



To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering

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FACED WITH THE REALITIES OF SUFFERING AND EVIL, CHRISTIANS CAN SAY SOMETHING, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say.¹ They cannot “explain” suffering or “resolve” the problem of evil or provide “answers” to these issues or develop an airtight “theodicy.” Such words are sometimes used to characterize or caricature efforts to say something, often as a distraction from pursuing the questions or as a way of shutting down the conversation. In response, the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and “explanation,” though it does not propose a single place to stand in that room, as if pastoral discernment were not needed.

The Bible, not least the Old Testament, knows of the experience of suffering and evil at both individual and communal levels, and speaks about those realities in forthright terms (e.g., the laments). The Bible also dares to connect God with both suffering and evil and invites its readers into a conversation about the nature of that connection (e.g., divine judgment). Generally, biblical texts bring various angles of vision to bear on the complexity of the realities of suffering and evil and God’s relationship thereto.

At the least, biblical perspectives can rule out several overarching “explanations.” To know of these can be pastorally and theologically helpful, though this

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¹Paul Sponheim and I have taught an interdisciplinary course on this topic for several years, and these brief articles reflect some of the concerns addressed in that course. Professor Sponheim wrote his article first, and I am much indebted to the range and rigor of his work. I responded by attending to comparable themes from a biblical perspective.

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Both systematic theology and biblical theology allow and embolden Christians to say something about God, evil, and suffering without falling into the trap of too-facile explanations. Theological care and pastoral discernment are both called for in this conversation between professors Sponheim and Fretheim.

knowledge does not eliminate the responsibility of discernment. For example, the Bible does not claim that *all* suffering is the will of God or that *no* suffering is the will of God. Or, that *all* suffering is due to sin or that *no* suffering is due to sin. Or, that *all* suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs or that *no* suffering is bad. More generally, deism (the absence of God from involvement in the life of the world) seems not to be represented in the biblical writings. At the other extreme, a monism or a divine micromanagement of the life of the world seems rarely to be claimed, if at all.²

I. A GOD OF RELATIONSHIPS

Fundamental to thinking about suffering and evil from a biblical perspective is the belief in a God who is in genuine relationship to the world. That this relationship is asymmetrical is evident in such biblical themes as God's holiness, eternality, and the inability to plumb the depths of God. At the same time, God wills to be known, has revealed God's self in manifold ways (Heb 1:1-2), and denies any interest in keeping the chosen people ignorant of the divine ways (Gen 18:17-19; Jer 33:3; Amos 3:7; see John 16:12-15). Indeed, human engagement with God will elicit knowledge of God and God's ways in a manner that passivity or self-effacement will not (witness the interaction between God and Moses in the call narrative in Exodus 3-6).³ The important testimony that God's thoughts are not our thoughts or God's ways our ways (Isa 55:8), which contextually refers to God's surprising plans for a dispirited Israel's deliverance, is spoken amid amazingly forthright and clear oracles regarding the divine salvific intentions for the exiles in the midst of their suffering (see Isa 48:6).

God's will for a genuine relationship with all creatures is grounded in the relational life of God, evidenced initially in the dialogical way in which God creates humankind (Gen 1:26) and henceforth in God's way of relating to the world (e.g., Jer 23:18-22). Relationality is fundamental to God's way of being and doing, and hence relational categories are key to interpreting such realities as suffering and evil and God's relationship thereto. Generally, God's relationship with the world is such that God is present on every occasion and active in every event, no matter how heroic or Hitlerian, and in every such moment God is at work on behalf of the best possible future for all creation, whether in judgment or salvation. That God is always and everywhere present, however, raises sharp issues regarding the nature and dynamics of the relationship. In the remarkably modern words of Gideon:

²Among the "divine pancausality" texts sometimes cited are Job 1:21; 2:10; Amos 3:6; and Isa 45:7. On these types of texts, see Fredrik Lindstrom, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983). On the basis of close exegetical work, Lindstrom claims that no monistic texts are to be found in the Old Testament. See also the helpful article that touches on some of these themes by Frederick J. Gaiser, "'To Whom Then Will You Compare Me?' Agency in Second Isaiah," *Word & World* 19/2 (1999) 141-152.

³On the theological implications of this call narrative, see my *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 52-53.

“But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?” (Judg 6:12-13).

Though the nature of the relationship between God and world cannot be factored out in any precise way, the biblical material witnesses to several directions of thought. For example, God has freely entered into relationships in such a way that God is not the only one who has something important to say. Prayer, for example, is God’s gift to human beings precisely for the sake of communication within relationship. Again and again, God honors such prayerful responses within relationship (e.g., Exod 32:11-14; 2 Kgs 20:1-7). Such human words bring new ingredients—will, energy, insight—into a situation in which God is at work; they constitute a genuine contribution to the shape of the future that is at stake. Generally, prayer is a God-given vehicle that can make a difference both to God and to the situation being addressed, though its inner workings cannot be plumbed.⁴

For another example, God has freely entered into relationships in such a way that God is not the only one who has something to do and the power with which to do it. The first words that God speaks to the newly created human beings (Gen 1:28), in developing what “image of God” means, involve commands that entail the possession and use of creaturely power: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue, have dominion. God thereby freely chooses, for the sake of a genuine relationship, not to be the only one with power in the world, entrusting creatures in the use of their God-given powers. God moves over, as it were, and makes room for others to be what they were created to be. In honoring this basic character of the Creator-creature relationship, God chooses to exercise constraint and restraint in the exercise of power in the life of the world. This is a risky move for God, as becomes shortly evident in Genesis 3 and beyond; yet, even in the face of human sinfulness and its disastrous effects, God continues to entrust human beings with creaturely responsibilities and the power to carry them out (see Gen 3:23; Psalm 8). This honoring of relationship is also risky in that it opens God up to the charge of neglect; God may well look bad in the eyes of those who think that God should not exercise such constraint and should simply take charge of every detail in our lives. From another angle, it opens God up to the charge of violence, for God chooses to act in and through instruments who often use violent means (e.g., the Babylonian armies). God’s efficacy in and through such less-than-perfect instruments will always have mixed results, and be less in accord with God’s good will than what would have happened if God had chosen to use power alone.

This divine exercise of constraint is intensified in the story of the flood, wherein God promises never to visit the earth in flood-like ways again, sealed by the rainbow (Gen 8:21-22; 9:8-17). God thereby limits the divine options in responding to the world’s sin and evil. Judgment will certainly occur so that sin and

⁴For a thorough study of biblical prayer in terms of divine-human relationality, see Samuel Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of the Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see also Patrick D. Miller, “Prayer as Persuasion,” *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) especially 361-362.

evil do not go unchecked in the life of the world, but it will be limited in scope and intensity. Even more, the flood story witnesses to a new divine strategy in dealing with human wickedness and its ill effects. The God who so puts constraints upon the divine activity is the God whose response to human wickedness “grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6:5-6). Deciding to go with a wicked world come what may, with all of the suffering and evil that that will mean for individuals and communities, means for God a continuing grieving of the heart (see Ps 78:40; Eph 4:30). For the sake of the continued life of the world, indeed for the sake of its salvation, God bears that grief and suffering within the divine self (see Isa 43:23-25; Hos 11:8-9). The reader of the New Testament knows that this divine way of being with and for the world is supremely embodied in Jesus the Christ.

II. THE WHENCE AND WHITHER OF SUFFERING

The biblical material, too, asks the questions “Whence?” and “Whither?” and almost precisely in those terms. Indeed, these kinds of questions are not simply addressed in more general ways; they are brought directly into the presence of God. God engages those questions and is moved to respond.

The biblical laments are filled with questions of “Why?” and “How?” regarding both individual and communal suffering situations (e.g., Psalms 13; 44). Even Jesus voices that kind of question from the cross (Mark 15:34).⁵ Key figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah sharply question God regarding such issues (e.g., Gen 18:25; Exod 32:11-14; Jer 12:1-4), and in each case God responds and in varying ways. Job also confronts God with questions and challenges regarding his suffering situation (e.g., Job 23:1-7), and God evaluates Job’s speaking as “right” (Job 42:7).⁶ Challenging questions addressed to God regarding issues of suffering and evil are deeply set within the biblical tradition in which we stand. Even more, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes, and segments of several others (e.g., Psalms 49; 73), move beyond the voicing of laments and questions in the midst of suffering to struggle in more intellectual ways with the theological issues involved. These biblical traditions invite their readers to engage in reflections on these matters with equal rigor, sharp probing, and intellectual integrity.

Regarding the “whence” of suffering, the biblical material permits us to make several distinctions,⁷ though without suggesting that every suffering experience can somehow be named or gathered in these terms. At the same time, a possible discernment of the specific “whence” can importantly shape the nature of the pastoral or theological or ethical response to the question of “whither.”

⁵On the importance of biblical lament, see Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 57-71; Daniel Simundson, *Faith under Fire* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

⁶On issues of God and suffering in Job, see my “God in the Book of Job,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26 (1999) 86-93.

⁷For an earlier formulation, see my *About the Bible: Short Answers to Big Questions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999) 82-85. I am indebted to Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 53-67, for prompting this type of reflection.

1. Human beings are created with limits—of intelligence, agility, and strength. When we stretch those limits (in, say, education or sports), we may suffer for the sake of gain. If such suffering serves life, it can be called good, and part of God’s intention for the creation. Or, when we test those limits (in, say, climbing), we may suffer (in, say, a fall), not because we sin but because we make mistakes, or someone else does. Accidents happen. God has not created a risk-free world (for example, the law of gravity is both gift and danger). Importantly, as noted, God has assumed risks as well. Sin, however, can intensify the risk (for example, we may fall because we are inebriated).

2. God has created a dynamic world; earthquakes, volcanoes, glaciers, storms, bacteria, and viruses have their role to play in this becoming of the world. This is an orderly process in many ways, but randomness also plays a role; in the words of Eccles 9:11, “time and chance happen to them all.” Because we are part of this interconnected world, we may get in the way of these processes and get hurt by them. One thinks of the randomness of the gene pool or tragic encounters with certain storms or viruses. Sin, however, can intensify the encounter and the associated suffering (for example, improper use of alcohol by a mother-to-be can damage the fetus).

3. Individual sins can cause suffering to those who commit them because God made a world in which our actions have consequences for both individuals and communities, though not in some mechanistic fashion. The Bible names these effects as divine judgment, as God, usually in non-forensic ways, sees to the workings of the created moral order and mediates “the fruit of their schemes” (e.g., through the Babylonian armies [Jer 6:19; 21:14] or authorities more generally [Rom 13:4]).⁸

4. We often experience suffering, not because of something we have done, but because of what others have done to us. The Israelites in Egypt suffered because of the harsh policies of others. Importantly, as one thinks of directions for response in other oppressive situations, God did not advise the Israelites to endure their suffering, but moved to get them out of that abusive situation, the results of which are called “salvation” (Exod 15:3). Some of the sharpest indictments of human sinfulness and announcements of divine judgment are directed at those who abuse the less fortunate neighbor (e.g., Exod 22:21-28).⁹

5. We also suffer because we belong to communities that have had a long history of sinfulness with the result that its effects, which can be named “evil,” are integrated into the very structures of our life together. Manifested in such realities as ageism, racism, and sexism, everyone will make their own contribution to these

⁸On the contingent character of divine wrath and judgment, see the excellent discussion by Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962) 279-298.

⁹On issues of moral order, see Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Patrick Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983).

systemic evils to be experienced by coming generations.¹⁰ In thinking about these forms of evil taking on a life of their own, we move toward biblical thinking about the demonic. In the latest Old Testament texts and into the New Testament there emerges something approaching a limited cosmic dualism (Satan). This reality is represented as a metaphysical power that stands temporally (not eternally) between God and world, opposing and subverting God's work. In terms of the development of such thinking, one may speak of anti-God forces, initially embodied in historical figures (e.g., pharaoh), which in theological reflection over time are thrown onto a cosmic screen, taking on metaphysical proportions (see Isa 30:7; Ezek 29:3-5; 32:2-8). Or, in more objective terms, a build-up of historical evil over time becomes systemic, affecting even cosmic spheres.

6. Suffering may be the effect of a vocation to which we have been called by God (see 1 Pet 2:21; Mark 8:34). Such vocational suffering, which is explicitly taken up for the sake of the neighbor and could be avoided, may be called the will of God (see Isa 53:10). The God who calls others to a vocation that may entail suffering is no stranger to that kind of vocation and to that suffering. The God who "knows" the sufferings of Israel (Exod 3:7) has entered deeply into our suffering world in Jesus Christ and made it his own so that neither suffering nor evil constitutes a final word for the creation.

God is linked to each of these types of suffering in varying ways, and how that linkage is made with respect to specific situations will shape pastoral directions to be taken. God creates a world with risks and challenges wherein suffering is part of life apart from sin,¹¹ but also a world wherein sin is possible and can intensify that suffering experience and bring still further suffering in its train. God sustains a world wherein sin and its effects are carried along and are built more deeply into the structures of existence over time. God judges the world in and through the created moral order, acting within the interplay of human actions and their consequences, so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the life of the creation. God saves the world by taking its suffering into the very heart of the divine life, bearing it there, and then wearing it in the form of a cross. ⊕

¹⁰For varying ways in which the Old Testament speaks of the perseverance and power of evil, see Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

¹¹The discussion of Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 53-67, is most helpful in drawing out the biblical themes that support this assertion.