

# God and Suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures

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Israel interpreted times of prosperity and hardship in light of its covenant relationship with God: “Yahweh has entered into a relationship of patronage with Israel....He saves and blesses his people. And any disruption of the relationship of trust, any turning away of Yahweh from his people, is equivalent in meaning to suffering and decline.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Perspectives on God in the Jewish and Christian traditions derive from two principal sources – revelation and theological analysis of that revelation. The same can be said of perspectives on suffering in these traditions, and many theologies of suffering represent an integration of these two sources. This essay delves deeply into these sources – revelation influenced by theological analysis – to focus on the question of God and suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures. In an excellent work on the subject, Jesuit biblical scholar Daniel Harrington identifies five different ways of interpreting the experience of suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures: (1) suffering and lament, (2) the law of retribution, (3) the mystery of innocent suffering, (4) suffering and sacrifice, and (5) apocalyptic suffering.<sup>2</sup> To these, Passionist theologian Robin Ryan adds a sixth category: the

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<sup>1</sup> Erhard Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering*, 69, in Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer: A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 1-86.

suffering of God.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by this thought, this essay explores God and suffering in the Hebrew scripture from the perspectives of suffering and sin, the law of retribution, the prophetic tradition, the suffering of God, and suffering as existential.

## **SUFFERING AND SIN**

As the quote at the outset of this essay implies, “Israel interpreted its entire life in light of its covenant with the God who had liberated a people from slavery and formed them into a nation. This covenantal relationship...was the lens through which the biblical authors interpreted the significant events of Jewish history.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, understanding the centrality of the covenant is absolutely necessary for any coherent grasp of Judaism’s interpretation of God and suffering in their history. An important first step in this interpretation is a clear comprehension of the meaning and consequences of covenant. “A covenant is like a contract. Like any legal contract, there are two parties in a covenant. Each must make certain action commitments.... [and mutually assured promises.” However, although a covenant resembles a legal contract, this notion of covenant “is too legalistic, too non-emotional. A covenant is something more. There is a relationship between the parties.... involving mutual promises, commitments, and love.”<sup>5</sup>

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, the best-known covenants between God and humanity involve those with the people of Israel. However, before the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of God’s covenantal relationship with the Jews, the book of

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011), 46-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Michael Golden, “Covenant – Part 1: God’s Covenant with Humanity,” *Heartfelt Communications*; available from <http://www.rabbigold.com/covenant.htm>.

Genesis introduces a covenant God made with all of humanity, one rooted the creation narrative. This covenant began with a command: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 1: 16-17). Implicit in the narrative is God’s commitment to the man demonstrated through the gift of life, of sustenance, of abundance, and of companionship with the woman who was “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (1: 23). The man and woman in turn had an intimate companionship with God who walked with them “in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (3:8). While Genesis 2 conveys the terms of God’s contract with humanity implicitly, it states the commitment required of the human partners explicitly: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” Failure to uphold this commitment had a consequence: “in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

While this narrative is replete with figurative language, the first two chapters of Genesis clearly communicate that life “in the beginning” was idyllic, orderly, harmonious, and “very good” (1:31) for creation, its creatures, and their Creator. There is no hint of discord or suffering of any sort – that is, until Genesis 3, the story of the fall of humankind. Once again, the details and characters in this story are interpreted both literally and symbolically; yet that is less pertinent here than what occurs beneath the details and between the characters. Essentially, the human beings fail to live out their covenant commitment to God and that failure triggers an array of consequences. In addition to the death portended by God (3:19), “the consequences or punishments for their disobedience involved suffering of various kinds: shame at nakedness, fear of snakes, pain in childbirth, a woman’s subordination to her husband, [and the pain of hard work.”<sup>6</sup> The upshot of infidelity to God, i.e., sin, is

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<sup>6</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 26.

quite clearly linked to multiple forms of suffering and ultimately death.

Significantly, Genesis 3 does not limit these consequences solely to the first humans. Rather, “the ‘original sin’ [of Adam and Eve is...the common lot of all humankind.” However, biblical scholar Daniel Harrington points out that “interpreters through the centuries have explained the inherited consequences of original sin in various ways.”

For some, it is like a genetically transmitted disease handed on from generation to generation. For others, it means that all humans repeat the disobedience of Adam and Eve. For still others, Genesis 3 is the result of reasoning backward from human suffering...to its cause in the disobedient action of our first ancestors. What is common to these different approaches is the idea that the consequences of “original sin” affect every human being.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of how it is inherited, the first sin of man and woman causes the degeneration of essential relationships within themselves and with others. The man and the woman are ashamed of their bodies – “I was naked; and I hid myself” – and fearful before God – “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked” (Gen 3:10). The man breaks faith with the woman and with God by blaming both for his actions – “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3:12). The woman then breaks relation with creation by faulting the serpent for her decision – “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (Gen 3:13).

In addition to this interpersonal tragedy, God imposes forms of existential and physical suffering as a consequence of the disobedience of the man and the woman. First God curses the serpent with suffering: “Because you have done this, cursed are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life” (3:14). Then God decrees the suffering the woman must bear: “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Finally, God pronounces the ground cursed because of their sin and declares the suffering the man must endure:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life....By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (3: 17-19).

Interpretations of this narrative range from accepting the details as a literal historical account to viewing the story as a religious myth. Representing a Christian approach to a literal reading of Genesis is professor of Old Testament G. Van Groningen. Assuming a “revelational” stance toward Scripture, Groningen states, “Genesis is part of the Self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ....[The language of Genesis is simple, direct, clear. The stories say clearly that the characters lived; they present a living actual historical setting for these characters.”<sup>8</sup> From those who consider the narrative a religious myth, that is, “a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form,”<sup>9</sup> other interpretations emerge. As New Testament scholar Marcus Borg explains, the Genesis narratives are “myths” in a particular sense; they are “stories

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<sup>8</sup> G. Van Groningen, “Interpretation of Genesis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*; available from [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/13/13-4/13-4-pp199-218\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/13/13-4/13-4-pp199-218_JETS.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Pretorius, “The Creation and the Fall of Adam and Eve: Literal, Symbolic, or Myth?” *South African Theological Seminary*; available from <http://www.sats.edu.za/userfiles/The%20creation%20and%20fall.pdf>.

about the way things never were, but always are. They are thus true, even though not literally true.”<sup>10</sup>

Borg emphasizes two points in this explanation. First, truth does not necessarily lie in the literal meaning of a word or phrase; rather, the truth resides at a deeper level attained only through careful and critical interpretation. Second, such truth transcends the particular circumstances and characters of the narrative; it speaks not only to the experiences of a particular pair of people but to the human condition itself. Therefore, utilizing this approach, philosopher Ian Barbour could say, “The fall can be taken as a powerful symbolic expression of human sinfulness, where sin is understood as self-centeredness and estrangement from God and other people, and, one might add, from the world of nature.”<sup>11</sup>

A middle ground between the two suggests that “The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man....the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents.”<sup>12</sup> The ensuing chapters of Genesis detail the broader consequences of this “original fault” in terms of escalating suffering, disorder, and death. Cain murders Abel (4:1-6), the great flood wipes out almost all living creatures (6:1-7), and the conceit of humanity converts communication into babble (11:1-9). Moreover, far from being simply the consequences of human failing, the suffering that follows from sin clearly originates from divine decree and stems from divine retribution.

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2000), 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 390.

Other narratives throughout the Torah attest to this perceived relationship between God and suffering. The book of Leviticus, for example, presents in God's own words a clear summation of the consequences of fidelity and infidelity to the covenant God had with Israel. The book itself rests upon two beliefs that echo the themes of Genesis one through three: that creation is essentially "very good" and possesses the capacity to maintain and enhance that goodness, though always inclined toward sin and corruption; and that fidelity to the covenant warrants divine providence, while infidelity merits divine punishment.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on the covenant with the chosen people of Israel, Leviticus makes clear that the covenantal relationship between God and Israel had consequences not only for the chosen people but also for the whole of creation. The covenant is succinctly and repeatedly expressed in Leviticus as well as throughout the Hebrew Scriptures by this divine declaration: "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (26: 12). This relationship required fidelity from both the human and divine partners in the covenant. For God's part, "I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce.... you shall eat your bread to the full and live securely in your land.... I will place my dwelling in your midst" (26:4, 6, 9, 11) God required only one thing of the people: to "keep my commandments and observe them faithfully" (26: 3).

If the people kept the covenant, rewards and blessings flowed from God: "I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you" (26: 9). However, if the people broke the covenant and sinned, reprisals and curses issued from God: "I will bring terror on you.... Your strength shall be spent to no purpose: your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.... I will send pestilence among you, and you

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<sup>13</sup> Frank H. Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 4-5, 14-16.

shall be delivered into enemy hands” (26:16, 20, 25). This allocation of reward and punishment leads to two critical conclusions concerning God and suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures. First, suffering comes to those who break the covenant, i.e., to those who sin. Second, this suffering is meted out according to the will of God and by means of the hand of God. These conclusions combine to produce what is known as “the law of retribution.”

## **THE LAW OF RETRIBUTION**

Daniel Harrington observes that “The law of retribution runs through the Bible.”<sup>14</sup> For the most part, in the Scriptures, this law concerns the rewards and punishments meted out by divine justice. At other times, however, it seems to reflect an inherent order in the universe, such that specific acts have predictable consequences. It is best articulated as the righteous being rewarded and the wicked being punished. While only one among a number of biblical approaches to the mystery of God and suffering, the law of retribution is perhaps the most prominent one in the Hebrew Scriptures. As Ryan points out, “there are several essential biblical affirmations implicit in the law of retribution.”

God is personal and active in the arena of human history; God is just; human beings have freedom; there is order in the world, implying that cause-and-effect relationships do exist; human beings need evidence of God’s justice in the world; our actions do affect one another.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, while the law of retribution certainly implies a connection between blessing and righteousness of life, it seems all the more that “the connection between suffering and sin is

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<sup>14</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 27.



very powerful in the minds of many religious people.”<sup>16</sup> For example, in the wake of someone’s violent or dreadful death, relatives and friends have often been heard to exclaim: “He didn’t deserve to die that way!” or “She didn’t deserve that fate!” This implies that the victim committed no action that would have called forth such a dreadful end. Likewise, in the absence of more consoling answers, sufferers sometimes blame themselves when misfortune strikes, wondering what they did to cause such a tragedy to occur. A seventh-grade girl who had lost her father to a heart attack once asked her religious education teacher, “What did I do that God took my father away?” Thus, while “there is a truth and wisdom to it,” the law of retribution can also be a source of anguish and harm “when suffering persons persist in blaming themselves for things that are beyond their knowledge and control.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, few experiences of suffering are so clear-cut as to fit the explanatory niche that the law of retribution provides.

One of the best-known examples of divine retribution is that of the ten plagues visited by God on the land of Egypt because of the Pharaoh’s refusal to release the Hebrew people from slavery. The plagues, chronicled in the book of Exodus, ranged from the first plague of blood (Exodus 7:17–18), to the plague of pestilence (Exodus 9:1–3), and finally to the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exodus 11:4–6). Several incidents in the book of Numbers further demonstrate the law of divine retribution. Numbers 16 tells of a revolt against Moses and Aaron. The hand of God sent a punishment on the rebellious: “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households...; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly” (16:31–33). Likewise, during the exodus from Egypt, when the people became impatient on the way and grumbled against God and against Moses, God sent poisonous serpents among the people, “and

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<sup>16</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 17.

they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” Nonetheless, when the people repented, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live’” (21:5-8). Regrettably, even Moses experienced retribution from God at the waters of Meribah because of his lack of trust. God commanded Moses to take his staff “and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water” (20:8). However, instead of obeying God’s instructions to the letter, Moses struck the rock twice and, as a consequence, was denied entrance into the Promised Land: “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (20:12).

Despite the fact that the law of retribution is frequently associated with God’s meting out suffering for disobedience, Deuteronomy 28 makes it clear that the reckoning of God works for both ill and good. It explicitly promised blessings to those who keep the covenant and obey the commandments. These blessings are not solely for individuals, but for the nation as a whole; they are not only for the people, but for creation as well:

If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. (28: 1-6)

Notice that God not only promises personal and economic prosperity, but political security as well: “The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways” (28:7). However, as beneficent as divine retribution

can be for those who obey, it can prove malevolent to those who disobey.

Like the blessings, the curses extend beyond the personal and economic to the political realm: “The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth” (28:25). Moreover, the fact that Israel’s economic and political destiny depended on its fidelity to the covenant made it imperative that the people remain mindful that disobedience or idolatry by some had consequences for the nation as a whole. As an example of this, Robin Ryan points out “a recurrent pattern” in Israel’s fate during the period of the Judges.

The Israelites repeatedly turned away from the God of the covenant to worship the gods of their neighbors (Judg. 2:13). This infidelity provoked the anger of God, who delivered them into the hands of their enemies who plundered them. Oppressed by their enemies, the people cried out to God, who raised up a judge to deliver them....however, the people would inevitably fall away again.<sup>18</sup>

The authors of Deuteronomy clearly interpret this pattern in terms of Israel’s infidelity to the covenant, and it served “as a way of making sense of the sufferings of God’s people.”<sup>19</sup> It became the job of the prophets to keep this reality ever before the people and their rulers. In fact, “the interpretation of ancient Israel’s history in terms of the law of retribution had its roots in the warnings of the great prophets.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 24.

## **SUFFERING IN THE PROPHETIC TRADITION**

The law of retribution served as the principal lens through which the prophets read the rise and fall of the fortunes of Israel and by which the prophets called Israel to repentance. According to scripture scholar Daniel Harrington, “The prophets... taught that the enemies of Judah...served as God’s instruments for punishing the people for their sins.”<sup>21</sup> They deemed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE “an appropriate punishment for the people’s sins (especially idolatry) and so was a manifestation of the sovereignty and justice of God.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the prophetic tradition helped to shape the Jewish understanding of the relationship between God and the suffering they endured.

According to Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel, the prophets of Israel were “some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived.”<sup>23</sup> Not only did they have a heightened sensitivity to idolatrous acts on the part of the chosen people, but also a “breathless impatience with injustice.”<sup>24</sup> Heschel describes the role of Israel’s prophets in moving terms:

Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words.... In the prophet’s message nothing that has bearing upon good and evil is small or trite in the eyes of God.<sup>25</sup>

The prophetic writings examine the relationship between God and suffering from a variety of perspectives including (1)

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (NY: Harper & Row, 1962), ix.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

suffering as punishment for injustice, (2) suffering as punishment for idolatry, (3) suffering as sacrifice, (4) suffering for a prophetic stance, and (5) suffering in God. The first two forms of suffering stem from *disobedience* and *infidelity* to the covenant, for which God metes out punishment in response to human sins. While the instruments of divine punishment may at times be the political powers of the day, the prophets make clear that the evils befalling the chosen people result from divine judgment. In contrast, the next two forms of suffering derive from *obedience* and *fidelity* to the covenant and to the prophetic calling from God. The suffering often results from the sins of those condemned by the prophets. The final form of suffering is borne by God's own self. According to professor of Old Testament Terence Fretheim, there are three main reasons for the suffering of God:

1. God suffers *because* of the people's rejection of God as Lord.
2. God suffers *with* the people who are suffering.
3. God suffers *for* the people.<sup>26</sup>

While all of the prophets deal with these forms of suffering to varying degrees, this essay examines the traditions of four prophets-- Amos, Hosea, Second Isaiah, and Jeremiah—each of whom exemplify one of the first four forms of suffering. Then each of these prophets contributes to the picture of the God who suffers in kind.

### ***Suffering as Retribution for Injustice***

The prophet views a sin against humanity as a sin against God. In the time of Amos (circa 745 BCE), for example, there was pride and plenty in the Northern Kingdom, and yet “the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery (2:6-8; 5:11), and

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<sup>26</sup> Fretheim, Terence. *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

the judges were corrupt.”<sup>27</sup> Amos warns that those who ignore the suffering around them are destined to suffer grievously themselves.

*Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts!...Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory...but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! They shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.*

(6:1, 4, 6, 7)

This suffering, moreover, comes not simply at the hands of their conquerors; rather God uses their conquerors to inflict punishment:

*Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel;  
forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up.  
For thus says the Lord GOD: Seek the LORD and live,  
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,  
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it...*

*The LORD is his name,  
who makes destruction flash out against the strong,  
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.*

(5:2, 6, 9)

Although the people of Israel continued to offer sacrifices, God judged their injustices and iniquities as a rejection of the Torah and of God’s commands. Hence, God proclaims through the prophet: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon” (5:21-23). Instead of these sacrifices, God desires that “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Despite God’s intolerance of injustice,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 28.

Amos offers a glimmer of hope to those who repent. For those who “seek good and not evil...and establish justice...LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (5: 15-15).

### ***Suffering as Retribution for Idolatry***

Hosea was also a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, which he called Ephraim. He rose up during the time of the conquest of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrian empire (circa 745 BCE). While Hosea and Amos were contemporaries prophesying in the same district, their aims were quite different. “The contrast between Amos and Hosea is seen in both what they condemn and in what they stress. To Amos, the principal sin is *injustice*; to Hosea, it is *idolatry*.”<sup>28</sup> While Israel enjoyed Assyria’s protection, Hosea proclaimed the political arrangement “promiscuity” in the eyes of God: “I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me,” says the Lord; “for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore; Israel is defiled” (Hosea 5:3). Rather than fidelity to covenant relationship with God, the chosen people succumbed to the Assyrian requirement that they recognize its supreme god. Because of this infidelity, “[Israel and Ephraim shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me” (11:5).

Hosea likened the covenant between God and Israel to marital love. In Israel’s adoption of alien religious practices as well as its reliance on its own political might instead of on the power of Yahweh, the chosen people embrace “a spirit of harlotry,” for “their deeds do not permit them to return to their God....and they do not know the Lord” (5:4). Because of this infidelity, God threatens to “send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour his strongholds” (8:14). Moreover, in a reversal of their exodus from Egypt, the people “shall not remain in the land of the Lord; but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and in Assyria they shall eat

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 60.

unclean food” (9:3). In all of this, the connection between God and Israel’s suffering is unambiguous. Clearly, “Hosea is making the case that the Assyrians’ overrunning the cities of Israel is an event...provoked by the Lord.”<sup>29</sup>

### ***Suffering as Sacrificial***

The book of Isaiah “is an anthology of poems composed chiefly by the great prophet, but also by disciples, some of whom came many years after Isaiah.”<sup>30</sup> It is in Second Isaiah,<sup>31</sup> written during the period of exile in Babylon and Egypt, that the Servant Songs appear (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12). The servant referred to in these songs has never been definitively identified; some suggest that it is an individual such as Isaiah, Cyrus of Persia, or the Messiah, while others propose that the servant may represent a collective group such as the people of Israel or the prophets.<sup>32</sup> This set of poems communicates a different relationship between God and suffering. The servant suffers vicariously in fidelity to God’s calling and for the sins of others. Daniel Harrington points out that, while the first two songs “say little or nothing about the Servant’s suffering, the latter two texts develop the theme in detail.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Dale Launderville, OSB, “The Book of Hosea: Introduction,” in *Anselm Academic Study Bible*, edited by Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2013), 1428.

<sup>30</sup> Carol Dempsey, OP, “The Book of Isaiah: Introduction,” in *Anselm Academic Study Bible*, edited by Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2013), 1169.

<sup>31</sup> Because of multiple authors and redactors, the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah divide into First Isaiah (1-39), Second Isaiah (40-55), and Third Isaiah (56-66).

<sup>32</sup> F. Duane Lindsey, “The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982): 12.

<sup>33</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 57.



## **The First Servant Song (Isaiah 42: 1-9)**

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice....  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

(42: 1-3, 6-7)

The First Servant Song tells of God's call and commission of the servant. The text makes clear that the servant's mission is to alleviate the suffering of the people by promoting justice in the nations. As a sign of God's covenantal love for the people (v.6), the servant emerges as a compassionate presence (v.3) who liberates people from all that blinds and confines them physically and spiritually (v. 7).

## **The Second Servant Song (Isaiah 49:1-6)**

*The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb, he named me....  
And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I  
will be glorified."*

(49:1)

In the Second Song, the servant acknowledges God's calling and mission to the tribes of Jacob and the people of Israel. Given the task by God to "bring Jacob back to him...that Israel may be gathered to him" (v. 5), the servant is nonetheless presented with a more expansive undertaking.

The servant is not only charged “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel,” but also to serve as “a light to the nations.” In so doing, God extends salvation beyond the people of Israel to “reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6). While the passage has an uplifting and even triumphal tone, it nonetheless hints at the servant’s suffering in the form of a “protestation about his own exhaustion and frustration.”<sup>34</sup> The servant complains, “I have labored in vain, and have uselessly spent my strength.” However, this distress is short-lived as the servant affirms “surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God” (v. 4).

### **The Third Servant Song (Isaiah 50:4-11)**

A dramatic shift in the servant’s tone characterizes the third of these poems. The suffering of the servant has suddenly escalated. God has given the servant the ability to speak a word to sustain the weary, and the servant has willingly done so. However, the listeners seem less than receptive to the message and have treated the servant brutally. Nonetheless, in fidelity to his mission, the servant accepts the suffering that comes: “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting” (v. 6). This suffering does not come from God; in fact, what sustains the servant is God’s fidelity and help: “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced...and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near” (v. 7). Furthermore, this knowledge of God’s saving help not only upholds the servant but also emboldens him in the face of his enemies. He presents them with a challenge, knowing that God stands near to defend him: “Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up” (vv. 8-9). Clearly, the nature of this relationship between God and suffering is radically different;

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 58.

the servant's suffering derives from the sin of others and his strength derives from his confidence in God as his refuge and his help.

### **The Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)<sup>35</sup>**

The suffering endured by the servant escalates dramatically in the fourth poem, aptly called the Suffering Servant Song. The song opens with the voice of God, who draws attention to the disturbing physical transformation undergone by the servant ("there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals"), while at the same time affirming that "my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high" (52:13-14). God does not afflict the servant; God intends to vindicate the servant despite the suffering inflicted on him.

The onlookers soon reveal the reason for that suffering: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account" (53:3). Yet the speakers seem taken aback by the way the servant bears his affliction: "He was oppressed...yet he did not open his mouth...and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. They made his grave with the wicked...although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth" (53:7, 9). In the midst of this amazement at the servant and his suffering, a startling perspective on suffering as vicarious and expiatory emerges; the onlookers realize that the servant has endured the suffering on their behalf (vicarious) to atone for their sins (expiatory)!

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<sup>35</sup> This passage has influenced the Christian interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection as salvific for all people.

*Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...  
he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

(53: 4-6)

As Daniel Harrington interprets the scene, “It is as if all the punishments due to all the sins of God’s people have been visited upon the figure of God’s Servant....And the result of the Servant’s suffering is the healing and wholeness of God’s people.”<sup>36</sup> Predictably, the onlookers interpret God’s relation to this suffering through the paradigm of their history – the servant was “struck down by God” (v. 4) and “it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain” (v.10). However, by all indications, the oppressors inflicted this suffering (53:7) and not God. Moreover, God clearly intends to reward the servant for his sacrifice. Thus, “he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper....I will allot him a portion with the great” (53:10-12 *passim*).

### ***Suffering for a Prophetic Stance***

The theme of suffering in fidelity to God weaves throughout the life and prophecy of Jeremiah (circa 625 BCE). His prophetic course was set even before he was born: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (1:5). Jeremiah’s commission was to prophecy to the people of Israel about the impending doom coming “out of the north.” From the outset it

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<sup>36</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 59.

was clear that this would be no easy task; Jeremiah would need to be duly prepared: “But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them....They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.” (1:17, 19)

Nonetheless, “Jeremiah was gentle and compassionate by nature, and the mission he had to carry out was, to him, distasteful in the extreme. It made him contentious, petulant, irascible.”<sup>37</sup> He railed against the luridness and injustice rampant in Jerusalem (5:27-28) and mourned the rebelliousness of those who ignored his warnings (6:28-30). He accused the people of inciting God’s anger by their idolatry (11:17-18) and prophesied that “the land shall become a waste...a heap of ruins...a desolation, without inhabitant” (7:34, 9:11). Jeremiah also bore within himself the “dramatic tension in the inner life of God,”<sup>38</sup> oscillating between pardon (5:7-9), melancholy (18:15), tenderness (4:22), anguish (14:17), sorrow (12:7-13), and lament (6:26). Moreover, when the intensity of his message, his empathy with God, and his inner life met with ridicule and rejection by the people of Israel, the combination produced a suffering in Jeremiah that he sometimes found too much to bear. “Woe is me, my mother,” Jeremiah cried, “that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me” (15:10). According to Heschel, “He who loved his people, whose life was dedicated to saving his people, was regarded as an enemy.”<sup>39</sup>

As a result, “Jeremiah hated his prophetic mission...of castigation and wrath.”<sup>40</sup> He complained to God, “I have become

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<sup>37</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

a laughingstock all the days; everyone mocks me...For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (20:7-8). This occurs despite the fact that he took upon himself the distress of his people’s situation: “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! ... My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war” (4:19).

Clearly, God did not put this suffering upon Jeremiah as punishment for his injustice or infidelity; rather, commitment to justice and fidelity to God was its source. However, that did not mean that Jeremiah would not hold God responsible for his suffering: “My heart is crushed within me, all my bones shake; I have become like a drunkard, like one overcome by wine, because of the Lord and because of his holy words” (23:9). Jeremiah did not expect his fidelity to God would bring such suffering, and he makes that accusation to God’s face: “You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced; you were too strong for me, and you prevailed. All day long I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me” (20:7).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, because of the difficulty and seeming futility of his mission, Jeremiah tried to avoid his prophetic work; yet this too proved a futile task: “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (20:9).

In his pain and frustration, Jeremiah’s only recourse was the God who had sent him as a prophet to the nations, who remained faithful to him and to Israel, and who knew the truth of his life. God’s love was one of the “sacred certainties” to which Jeremiah clung in his prophetic ministry. When he and his people sought respite from their trials, the conviction of God’s

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<sup>41</sup> Translation from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2010).

steadfast love enabled him to bear his own sufferings and proclaim relief for the suffering of his people:

*Thus says the Lord: I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you....With weeping [Israel shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back....I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow....there is hope for your future, says the Lord. (31: 3, 9, 13, 17)*

## **SUFFERING IN GOD**

Despite the sin and suffering of the people throughout the prophetic tradition, prophet after prophet bears witness to the pain and anguish borne by God as a result of their injustice and infidelity. While some theologians object to the thought of divine suffering in view of the immutability and impassibility of God, others argue that the biblical portrait of God is “dynamic, passionate, and involved.”<sup>42</sup> This divine anguish “is never the wailing sympathy of an uninvolved onlooker, but the genuine pain of one who is directly affected, the suffering of a comrade, who takes upon himself a part of the burden.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in the scriptures, “It is not considered in the least incongruous to juxtapose grieving and holiness; it is God in all his Godness who grieves.”<sup>44</sup>

In the midst of the “harlotry” of Israel condemned by Hosea, the prophet nonetheless hears the word of God cry out, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim...and I will not come in wrath” (Hosea 11:8-9). In

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<sup>42</sup> Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 46.

<sup>43</sup> Erhard Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering*, trans. by John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 99.

<sup>44</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 111.

response to the infidelity of God's people that led to their exile, a divine lament comes to Isaiah for beloved Israel:

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines...he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? (5:1-4)*

Horrified by the devastation that would come because of the “perpetual backsliding” of the people who “have refused to return” (8:5), God mourns in the voice of the prophet Jeremiah, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: ‘Is the Lord not in Zion?’... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me” (8:18-19, 21). These examples reflect the insights of professor of Old Testament Terence Fretheim noted at the beginning of this section. God suffers *because* of the people's rejection, *with* the people who are suffering, and *for* the people themselves.<sup>45</sup>

As Robin Ryan observes, “The biblical authors are careful to show that this vulnerable God is not overwhelmed or embittered in his grieving; God remains God.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, God clearly suffers *because* of Israel's rebellion. Despite the great favor and abundant love shown to Israel, although God “lifted them up and carried them all the days of old....they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit” (Isaiah 63:9-10). In the face of such rejection, God continued to call, but to no avail: “I was ready to be sought

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Fretheim, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Ryan, 47.



out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name" (Is 65:1). Yet, "the divine eagerness for intimacy has been ignored. God stands and offers himself in a cry that...is almost heart-rending: 'Here I am, here I am.'"<sup>47</sup>

In addition to suffering because of Israel's rebellion, God also suffers *with* the people who are suffering. While Exodus (2: 23-25, 3:7-8) and in Judges (2:18) include resonances of divine suffering with the people, divine mourning and compassion reverberate throughout the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Anticipating the destruction of Moab, God cries out, "I weep with the weeping of Jazer...I drench you with my tears....Joy and gladness are taken away...and in the vineyards no songs are sung....Therefore my heart throbs like a harp for Moab, and my very soul for Kir-heres" (Isaiah 16:9-11). Often, the prophets' emotions and actions mirror those of God. The prophet Micah also bears witness against Samaria and demonstrates God's anguish in his symbolic action: "I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals and mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable. It has come to... Jerusalem" (Micah 1:8-9).

Finally, God suffers *for* the people in what Fretheim calls divine "self-giving." God's "giving of self for others" in the Hebrew Scriptures emerges in "those passages which speak of God being burdened by the sins of the people."<sup>48</sup> One example appears in the prophet Isaiah. Because of their iniquity, God deems the multitude of sacrifices presented by the people as futile (1:11-13): "Your new moons and your appointed feasts...have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them" (1:14). Despite this weariness, God continues to offer restoration and protection (Isaiah 43:1-21). Nonetheless, the

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<sup>47</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 118-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

people refuse to turn back to God; thus God proclaims, “you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities” (43:24). Fretheim draws a connection between this passage and that of the Suffering Servant Song in Isaiah 52-53. In the fourth servant song, “The servant of God...assumes the role which God himself has played.... By bearing the sins of the people over a period of time, God suffers in some sense on their behalf.”<sup>49</sup> If the comparison holds, then, like the servant, God’s participation in the suffering of the people was salvific for them – an inference borne out by Isaiah 63:9: “In all their affliction he was afflicted; it was...his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them.”

How does the perception of divine suffering because of, with, and for the chosen people illuminate the mystery of God and suffering? First, it calls into question the notion of God as the perpetrator of human suffering. “God’s response to Israel’s judgment is to take up the cry of a mourner...an empathetic presence....God works in the situation to bring about good. God is at work *in* death to bring about life.”<sup>50</sup> Second, it focuses on suffering as a consequence of Israel’s free choice to act unjustly toward others, to rupture the covenant relationship with God, and to rely on political power rather than on the Holy One of Israel. “God’s hands are extended all day long in invitation, even to a rebellious people; but they would have none of God. Judgment must fall...accompanied by a heart of grief.”<sup>51</sup> Third, it transforms the image of God from one of anger and vengeance to one of vulnerability, love, and compassion. As Fretheim states, “These texts...give a glimpse into the heart of God. God is revealed not as one who remains coolly unaffected, but as one who is deeply wounded by the broken relationship,”<sup>52</sup> as

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 123.

one who is unceasing “in efforts to repair the breach.”<sup>53</sup> Finally, it reinforces the reality that no matter how grievous the sin, how extreme the infidelity, and how heinous the injustice, God does not abandon the beloved ones in their suffering and pain. Rather, in the words of Isaiah, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (54:9-10).

### **SUFFERING AS EXISTENTIAL: THE WISDOM TRADITION**

In the Wisdom tradition, the law of retribution undergoes a decided adaptation. Rather than understanding suffering solely in relation to divine judgment, the Wisdom literature generally sees retribution in the sphere of human experience. Suffering as retribution results from imprudent human actions. Thus, “Wisdom literature is centrally concerned with the nature of the proper moral and religious conduct of an individual and with the relation of such conduct to personal and communal well-being.”<sup>54</sup> According to Harrington, the law of retribution so predominates in the Scriptures because “in many cases, the law of retribution has proven true to human experience.”<sup>55</sup> For example, “I know that if I do something foolish such as putting my hand into a fire or stepping in front of an automobile, I will get hurt and suffer. I also believe that if I do good and avoid evil, I will (usually) lead a peaceful and happy life.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, law of retribution seems to have a certain logic within the human psyche, and it is this logic or “wisdom” that this tradition takes advantage of. Such practical wisdom forms the basis of much of the sapiential literature found in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Book of Proverbs, which reflects many of the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>54</sup> Carol A. Newsome, “The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary and reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 326.

<sup>55</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 16.

writings of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and surrounding regions. Harrington observes that “one of the great principles of the wisdom movement in its international manifestations and in its Israelite form is the law of retribution” as both “an assumption and a theme.”<sup>57</sup>

Reflecting the writings of the Ancient Near East, the “wisdom literature does not speak in quite the same tongue” as the Torah. Hence, in addition to shifting the locus of the law of retribution, the wisdom tradition also alters the association between God and suffering. Rather than portraying God as the active and immanent Liberator of Exodus and Exile who frees a chosen people from suffering and bondage, the wisdom literature reveals God as the transcendent Creator and Sustainer of the world whose wisdom permeated creation. Thus, through engagement with the natural world, all “people could learn, make informed choices, and live in harmony with their creator.”<sup>58</sup> As a result, well-being and suffering depended less on divine judgment than on an intrinsic “harmony between action and result” known as the “act-consequence” dynamic. This dynamic suggests that “every deed contains the seed of its own outcome.”<sup>59</sup> Hence, suffering inevitably follows from foolish or wicked choices in themselves, rather than from divine retribution. While wickedness or perversity surely displeases God, the pragmatism of the wisdom tradition dictates that suffering befalls the evildoer because it is inherent in the evil deed itself; by its very nature, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16: 18).

One of the many parallel couplets, the common literary form of the proverb (*mashal*), declares, “For the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will remain in it; but the wicked will be

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>58</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, “Wisdom Traditions in the Hebrew Bible,” *Dialogue*; available from [http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue\\_V33N01\\_123.pdf](http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V33N01_123.pdf), 102.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 103.

cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it” (Proverbs 2:21-22). It does not mention God’s explicit involvement in the outcome; it is not God who empowers the upright to abide and the treacherous to be rooted out. The consequences stem from the free choices of the innocent and the wicked, not from divine will or act. This dynamic is echoed in Proverbs 6: 12-15:

*A scoundrel and a villain  
goes around with crooked speech,  
winking the eyes, shuffling the feet,  
pointing the fingers,  
with perverted mind devising evil,  
continually sowing discord;  
on such a one calamity will descend suddenly;  
in a moment, damage beyond repair.*

Once again, the text emphasizes the behavior of the scoundrel and the villain, as interpreted by those who witness it. The evil they devise and the discord they sow—not than divine fiat—calls down calamity upon them. This is not to say that God remains unaware or unmoved by such actions. The wisdom tradition presumes divine justice.

*The Lord’s curse is on the house of the wicked,  
but he blesses the abode of the righteous.  
Toward the scornful he is scornful,  
but to the humble he shows favor.  
The wise will inherit honor,  
but stubborn fools, disgrace.*

(Proverbs 3: 33-35)

Nonetheless, in general, this tradition suggests that persons reap what they sow (Cf., Proverbs 11:25 and 22:8) and that the law of retribution does not of necessity involve divine will or act. In so doing, it challenges the conventional link between God and suffering that much of the Hebrew tradition commonly accepts.

In a further move away from the beliefs that weave through the Hebrew Scriptures, the wisdom book Ecclesiastes is overtly cynical about the validity of the law of retribution and “refuses to accept the assumption that people get what they deserve.”<sup>60</sup> This book contradicts the sapiential tradition that wisdom can be gleaned from human experience and reflects the thought and life experience of a teacher named Qoheleth. While clearly a “maverick within the international wisdom movement and within the Hebrew Bible,” Qoheleth raises questions about the “harmony between action and result” as well as confidence in the judgments of God.

In famous opening lines of the book, the Teacher protests, “Vanity of vanities...! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (1:2-4). Qoheleth zealously sought wisdom, only to find “much vexation and...sorrow;” he then engaged in self-indulgence but found that it was “a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained” (2:11). While he concludes that wisdom does excel folly, he recognizes that “the same fate befalls all,” the fool and the wise alike (2:14). This is the crux of the Teacher’s wisdom and the major challenge to the law of retribution: “the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice.... the same fate comes to everyone” (9:2).

Not only do all die, Qoheleth observes, but also “there are righteous who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing” (7:15). This outcome serves as a clear affront to the law of retribution, as well as a challenge to the justice of God. Although Qoheleth acknowledges that at the appointed time, “it will be well with those who fear God..., but it will not be well with the wicked”

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<sup>60</sup> Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer*, 18-19.

(8:12, 13), in this life, “there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous” (8:14). Hence, trust in the immanent justice of the world is vanity, and the ways of God offer no respite. Though the living may see “all the work of God...no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out” (8:17).

## **CONCLUSION**

It seems clear from this overview of the many ways that suffering and its connection to God are described in the Hebrew Scriptures that the two are irrevocably connected. This connection may frequently stem from disobedience to divine command or breach of the covenantal relationship. Nonetheless, it may result from the opposite stance – that of fidelity to divine command and to covenant. Moreover, many would deny that God or relationship with God is the cause of suffering, attributing it rather to the exercise of free will or the vagaries of cosmic existence. Surely, as T. S. Eliot wrote, words do “strain, crack and sometimes break under the burden” when one tries to speak rightly of God in the midst of suffering. However, that is what the biblical writers surveyed throughout this essay have ventured to do in the face of one of the most critical challenges theology faces. Those scholars who have risen to this challenge have not simply engaged in intellectual speculation but have profoundly shaped how believers have viewed and related to God in their suffering.

Many who pray and reflect and write on the mystery of God and suffering desire a resolution to the problem of God and suffering or at least a convincing argument for favoring one approach above the rest. Nonetheless, the aim of this essay was not to offer one solution, but to invite readers to think with the biblical writers and scholars – each grounded in scripture, tradition, and human experience – and to evaluate thought through their

reflection, prayer, and human experience. In the process, readers may have discovered that, in the midst of suffering, God is not a problem to be solved, but a Mystery to encounter in humility and prayer. For, despite the variety of interpretations of the God who in our suffering afforded by the Hebrew Scriptures, this promise of God through the often-beset Jeremiah is implicit in all of the theologies of suffering: “I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.” (29: 10-14) In that conviction, those who suffer can find hope.

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