

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God's Word: Exploring God's Will and Human Free Choice

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Introduction

Natural disasters, disease, and human evil raise the specter of a cruel God. Does God care about human suffering? Or is God whimsical? Is He somehow causing these events for some mysterious purpose? Or can He be separated from them? And in what sense? This paper seeks to be absolutely to the biblical texts to answer those questions. It is my conviction that God is not causing this kind of suffering. But He is trying to heal the suffering behind the suffering: the corruption of human nature, which is the source of human evil and reason for our vulnerability to the natural world.

Early Christian Theology and Apologetics on the Sovereignty of God

The early Christian evangelistic literature called the *Epistle to Diognetus*, which dates back to the 1st or 2nd century, says that if you want to see God and know how God is sovereign over the world, you have to first *care for the poor*. That is, according to this early Christian letter, you have to honor human beings as made in the image of God, because it shapes your vision. This is amazing:

‘If you also desire [to possess] this faith, you likewise shall receive first of all the knowledge of the Father. For God has loved mankind, on whose account He made the world, to whom He rendered subject all the things that are in it, to whom He gave reason and understanding, to whom alone He imparted the privilege of looking upwards to Himself, whom He formed after His own image, to whom He sent His only-begotten Son, to whom He has promised a kingdom in heaven, and will give it to those who have loved Him. And when you have attained this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled? Or, how will you love Him who has first so loved you?’

That is, the way to first know God is through Jesus, because through the Son, the Father makes himself known. One cannot look at natural disasters or the state of the world as it is. One must look at Jesus. Then, one must live according to his teaching, because one must participate in the love that he has for those injured by the world:

‘And if you love Him, you will be an imitator of His kindness. And do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing. For it is not by ruling over his neighbours, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can anyone by these things become an imitator of God. But these things do not at all constitute His majesty. On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbour; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God. *Then thou shalt see, while still on earth, that God in the heavens rules over [the universe]; then thou shalt begin to speak the mysteries of God; then shalt thou both love and admire those that suffer punishment because they will not deny God; then shalt thou condemn the deceit and error of the world when thou shall know what it is to live truly in heaven, when thou shalt despise that which is here esteemed to be death, when thou shalt fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who shall be condemned to the eternal fire, which shall afflict those even to the end that are committed to it. Then shalt thou admire those who for righteousness' sake endure the fire that is but for a moment, and shalt count them happy when thou shalt know [the nature of] that fire.*’ (*Epistle to Diognetus*, ch.10, emphasis mine)

The reason for honoring every human being, and enabling their proper freedom is rooted in the nature and character of God.

‘As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Saviour He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; for violence has no place in the character of God.’ (*Epistle to Diognetus*, ch.7)

The violence the author is speaking of refers to overriding human free will. That, according to this early Christian author, is the most fundamental type of *violence*. And this, God does not do. This is evidence of how Christian theologians and evangelists discussed the character of God, and the sovereignty of God. How did they reason their way through the Scriptures to arrive at this conclusion?

Israel and the Old Testament in Context

A common belief that people had in ancient times was that history is circular. Israel, however, 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* once read,

‘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*).

The Old Testament: Establishing the Sovereignty of God’s Word

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. ^{1:3} Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.
2. ^{1:6} Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’
3. ^{1:9} 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. ^{1:11} 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. ^{1:14} 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; ¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth’; and it was so.

6. ^{1:20} 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. ^{1:22} God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
8. ^{1:24} 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. ^{1:26} 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.' ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. ^{1:28} 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 is 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 and injustice to God's causality, then we have assigned evil and injustice to God's character. And if we do that, then we have made God arbitrary and evil and unjust. 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.

The 'sovereignty of God' is sometimes defined as 'God causes everything.' There are many passages and situations in the Old Testament which support the view that God is not omni-causal:¹

1. God's regret, showing that God was not pleased with the outcome of some human decisions. Regret would not be an appropriate expression if God controlled a human being in such a way that they had no real choice in the matter:
 - a. 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. And the Lord *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved* in His heart. (Gen.6:5 – 6)
 - b. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, '*I regret* that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.' (1 Sam.15:10)
2. Various 'moral outrage' passages, showing that God was not pleased with the moral decisions of some people
 - a. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for *while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster*. (Zech.1:15)
 - b. The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, *that My anger may burn* against them and that I may destroy them..." (Ex.32:9 – 10)
 - c. Nathan then said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! *Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight?* You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. (2 Sam.12:7 – 9)

¹ See Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

- d. Then he began to *denounce* the cities in which most of his miracles were done, *because they did not repent*. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you. (Mt:10:20 – 24; Lk.10:12 – 16)
 - e. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! *How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling*. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!’ (Mt.23:36 – 39; Lk.13:33 – 35; 19:41 – 44)
 - f. *I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent* of her immorality. (Rev.2:21; 9:20 – 21; 16:9 – 11)
3. Various ‘I did not intend that’ passages, showing God did not cause a certain event:
 - a. The LORD said to Samuel, ‘Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for *they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them*. Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day--in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods--*so they are doing to you also*. (1 Sam.8:7 – 8)
 - b. And he said to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, ‘Because *you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction*, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.’ (1 Ki.20:42)
 - c. Oh, rebellious children...who carry out a plan, *but not mine*; who make an alliance, but *against my will*, adding sin to sin. (Is. 30:1)
 - d. If anyone fiercely assails you *it will not be from Me*. Whoever assails you will fall because of you. (Isa.54:15)
 - e. By refusing to be baptized by [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers *rejected God’s purpose for themselves*. (Lk.7:30)
 4. Various ‘what more could I have done?’ and ‘in vain’ passages, showing that God wanted more human response than how people actually responded:
 - a. The Lord said to Moses, “*How long* will this people spurn Me? And *how long* will they not believe in Me, *despite all* the signs which I have performed in their midst? I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they.” (Num.14:11 – 12)
 - b. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. ‘*What more was there to do* for My vineyard that I have not done in it? *Why*, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? (Isa.5.3 – 4)
 - c. *In vain* I punished your people; they did not respond to correction. (Jer.2:30)
 - d. During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, ‘Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. *I thought* that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.’ (Jer.3:6)
 - e. Then I said, ‘How I would set you among My sons and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of the nations! And I said [*thought*], ‘You shall call Me, My Father, and not turn away from following Me.’ (Jer.3:19)
 - f. *What shall I do* with you, O Ephraim? *What shall I do* with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early. (Hos.6:4)
 5. Various ‘testing’ passages, showing that in these cases, God does not know what a person will actually decide, though He might know the range of possible choices:
 - a. God *tested* Abraham (Gen.22:1)... ‘*Now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ (Gen.22:12)

- b. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may *test* them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.’ (Ex.16:4)
 - c. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, *testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.* (Dt.8:2)
 - d. And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, *God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.* (2 Chr.32:21)
6. Various ‘if’ or ‘may’ or ‘perhaps’ passages, showing that God was giving people a real choice:
- a. You will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac... *But if* the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath (Gen.24:4, 8)
 - b. The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see *if* they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and *if* not, I will know. (Gen.18:20 – 21)
 - c. And it shall come about that *if* they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they *may* believe the witness of the last sign. (Ex.4:8)
 - d. Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, ‘The people *might* change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.’ (Ex.13:17)
 - e. Then David said, ‘O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has heard for certain that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? *Will Saul come down* just as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.’ And the LORD said, ‘*He will come down.*’ (1 Sam.23:10 – 11) But Saul did *not come down*, because David did not go that way.
 - f. For *if* you truly amend your ways and your deeds, *if* you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor... (Jer.7:5)
 - g. For *if* you men will indeed perform this thing, then... But *if* you will not obey these words... (Jer.22:4 – 5)
 - h. This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. *Perhaps* they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. (Jer.26:2 – 3) *If* you will not listen to Me, to walk in My law which I have set before you... (Jer.26:4)
 - i. *Perhaps* when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin. (Jer.36:3) *Perhaps* their supplication will come before the Lord, and everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and the wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people. (Jer.36:7)
 - j. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken; wail over her! Bring balm for her pain; *perhaps* she may be healed. (Jer.51:8)
 - k. Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. *Perhaps* they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. (Ezk.12:3f)
 - l. And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And *if* anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.’ (Mt.21:1 – 3)
 - m. The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; *perhaps* they will respect him.’ (Lk.20:13)
7. The ‘divine counsel’ motif, when God invites consultation from his human partners, and then changes His mind:

- a. Abraham came near and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city... Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike... (Gen.18:23 – 25) Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?” And He said, “*I will not destroy it* on account of the ten.” (Gen.18:32)
 - b. The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, *that My anger may burn* against them and that I may destroy them...” Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people...? Turn from Your burning anger and *change Your mind* about doing harm to Your people...” So the Lord *changed His mind* about the harm which He said He would do to His people. (Ex.32:9 – 14) emphasizing Moses’ choice to intercede with God for Israel.
 - c. Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” So the Lord said, “I have pardoned them *according to your word*... (Num.11:19 – 20) emphasizing Moses’ choice to intercede with God for Israel.
 - d. The Lord *changed His mind* about this... The Lord *changed His mind* about this. (Amos 7:1 – 6)
8. Various ‘conditional’ present or ‘conditional’ futures, showing that Jesus was not certain exactly when something would happen:
- a. Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! *But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.*’ (Mt.25:14 – 20)

In all of these cases, God gives human beings genuine free choice. He can work within a certain amount of uncertainty, because He knows His ultimate goal with certainty.

God’s ultimate purpose of coming in the person of Jesus was never thwarted. He declared His own purpose by 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.

God’s Partnership with Israel: Did God Cause Suffering?

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 appears to have attempted to thwart God's plan to overthrow him. 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 – 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 '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. 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 in the attacks of 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 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.'² 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

² 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.

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, 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.'³ 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 11th, 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 they rely 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

³ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5. See also T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.56 – 82.

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.'⁴ That is the suffering 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.

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. 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

⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p.51

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 – a la Psalm 91 – 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, God was simply according the wishes of humanity. They wished for death, and God consented. But 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.