

# **Theodicy in Job: Ancient Word, Modern Reflections**

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“I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words.” – C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have faces*

## **1.Introduction**

“Why?” A one word question that can evoke a number of responses: from a challenge to understand one’s motives, to a query to discern one’s heart, to the initial prompting of doubt. When directed to God, the question rightly reflects the limits of human understanding; however, the motive is more often to challenge the perceived activity of God. One’s inability to understand the ordered structure of God in a world filled with reality that does not seem to reflect the hand of God has led many to a crisis of faith. For some, the crisis is relieved by disavowing any possibility of God. For others, the “goodness” of God is set aside or the ability of God to act is questioned. Still others might challenge the reality of evil or suffering, suggesting it is a matter of perception. Indeed, the task of balancing a confession that states God is good, God is omnipotent and evil exists is not a new one.

A belief that seems commonplace is the basic confession that based upon the character of God, God will bless those that do well, and punish those who do wrong. Within the biblical narratives, this position seems to be reflected in God’s own declaration concerning the nation of Israel and their possession of the Promised Land. Indeed, the call to fidelity found in Moses’ three speeches to the Israelites in Deuteronomy and the assertion of covenant and land in relation to the people’s faithfulness to God became the cornerstone of a theology of divine retribution. This theological movement, however, was not limited to the national identity of Israel, but became a lens through which one viewed everyone. One should be able to discern the spiritual state of any individual based upon the level of well-being or suffering that person was experiencing. This thinking takes seriously God’s character and power as well as placing a high value on the revealed Laws of God. It should be fool proof. This theological approach struggles, however, when suffering or evil seems to afflict the righteous or innocent. At such a point, one’s balance of God’s goodness, power and suffering often fails much like a juggler who has added one ball too many.

It is precisely into this dilemma that the book of Job speaks. In Job, one finds the story of an upright man who experiences unexplainable suffering. The narrative of the event is rather short (two chapters at the beginning and half a chapter at the end). Instead, one finds a series of dialogues between Job, three of his friends, a young man and, eventually, God. The accepted theology of divine retribution is

expressed eloquently and comprehensively by the friends of Job. Yet, Job finds answers to challenge them based upon his conviction of the truth of his innocence. In the course of these speeches, one wrestles with how to respond when theology doesn't match reality. Such a challenge is needed for every believer living in the modern world as so many have moved toward sceptical, agnostic, or hostile expressions regarding God. In order to best understand this challenge, one needs to follow the arguments presented in Job, grasp the central solution offered in Job and draw parallels for the modern context.

## **2. Divine Retribution according to Job's Friends**

Within the three cycles of speeches between Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, one finds a basic proposition of God's activity in the world expressed with varying conviction and implication in light of Job's circumstances. All three affirm the principle of divine retribution—that God will bless the righteous and punish the wicked—and each seeks to interpret the circumstances of Job in light of that conviction. As a result, the reader is confronted with subtle, yet significant, variations of the principle in this process.

### **2.1 Insights from Eliphaz**

Eliphaz approaches the task of balancing the principle of divine retribution and the circumstances of Job from the foundational assumption that innocent never suffer, at least not permanently (Clines, 1989: xl). Indeed, it is with this very fact that he seeks to comfort Job in his first speech: "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?"<sup>1</sup> (4:7). As Job does not respond to such obvious wisdom, and, indeed, will challenge him, Eliphaz is forced to adapt his theory.

In his first speech (4:1-5:27), Eliphaz seems to accept that Job is innocent over the whole of his life and can be characterized as upright. This affirmation is meant to be comforting as he concludes that any suffering Job may have endured will be temporary. He does, however, introduce the understanding that Job's suffering may be categorized as "correction" or "discipline" (5:17). In the second speech (15:1-35), Eliphaz still allows for the truth of Job's general innocence prior to his suffering; however, he begins to question the manner of Job's responding to the advice of his friends. Indeed, he sees in Job's responses the evidence of sin: "Sin prompts your mouth; you adopt the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, not mine..." (15:5-6a). In other words, for the manner of his responding, one finds evidence that Job deserves to suffer! As he continues, he argues that, ultimately, no one can claim innocence (15:14) and, obviously, God knows better in this matter. Even the most "innocent" of persons, like Job, deserves punishment at some point. In a major development for Eliphaz, he focuses on the inevitable woes and grief of the unrighteous—both in the present and future (15:20-35). The certainty of the suffering of the wicked is used as a word of hope for Job—he's not yet one of the wicked. In his final speech (22:1-30), Eliphaz abandons any pretext of supporting Job's innocence. As Job has continued to question the accepted wisdom offered, Eliphaz becomes more convinced that Job must be deserving of suffering. The more he has pondered Job's circumstances, the more convinced that God would not act against Job if he were righteous: "What pleasure would it give the almighty if you

were righteous?" (22:3a). As this truth becomes clear for Eliphaz, he now calls into question Job's piety before his suffering (22:4-11). He finds in Job's pleas to be left alone more affinity with the wicked than the righteous (22:17) and concludes this speech with impassioned pleas to "submit to God" (22:19), "accept instruction" (22:20), and "return to the Almighty" (22:23).

In the course of the three cycles, Eliphaz maintains the foundational proposition that God does not punish the innocent. As he is forced to look upon the world, he begins to find ways to adapt this position to best explain any gaps in his theology and experience. Ultimately, he concludes that God has greater perspective and truly knows the condition of every person. With God's understanding, no one can truly claim innocence; therefore, everyone who suffers must deserve it. The great impossibility for Eliphaz is for anyone to be entirely righteous before the Almighty (Clines, 1989: 271). If one has been generally upright, however, any suffering experienced will be trivial by comparison to the whole of life.

## **2.2 Insights from Bildad**

Like Eliphaz, the second of Job's friends, Bildad, firmly believes in the principles of divine retribution. In truth, Bildad is even more absolute in his convictions. After Job's initial rejection of Eliphaz's logic, Bildad challenges Job: "Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?" (8:3). These questions reflect the foundational belief of Bildad that God only acts according to his character. The great impossibility for Bildad is for God to pervert justice (Clines, 1989: 271). Any question of the activity of God, by nature, is a question of God's character.

In his first speech (8:1-22), Bildad, like Eliphaz, is willing to accept the general declaration of Job's uprightness. As God is just, however, an explanation for the breadth of Job's calamity must be explained. To maintain this balance, Bildad concludes that the fault lies with Job's children: "When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin" (8:4). This seems to be the logical conclusion and maintains the balance of God's justice and the experience of suffering. Further, Bildad appeals to the truth of generations of experience to validate his conclusions.<sup>2</sup> The good news for Job is in the fact that he still lives, and, if he is indeed pure and upright, then God will restore him (8:5ff). In his second speech (18:1-21), Bildad follows Eliphaz in shifting focus to the fate of the wicked; however, as Eliphaz primarily uses the wicked as an illustration of warning, Bildad seems to view Job as nearing the wicked and in need of a stern warning. Almost the entire speech is taken with the description of the fate of the wicked and ends with the declaration that such a person "knows not God" (18:21). In the final cycle, Bildad offers a psalm of praise to the majesty of God in which he declares not only the dominion of God over all of creation, but also the incomparable nature of God (25:1-6). The moon is pale and the stars are not pure when compared with God (25:5). It is logical, therefore, to assert that no man can be righteous before God or pure in his sight (25:3). But, Bildad does not stop with that comparison; rather, in an interesting line seemingly patterned from the declaration of Psalm 8, he concludes: "how much less man, who is but a maggot—a son of man, who is only a worm!" (25:6). While the psalmist used the majesty to declare the wonder of God's concern for humanity, Bildad uses the majesty of God to measure the lack of worth of one man by comparison.

Through these speeches, Bildad strengthens his belief in the absolute application of divine retribution. When faced with the uneven evidence of Job's suffering, Bildad refuses to relinquish his position. Instead, like Eliphaz, he re-evaluates his initial observations about Job. He not only implies that Job is closer to the wicked than anyone realized, he ultimately dismisses the right of anyone to question the actions of God—whose wisdom far exceeds human ability.

### 2.3 Insights from Zophar

Of the three friends, Zophar has the least progression in his speeches. He begins with the absolute declaration that Job must be responsible for his suffering due to sin. He does not allow for Job's suffering to be explained away:

“The fact is, he would say, that Job is suffering, and suffering is inevitably the product of sin. To contextualize Job's suffering and try to set it in proportion is ultimately to trivialize it. Zophar is for principle rather than proportion; the bottom line is that Job is a sinner suffering hard at this moment for his sin” (Clines, 1989: xl).

Zophar's steadfastness is further noted in the fact that he, alone, has only two speeches—not even offering a third speech. In his first speech (11:1-20), Zophar expresses his frustration at Job's boldness and unequivocally declares that Job is a sinner and hasn't even been punished for all of his transgressions: “Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin” (11:6b). Key to his position is the certainty that God is inscrutable for the human. The great impossibility for Zophar is for any person to fathom the wisdom and knowledge of God. This results in a unique approach to suffering by viewing it in terms of mercy:

divine mercy... so frequently appealed to by Hebrew sufferers in their psalmic prayers...has been cruelly denatured in the wisdom theology of Zophar... No one may hope that God will exercise his mercy to temper his justice for he has already done so! Any mercy that God is going to show has already been allowed for before the law of retribution is called into play” (Clines, 1989:272).

Of course, his affirmation that God will invariably punish the wicked seems to run counter to the inability of humanity to discern the movements of God. As Zophar shows no doubt of Job's guilt, his counsel is in seeking forgiveness and beginning a life of righteousness. In his second, and final, speech (20:1-29), Zophar, once again, expresses surprise and dismay at Job's stubborn refusal to see the obvious truth of his sin. Like Eliphaz and Bildad, Zophar's second speech highlights the fate of the wicked. While Zophar doesn't seem to count Job as one of the wicked, he clearly believes Job is on a path that leads to wickedness. An important development is his balance of his theological premises and experience of reality. He suggests that one cannot always determine the significance of actions and events; rather, one must discern the truth gradually. In this matter, some things may seem good to the wicked (such as wealth, food, position), but the wise will be able to see the truth of these “blessings” in that the wicked will not receive fullness of satisfaction or joy from them: “He will spit out the riches he swallowed; God will make his stomach vomit them up” (20:15). Zophar demonstrates an unwavering adherence to a theological conviction.

With a near simplicity, he expresses the absolutes of his conviction that suffering equals sin. All experience must submit to this foundational declaration. Any seeming discrepancies are attributed to the limitations of human perspective.

Throughout the eight speeches of the friends, the reader is presented with a theodicy based upon the principle of divine retribution. While some variations are present, the foundational beliefs are consistent. God is omnipotent and does respond to evil. Suffering, therefore, is ultimately evidence of judgment. Suffering may be as a result of another person's sin, of secret sins, of potential sin, or direct sin, but all suffering is connected to sin according to the friends. Remember that the friends did not have the benefit of the narrative of chapter one to explain the situation. They saw in Job's situation a person of great standing and wealth which was attributed to God's blessing, brought to complete destruction—something only God could do. The conclusion seems obvious that God is the source, therefore to suggest any reason other than sin runs counter to perceived revelation of God through the generations. Nevertheless, the friends are unable to convince Job. Lest the reader be swayed by the eloquence and logic of the three friends, one needs to be reminded that in the final chapter, God reveals that these friends "have not spoken of me what is right" (42:7).

### **3. Insights from Elihu**

Elihu enters the scene as an outsider who 'cannot be silent'. Apparently, he has observed the dialogues between Job and his friends and concludes that Job has won the argument. As a result, is compelled to speak out of his anger—at Job for "justifying himself rather than God" (32:2) and with the friends "because they found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him" (32:3). In a series of three challenges, Elihu selects a portion of Job's arguments and seeks to answer it, thus, providing some additional perspective on the situation of Job.

In the first response, Elihu challenges Job's assertion that he is "pure and without sin" (33:8) yet has not heard a response from God. He counters that just as God will speak through dreams, God also speaks through suffering (33:19-22). Further, such suffering continues until either an angel speaks on his behalf or he repents. Such action on God's part ultimately has a just purpose: "to turn back his soul from the pit..." (33:30a). Elihu continues his speech and evaluates Job's suggestion that God has denied him justice (34:5-6). Much as Job's friends, Elihu will not accept such a suggestion as it impugns God's character as "it is unthinkable that God would do wrong" (34:12a); rather, Job must be wicked. The evidence is in his interpretation of Job's quoting of the evildoer in 21:15: "Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?" Elihu takes this as evidence of Job's walking with the evildoers (34:8) and paraphrases Job: "For he say, 'It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God.'" (34:9). Like Bildad, he will go on to affirm the justice of God. He argues for God's complete justice due to the unchanging nature of God. Such character expects punishment. Job must repent, therefore, or stand condemned. In his final review, he challenges Job's assertion, "I will be cleared by God" (35:2b). It is Job's certainty that he would be vindicated if he stood before God that seems unthinkable to Elihu—much as it had to Job's friends. He counters by mocking Job's perception of his own righteousness: "If you are righteous, what do you give to him [God], or what does he receive from your hand?" (35:7).

Elihu concludes that God is removed from human suffering due to the arrogance of the wicked.

In his concluding speech, Elihu moves to defend God in response to Job's "empty talk" as he has "multiplied words" without knowledge (35:16). He affirms God's retribution once again, but highlights God's justice in that he tells the afflicted of their sin. He warns Job to listen as God is "wooing you from the jaws of distress" (36:16). He concludes by affirming God's wisdom over human knowledge; God's power over human limitations; God's unchanging character over the fickle human heart. In this lengthy speech, Elihu does not propose a new theodicy; rather, a new focus for the defence of divine retribution. His tact has been to dispute Job point by point highlighting the contrast in Job and God. The final speech does, consequently, anticipate God's own revelation to Job which follows in chapters 38-41. Nevertheless, Elihu fails in precisely the same fashion that the three friends have failed—he believes Job to be guilty. He will not be moved from this assertion of guilt, not because of any evidence (as he condemned the friends) but because it is the only conclusion which fits with his theological premise. The reader, however, understands the error of the young man.

#### **4. Job's Perspective**

Throughout the book, Job has responded to a series of speeches. In his declarations, he not only dismantles the arguments of his friends, but also establishes foundational beliefs from which he will not be moved. It is important to remember that like his friends, Job is not privy to the heavenly scenes of chapters 1-2. He is also confronted with the appearance of judgment in the breath of suffering he experiences. Unlike his friends, however, he is privy to the reality of his experience and the clarity of his conscience. As a result, Job provides significantly different conclusions.

Throughout the first cycle of speeches, Job comes to a particularly important realisation: only God can answer Job. As each of the friends define Job's circumstances in terms of sin and God's judgment, Job is pushed to evaluate the established understanding of God's activity. He refuses to acknowledge their teaching insincerely. Instead of simply agreeing with them and confessing some unknown sin, he challenges them to "Teach me and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong" (6:24). He knows that he is upright in his relationship with God and refuses an answer to his dilemma that is not true. As he is not one of the wicked, his suffering does not fit the paradigm any of his friends uses. Throughout the cycle, he becomes more convinced of the need for God to speak. Most of his turmoil is how to accomplish this task if God desires to remain silent. As a result, he moves through a number of conflicting emotions and reflections: God alone can provide answers and restoration, yet Job wonders if it might be better to be left alone by God (7:16, 19); he feels he is being treated like a guilty man (Job does initially operate from the same foundation of divine retribution) and wants an explanation, yet does not think he would be able to stand before God (9:25-35). As a result, he laments his dilemma: "If I am guilty—woe to me! Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head..." (10:15a). In this statement, we find that Job is really striving to come to some new understanding. He feels he is treated like the wicked, but knows he is not. Nevertheless, he is bearing the shame as one who is wicked. In this sense of

loss, Job moves to a great conclusion: he must stand before God. He affirms all “wisdom and power; counsel and understanding” belong to God (12:13). He commits himself to seek out God: “Only grant me these two things, O God,... withdraw your hand far from me...then summon me and I will answer, or let me speak, and you reply” (13:20-22). Job illustrates for the reader the correct perspective in the midst of theological turmoil: a conviction to stand before God, alone. At some point, one must cease to be prisoner to the perceptions of friends or self and seek the face of God.

As the second round of speeches turns to a discussion of the fate of the wicked, Job dismantles much of the traditional thought. While each of the friends portrays the existence of the wicked as horrid and filled with terror or strife—either as filled with both present woe and anticipation of continued grief (Eliphaz) or overwhelmed by night fears and anxiety as the realization of no lasting name or honour confronts them (Bildad) or the assurance that the good they experience will slowly poison them and serve to bring them to punishment (Zophar), Job not only rejects their conclusions, but reveals them as false in the absolute. In 21:7-15, Job counters with his own observations of the wicked: “growing old and increasing in power”; “see their children established”; “homes are safe and free of fear”; “their little ones dance about”; “sing... make merry”; “spend years in prosperity”; “go to the grave in peace”. He even notes their mockery of God. Nevertheless, he refused to join their ranks as he recognises “their prosperity is not in their own hands” (21:16). But, after a thorough review of the “anguish” of the wicked in which Job has dismantled the observations of the friends, he challenges them “So how can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood!” (21:34). Once again, Job has been striving to come to new perspectives. Ultimately, one cannot turn to God out of the threat of the fear of the wicked. In God’s sovereignty, one does not know how God will deal with each person. While Job does accept that the wicked will receive God’s just attention, that is not the rationale for obedience; rather, the journey to God is not to miss out on judgment but to encounter God. A second significant development occurs in the second cycle. Not only does Job dismantle the observations of his friends concerning the fate of the wicked, but comes to greater perspectives on his necessary encounter with God—there must be an advocate for him in the heavenly realm (16:19-21). Initially, this one is seen as a “witness”, “advocate” and “intercessor”. As the cycle continues, the image becomes intensified. Not only, is this one who will testify and vindicate, but is now described as a “redeemer” (19:25). While he still anticipates death in the face of God, he knows one will serve as a kinsman-redeemer for his life. This certainty stems from Job’s understanding of God’s justice—even though feels his suffering doesn’t reflect God’s justice at the moment. He does not, however, ignore his suffering as inconsequential.

In his final round of speeches, Job steels his resolve. Although he wonders at his lack of justice at the hand of God, he states emphatically that he will not agree with his friends (27:1-6). Further, he expounds on the virtues of avoiding the ways of the wicked. First among the tragedies of the wicked is that he is cut off from God! (27:8-10). The true loss for the wicked is the intimacy of the council of God. In that light, he pronounces the judgment on the wicked in terms very similar to those his friends espoused (27:13-23). The ultimate secret is the pursuit of true wisdom, not a theological framework to provide understanding of one’s circumstances; rather, “The

fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding” (28:28). He ends his speech with an accounting of himself—those virtues that he has pursued in his seeking to live before God (31:1-40). Ultimately, he decides to let his life bear witness of his place before God and not the circumstances of his suffering. The final observations regarding Job, however, must include the concluding narrative in which Job is vindicated by God. His friends are judged as having spoken ill of God (42:7) and Job receives twice the wealth he had earlier (42:10, 12). The book as a whole, then, does validate the principle of divine retribution. The wicked are punished and the righteous are rewarded. What is not affirmed, however, is the application of this truth in absolute fashion. Not every blessing is a sign of favour, nor is every moment of suffering a sign of sin. Instead of trying to discern the movements of God to avoid punishment or receive gain, one is to seek God wholeheartedly. Even if all that one has is removed, the greatest treasure is to encounter the creator God.

## **5. Modern articulation**

Over the centuries Bible scholars have tried to give an answer to the problem of evil. Job’s friends tried to understand Job’s suffering in light of God’s character and their understanding of God. Modern treatments of the theodicy try to do the same. This section will articulate a summary of the modern treatments of the theodicy problem and will contribute to Christian discourse on the classic theodicy problem, namely on the question why God allows so much (human) suffering if God is indeed both omnipotent and a God of love. Millard J. Erickson (1998: 125) states, “the problem of evil is real and serious. To see the destructiveness of nature is disturbing to one who believes in an all-powerful divine being.” Thus, as W. Hamilton (1966:25) observes, for many the contemporary human issue is not merely the absence of the experience of God. It is the experience of the absence of God.

Within the long tradition of Christian reflection on this problem, various approaches have been adopted.

### **5.1. Human suffering: The need for a theological response**

Medical science and technology have immensely helped with the caring of those who endure “physical suffering” through various methods of therapy. This is only one response to human suffering. Humans suffer in different ways not considered by medical science with all of its advancements and specializations. A distinction may be made between “physical suffering” and “spiritual suffering”. This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering. Physical suffering is present when “the body is hurting” in some way, whereas spiritual suffering is “pain / suffering of the soul” The “suffering of the soul” occurs when a person asks “Why is God allowing me to suffer physically or where on earth is God during my pain?” Sarah H. Pinnock (2002: 39-40) states that the practical challenge posed by suffering first hinges on the question “How can faith survive suffering?” Second “when does religious meaning in suffering raise the question of the “eclipse of God”: the apparent absence of God in human suffering?” It is with reference to this spiritual suffering that a pastoral / theological response is required. Any theological discourse on the theodicy problem from within the South African context needs to come to

terms with the immense (human) suffering both physical and spiritual that form part of the everyday experience of numerous South Africans.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu states:

That problem of evil and suffering is important and is not to be dealt with lightly. Our ability to do evil is intimately connected to our ability to do that, which is good. One is meaningless without the other. Empathy and compassion have no meaning unless they occur in a situation where one could be callous and indifferent to the suffering of others. Suffering, it seems, is not optional. It is part and parcel of the human condition, but suffering can either embitter us or ennoble us. I hope that people will come to see that this suffering can become a spirituality of transformation when we find meaning in it.<sup>3</sup>

In an earlier article, I have suggested that the pastor's responsibility is to try to find out how a person understands God in their suffering (Harold, 2006:97). What interaction exists between the person suffering and their expectation of God? The therapeutic dimension of faith is closely connected with the person's concept of God. According to Danie Louw (1994:77) when people are experiencing suffering or pain, their perception of God becomes distorted, thus this distortion prevents a constructive application of their faith potential. Once a person's emotional filters are blocked, their vision of God becomes distorted. Thus, the quest for meaning becomes primarily a problem of a dysfunctional belief system and it becomes a problem of perception. I agree with A.E. Kasambala's statement that when one has a distorted image of God in times of suffering, this will lead to what he terms "pathological faith" (Harold, 2006:97).

## 6. The Theodicy Problem

The word "theodicy" is derived from the Greek word Θεός (God) and δικη (justice). Theodicy is a word traditionally used for an argument to show that God is righteous or just despite the presence of suffering in the world. The classic question that is addressed in any form of theodicy is why a God who is both loving and powerful would allow suffering to prevail? In other words, if God would not want us to suffer so much and if God can do something about that, why is that humans still experience so much suffering? Ronald Nash (1988:178), a theologian and philosopher, identifies specific challenges that have to be addressed in relation to the theodicy problem:

- If God is good and loves all human beings, is it reasonable to believe that He wants to deliver the creature He loves from evil and suffering.
- If God is all knowing, is it reasonable to believe that He knows how to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering
- If God is all-powerful, is it reasonable to believe that He is able to deliver His creatures from evil and suffering.

In an article entitled "HIV/AIDS and human suffering: Where on earth is God?" Ernst M. Conradie states:

The theodicy problem is much easier to formulate than to answer. In fact, any brief overview of theodicy debates over twenty centuries of Christian theology soon reveals the disparateness and inconclusiveness of these debates. Some would conclude that this clearly indicates that the problem cannot be resolved – and that God cannot and does not exist if there is so much suffering, or that God is absent, perhaps far away in

heaven, or that history is controlled by fate, not God, or that God is either not powerful or not compassionate. Others would maintain that the conceptual problem is indeed irresolvable because human beings would never be able to comprehend God's ways, given the finitude of our own knowledge, wisdom and power. Yet others would question the way in which the problem is formulated. Who are we to offer a justification of God's existence? Should we not focus, instead, on God's justification of us as sinners? (2005: 406-432).

One must acknowledge that from its inception, Christianity has been continually challenged on the philosophical, theological and pastoral levels to provide an answer to the question as to how a good God can allow suffering to prevail in the world. Defences of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of this problem, called *theodicy*, stretch back to the beginnings of Christianity. The crucial problem that has to be addressed in such reflections on the theodicy problem is how to reconcile a number of characteristics that Christians have attributed to God, with specific reference to God's love and God's power. Traditionally, God has been described in terms of characteristics such as absolute goodness, absolute power (omnipotence) and absolute knowledge (omniscience), including foreknowledge. Each of these concepts has been the subject of much debate, especially in recent theological discourse. As a result, the relationships between the characteristics have elicited much controversy, which constitutes the core of the theodicy problem.

## **7. Responses to the theodicy problem: A brief survey**

Although many have suggested that the theodicy problem is one that, in the final analysis, cannot be resolved theologically since we, as human beings cannot place ourselves in God's position, this has not prevented theologians through the ages to offer extensive reflections in this regard. During the last few decades this is the theme of numerous publications.

An early development of a theodicy is found in the book of Job. As discussed earlier the underlying assumption that governed the time in which Job lived was that people lived in a universe, which was created and sustained by God. The prevailing orthodoxy held that God has structured the world so that the righteous and wicked were rewarded and punished according to their deeds. The book of Job struggles with this religious opinion, for it begins by insisting that the justice of God is not confirmed by the reality of human suffering. The book thus calls into question the popular interpretation as to the existence of suffering in a divinely governed universe.

In order to place the treatment of the theodicy problem in a wider perspective, it is important to offer a very brief overview of the history of Christian reflection on the theodicy problem, drawing on the contributions that will follow below.

### **a) The Irenaean Theodicy**

St Irenaeus (130-202 AD) taught that the existence of suffering actually serves a purpose. From his point of view, evil provides the necessary problems through which we take part in what J. Hick (1981:40) calls "person-making". From this point of view, suffering is a means to an end so that, if it did not exist, there would be no means of spiritual development. So the foundational principle of the theodicy of Irenaeus is that we have been placed in a hostile environment in order to learn to become better

people. Philosophers such as John Hick and Richard Swinburne have adopted the view of Irenaeus in modern times. According to this view, the pains and sufferings of the world are used by God to act as a means of producing a truly good person. God could have created us perfect beings, rather God is more interested in our choosing to become who God wants us to be (at some point), rather than force us to be this way (no matter how long this takes). Leibniz explained the existence of human suffering by saying that God allows it temporarily for the greater good (S.E. Stumpf 1989:257). Leibniz like Plato and Irenaeus maintained that everything in the universe was explicable, and God must indeed create the best while allowing suffering temporarily for the greater good of his creation (Stumpf 1989:64-67). Another modern adherent to this perspective is P. Quinn. Quinn (1982:199-215), like Leibniz, argues that we cannot know the effect of removing certain evils in the world since we cannot see the world from an infinite perspective. Hick (1966), in his proposed "soul/person making" theodicy, views suffering not as evil but rather as a necessary stage in the development of a relatively immature creation into a more mature state. Following Irenaeus, Hick does not view suffering in the world because of the fall from a once perfect state but rather emphasizes suffering as a process that will bring about a gradual improvement in the human race. Hick (1981:25) sees humans as endowed with real but limited freedom that forms this relationship with God through which humans find their fulfilment. This relationship gives meaning to our human existence "as long as the process, through which we are being created by our free responses to life's mixture of good and evil, ultimately leads to good". The good that outshines all evil is not a paradise long since lost but a kingdom, which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence.

## **b) The Augustinian theodicy**

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) proposed a solution to the problem by blaming suffering on the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. From this perspective, humans are responsible for suffering by being led astray by Satan. To begin understanding Augustine's theodicy, one first needs to examine his ideas in light of two major influences in his life. Frend (1953:22-23) rightly observed that the first is *Manichaeism* (established by Mani 216-76 CE), which Augustine was associated with for some time, which emphasised the duality (separation) of darkness and light. This duality was expressed in two eternal principles – matter and God and both were opposed to each other. Escape from the bonds of the physical world (matter), was said to be the aim (or purpose) of humanity. Augustine eventually became disillusioned with Manichaeism, and as a result began to reject the notion that evil is an independent and corrupt substance. The other key factor influencing him was the teaching of Plotinus (204-70 CE). Geisler (1999:596-597) states that Plotinus was a Neo-Platonist, who taught the goodness of creation, and the chaotic nature of evil. For Augustine, God is the source of everything. He also believed the world had been created literally out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), according to the Divine will. This meant that as far as Augustine was concerned, *everything* in the world was created good or perfect. He also believed that, although there is an abundance of variety in the world, this is in fact ordered in varying degrees, according to the fullness of a creature's nature. This means that there is no totally evil thing in the world.

For Augustine matter is something essentially good, but it is also something that is able to deviate from what it should be. Thus for Augustine the notion of "evil" must

now be understood as the *privatioboni* (“privation of good”), or that which occurs when a being renounces its proper role in the order and structure of creation. In other words, something becomes “evil” when it ceases to be what it is meant to be. St. Augustine in *Confessiones* (VII. XII) further clarifies the relationship of privation to the good, by stating:

That even those things, which are subject to decay, are good. If they were of the supreme order of goodness, they could not become corrupt; but neither could they become corrupt unless they were in some way good. For if they were supremely good, it would not be possible for them to be corrupted. On the other hand, if they were entirely without good, there would be nothing in them that could become corrupt. For corruption is harmful, but unless it diminished what is good, it could do no harm. The conclusion then must be either that corruption does no harm—which is not possible; or that everything which is corrupted is deprived of good—which is beyond doubt. But if they are deprived of all good, they will not exist at all. . . . So we must conclude that if things are deprived of all good, they cease altogether to be; and this means that as long as they are, they are good.

Thus, if Augustine understood creation to be good, then this begs the question, where then did evil originate. For Augustine, evil entered the world because of the wrong choices of free beings (free in the sense that there was no external force necessitating them to do wrong). In other words, corruption occurred because of the use of our free will. According to Augustine<sup>4</sup> when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil – not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked. This not only absolves God of creating evil but also allows Him to show the world His love by bringing Christ into the world. A modern advocate of Augustine’s view can be found in Alvin Plantinga (*God, Freedom and Evil*, 1974) who claimed that for God to create a being who could only have performed good actions would have been logically impossible.

Augustine’s theodicy is often associated to the so-called free will defence – which suggests that suffering is essentially a function of human freedom and that God therefore cannot be blamed for such suffering. The logic of the free-will argument may be described in the following way:

- Evil is the result of human error.
- Human error results from human free will (the ability to do wrong).
- If we did not have free will we would be robots.
- God prefers a world of free agents to a world of robots.
- Evil is therefore an unfortunate although not an unavoidable outcome of freewill.
- For God to intervene would be to take away our free will.
- Therefore, God is neither responsible for evil nor guilty of neglect for not intervening.

Haig (2006), in summarising the free will view states that at the core of free will theodicy is the claim that God created creatures who are genuinely free in some highly desirable sense, but who are also capable of choosing to evil. It is then argued; that the good, which comes from creating such genuinely free creatures, outweighs the cost of the various evils, which will result.

### **c) Process Theodicy**

Process philosophy concerns itself with what exists in the world and with the terms of reference in which this reality is to be understood and explained (metaphysics). The task of metaphysics is, after all, to provide a cogent and plausible account of the nature of reality at the broadest, most synoptic and comprehensive level. Moreover, it is to this mission of enabling us to characterize, describe, clarify and explain the most general features of the real that process philosophy addresses itself in its own characteristic way. The guiding idea of its approach is that natural existence consists in and is best understood in terms of *processes* rather than *things* — of modes of change rather than fixed stabilities. Process philosophers see change of every sort — physical, organic, psychological — as the pervasive and predominant feature of the real<sup>5</sup>. Process theologians, who derive their philosophical influences from process philosophy, attempt to understand God and the problem of evil from the view that reality is changing and that God thus changes or is developing. According to Diehl (1996:883-885) Process Theology is a contemporary movement of theologians who teach that God is “bipolar”, or has two natures, and that God is integrally involved in the endless process of the world. God has a “primordial” or transcendent nature, God’s timeless perfection of character, and God has a “consequent” or immanent nature by which God is part of the cosmic process itself. This process is “epochal”, i.e., not according to the motion of atoms or changeless substances but by events or units of creative experience, which influence one another in temporal sequence. Process theology argues that the reality of God is not fixed and that God is still developing.

Whitehead in *Process and Reality* (1978:46) views God as “bipolar” – a term that is used to describe, God as having two “poles”, one mental and one physical or one eternal (potential) and one temporal (actual). The potential pole (mind of God) is the order of all that can be, and the actual pole (his body) is the order of all that is. The potential pole is both absolute and eternal, but that actual pole is relative and temporal. So then God is actually finite but potentially infinite. Thus, they see humanity as “created co-creators” with God. The creation itself is seen as a co-operation between God and all other beings. Thus, process theologians can be seen as panentheists<sup>6</sup>, God in the world, who attains perfection successively and endlessly because of his/her interaction with the humanity. As a result, God is limited by conditions from the outside. While process theists affirm divine love, they reconstruct divine power. Griffin (2004:298) states that process theodicy is based upon a notion that there are metaphysical principles, which are beyond even divine decision. According to Whitehead (1978:52), this metaphysical principle is itself the “principle of limitation” as God relates to the actual (metaphysical). The conclusion here is that God’s perfect power is best conceived in relationship to human beings thus God is limited, at least to some degree, by others who possess power of their own. Because of the limitation of God’s divine power, process theists do not hold God culpable for failing to prevent evil or suffering but rather see any suffering in creation is also undergone by God.

### **d) Open Theism**

In recent years another proposal regarding the problem of evil has gained some degree of recognition and acceptance among Christian theologians and philosophers. Theologians in the school of Open Theism have argued that the

classical definitions of both divine omnipotence and omniscience are seriously problematic for addressing the problem of evil and suffering. Hasker provides the following explanation:

God knows that evils will occur, but *God* has not for the most part specifically decreed or incorporated into his plan the individual instances of evil. Rather, God governs the world according to general strategies which are, as a whole, ordered for the good of the creation but whose detailed consequences are not foreseen or intended by God prior to the decision to adopt them. As a result, we are able to abandon the difficult doctrine of “meticulous providence” and to admit the presence in the world of particular evils God’s permission of which is not the means of bringing about any greater good or preventing any greater evil (1994:152).

Open theism derives its name from its view of the relationship between God and the future. On that view, God lacks exhaustive knowledge of the future; the future is thus “open” to him. Therefore, while God may have a good idea of what might happen, he does not know when it will happen. According to Boyd (2000:11), the future is “partly determined and foreknown by God, but also partly open and known by God as such. Divine uncertainty of the future results from God’s decision to grant freedom to some of his creatures. On this Pinnock elaborates:

God, in grace grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives, and he enters into a dynamic, give and take relationship with us. The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God gracious initiatives and God responses to our responses(1994:7).

The above statement is an accepted explanation for God granting humans significant freedom within the Evangelical tradition, but Pinnock goes on to that the freedom humans have in relation to God’s foreknowledge runs counter to the Evangelical understanding of God’s foreknowledge. He states:

God takes risks in this give- and- take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working towards his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being(1994:7).

Hasker (1994:139) therefore confidently argues that the openness model is “in a better position than Calvinism or Molinism” in dealing with the issues brought about by the problem of evil. In particular, it is asserted that traditional Christian theism fails to absolve God of guilt or responsibility for evil and should, therefore, be abandoned in favour of the more attractive openness model of divine providence.

Blount (2005:178) views the open theist understanding of God as a God who takes risks and adapts his/her plans to changing situations. God’s doing so results from the fact that he/she has created us as free creatures together with the assumption that he/she cannot know in advance what we will freely do. Such an understanding of the divine nature stands in marked contrast to traditional theism, according to which God not only exhaustively knows the future, but also is timeless, immutable and passible. The open theist perspective which is making great inroads into the evangelical church must be guarded because its views about God and His attributes leadspeople

to a pathological and distorted view of God in relation to how God relates to suffering.

## 6. Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded from our investigation of the modern treatments of the theodicy as well in the book of Job that one does not find the universal answer to the question, “Why do the righteous suffer?” One does find the answer to why Job suffers. That answer, however, is not the primary value of the book. Of greater value, instead, is the answer to how one should respond to unexplained suffering. Not suffering connected to sin, but suffering that seems to come from nowhere, without reason, without perspective. It is to this occurrence that Job gives voice. Job challenges the believer to evaluate all the formulas that have been created to anticipate God’s movements and actions. The follower of God is called, instead, to return one’s gaze to God. One cannot allow circumstances—even horrific occurrence—to overwhelm one’s view of God. Rather, one is called in the midst of turmoil to seek the presence of God. Job does not take comfort from any answer to his dilemma. As a matter of fact, he never hears an answer to his questions about his suffering. He never receives a doctrinal defence of his theology. Instead, he is confronted with the majesty of God and realizes he had been too small in his own picture of God.<sup>7</sup> True satisfaction for Job only came when he can declare: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (42:5).

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## 7. Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>2</sup> Clines notes that from Bildad’s perspective, the death of Job’s children in their prime is “the classical picture of the fate of the wicked” (Clines, 1989: xl).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/143/story\\_14326\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/143/story_14326_1.html).

<sup>4</sup> See The City of God XII [6] in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* Vol. II, 229.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/>

<sup>6</sup> Panentheism must not be confused with pantheism. Pantheism means *all is God*, but panentheism means “*all in God*”. For a summarized explanation on panentheism see Bakers Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetic 576-579

<sup>7</sup> See the article “Why Does Job Repent?” elsewhere in this journal for a more specific investigation into Job’s conclusions and response to God’s self-revelation.

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## ABSTRACT

The Evangelical community of faith uses the Bible in order to understand events in people's lives. The Bible helps people to make sense of existence and to orientate themselves in their lives. The Bible provides the community of faith with material that helps us to react to existential questions. It is for this reason that this present study consults a biblical text –the book of Job– in order to explore the issue of how to deal with the presence of suffering in this world. Reading the book of Job makes one recognise several elements in it which are also matters in the issue of theodicy. The leading character, Job, suffers innocently. He wrestles with his miserable fate, questions God's righteousness and looks for reasons which can explain God's role with regard to his blameless misery. The book as a whole casts doubt on a specific form of theodicy, which was broadly found in the Ancient Near East. This is the view that God acts according to a strict relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. According to this theodicy, God rewards upright behaviour with prosperity and punishes wickedness with misery. Furthermore, the prologue of the book suggests the alternative that suffering might serve in order to test one's loyalty to God. Some of Job's friends suggest that evil has a pedagogical or warning function. Among other things these clues indicate that the book of Job somehow

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deals with aspects of the issue of theodicy and how one tries to understand God and the problem of evil.