



Old Testament Theodicy – Guides for Purposeful Christian Life Associate

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Abstract

Old Testament theodicy constructions have purposeful living guidance and directions for modernity bequeathed with all age long problem of evil and the justice of God. Suffering and evil are part of life and necessary for the realization of excellence which outshines them in eternal significance. Evil, suffering, and misery are integral parts of life and to know how to cope with them, through Old Testament theodic - blueprints, while maintaining faith in God is an indication of Christian advancement. No reason, other than God's grace is required for bestowing his goodness on men; the absence or withdrawal of this human perceived goodness requires no explanation because the gift and the giver are one and the same. Total reliance, dependence and submission to God in all situations are considered necessary.

Keywords:

Old Testament; theodicy; guides; purposeful; Christian and life

Introduction

It is self-evident that the world in which we live bears the mark of unhappiness, pain and evil in all its shape. Nobody in this world escapes the crippling effect of misery, suffering and evil as all are subject to death, and class distinction becomes meaningless in the face of the prospect of dying. The poor and the rich suffer it alike. Anxiety reigns day and night; even sleep is sometimes turned into an occasion for further dismay when imagined harm exceeds the horrors of actual reality. Most unfortunately, innocent people, including children, are also exposed to suffering.

Reflections upon such human situations as above occupied the minds of thinkers and researchers since time immemorial. They have all in different ways tried to explain the existence of misery, suffering and evil in God's created orderly and harmonious world. These explanations are done while maintaining that God is just. This is known as "theodicy".

Today, as it has always been, the whole problem of the existence of evil and the questionability of undertaking to justify God still exist. The problem of underserved suffering, for instance, is an issue that frequently occupied the thoughts of the ancients as it continues to do in the modern world. One of such definitive manipulations of theodicy in modern time is seen in the total number of lives property lost in frequent plane crashes, Tsunami, collapse of houses and attack on people in many places all over the world. In most cases such disasters result in the death of many people without discriminating between the innocent and the guilty.

One way of diffusing the situation is to assert that natural forces merely functioned as instruments of divine punishment for sin. But this explanation has failed to take into account the terrible misery inflicted upon innocent people who always happen to be caught up in the suffering occasioned by nature's fury. Such undeserved adversity is seen everywhere today and many lack the desired experience to handle such situations, hence the need for this paper. The Old Testament of the Bible has several explanations about the way or means of reconciling underserved suffering with belief in God. It is the aim of



this paper to discuss some of these prominent theodic constructions in the Old Testament with a view to proffering them as models for purposeful living in a world filled with evil and suffering.

Theodicy is not an everyday word and it therefore needs to be explained. It is the philosophico - theological term for the whole subject of the existence of evil and its attempted resolution. According to Hick (1985), theodicy is an express attempt to balance the present state of the world, with its physical and moral evils, with the all inclusive government of a just and beneficent God. The invention of the word in its French form is commonly and credibly attributed to Von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It came from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice). It is a kind of technical shorthand for the defense of the justice and righteousness of God in the face of the facts of evil.

Hick went further to report that the theodicy of Leibniz was directed mainly against the skeptic, Pierre Bayle, who had denied the goodness and omnipotence of God on account of the suffering experienced in this earthly life. Imitating the example of Leibniz, other philosophers and theologians now adopted the term for the study of the problem of evil.

In Lorimer et al (1995), theodicy is defined as the vindication of the justice and goodness of God in spite of the existence of evil. More pointed for our study are the two following definitions. Eichrodt (1983) says that it is an express attempt to balance the present state of the world, with its physical and moral evils, with the all –inclusive government of a just and beneficent God. For Schumaan (1996) theodicy refers to an attempt to exhibit in a positive way the relationship of God, especially God's justice and goodness, to evil. He went further to say that the term is sometimes used even more broadly to mean any interpretation of evil and human existence which enables people to find meaning and purpose in life in spite of the presence of evil in the world.

Old Testament theodicy

There is an implicit theodicy at work in the Old Testament at least in the sense of an effective reconciliation of profound faith in God, with a deep involvement in the realities of sin and suffering. The Old Testament reflects on the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. It records every kind of sorrow and suffering from the terrors of childhood to the stony grief of old age: cruelty, torture, violence, and agony: poverty, hunger, calamitous accidents: disease; folly, every mode of man's inhumanity to man and of his painfully insecure existence in the world.

Crenshaw (1983), noticed that the wish to construct a theodicy surfaced in the very first recorded utterance by a woman in the Hebrew bible-Genesis 3:2-3: "And the woman said to the serpent, 'we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but God said, "you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die". Here the serpent's accusing question cast suspicion upon divine goodness. The woman really was trying to justify God for the prohibition – eating the fruit means inviting death so God is justified in forbidding it.

This tendency to save God's honor also lies behind the reason for the flood. It is not God who caused it but men whose wickedness was great (Gen. 6:5). In the biblical writer's view, the flood was wholly justified. Genesis 18: 16-33 endeavors to justify the wholesale slaughter of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. The narrative depicts a just God and one notices that the failure was that of Abraham who could not find a single virtuous persons in Sodom and Gomorrah.

The same sort of defence for divine justice is employed to justify the defeat and exile of the Southern kingdom of Israel to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. In Jeremiah 5:1, God asked Jeremiah, the prophet, to search the city for one just man, for he would spare it if such a just man



were found but Jeremiah could not succeed. So God is justified in permitting their suffering. The portrayal of Israel and Judah as corrupt to the core suffices to justify divine abandonment of the chosen people.

Underserved suffering featured prominently in Old Testament. For instance, Habakkuk finds the Lord's toleration of the wicked very difficult to understand. God's inactivity is intolerable. His agonizing cry in chapter one summarizes the anguish of the down-trodden and the righteous ones in the society (1:1-17). One of the most natural ways to handle this case of incursion of evil into unexpected circumstances is the surrender of the present moment in favour of future rectification. In the rest of the book of Habakkuk, his hope is strengthened (2:2-4). Without a tiny ray of hope, life would become intolerable.

To remove the hoped-for event from the realm of experience altogether is one means of dealing with delay in deliverance. That can be achieved in two quite different ways. One can deny the reality of evil, relegating it to an illusion, or one can shift the arena of God's action to the inner spirit or unto a hidden dimension of reality. In Crenshaw's view (1983), such a shift occurs in the Old Testament apocryphal books of Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon, for which the psychological and metaphysical realms achieve prominence in discussions of theodicy. Usually, the present experience fades into the shadow cast by anticipated bliss.

Sometimes Old Testament theodicy interprets adversity or suffering as disciplinary experiences. Such an explanation for suffering takes many forms but invariably it assumes that true character cannot emerge apart from testing. This argument pervades the Old Testament book of Job, finding frequent expression in the speeches of the friends as well as in Elihu's remarks.

Treble (1978) posits that it is from this experience of suffering that new insights into selfhood emerge, just like the

initial act of disobedience in the garden of Eden bestowed valuable knowledge upon the first couple. Suffering is not merely to be regarded as evil, but as a salutary, if not bitter medicine. Through deep suffering one who stands nearest to God becomes a useful tool in God's hand for building his kingdom. The divine intervention in Job in the form of the restoration of his wealth and health does not answer the all-important question. The existential answer to life's problem provided by the Hebrew Scripture of Job is that of Job's confrontation with God, his acceptance of God, and his resignation to an inscrutable supreme will.

In the Old Testament, one also ventured to explain suffering in the light of the eschatological consummation, as in Psalm 22, which final section (23-31) interprets suffering as a building-block toward the completion of God's kingdom. That God would find in the suffering of the faithful the most effective means of establishing rule over mankind gives this psalmist consolation in the midst of night of affliction. This thought helped him in overcoming a felling of abandonment by God and enabled the discovery of a victorious answer to the paralyzing doubts about the meaning of suffering.

The poet of Psalm 73 poignantly describes for us how the daily contradictions of an experience against the claims God's just retribution brought suffering and how there was a struggle to solve this tormenting riddle in every conceivable way (73:16). But despite all this pondering, no theodicy brought satisfaction. The Psalmist's eyes were opened to see the answer by direct, divine illumination. It is in this sense that Psalm 73:17 is to be interpreted.

The miracle of true fellowship with God consists not in any earthly gift, however great or magnificent, but in personally opening oneself to the inconceivable greatness of God in the form of a constant faithfulness and communication of supernatural life. In this way even the poorest human life outwardly



is given an incomparable inner worth, which cannot itself be touched by death. With a true cry of joy, the singer of the psalm casts the self into the arms of God once again, sure to have found a solution to the enigma of life.

Old Testament apocalyptic writings contain much of theodicy construction. Apocalyptic writing was a response to the difficult realities of life in Palestine during the inter-testamental period. After the exile those who returned were determined that they would not make the same mistakes as their ancestors. So they kept every detail of the law.

Yet as things turned out, they did not prosper either (Drane, 1990). Those who tried to keep Old Testament faith alive found themselves more and more in a minority, and those who prospered often did so by displaying lukewarmness of even abandoning it. Apocalyptic writing began as a theodic answer to these questions. Why did faithfulness not lead to prosperity? Why did God not put an end to the power of evil forces? Why were good people suffering? To these questions the apocalyptists answered that the present difficulties were only relative. Seen in the light of God's working throughout history, the good would eventually triumph and the oppressive domination of evil would soon be relaxed.

Paradigms for Christian living

In practice, it is impossible to articulate an adequate Christian faith without reference to the Old Testament. At the most fundamental level, it is a simple fact that one will not get far in making sense out of New Testament itself if we are ignorant of the Old Testament. Jesus and his disciples were practicing Jews. They were thoroughly immersed in Old Testament ways of thinking about God and the world.

Finding models for proper living in the Old Testament is appropriate, more so in our age today where Christians tend to regard evil and suffering as not part of Christian living. The most obvious and

popular question being asked by one who is experiencing evil or suffering is why is this happening to me? In the mind of the questioner, God ought to know his disposition as a "good" man and should not have allowed such to happen to him. This is true in the Old Testament times as it is today in our world.

The Deuteronomist history in the Old Testament asserts plainly that evil and suffering were the outcome of sin. This easy explanation for the permission of evil can sometimes be true. For instance, excessive drunkenness may lead to over-speeding that could cause an accident or death. Living reckless and wayward life can prompt abortion, death and diseases of all sorts. Armed robbery has on many occasions brought about the execution of the robbers involved. Such actions with in built consequences are numerous and we are familiar with such experiences in our daily life. Many things we do, both in the open and in secret, can cause evil and suffering to thrive in our society.

We notice that the above action - consequence - construct fails to work sometimes. Innocent children are killed in accidents; they are worst hit in war - ravaged areas: many of them are trapped under rubbles during many incidents of collapse of houses. These children never committed any sin. In a similar way, not all poor people are poor as a result of their own bad judgment. Many have lost jobs because of changes in industrial policies. Simply put, there are many wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous" (Eccl. 1: 14). Why should this be?

Many would want religion to provide clear, explicit, and mathematical like answers to questions like this. Of course, Old Testament religion has answers but not exactly in a mathematical form. Prophet Habakkuk is intensely preoccupied with the problem of evil, the perennial stumbling block for all thoughtful men (Murphy, 1977). He is told by God to write down the divine answer to evil so that all



who run may read and he wrote that in ways paradoxical to us, God is preparing the final victory of justice; the evil doer shall pass away, but the just shall live, only if he is faithful (2:4). Paul works this "heart of Habakkuk" into his own teaching on faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). When one pushes God's time of intervention further into the future, the experience of evil is swallowed up by the feeling generated by the feeling generated by the expected happiness.

Another Old Testament book (Job) provides a further paradigm of Christian living. It deals with the profound theological problem of the meaning and function of suffering in the life of a just man and with the consequences of it for a man's attitude to God (Mackenzie, 1977). The withholding of Job's possessions was to demonstrate whether Job's affections centered on the possessions or the giver of the possessions. His trust in God never wavered. God is mystery. No reason, other than God's goodness is required for his bestowing material possession on men; is it the absence of material possession or withdrawal of it that requires an explanation? Of course, men's sins could be the cause but in the case of Job, it is virtue. His possessions were withdrawn to test his virtue. He consistently recognized that the gift and giver are the same.

Psalm 22 is an individual lament and thanksgiving undertaken by a private worshipper whose suffering and its solution could serve as a model for us. He suffered from physical pain and from enemies. Always, he relied on Yahweh's help. The repetition "my God" in verses 1-2 suggests the dire situation of the abandoned one. The basis of his trust is Yahweh's presence in the temple and his deliverance of Israel in the past salvation history. Yahweh's justice, that is, the deliverance of the palmist, was achieved and fulfilled in a transcendent manner in God. Something that is transcendent exists or comes from outside normal limits and most riddles to suffering and evil are solved this way.

Murphy (1977) supports us when he describes this psalm as "... a presentation of an exemplary suffering and deliverance ..." (p. 579)

In a similar way Psalm 73 provides another model achievable in a mystical way. The psalmist describes the crisis he has experienced but only after stating his conclusion about God's goodness. He reached the conclusion after being scandalized by the prosperity of the wicked. He relates how close he comes to giving up his faith. The injustices perpetrated by sinners will seem like a dream after God rises to judgment.

The insight the psalmist had into the lot of the just is important. He finds it, just like himself, in companionship with God. This association with God is beyond death in glory. The author no doubt had some insight, a contact with God. Given the right situation, a man could peep into a part of the store of universal intelligence if the veil demarcating it from us is partly lifted. In such a way, like the psalmist, our eyes could be opened to see the meaning of suffering by direct divine illumination.

Like the secular world, our churches today, including the mainline ones, are affirming by stealth, an understanding of Christianity as assurance of material things, temporal gains of all sorts: business, employment, promotion, marital compatibility, better health, longevity etc. According to Oguejiofor (2006) churches' common view is that the cross is a curse, and if you are less materially endowed, you are either under the influence of the devil or your miracle is on the way.

Armed with this background, all means must be explored, to magically get rid of suffering, including seeking the assistance of self-proclaimed prophets, healers and exorcists, and when these are not quick enough, the secret sorcery of the traditional medicine man is sought. What is aberrant is not just that this understanding of Christianity is present and expanding among us, more important is that it is relentlessly becoming the basic creedal



position of perhaps a majority of our Christian brothers and sisters and of course, most regrettably, our Christian priests and custodians of Christian religion.

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 says: Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other.

In Amos 3:6, the prophet rhetorically asks "Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it." God is the cause of evil as well as the good in Old Testament original sense (King, 1977). The good things that God gives should be accepted. But one must also live with evil and suffering, and recognize that all come from God. God had entered into an intimate relationship with his people, Israel, by choosing them. In no way had the Israelites merited this election because of any special qualifications of theirs (Deut. 7:6-11).

Israel's election was for service; it was not merely a guarantee of divine protection against suffering. Their history at all levels of existence in the Old Testament shows that they constantly experienced evil and suffering. Even today in the new independent state of Israel, suffering continues to be part and parcel of their existence.

This does not typify God as unjust God; rather suffering and evil could be understood as part of life and necessary for the realization of goods which outweigh them in eternal importance.

Conclusion

We are human beings and no doubt every one of us goes through times when God seems incomprehensible and absent. We encounter people in anguish and suffering daily. The grander the scale of the evil, the deeper our pondering. Who is responsible? Whose action caused this calamity? Whose inaction contributed? Christians ask, too.

Some say it is God's punishment for sin, and they can find scriptures to support their charge. Others say no; this is not how

God deals with us. The debate occurs in all the world's religions and is older than scripture itself. The Old Testament, as we have seen has several explanations about questions of evil, suffering and divine justice. Many refuse to believe the truth because it points to a less pleasant scenario. Good things happen to everyone, but evil also comes to us all.

Life places this duality upon us from birth to death. Once we confront our 'demons', then we can find peace within ourselves to see that when terrible things happen, there is a lesson. Evil, tragedy, or suffering is horrendous. That is a sad fact. It is a reality but we have to try to come to grips with whatever life throws our way. Evil, suffering, and misery are integral parts of life and to know how to cope with them, while maintaining faith in God is a mark of Christian maturity (Ugwueye, 2006).

We are not trying to evade the fact that evil is dark, menacingly ugly heart-rending and crushing. The climax of the biblical history of evil was the execution of Jesus Nazareth. Here were pain and violent destruction, gross injustice, the apparent defeat of the righteous, and the premature death of a young man. The problem of evil rises to its ultimate maximum here. Yet throughout the biblical history of evil, including even this darkest point, God's purpose of good was moving visibly or invisibly towards its fulfillment. There is no room within the biblical thought world for the idea of tragedy in any sense that includes the idea of finally wasted suffering and goodness.

Christian faith is thus a distinctive consciousness of the world and of one's existence within it, radiating from and illuminated by a consciousness of God in Christ. It is because there are often a successful facing and overcoming of the challenge of evil at this level that there can, in principle at least, be an honest and serious Christian theodicy.

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