

## Can there be an adequate theological response to human suffering in the Judeo-Christian tradition?

### Introduction

David Ford, in his *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, observes that we are in a post-modern era – an era that lacks confidence in modernity. One of the causes of this according to Ford is the “traumatic events and developments in the twentieth century”.<sup>1</sup> He lists some of these: World wars; Fascist and Communist ideology and terror; the holocaust; genocides; the use of nuclear weapons; the destructive, polluting and unjust effects of modern science and industry; the trivialization of life in modern culture; and the sexism and racism of much modern society. Such a catalogue (to which much more could be added) also sets the context for a consideration of the problem of human suffering because it throws into doubt whether there can be a good and benevolent God.

The “doubt” that the twentieth century presents to theology is both one of quantity and quality. It is not that the twentieth century produced more suffering than in earlier times (although this is trivially true because of a greater world population); it seems that human nature is nasty, brutish and short whatever era we study. Rather, in our time the mass media has brought close to all of us the *quantity* of human suffering in the world. Moreover, the *quality* of that suffering is brought close to each person – they see it, as it were, with their own eyes; and they feel it with their own heart - the suffering of great swathes of humankind.

The “problem of human suffering” in the post-modern era in theology is one of *scale*. Today, our awareness of the scale of human suffering confronts traditional narrative and philosophical theodicies and as a consequence they often fail to carry conviction. However, it is also true that in some of the most extreme circumstances of human suffering (e.g. at Auschwitz or in the Warsaw Ghetto) men and women have retained a religious faith.

We will take the question whether there can be an adequate theological response to human suffering as a question of philosophical theology and our measure of adequacy will be whether human suffering disproves the existence of an all-powerful and good creator-God. We will also construe the question in *pastoral* terms and ask: can there be an adequate theological response to human suffering as it confronts a person of faith. Here our measure will be whether and in what shape faith survives the experience of suffering. We will take this dual-track approach and use the biblical book of Job as our primary source material.

### The Technical Architecture of Theodicies

What do theodicies look like? This is a preliminary question of philosophical analysis. A theodicy,

- will describe the framework of the relationship between God and man; the rights and obligations on both sides
- will define God’s goodness in terms of his interest in the world, his intentions with regard to the world and his goals

---

<sup>1</sup>D. F. Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1999), 11-12.

- will define God’s powers and any limits
- will describe the way the world is and how it is that human suffering comes about
- will justify God’s behaviour in respect of human suffering taking into account the framework of his relationship to man

If God has no relationship to man (a kind of deistic position), then the question of theodicy doesn’t arise except to say that human suffering is of no concern to God. Where there is a relationship, the character of that relationship will affect any theodicy. Within the Judeo-Christian traditions God enters into a covenant relationship with “his people” and there are those that lie outside that relationship; there are “insiders” and “outsiders”.

What is said about the human suffering of the insiders may be different to what is said about the outsiders, but the problem of human suffering is equally acute whether our theological concern is for one within a covenant relationship with God or for those outside. This is because within the Judeo-Christian tradition God is held to be **creator and sustainer** of the world and all life, and this is a larger and all embracing relationship that God is said to have with human beings. God is in a relationship with the world as well as “his people”, and within the Judeo-Christian tradition such relationships are said to be “good” because God is “good”.

These doctrines of creation and covenant<sup>2</sup> would appear to imply that,

- God is ultimately responsible for the way that the world is and how human suffering has come about, and
- God bears responsibility with regard to human suffering continuing to happen and for such suffering not being ameliorated.

Such apparent “facts” constitute the classic “problem of evil”. The problem arises first out of a doctrine of creation (i.e. that God is a *good* creator and sustainer) taken with matter of fact observations about that creation.<sup>3</sup> In a secondary sense it arises out of a doctrine of covenant as we consider the suffering of the people of God.

Theodicies articulate a response to this problem and tend to focus on how we understand God’s goodness. We might ask: “Is the goodness of God such that...

- he would not *create* evil,

---

<sup>2</sup> I am assuming in this paper that creation is *not* a kind of covenant relationship, and that covenants presuppose an agreement between two parties.

<sup>3</sup> In my formulation of the “problem of evil”, I am not postulating that we also need to say that God is omnipotent. I am arguing that the problem arises from the doctrine that God is a good creator/sustainer of the world/human life taken with the fact that the world appears to contain much evil and human suffering.

- he would not *act* in an evil manner,
- he would not *allow* evil?

The answers that we give to these questions would constitute a theodicy. The goal of such answers is to show how the goodness of God is consistent with the existence of evil.

In meeting the “problem of evil”, theodicies also present views on God’s omnipotence and his justice. It is easy to see why considerations about God’s omnipotence or his justice should be part of a theodicy. If a theodicy takes a position on whether a good God can create evil, act in an evil manner, or allow evil, it necessarily circumscribes what it means to say that God is omnipotent. And, in meeting the problem of evil, theodicies are also engaged in a process of demonstrating that God has been *just* in respect of the terms of the relationship that he has with creation and with his people.

In summary then, the architecture of a theodicy will articulate concepts of God, his power and goodness; a concept of the world and how it is; a concept of man and any relationship that he has to God, including any human rights that he has derived from God; God’s interests in the world and man, including his providence; and finally, whether God’s dealings are just.

### Narrative and Philosophical Theodicy

We shall take a “narrative theodicy” to be one that attempts to account for human suffering by telling a story about *origins or the ways of providence*.

Typically, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, an “origins” story will be an account of the Creation of Man and the Fall of Man or an account of the origin of supernatural forces of evil – such accounts are often grounded on Scripture. They are explanations of why there is human suffering that focus on purported “facts” - origins.

In contrast, a “ways of providence” theodicy is one which talks more directly about God’s purpose with man. The classic theodicy here is that of “sin and punishment”. God’s people, having entered into a covenant relationship with God, are subject to punishment if they sin. Such punishment necessarily involves human suffering, but it has a corrective and educative intent. Likewise, in respect of creation as a whole, a “ways of providence” theodicy will argue that God punishes those who reject him, i.e. the “wicked” – such suffering may be corrective or simply retributive. Within the Christian tradition the fiction of the “incarnation” and the hope of the “kingdom of God” are used to reconcile suffering with the goodness of God by giving such suffering an ultimate purpose.

A “philosophical theodicy” has a more analytical focus. It will give an account of the nature of man and God. In a classic essay,<sup>4</sup> J. L. Mackie discusses theodicies that trade on notions of necessity. Mackie reviews several ways in which evil has been thought of as a *counterpart* to good. These say that without the existence of certain kinds of evil certain goods would either not be appreciated or practised. The epistemic point here is that in order for someone to understand goodness he has to understand its opposite – evil. The

---

<sup>4</sup>J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence” in W. L. Rowe, W. J. Wainwright (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 206-216.

metaphysical point is that it is that without the existence of evils like misery, you could not have goods like sympathy.<sup>5</sup> Proposals like these tie good and evil together in some sort of necessary relationship and circumscribe what God has done (and can do) in creation: i.e. *if God creates or allows one, He has to create and allow the other*. The thrust of this proposal is that in order for certain kinds of good to exist like heroism, self-sacrifice and compassion, there have to be corresponding evils. Such evils are then justified by the over-riding value of corresponding goods. Human suffering makes it possible to exercise different kinds of virtue.

In addition to these “counterpart” theories, there are “consequence” theories which say that evil is a consequence of God’s choices in creation. The most common “consequence” theory is the “free-will defence”. This states that in creating human beings with a moral free-will it was necessary that there be *moral choice* – and by definition such choice is between good and evil. In creating such an environment with this choice, God imposed a limit on his own future actions, and this is why there is evil in the world. It is *possible* that men and women with free-will might always have chosen to do the good. But as a matter of fact this hasn’t happened, and this accounts for the human suffering that has arisen out of moral evil. The free-will defence then justifies human suffering in terms of the value and purpose in there being a creature such as man with free-will.

Narrative and philosophical theodicies can be combined because narrative is about what *has happened or will happen* whereas philosophy offers a more technical explanation of *what is the case*.<sup>6</sup> Although they can be combined, it is true to say that literature in this field seldom makes the attempt. Narrative theodicies tend to emerge from Scriptural tradition and are often part of a theological dialogue with modernity, or part of a pastoral application.<sup>7</sup> Philosophical theodicies tend to be more isolated from the real world. A supplementary aim of this paper is to show how these two approaches to the problem of human suffering share an underlying logic.

Over and above these theoretical approaches to human suffering, there is obviously a practical and pastoral dimension. Explanations of human suffering may or may not be valid. Even if at least some are valid, this does not guarantee that they are applicable in any *given* situation. It is the task of pastoral theology to consider the application of spiritual truth to real-life situations.

The book of Job is the defining Scriptural consideration of the problem of human suffering that is *shared* by the Judaic and Christian traditions and it has been influential in engendering much theological reflection. It is a lengthy dialogue between Job and other characters. The content of the book is a blend of the language of personal suffering and the attempt by various minds to account for that suffering. It is Job’s very personal wrestling with his own suffering and how this is consistent with what he has previously believed about God.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mackie’s terminology for the relationship between such evils and the corresponding goods is derived from philosophical logic: evils like misery are “first-order” evils and corresponding goods like sympathy are “second-order” goods.

<sup>6</sup> One way to combine the free-will defence with an “origins” story would be to say that men and women have *chosen* to do the evil because of Original Sin.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in respect to Job, see P. S. Sanders, (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Book of Job* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

A consideration of Job allows us to examine human suffering both in a pastoral context and in a theoretical way. Job's language of suffering anchors a reader in such a way that he cannot but *feel* Job's position. Furthermore, his dialogue partners are in part a "pastoral" response to Job's suffering and we can consider the value of that response. But Job's dialogues also invite the reader to go beyond his particular case and think seriously about human suffering and the justice of God at a theoretical level.

The question whether there can be an adequate response to human suffering in the Judeo-Christian tradition can be approached through Job.

## Job

E. Good opens an essay, *The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job*, by remarking that in our western cultural tradition we want God to be both good and all-powerful, but that "the philosophical and theological labourers in the vineyards have not yet successfully shown how we can have both" in the face of human suffering.<sup>8</sup> Good regards the book of Job as an attempt to solve this central problem.

The book of Job is comprised of a short narrative prose prologue in which the figure of Job is introduced and his calamities and affliction is described. This is followed by a large poetic central section in which Job enters into dialogue with three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar), an interlocutor (Elihu) and finally God. The book concludes with a brief narrative prose epilogue in which we learn of Job's restoration to prosperity and fortune.

The book bristles with problems of translation and interpretation. Some of the leading issues include,

- The dating of the book has been placed anywhere between the 8c. and the 2c. BCE.
- The speeches appear to be in three cycles with a definite pattern (Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Zophar, Job), except that in the "third cycle" the pattern breaks down; Bildad's speech is much shorter and Zophar does not have a speech. This has led scholars to propose that the text is disturbed and they offer reconstructions that restore the pattern.
- Another area of dispute is how the narrative envelope and the dialogues relate to each other. Reading the dialogues without the scene setting of the prologue engenders the impression that Job's situation is much worse; there are social and political aspects to his circumstances as well as his physical affliction. The Hebrew of the prologue is different to that of the dialogues.

A discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of a paper on the theology of human suffering. However, it is important to state our background assumptions on these matters, which are as follows,

---

<sup>8</sup> E. M. Good, "The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job" reprinted in L. G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin, eds., *The Voice from the Whirlwind* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 51.

- We are taking a canonical approach to the book and treating it as a literary unit for the purposes of examining its theodicy. This takes the book “as is”, and we assume that the “wisdom poem” of Job 28 and Elihu’s speeches are an integral part of the book for the purposes of our analysis.
- It is a common view that the text has been disturbed. For example, D. J. A. Clines, following other scholars, assumes that Job 26:5-14 belongs to Bildad’s third speech and that Job 27:13-28:28 is Zophar’s missing third speech.<sup>9</sup> However, we will assume that the text hasn’t been disturbed and follow the treatment of F. I. Andersen<sup>10</sup> in regarding Job as speaking all of Job 26-27. This means that there is no third speech for Zophar and Bildad’s “speech” is very short and more of an invited interruption to a monologue by Job.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Theodicy of the Friends*

The friends are confronted by Job, and they have both “factual reasons” to explain Job’s sufferings and a message of hope. They consider themselves to be “righteous” and their concern in the first instance is an explanation of human suffering as this affects those who are “righteous” and in some sort of covenant framework with God. They also have a clear understanding that there are also “the wicked” that lie outside any relationship with God and this is their second theme.

The first cycle of speeches by the friends focuses in on Job’s situation and the question of his guilt or innocence. Each of the speeches ends on a positive note to Job which can be paraphrased as an appeal to Job. Eliphaz offers Job hope that everything will be alright in the end and that Job is experiencing a period of chastening (Job 5:18-27). Bildad offers hope to Job by saying that God will not cast away a pious man and that Job will once again experience laughter (Job 8:20-21). Zophar appeals to Job to prepare his heart before God and to put wickedness far from his tents (Job 11:13-19).

The narrative theodicy that the friends have chosen is the one that focuses on the providence of God; they offer no story about the origins of human suffering. The

---

<sup>9</sup> D. J. A. Clines, *The Arguments of Job’s Three Friends* in D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn, A. Hauser, (eds.), *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 208. Clines is only canvassing one proposal about the disturbance of the text and notes that there are other suggestions.

<sup>10</sup> F. I. Andersen, *Job* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 214-19.

<sup>11</sup> The conventional approach to Job argues that there are three cycles of speeches; however, if Zophar’s speech is absent, Bildad’s speech is more of an interruption, and the text is not disturbed, the proposal that there are three cycles of speeches is overturned. We are inclined to take the view that there are only two cycles of speeches which are concluded by Eliphaz summarizing the friends’ position in Job 22. This would make Eliphaz’ third speech the structural counterpart to Job’s opening speech (Job 3). In fact it brings to a close the “first day” of speeches: the next day begins with Job saying, “*Today* also my complaint is bitter...” (Job 23:2). This “second day” monologue is then briefly interrupted by Bildad because Job invites an immediate response by his challenge: “If it is not so, who will prove me a liar, and show that there is nothing in what I say?” (Job 24:25). This two-cycle approach to Job is supported by D. Wolfers, *Deep Things out of Darkness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 225-259.

prevailing view of the friends is that the suffering of the righteous is punishment from God for sin, although Eliphaz is the only one to express the point explicitly,<sup>12</sup>

How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. Job 5:17<sup>13</sup>

The notion of punishment that Eliphaz presupposes is not retributive but corrective. Bildad and Zophar are not as generous. Bildad certainly thinks Job's children have been punished in a retributive sense (Job 8:4), and this seems to be a warning to Job about his present condition. Nevertheless, Bildad stops short of describing Job's suffering as retributive. Zophar is more caustic, "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (Job 11:6), and he may think that Job is experiencing retribution from God. Nevertheless, because all three friends offer Job hope, such punishment is not without a positive end in sight. It is this focus on a positive outcome that makes the friends' first set of speeches a narrative theodicy that focuses on the providence of God.

In this first cycle of speeches, the friends are attempting to integrate Job's experiences within a larger picture, and they employ a standard approach – they invite Job to think about the *end* of his suffering. They are attempting to bring an order to the chaos of Job's evident situation. Job can have this hope because, whatever he has done, he has been fundamentally pious (e.g. Job 4:6). He can expect to share in God's blessing. However, they do not only offer something in the future; they couple their expression of hope with practical advice about seeking God (Job 5:18-26, 8:5-6, 11:13-19). In making this coupling of hope and action, the friends are offering Job a way to re-build his sense of identity and his self-worth. They are meeting the disorder in Job's life by advocating that Job must take on a sense of agency.

Our characterization of the friends' "comfort" in the first cycle highlights its pastoral value. It seems reasonable to argue that offering hope and a way to re-validate one's life are essential in any response to human suffering. The theological dimension to such an approach is in the religious quality of the hope (it lies within a relationship with God) and in the religious character of the proffered action – seeking God.

However, this is not the whole truth about the friends' message. They do think Job is guilty of sin which, because Job does not confess it, must be hidden; Job is suffering for this sin. They also think that human nature is such that it is prone to sin, and that the pious must accept responsibility for sin in their lives. This strand in their thought is their "anthropology". However, the friends do not offer a story about the origins of mankind's proneness to sin. Eliphaz expresses their position rhetorically when he says,

Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker? Job 4:17; cf. Job 25:4

Eliphaz' answer to these rhetorical questions is that a creature made of dust cannot be pure and righteous before God (Job 4:19). Here Eliphaz alludes to the Hebrew creation story without engaging in any narrative theodicy.

---

<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this paper we can treat the friends collectively and take our cue from Eliphaz' claim to be a spokesman (Job 5:27). Job certainly rejects the friends' speeches collectively (Job 21:34).

<sup>13</sup> All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless explicitly noted.

The idea of discipline, correction or punishment as an explanation of suffering is one which has a long pedigree in theodicy (e.g. it is enshrined in the Law of Moses). But its principal application has been in those situations where there is accountability on the part of man to obey God. This accountability exists within the covenant relationship that God has with his people, but also to a lesser extent in the rejection of God by “the wicked”. The friends enunciate a doctrine of distributive justice: God respectively distributes rewards and punishment to the righteous and the wicked.

The second cycle of speeches by the friends focuses in on the fate of the wicked. They enunciate a doctrine of temporal retribution – the wicked suffer *in this life* for their misdeeds. The tone of the friends’ speeches becomes more confrontational as each is delivered. This is no doubt in response to Job’s defence and proclamation of his innocence, which the friends see as a questioning of the justice of God in afflicting Job. The second cycle reaches a crescendo in Eliphaz’ closing unequivocal condemnation of Job as “wicked”. The critical question in understanding these speeches is whether the friends’ view Job as completely “like” the wicked or whether their presumed fate is delivered more as a warning to Job.<sup>14</sup> Whatever answer we give to this question, the second cycle of speeches sees Job become more estranged from the friends and their simplistic and self-comforting view.

Job rejects the friends’ position. He rejects their doctrines of distributive justice and temporal retribution because they do not account for *innocent* suffering of which he is a prime example. In return for this rejection, all the friends offer Job is the belief that he cannot expect God to explain himself because ultimately His ways are unknowable (Job 11:7-12).<sup>15</sup>

### *Job’s Theodicy*

Does Job express a theodicy, or are his speeches a denial of the possibility of theodicy? This is the critical question that confronts commentators on Job. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can identify two main strands in his speeches:

1. Job justifies himself in response to the accusations of the three friends. His justification is not an absolute denial that he has sinned (e.g. Job 7:21, 13:26), nor is it a denial that man’s nature is mortal and base (Job 14:1-5). Rather, it is that his suffering is not *proportionate* to anything that he might have done. When he challenges the friends to show him his sin (e.g. Job 6:24), the implicit assumption is that they cannot show him a sin that is proportionate to his suffering.

O that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances!<sup>16</sup> For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up. Job 6:2-3, cf. 31:6

---

<sup>14</sup> A discussion of this expositional issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> The view that God’s ways are often unknowable is a classic theodicy in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the understanding of the three friends it is a supplementary theodicy that lies behind their distributive and retributive doctrines.

<sup>16</sup> The metaphor of “weight” and “balances” suggests a loading of his suffering onto one side of the scales and any alleged sin on the other. Job is supremely confident of the outcome.



In raising the issue of “proportion”, Job is questioning the scale of his suffering. This connects Job’s intellectual struggle with our characterization of the problem of human suffering as presented to theology by the events of the 20c. It is one thing to question whether the very existence of *any* human suffering is consistent with the justice of God; it is quite another to question whether the *scale* of human suffering, whether in one individual or in a larger group, is consistent with the justice of God. The problem of human suffering is a far more acute problem for Judeo-Christian theology when it is presented as a problem about *scale*.

Job himself is aware of the wider problem of human suffering. In his first speech he laments, “Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they find the grave?” (Job 3:20-22). And in his later monologue he describes in detail the suffering of the poor who are oppressed by the wicked (Job 24:2-14), commenting that “God pays no attention to their prayer!” (Job 24:12). Job’s mention of the poor broadens the value of his response to suffering and enables that response to be used as a model in approaching social deprivation and injustice in society today.<sup>17</sup>

2. Job doesn’t accept that the doctrines of distributive justice or temporal retribution are unequivocally true. He deploys two arguments: firstly, he himself is fundamentally innocent and a counter-example to a theodicy based on such notions; secondly, the wicked are not necessarily punished, nor do their children necessarily suffer as a consequence of the wickedness of their fathers; some suffer in this life, but many live happy lives and die in peace and old age.

One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, his loins full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist...Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them. Job 21:23-26<sup>18</sup>

Job doesn’t produce an intellectual theodicy. His speeches in the first cycle are taken up with descriptions of his suffering, the injustice of that suffering and rebutting the friends’ arguments. In the second cycle, Job continues these themes and turns his attention also to the behaviour and fate of the wicked, again seeking to refute the friends’ outlook. A theodicy available to Job from religious tradition was one that explained suffering as a *test*.<sup>19</sup> This would have been consistent with his conviction of innocence. It is a common explanation in Judeo-Christian theology, appearing for example in the apostolic church letter of James (Jms 1:2-3).<sup>20</sup> However, even though as readers of the book we know that this is the view of the prologue, it doesn’t appear in Job’s speeches.

---

<sup>17</sup> An example of a theologian applying Job in this way is G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (New York: Orbis, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> This text describes those who are eminent (Job 21:22), but these are those whom Job has previously identified as “the wicked” (Job 21:7).

<sup>19</sup> Job speaks of being “tested” (Job 23:10), but this is the testing that takes place in the adversarial atmosphere of a court of law.

<sup>20</sup> The philosophical treatment of this theodicy has been dubbed by J. Hick as a “vale of soul-making” theodicy. See J. Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy” in S. T. Davis, (ed.) *Encountering Evil* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2001), 38-51.

It could be argued that Job's theodicy is not intellectual but rather existential.<sup>21</sup> His constant request for an encounter with God is satisfied in a theophany through the whirlwind. In this encounter, God does not justify his action to Job; rather he declares his creative power and majesty. Job's reaction is to declare, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3). This "conclusion" to the book may suggest that the only adequate approach to the problem of human suffering is a pastoral one in which the sufferer is brought to experience the presence of God in his suffering.<sup>22</sup>

### Divine Theodicy

C. A. Newsome<sup>23</sup> has shown that a reading of Job that "privileges" the narrative envelope is likely to be different from one that "privileges" the dialogues. A focus on the dialogues alone is likely to lead to a reading that resists any moral closure. This is because scholars find it difficult to see how God's speeches resolve any of Job's *specific* concerns. D. J. A. Clines supports Newsome when he argues that the epilogue is a deconstruction<sup>24</sup> of the dialogues because it shows that Job is doubly rewarded for his suffering. If the dialogues demolish the traditional doctrine of distributive justice, Clines argues that the double reward for Job reinstates this view, and hence deconstructs the dialogues. The observations made by Newsome and Clines challenge a canonical reading, although Clines does point out ways in which the book can be read as a coherent whole.

The intention of the implied author<sup>25</sup> of the canonical Job leads a reader to privilege the narrative envelope, take Job's speeches as setting the agenda, and look for a resolution in God's speeches. There is no reason why such a reading strategy cannot hold in tension the "why it happened" of the prologue with the apparent lack of a satisfactory "why-answer" in the dialogues. Such a strategy would recognise that the function of the prologue is to present one key to the dialogues – one that was felt to be necessary precisely because of the absence of a clear "why-answer" in the dialogues.

In any event, while the speeches of God do not directly address Job's concerns, there are ways to read them as meeting Job's needs in a concrete way. Gutiérrez makes this point as follows,

Some interpreters of the Book of Job are so disconcerted by the fact of God's speaking that they pay too little attention to the content of the speeches; they think that what God says is less significant than the fact of the

---

<sup>21</sup> For example, D. J. Clines, "Job" in B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan, eds., *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 369.

<sup>22</sup> Elihu's theodicy follows that of Job, but he is not answered by Job, nor is he mentioned by God. Some commentators have argued that Elihu is a later addition to the work, partly because no one engages his contribution. Other commentators argue that he adds nothing substantially new to the arguments of the friends, except perhaps an arrogant manner. Of all the participants, he is the most neglected by commentators; space prevents our consideration of his contribution in any depth.

<sup>23</sup> C. A. Newsome, "Cultural Politics and the Reading of Job" *Biblical Interpretation* (1993), p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> D. J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do To Help? – And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), Chap. 5, "Deconstructing the Book of Job".

<sup>25</sup> For a definition of "implied author" see M. A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, (London: SPCK, 1993), 19.

speaking, the presence, of God...I do not think that this is a correct view, for the content of God's speeches specify and concretize the response; the words of God give the presence of God its full meaning.<sup>26</sup>

God's speeches focus on the world of nature whereas the concern of Job and the friends has been about the world of humankind. The exegetical task is to determine how God is addressing the social and political doctrines of Job and the friends using similes from nature.

God recognises the thrust of Job's and the friends' speeches when he opens his first reply with, 'who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge' (Job 38:2). The Hebrew word translated 'counsel' means 'plan of action' and is used to describe God's actions in history (e.g. Isa 14:26, 19:17, 25:1, 28:29). With this introduction, it is natural to read God's speeches as a justification of his action in history.

The speeches rehearse God's work of creation, and establish that God acts for reasons – he has a plan; the constant theme is that Job cannot know the nature of this plan. The character of God's governance of creation illustrates love (Job 38:26-27, 41) and is designed to curtail the activity of the wicked (Job 38:13). Whereas Job and the friends display an anthropocentric view in all matters, God describes in detail the mysteries of the inanimate and animate creations, in order to draw out a better balance of thinking about divine action. One commentator therefore expresses the thrust of the speeches in this way:

From this flows the basic conclusion at which the poet has arrived: just as there is order and harmony in the natural world, though imperfectly grasped by man, so there is order and meaning in the moral sphere, though often incomprehensible to man.<sup>27</sup>

God's speeches are not the specific answer that Job has demanded but they are an answer of a kind – God is present and in control.

### *Job and the Problem of Evil*

In approaching his suffering neither Job nor his friends question the existence of God. The philosophical pre-occupation with the problem of evil as an argument against the existence of God never raises its head. In fact it would appear that if we compare the book of Job with contemporary philosophical theodicies it can really only be considered to be a narrative theodicy. For example, there isn't the technical language that we associate with the free-will defence. However, appearances can be deceptive and a case can be made that the book of Job does have something in common with the philosophical "problem of evil".

Mackie notes that,

If you are prepared to say that God is not wholly good, or not quite omnipotent, or that evil does not exist, or that good is not opposed to the

---

<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 133.

kind of evil that exists, or that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do, then the problem of evil will not arise for you.<sup>28</sup>

Of these “solutions” documented by Mackie, the book of Job clearly rejects the idea that God is not omnipotent. If there is one message in the speeches of God, it is that he is omnipotent! Also, for both prologue-Job and dialogues-Job, there is an insistence that what has happened is an evil. In the prologue, Job exclaims, ‘What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?’ (Job 2:11). In the dialogues he reasons, ‘When I looked for good, then evil came unto me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness.’ (Job 29:26). The book of Job accepts that evil exists.

Of Mackie’s solutions, the friends are therefore arguing that “good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists”, because there is a “higher” purpose in Job’s suffering – the purpose of correction and discipline, or even (perhaps uncharitably) punishment. As we have seen, Job rejects this explanation because he is convinced of his own innocence and he believes the scale of his “punishment” is out of all proportion to his “sin”. But Job’s rejection of the friends’ counsel doesn’t invalidate the logic of the friends’ approach that “good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists”.

In taking a realist view toward evil, the book of Job is not attributing an evil *act* to God; rather it is presenting *what has happened* to Job as an evil. God may bring about circumstances and happenings that men construe as “evil” – but this is not the same as saying that God acts in an evil way. It would be contrary to the notion of God’s goodness to suppose that an act of his was evil.<sup>29</sup> This might appear to be a sleight of hand: can God bring about circumstances and events that men construe as evil and *not act* in an evil way? We can address this “sleight of hand” charge by deploying a distinction from the philosophy of action and show how the book of Job shares a common logic with the philosophical “problem of evil”.

Theologians and theistic philosophers might argue that God *cannot* act in an evil way in virtue of his nature.<sup>30</sup> However, arguing that God cannot act in an evil way because of his moral attributes begs the question at issue for a sceptic pointing to the reality of human suffering and God’s omnipotence. If we concede this line of argument to the sceptic, the question becomes - *has* God acted in an evil way? This takes things out of the sphere of what is necessarily implied by God’s attributes and into the realm of the contingent and

---

<sup>28</sup> Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 207.

<sup>29</sup> There is perhaps a difference between the prologue of Job and the dialogues on this point. The author of the prologue has God hand over Job to Satan and in this way he distances God from what happens to Job. In the dialogues, Satan is absent, and Job is very clear in attributing his calamities to God. A reader of the dialogues alone could misconstrue Job and think that God acts in an evil way. The prologue would prevent such a reading with the figure of Satan; this stratagem is not uncommon in Jewish inter-testamental literature (e.g. in the Jewish treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac, *Jubilees* 17:16).

<sup>30</sup> For example, S. Clarke argues that “...as it is manifest infinite power cannot extend to natural contradictions which imply a destruction of that very power by which they must be supposed to be effected, so neither can it extend to moral contradictions which imply a destruction of some other attributes as necessarily belonging to the divine nature as power”. S. Clarke, “Can God do Evil?” in W. L. Rowe, W. J. Wainwright (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 75.

the empirical. The problem of evil becomes a problem of evidence and a problem of how divine action should be characterized.

G. E. M. Anscombe<sup>31</sup> in her study of the philosophical concept of “intention” shows how we cannot just construe an action as it were “in itself”; instead we perceive actions “under descriptions”. For example, it is trivially true that the action of raising an arm could be any one of a number of *actions*: it could be a greeting or a warning; it could be exercise or a signal to an oncoming vehicle, *and so on*. The moral quality of an action is obviously dependent on how we construe the action, i.e. how we see it “under a description”. If we construe what has happened to Job as an act of chastisement or as an act of discipline we are forestalling the charge that these are evil *acts*. This is the logic of the friends’ position, and it is a **logic shared by philosophical theodicies**.

We can only evaluate an action as good or evil if we know the nature of that action – *what it is*. It seems reasonable to distinguish what we might call “basic actions” like the raising of an arm from “higher” actions like that of sending someone a warning with the raising of one’s arm. The philosophical value of this distinction between “basic” and “higher” actions is that with “higher” actions we introduce the idea of “intention” in the action. The notion of “intention” brings with it the idea of purpose and it is at this stage that the possibility of moral description of the action becomes possible.

If all that happens to Job is the action of *the affliction of the body* or the *decimation of his household* then we aren’t in a position to say whether this is a good or evil act. It appears evil, but until we know the context of these happenings we cannot pass this judgement. If it turned out to be the case that his household (unknown to Job) were a terrorist cell plotting against the Sabaeans and the Chaldeans, our judgment would be different than if they were innocent landowners. An event, if it is an action, requires a context of interpretation in order for it to be evaluated from a moral perspective.

The friends offer narrative contexts for understanding Job’s calamities and in this way they construe God’s actions as good. They assume that discipline, chastisement and punishment are “good” and forestall the charge that God is unjust and has therefore acted in an evil way. (In the same way, they argue that God justly punishes the wicked).

A sceptic might argue that the book of Job has a narrow focus and can offer nothing to explain the wider problem of human suffering. For instance, it might be argued that it has nothing to say on natural evil, the suffering of animals or the suffering of innocents – babies and children. This is a fair point, although Job is not so pre-occupied about himself as to be unaware of the plight of the poor (e.g. Job 24) as examples of suffering. However, even though the book of Job does not explicitly consider these aspects of the problem of evil, it is using a completely general philosophical approach to the problem of evil, and this is to challenge the person questioning the justice of God about how they construe God’s agency in respect to the world. Is a challenger legitimately characterizing God’s action?

Philosophical theodicies can be characterized as debates over what God has done, i.e. how he has acted. The debate is often constructed around what God has created – with creation taken as an act of God. This focus on creation is understandable because creation is the most general thing that God has done and the apparent presence of evil in

---

<sup>31</sup>G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 1-16.

the world is general and widespread (both moral and natural). The classic “creation” theodicy is the free-will defence. This “defence” is absent in Job, but the defence still illustrates the Joban strategy of debating how God’s action should be construed in respect to the world.

In a classic essay, A. Plantinga defines the free-will defence as follows,

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he can’t cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they aren’t significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he can’t give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.<sup>32</sup>

What Plantinga is doing here is characterising God’s *action* of creation. The existence of moral evil in the world is due to God having created human beings with the capacity for free choice between good and evil. With the creation of a “free” creature there comes the risk of that creature making evil choices. However, it is not enough to explain God’s action in this way; the free-will defence also goes on to say that such a creation of a free creature was “good”.<sup>33</sup> The presence of moral evil in the world is justified by the “good” that there should have been a moral creature with free-will.

In this defence, and in the theodicy of Job’s friends, a context of interpretation is being brought to bear on the action of God. The friends bring a social context in which there is a (covenant) relationship between Job and God; within this context Job’s suffering is justified and God has not acted in an evil way. Advocates of the free-will defence bring to bear the context of the *object* (or subject) that is created, i.e. creation *itself*. Within this context evil is justified and God has not acted in an evil way because of the value of there being a creature that had free-will. Both types of defence illustrate Anscombe’s principle that in order to understand action, we have to see such action “under descriptions”.

### *Adequate Responses to Human Suffering*

At the beginning of this paper we posed two measures for determining the adequacy of Judeo-Christian theodicies. The first was whether human suffering was a disproof for the existence of God. The second was whether they helped the person of faith survive the experience of suffering.

Mackie, as a representative sceptical philosopher, presents the problem of evil as a disproof of the existence of God. However, he offered several ways in which a theist could resist the logic of the problem of evil and we took up one his defences (but which he himself didn’t explore) – viz., that “good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists”. This theodicy works because it insists that the prior question of any theodicy

---

<sup>32</sup> A. Plantinga, “The Free-Will Defence” in M. L. Peterson (ed.), *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), 118.

<sup>33</sup> Plantinga doesn’t go on to make this second point, though it is common in other presentations of the free-will defence. His essay is concerned to prove that God could not create a creature with free-will who could only act for the good.

must be how we should construe God's action. Essentially, the dispute between sceptics and believers is about how the acts of creation and sustaining that creation should be construed. Does the evidence show that such acts have an over-riding good intention? Is the existence of evil evidence of evil intent and therefore the non-existence of a good creator, or is it evidence of good intent when it is properly construed? It is possible to construe God's creative and sustaining acts in such a way that they are consistent with divine goodness. The free-will defence is the typical example, but the same is true of theodicies that address natural evil.<sup>34</sup> Philosophical theodicy is an attempt to explain God's action and show that the problem of evil is not a disproof of the existence of God.

The friends are following the same logic as the philosophical theologian, but they are doing so in a pastoral context.<sup>35</sup> They offer several thoughts that have been used in theodicy and in counselling situations. These thoughts include: suffering is discipline; suffering is disciplinary instruction; suffering is retributive punishment; suffering is a warning; and suffering cannot be understood in the present situation, but it will be seen to have a purpose in the future. All such thoughts are ways to construe God's action that make such action consistent with divine goodness. They may or may not be successful in preserving faith in God. In the case of Job, the friends were not good counsellors.

The theodicy of the prologue is that Job's suffering is a test of his piety – is it a disinterested piety? This theodicy doesn't appear in the dialogues and it is absent from God's speeches. The divine theodicy is that there is a reason for Job's suffering just as there are explanations of the mysteries of creation. But God does not disclose the explanation; nevertheless Job is satisfied with what God says and his encounter with God. Job does not lose his faith in God. The intent of the implied author therefore must be that there can be both bad (the friends) and good (Yahweh) pastoral responses to the problem of human suffering. The response that he affirms is one in which the providence and the control of God is mediated to the sufferer. His book shows that it is possible to help the person of faith survive the experience of suffering.

---

<sup>34</sup> For example, see R. Swinburne, "Natural Evil" in M. L. Peterson (ed.), *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, 303-316.

<sup>35</sup> Because of their common logic, there is nothing to prevent a counsellor using a philosophical theodicy to meet a pastoral situation of human suffering, for example, suffering that was the consequence of moral evil.

This document archive has been made available  
to you with the assistance of the publishers of:



**inWORD**

<http://inwordbible.com>