to us under God's wrath, nor because of an equivalent economic transaction – also in penal substitution – where Jesus 'paid' the debt that we owed to God in that sense. Despite the use of this language at times, forgiveness comes because we have died and risen again in Christ and have a radically new identity 'in Christ' and not 'in sin.' That is, by faith in Christ, we have participated in our own identity transformation whereby the old person we were no longer exists to God. Forgiveness and transformation cannot be divided up between the Son and the Spirit. Both members of the Trinity do both on our behalf.

makes God complicit in human evil. For this theory posits that at the heart of Christian theology – the atonement – God is solving a problem internal to *Himself* in relation to *some* people, rather than a problem internal to *us* in relation to *all* people.

Physical redemption does not have this problem, for two main reasons. First, the objective of the atonement itself is to achieve an ontological compatibility and union between God and humanity within the loving relations of God's Triune nature, that is, within God's very being. This was God's purpose from the creation, but after humanity's fall, in order to accomplish this original purpose, God had to also destroy the corruption of sinfulness within each human being so that His love could be received as love and not as torment, since our self-centeredness would resist and resent the call of God to be as other-centered as He is. In the physical redemption theory, the wrath of God against the fallen humanity of Jesus was poured out *within* the person of Jesus, since Jesus was both divine and human, not *upon* the person of Jesus by God, as penal substitution advocates hold. The atonement was personal in the sense that Jesus atoned first for his own humanity through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus forced his humanity to adjust to the radical nature of God's other-centered love. Then and only then could he offer the Spirit of his atoned-for-humanity to all, genuinely, without any reservations or limits from God's side. The destruction of the corruption of sinfulness within other human beings therefore begins in us fundamentally with our conversion to Jesus whereby he comes to dwell in us by his Spirit and puts our 'old self' to death as Paul says in Romans 6:6. God's progressive victory against each person's sinfulness is developed subsequently in each person's active relationship with Jesus by his Spirit as we struggle against our own self-centeredness. Then it is consummated at Jesus' return when he will grant us renewed physical bodies akin to his own resurrection body. Jesus deals with a problem internal to us, not internal to God. For God has always been *for humanity*, desiring to draw us up and elevate us into Himself. Because of humanity's fall, He has also been against our sinfulness, evil, injustice, and brokenness because we contradicted our original good nature and, by this internal pollution, set ourselves ontologically against the purpose for which God created us: union with Himself.

Second, physical redemption holds that God by His grace constantly enables human free will rather than negates it, because it is against God's character to strip human beings of their free choice to accept Him in Christ. Those who reject God in Christ do so by their own free will, thus abusing God's grace, and will bring their unhealed, selfish human nature into the presence of the radically other-centered God who calls for all things to become consistent with His character. By seeing matters this way, the physical redemption theory is not 'Augustinian.' The later Augustine posited *monergism* (literally, 'one-will'), such that God's will alone is the sole, efficient cause of the salvation of people, apart from and without any human free will whatsoever. Augustine in the Latin West redefined words like 'predestined' in a way that no Christian had done before him.<sup>3</sup> Augustine's contemporary John Cassian, held up in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the one who attempted to correct Augustine, held to the *synergism* (literally, 'working with' God's grace, with God's grace being prior) passed onto him by earlier Christian thinkers. This is why Eastern Orthodox theologians are neither Augustinian, nor Pelagian, nor Semi-Pelagian. Within the physical redemption theory, God is understood as not limiting the scope of the atoning work of Christ in any way. Each and every human being must respond personally and affirmatively Jesus' work of undoing human evil at its source in every human being is truly available to every human being, with no limitations from God's side.<sup>4</sup> God is understood to be working by His grace within each person, enabling their free will and calling out to them to come to Christ and be transformed; it is their free choice in refusal that explains their ongoing rejection and their embrace of self-centeredness. Much more can and must be said about this comparison, but I offer a preliminary comment here: I believe physical redemption allows us to treat the Old Testament story and prophecies more naturally, and does a better job making sense of the various New Testament idioms surrounding the atonement, so as to firmly undergird the claim that God really and truly wants to bring *all* people to Himself and undo *all* human evil, at its source. This articulation of the atonement clearly gives us the ability to say God is against *all* human evil, and for *all* humanity – each and every person – and all this by His love.

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<sup>3</sup> Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1968), p.110 – 136, especially p.117 – 126.

<sup>4</sup> This is a much more natural reading of the following Scriptures: 'He [Jesus] himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world.' (1 John 2:2). 'False teachers were...denying the Master who bought them.' (2 Peter 2:1). 'The living God... is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.' (1 Timothy 4:10). 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.' (Titus 2:11) 'God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4) 'The Lord is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.' (2 Peter 3:9) 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked...rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?...For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Therefore, repent and live.' (Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33)



### **Chosen to Suffer On Behalf of the World: Job, Israel, and Jesus**

The covenant arrangement God made with Israel resulted unquestionably in Israel's suffering. The suffering came from three different sources: the Gentiles around them, Satan, and God. Because I am writing this paper with an eye towards evangelism, I find that I must address more deeply the question of Israel's suffering at the hand of God. What I find is that the Hebrew Scriptures present the relationship between God and Israel in a way that Christians find difficult to explain. They either try to avoid it out of a discomfort or embarrassment, or they effectively threaten the non-Christian with the wrathful side of God displayed in the Old Testament that is the backdrop, i.e. the necessary flip side, of God's mercy and grace found in Jesus in the New Testament. They then proceed with this dichotomy in their minds, which is, in my opinion, erroneous. Let me quickly summarize Israel's suffering at the hands of the Gentiles and Satan.

First, Israel was attacked by the Gentile powers around them. On a purely sociological level, one can understand this fairly easily. When Israel experienced some kind of blessing from God, the Gentile people roundabout wanted to acquire, control, or dismantle that blessing. The Egyptian Pharaoh, for instance, felt threatened by Israel's population (Exodus 1:9). God had enabled Israel to 'be fruitful and multiply' (significantly noted in Exodus 1:8) because God made them a partial restoration of His creational plan for humanity, and thus He empowered them with His creational blessing (Genesis 1:28). Yet the Egyptian Pharaoh interpreted Israel's large population as a political and military threat. He therefore forced them into hard slavery and later attempted to kill all the infant boys (Exodus 1:10 – 21).

The two greatest blessings that God gave to Israel were the land of Canaan and the Temple in Jerusalem, the physical representations of the original garden and Eden, respectively. The land itself was always attractive to other peoples (the Philistines/Phoenicians, etc.) and the major world empires who saw the Middle East as the land bridge between continents. In fact, God had to protect the Israelites from themselves: He stopped the Israelites from taking over each other's portions of land by requiring land to return to families every 49 years (see especially Leviticus 25). Although the erection of the Tabernacle was a 'Plan B' (see below), and although the shift from the portable Tabernacle to the fixed Temple was ambiguous – as David's commitment to build God a house did not receive an endorsement from the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7) – the Temple came to signify a real and tangible blessing of God to Israel. However, Hezekiah's folly in bringing the Babylonian envoy into the Temple to see its riches put the wheels of Babylon's imperial designs in motion (2 Kings 15; Isaiah 39). Babylon invaded the southern kingdom of Judah, raided the Temple, burned it and the city of Jerusalem to the ground, and deported part of the Jewish population to Babylon. After the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple, the Gentile empires that still held Israel captive as a vassal people interpreted the city and the Temple in purely political terms, and thus vied with the Jews over possession of the city and the Temple. In this way, the Gentile powers around Israel kept trying to acquire, control, or dismantle God's blessings upon Israel.

Second, Israel was subjected to attacks by 'the Satan' (the accuser), the supernatural enemy of all humanity. In Christian tradition, Satan initiated the fall because he refused to follow God's command that the angels serve humanity. Wanting to demonstrate humanity's fallibility, he instigated the fall of Adam and Eve. God then pronounced humanity's redemption and Satan's doom in the garden (Genesis 3:14 – 15). From that point onward, Satan attempts to thwart God's plan of redemption. Because God desired to bless Israel, and through Israel all humanity, Satan desired to thwart that blessing. Christians later saw continuity between Israel's persecution by 'the great dragon...the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan,' and their own persecution, since they had inherited the blessing and commission of God (Revelation 12), but this begs the question of how Israel understood its own suffering at the hands of Satan.

In the Hebrew Scriptures outside of Genesis, Satan appears most actively in the book of Job. Job as a character seems to me to be a representation of Israel as a whole. Job certainly behaves as an ideal Jew – offering bountiful offerings to God, praying and interceding for others, etc. Just as God had blessed Job with fruitful land and fertile family, God had brought Israel into the 'garden land' to enjoy the fruits of His gardening and to become a fruitful people. Moreover, Job was targeted by Satan, just as Israel was, as a bearer of God's praise and prophetic hope. Satan is, at least, an indirect cause of misfortune, disease, and death. The question of whether Job would love God without material and relational blessing was a question very pertinent to Israel, especially during its exile in Babylon. And God's response to Job emphasizing His wisdom and love – not His justice – was part of God's reply

to Israel. Thus, it seems relatively easy to see the place of Job in Israel's Scriptures. Job's theodicy raised the same questions that Israel asked: Is this what it means to be God's covenant partner?

Because I believe Job represents Israel, I believe Job shares a similar role with the Messianic King, who would also represent Israel. It is not too difficult to see, not a perfect one to one correspondence, but a categorical similarity between Job and Jesus. Jesus was the ideal Jew; he prayed and interceded for others. Jesus' supreme test was to forego the material and relational blessings of his Jewish heritage and ultimately give up his very life while still remaining committed to God. Jesus was targeted by Satan, but in a way that even Job was not: whereas God prevented Satan from taking Job's life, such protection was not extended to Jesus. Finally, the vindication of Jesus through his death and resurrection is seen as God's supreme demonstration of His wisdom (Romans 11:33, 1 Corinthians 1:22 – 24). Hence Job is a Messianic-Davidic figure because he sums up Israel's experience and questions in himself.

Therefore, difficult questions about the character of God raised by the book of Job (does God cause or allow evil) must be reframed. Job is focused on the question of being God's covenant partner. Who does Job represent? Job does not represent 'everyman' or 'any person.' It is not appropriate to generalize that God causes or allows evil for everyone, or that God causes or allows evil in general. Rather, God makes a covenant with a human partner – represented by Job – which exposes that human partner to Satanic attack, because Satan desires to stop God from redeeming humanity through this human covenant partner. God nevertheless maintains and protects His chosen humanity, for the sake of all humanity. It is painful and costly to be God's covenant partner, which Israel and, supremely, Jesus, discovered. Yet there is blessing and hope involved, for this is God's wise way of unfolding His plan to redeem the world.

Any treatment of the book of Job would have to account for God's response to Job in Job 38 – 41. What is it about this speech that stops Job's complaining? Unfortunately, most commentators see God's response as stressing His sheer power in creation, as if God were saying to Job, 'I am more powerful than you, and I know more than you,' as if this intimidating and obvious fact is what stopped Job's mouth. If such were the case, God would be justifying various evils and calamities based on some purported 'good' that He were bringing out of it, as if to say, 'The ends justifies the means.' Much to the contrary, along with Professor Elenore Stump, in her lecture *Job and the Problem of Evil*,<sup>5</sup> I find just as much evidence in God's speech that stresses His ongoing love and care for His creation, not His direct efficient 'control' of it: 'Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?' (38:16); 'Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?' (38:39); 'Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you count the months they fulfill, or do you know the time they give birth? They kneel down, they bring forth their young, they get rid of their labor pains. Their offspring become strong; they grow up in the open field; they leave and do not return to them' (39:1 – 4). Job stopped his complaints because he was persuaded that God does indeed care about His entire creation, that God is involved in an ongoing way, and that God would not abandon His creation because of His great love for it. Job was not silenced by God's sheer power as if God had just bullied him into silence. God's response to Job, and to us, in our painful questions about human suffering and evil, is not to claim that He is 'in control' so that we had better just be silent about it. His response is to say, 'I am involved. I am affected.' God's response stresses His ongoing involvement with, love for, and care for His creation.

This is why, when Jesus spoke to his disciples about being persecuted because of their loyalty to him (Matthew 5:9 – 12, Luke 6:20 – 26), and when Paul spoke about the persecution falling on him as 'filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Colossians 1:24), they were saying that the task of being God's covenant partner now falls on the church. The suffering Israel sustained from human and spiritual enemies trying to thwart God's purposes now fall upon the body of Christ, the locus of God's purposes being carried out by God's human partners. However, there is one form of suffering that Israel suffered that does not fall on the church: the punishment that came from God for disobeying the Mosaic Law. To that subject I now turn.

Third, as I have already begun to elaborate, Israel was subjected to refinement and chastisement from God Himself. One can observe the occurrences in the Old Testament where God actively judged specific sins of Israel. He took the lives of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu because they offered strange fire before the Lord in the priestly service (Leviticus 10:1 – 3). He slew disobedient Israelites in the wilderness for complaining (Numbers 11:1 – 2), God

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<sup>5</sup> Professor Elenore Stump, *Job and the Problem of Evil*, <http://www.veritas.org/media/talks/151>.

caused the earth to open under Korah and his rebellion (Numbers 16). He sent snakes to bite the Israelites after they longed to go back to Egypt (Numbers 21). God withdrew His protection from Israel in the face of various Canaanite peoples: the inhabitants of Ai in Joshua 7; the enemies roundabout in Judges; and the Philistines in Samuel. God took the life of Uzzah who touched the ark (2 Samuel 5). He brought Assyria and Babylon to the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, respectively, to punish them for their idolatry, oppression, injustice, and reliance upon Gentile military powers. They invaded Israel and took them captive.

God's judgments on Israel had a double meaning. On the one hand, they were active movements of God to judge and purge something out of the people, to purify the people and probably remove the 'worst offenders.'<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, these incidents were moments when God was revealing and making visible something that was already happening in the hearts of the Israelites. For example, the incident of the snakes in Numbers 21:5 – 9 is contrasted with Numbers 21:1 – 4 where God delivered the Israelites from the Canaanite king Arad. The strange response of the Israelites in 21:5, longing for the captivity under Egypt, was perfectly inappropriate. Something in them was turning away from God, and dying. God made that visible and concrete through this incident where some Israelites died. In that sense, God was revealing what was occurring within the hearts of those Israelites. He was pointing out an ontological reality and danger deep within the hearts of the people, namely, their choice of death, and not simply taking offense over a bad behavior.

Thus, the Israelites suffered at the hands of God because of their sins. Isaiah said that Jerusalem and its people had 'received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins' (Isaiah 40:2). The writer of Hebrews said retrospectively about Israel's history, 'Every transgression and disobedience [of Israel] received a just penalty' already (Hebrews 2:2). Why did Israel suffer this way? Because Israel repeatedly failed the moral dimension of the Mosaic Law, which was not even as high an ethical standard as Jesus' own teaching, but was enough to condemn Israel before God; this led Moses to speak of Israel's future exile as certain (Deuteronomy 27 – 30). Notably, the last commandment barring covetousness, or jealousy, revealed all manner of coveting in the hearts of each Israelite, as it did for the apostle Paul (Romans 7:7 – 13). Covetousness was the primal sin that led Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit; they coveted God's authority and wanted to displace Him from the creation and become their own 'gods.' But from a cursory glance at any of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, God did not punish covetousness per se, but the outward actions that resulted inevitably from coveting: a lust for control that led to idolatry, a lust for wealth that led to injustice and oppression of the poor, a lust for power that led to corruption in the official leadership, a lust for sex outside the vision of God for human sexuality, a lust for security that led to Israel's kings making foreign alliances, including using marriage as a political tool, etc.

God did not punish covetousness per se until He punished it in the very flesh of Jesus. Jesus never coveted anything, and the very faithfulness and innocence of Jesus was the just wrath of God poured out on covetous human flesh, and the very judgment of God on human sin at its source. But Jesus suffered what he did not deserve in a manner that involved far more internal struggle and battle than Israel did, for his struggle was to cleanse out covetousness and all sinfulness from his own humanity, to become the source of victory over sin at the source. 'In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.' (Hebrews 5:7 – 9)

Thus, Jesus judged and put to death the sinful flesh that he had taken on. Put the other way round, all the judgments of God that were poured out upon the flesh of Israel pre-figured and made externally visible, to a limited and partial degree, God's future judgment on the flesh of Jesus. Israel's experience of suffering under the Mosaic Law and God's wrath pre-figured Jesus' own experience of suffering. Jesus' sinless life was not effortless; it came at great cost to him. Nor did Jesus remain sinless simply to take the judgment of God upon the cross. Rather, he embraced the judgment and wrath of God at every moment of his life, precisely by struggling at every single moment of his life against the human flesh he had taken on. Even Calvin noted this: 'When it is asked how, after abolishing sins,

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<sup>6</sup> Let me be quick to add that I do not think God was instantly consigning them to hell. If God offered people who died during the Flood another chance to accept the lordship of Jesus (1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6), it is my hope that this principle is extended to others whose lives God took in the Old Testament. See below. In addition, the nature of hell needs to be clarified; along with the Eastern Orthodox Church, and C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, I understand the hell to be a state of being in which human beings can place themselves, in which the love of God is experienced as torment.

Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by the whole course of his obedience...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ's death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, 'he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'...Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself, that he might promote our benefit.'<sup>7</sup> Calvin himself says that Jesus' whole life, not just his death, was atoning and purifying. His whole life was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity in himself. The cross simply made visible what was happening in the flesh of Christ all along. The suffering of Jesus on the cross made visible what he was suffering all along. And it also made visible what was happening to the flesh of Israel to a lesser and limited extent.

People who read the Bible in a flat, linear way often get the impression that God deals with all people the way He dealt with Israel, though perhaps to a lesser degree. That is, on an individualistic reading, they interpret bad circumstances as the wrath of God, and, not surprisingly, they interpret material blessing (for instance) as the blessing of God for themselves as *individuals*. Read and interpreted corporately, when events happen in nature or politics, people often ascribe an interpretation of those events to the wrath of God *on an entire people*: the earthquake in Haiti signifies the judgment of God on Haiti's voodoo and supposed pact with the devil; the Al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Towers and Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 signifies a judgment of God on the U.S. for allowing abortion and gay marriage, etc. Also involved is the tendency to think, as Calvin thought and the Reformed Theonomists (including the American Puritans) did after him, that Israel represents a blueprint for a Christian civil society, i.e. a theocracy. And once that paradigm is the lens through which people see, they interpret national disturbances as bad omens of God's failure to live up to His laws, and national fortunes as God's approval for their moral righteousness. The tendency to read one's self into the story of Old Testament Israel is strong, but wrong-headed.

The questions we must ask are: Does God deal with other people, whether individually or corporately, the same way He dealt with Old Testament Israel? Does Israel provide us with God's blueprint for how Christians ought to influence every society? I would insist that the answer is absolutely 'no' to these questions, because the tendency to read *one's self* into the story of Israel is founded on a faulty understanding of the role of Israel. God's special covenant with Israel made them absolutely unique among all peoples of the world (Deuteronomy 11). This special relationship where God and Israel agreed to the covenant in order to purify Israel made them different. And over time, God drew the cords of His transforming, purifying love closer and closer around Israel: He dealt with the patriarchs of Genesis 12 – 50 more 'loosely' than the whole nation from Exodus 19 onward, etc. But because this did not solve the immediate issue of Israel's sinful flesh, they also resisted. The chastisement of God upon Israel was a direct result of the special covenant that bound together God and Israel. The tighter God drew His cords of love around Israel, drawing them to Himself and His purposes, the more they resisted, sinned, and were judged. When God was shaping Israel to have no dynastic kingship (a bureaucratic state!), Israel insisted that they have one. When God condescended to give them a dynastic kingship, God condescended but drew the king into a radically different posture from the kings of the nations roundabout Israel. But the kings of Israel became jealous of the Gentiles and acted like them, so God judged the Davidic kings. Even when God eliminated idolatry from Israel through the Babylonian captivity, they still developed a nationalistic and ethnocentric rebellion to God's plan to redeem the world. This became part of God's preparation of Israel for His personal coming to them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It made them reject Jesus precisely because His love extended to the Romans (Luke 4:14 – 30) as well as the marginal within Israel. Hence the covenant between God and Israel 'was paradoxical in character – the more particular it became, the more universal it also became; the deeper the bond between God and man was driven in the human existence of Israel, the closer redemption made contact with creation; the more intimately Israel was tied to the one and only God, the God of all, the more the activity of grace broke through the limitation of national Israel and reached out to all the world. That was particularly apparent in the election of Israel to be God's *laos*, people, upon which Israel's aspirations to be *ethnos*, nation, were shattered again and again.'<sup>8</sup> That is the suffering

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5. See also T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.56 – 82.

<sup>8</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.51

of Israel at the hands of God. It was unique among all peoples, and it reached a culmination and finality in the suffering of Jesus.

Once again, I reiterate my conviction that Israel is not 'every man' or 'every woman' or 'any Christian nation.' It does *not* represent God's active involvement in the affairs of all humanity to judge specific sins with suffering. God does not judge nations through the outcomes of international politics and the catastrophic wars one nation wages against another. Circumstances and historical events do not reflect the will and character of God. Rather, God's judgment on Israel before Jesus represented God's active involvement in the physical body and mind of Jesus to judge the humanity he had taken on, taking it all the way to its death. So the suffering was specific to Israel, and then concentrated in Jesus, and brought to an end through his death and resurrection. Paul's exhilarating statement, 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1) is exact because, as a Jew speaking to those who 'know the Law' (Romans 7:1), he can fully appreciate the fact that, because he is joined to Jesus who stands on the other side of the Law's condemnation, he no longer lives under the Mosaic Law and its threat of exile and punishment because of the displeasure of God. Israel struggled under the Law, and then Jesus assumed sinful flesh and concentrated the great struggle and suffering of Israel within himself, leaving no remainder. The suffering of Old Testament Israel in this third aspect, that which came by the angry chastisement of God for breaking the Mosaic Law, was unique and has been completed by Jesus.

In fact, the above three points offer a fascinating response to the question of why God did not have multiple 'chosen people' groups. More on this larger question can be found below in my summary, but with regards to the suffering of Israel, I believe such a scenario to be theoretically impossible. Why? For one, the fact of Jesus' unique incarnation and personal significance makes it logically impossible to have multiple 'chosen people' groups. Jesus had to inherit a history of people who had borne the brunt of God's chastisement upon their flesh to make it his very own. There is no disconnecting Jesus from the Mosaic Law, for it was the Mosaic Law which articulated the judgment of God that was ultimately executed within and upon the human flesh of Jesus. Had God established another covenant with another people, He would have had to make either group's suffering a waste and a lie, because Jesus would only be conceived once and carry out his saving mission once for all. The Word of God become flesh in Jesus could not shed humanity and then take on another human flesh, for that would render the union between God and humanity mere whim rather the bond of permanent saving significance. Secondly, although this hypothetical scenario is already ruled out, if God had another 'chosen people' in addition to Israel, He would have exposed more of humanity to attack from their own neighbors or from Satanic forces arrayed against Him. The suffering of Israel was quite enough.

### **Suffering and the Christian God**

Our subject merits a much longer treatment than can be given here, but I wish to move onto the relevance of this conclusion for tackling the topic of suffering in general. At this point, we have almost fully extricated God Himself from being a cause of suffering, generally. I focused here on Israel's direct experience as a community and must leave aside for other times and more specialized occasions the discussion about suffering that befell non-Israelite people at the Flood of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plague on the firstborn of Egypt at the time of the Exodus, and the destruction of the city of Jericho at the time of Joshua. This was necessary to stay within the parameters of the paper – namely, considering the role of Israel. Suffice to say that I think we can make two observations about these incidents affecting non-Israelites in Scripture: First, they were unique and are not repeatable. For example, God said He will never again bring about a flood (Genesis 9:12 – 17). Israel's Exodus deliverance from Egypt and the conquest of Joshua are unrepeatable because the history of Israel is unrepeatable; they have run the course of their history as Moses foresaw it. I assume Sodom and Gomorrah are unrepeatable because they were intertwined with interactions God had with Abraham and Lot. Hence, none of those incidents serve as models for God's interactions with us in the present. Second, we must consider Peter's comments in 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 about Jesus meeting those who were slain during the flood. Peter's remarks lead me to think that when God took life in the Old Testament, at least on that occasion and perhaps on others, He did not simply cast them into damnation. Rather, God took their lives before they hardened their own hearts so firmly to the point that they could not choose Jesus. I believe they still have a chance at choosing Jesus when he appears in glory. God's mercy was severe, yes, but it was still a form of mercy. Again, much more about this can be said, but I think my comments address those loose ends.

God does not cause human suffering, and the experience of Israel actually proves that point rather than calls it into question. Suffering is the result of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey in the garden and plunge the creation into

disharmony. The natural world and the created order is wracked with convulsions because humanity pushed off God, the source of life, to a distance, and death has set into the cosmos in such a way that human life is marked by suffering. The world had its own geologic processes, but in the creation, there appeared to be some kind of divine protection and blessing afforded to humanity – perhaps the role of angels as Psalm 91 suggests – and apparently on the created world too if humanity moved outward in obedience to God to spread the garden. That divine protection appears to have been rejected once the fall occurred. Paul summarizes this by saying, ‘For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him [i.e. *Adam*] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Romans 8:20 – 21). In this corruption of creation, God was simply according the wishes of humanity, whom He had placed in real authority over the creation. Adam and Eve wished to kick God out of the creation by becoming their own authorities. Thus, the pains in childbirth and the thorns and thistles are not simply ‘retribution’ by a God who felt spited; they were ontological consequences of pushing the life-giving God out of the creation: All life-producing activities would now happen with pain and sorrow, because God was not in the center of humanity’s life-producing activities. Even human beings would be directly affected by the physical world’s suffering through disease, genetic mutation, and death.

God, out of His love for humanity, did not consent to this rejection, but immediately began to redeem humanity. He did not allow death and sin to have the final word, nor did He destroy the rebellious world, nor did He remain at a distance. Such courses of action would have violated His very character of love for us. Instead, He did what His love and very being required: He re-engaged humanity, suffered on our behalf, and, by embracing the fullness of death, defeated sin at its source: in us. This is why Israel’s history took its glorious and often painful route. Israel suffered on behalf of the world. God’s chosen people – which was still of voluntary membership – bore the role of representing God in the world and being His human partner in His purposes. But Israel was also the obstacle to God. God overcame that resistance in and through Himself, by coming personally as the king of the Jews, Jesus of Nazareth. And the suffering of Israel from all three sources climaxed in a tidal wave of suffering upon and within the one man, Jesus. He suffered redemptively and calls His people to suffer redemptively with Him for the sake of His purposes. There is only one sense in which we can say ‘God allows suffering’: He does not send Jesus back to earth right now to end it all immediately. Otherwise, God in Christ is working by the Spirit in us to undo human evil and suffering.