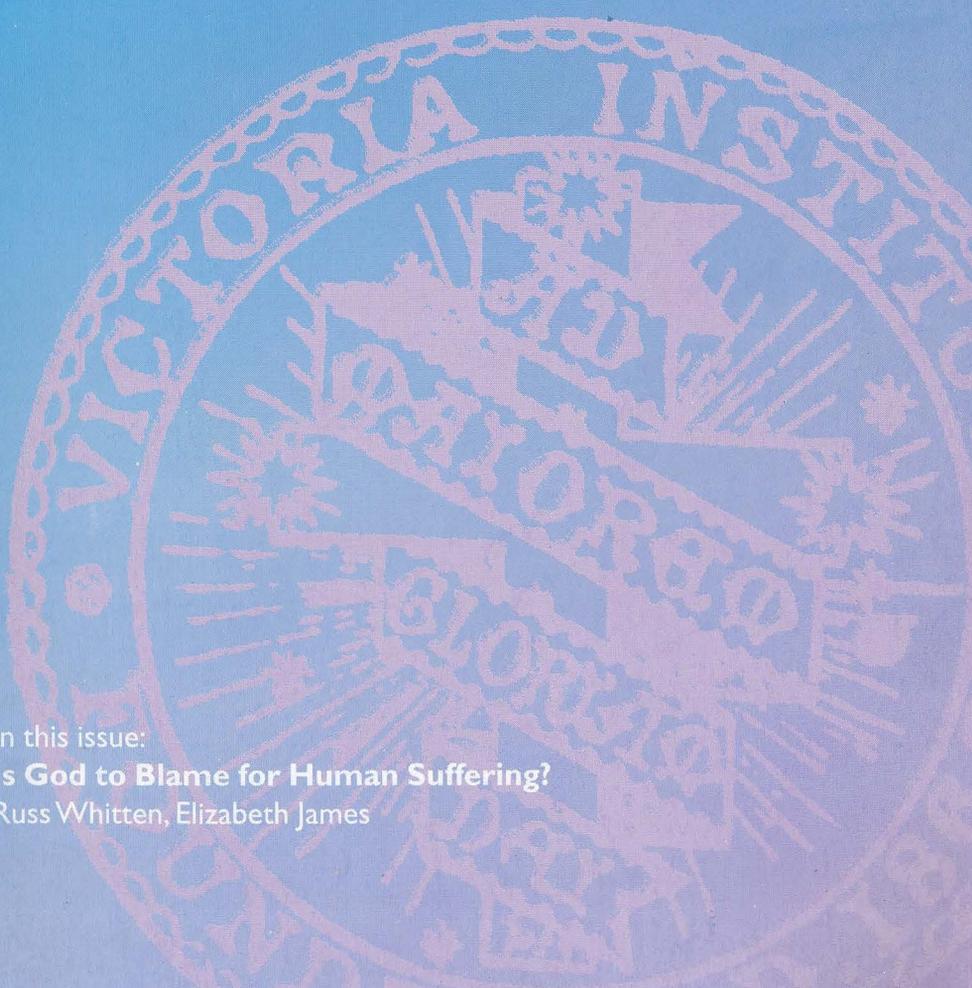


Faith & Thought



Relating advances in knowledge to faith within society
October 2006 No. 40



In this issue:

Is God to Blame for Human Suffering?

Russ Whitten, Elizabeth James

FAITH and THOUGHT

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Editorial

Both articles in this issue are the joint winners of our Prize Essay Competition on the subject 'Is God to Blame for Human Suffering?' The two complement one another. Russ Whitten concentrates primarily on the Christian response to the question, whereas Elizabeth James trawls wider in her search for an answer.

The referees considered that these two essays stood out from the rest and decided to have the prize shared between the two. We would like to congratulate both Elizabeth James and Russ Whitten for their contributions. It is particularly pleasing that the referees decided to award the prize to Elizabeth, who is a young, newly qualified teacher starting out on her life's work. We would like to continue to encourage young people not only to join but also to submit work for publication in the journal.

New Members

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Annual General Meeting: April 24 2006

The meeting was held in Methodist Church House, 25, Marylebone Road, London WC1E 7JH at 3.30 p.m. during the meeting of the Council of the Victoria Institute.

- (a) The chair was taken by Mr. Terence Mitchell MA, who officially welcomed Dr. Rodney Holder onto the Council. No other members were present except the Council members and Mr. Brian Weller, the Minute Secretary and Mr. Reg. Luhman, the Editor of the Journal.
- (b) The minutes of the previous AGM were agreed.
- (c) The President, Vice Presidents and Honorary Treasurer were elected for further terms of service as were Professor Duncan Vere, MD, FRCP, FFPM, and the Rev. R.H. Allaway, B.Sc, MA, Ph.D. The Rev. Rodney Holder, MA, DPhil, FRAS, FIMA and the Rev. Nick Mercer BA, MA, MPhil, PGCE were elected as additional members of Council.
- (d) The Rev. John Buxton, MA presented the annual accounts, which are available upon application. The Chairman thanked the Hon. Treasurer for preparing these accounts.

Is God to Blame for Human Suffering?

Russ Whitten

Synopsis

How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow so much suffering and evil in the world? Where is God when innocent people are undergoing tormenting pain? Is God ultimately to blame for the human suffering we see and experience in the world? Suffering and evil confront us in many ways and demand some kind of answer. In this essay, I shall consider how various world views approach these thorny questions, offer perspectives on how to understand suffering and evil from a Christian point of view and will give special attention to what the Bible has to say about this all-important and sensitive subject. While being influenced by the writers mentioned in the bibliography, this work is original save for the quotations acknowledged in the footnotes.

I. Introduction

In her book entitled *When God Weeps*, Joni Eareckson Tada writes the following about her friend, John McAllister, whose degenerative nerve disease leaves him bedridden and unable to move:

“Nighttime is no longer friendly. Shadows cast jerking, jagging shapes across the room. Gravity is his enemy as the weight of the air settles on his chest. Breathing is heavy labor. Calling out is impossible. He needs to call out tonight. In the darkness an ant finds him. The scout sends for others and they come. First hundreds, then thousands. A noiseless legion inches its way down the chimney, across the floor, secretly crawling up his urine tube, up over and onto his bed. They fan out over the hills and valleys of John’s blanket, tunneling under and onto his body. He is covered by a black, wriggling, invasion ... John’s wife, along with a nurse, found him in the early morning with ants still in his hair, mouth and eyes. His skin was badly bitten and burned ... John is a Christian. His God can see in the dark. Why, in the name of heaven, why? God, who are you? ... This is suffering stalking a person down and ripping into his sanity. This is affliction spinning out of control ... Is this God’s idea of accomplishing something deep and profound in our lives? Is there anyone out there who can make sense of this? Who actually believes this?”¹

Millions upon millions of similiar, horrific stories like this, as well as personal experiences with suffering, have driven scores of people to question God’s justice, power, goodness and love. Peter De Vries describes the age old mystery of pain as “the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart.”² The jagged edges of the reality of suffering and evil in the world have even led many to deduce that an all-powerful, all-loving God cannot possibly exist. The Christian lecturer, Michael Ramsden, succinctly sums up the problem of suffering in this way: “For a while now, at least in the Western world, the existence of any form of pain, suffering or evil has been regarded as evidence for the non-existence of God. If a good God existed, people say, these things wouldn’t. But they do and, therefore, he doesn’t.” Nineteenth century minister, Joseph Parker, conveyed these feelings with forthright honesty, anguish and anger following the death of his wife:

“In that dark hour, I almost became an atheist. For God had set his foot upon my prayers and treated my petitions with contempt. If I had seen a dog in such agony as mine, I would have pitied the dumb beast; yet God spat upon me and cast me out as an offence - out into the waste wilderness and the night black and starless.”³

II. Stating the Problem⁴

The presence of suffering and evil in the world undoubtedly presents the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith. Henri Blocher, commenting on this challenge, writes: “while it is evil that tortures human bodies, it is the problem of evil that torments the human mind.”⁵ Even the prophets in the Bible raise the question in various forms. For example, the prophet Habakkuk asked God, “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?”⁶ Jeremiah challenged God by saying, “I would speak with you about your justice: why does the way of the wicked prosper?”⁷

However the issue is articulated, it is ultimately God’s character and moral trustworthiness that are called into question.

III. Evaluation of proposed explanations from non-Christian worldviews

It is important to say at the outset that when examining the question of suffering and evil we should have a proper degree of humility and realize that we are dealing with a profound mystery for which no-one has an exhaustively satisfying answer. The human mind seeking to explain this mystery is like a harmonica interpreting Beethoven. The music is too majestic for the instrument.

Further, it must be acknowledged that every world religion and worldview must give an explanation for evil and suffering. This is not just a Christian question.

Finally, it should be pointed out that if someone puts forth an explanation for the problem of suffering and evil, it should make sense logically, intellectually, philosophically, existentially and emotionally.

What are the possible answers? Let us begin by examining and evaluating how other worldviews go about formulating a response to the mystery of suffering. Blocher, in his book *Evil and the Cross*, suggests that, outside of the Biblical framework, there are three main historical categories of approaches: optimism, dualism and pessimism.⁸

A. Optimism

One way that people choose to resolve this problem is to say that evil and suffering really do not exist. The category of optimism, describes Blocher, is the “optimistic denial of the reality of evil.”⁹ Many Eastern religions go this route. For example, pantheistic religions teach, “If God is all, and God is good, then evil can not exist.” Hinduism, Taoism, Stoicism, and some forms of Buddhism teach that the way to resolve the problem of evil is to realize that it really does not exist at all. It is an illusion. Thus, in order to overcome pain, suffering and evil, we must learn to believe that everything in the physical world is non-real -

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then the illusion will have no grip on us. Many would contend that this explanation does not make sense emotionally. I can't imagine having to tell a rape victim - "The evil and pain you have encountered is just an illusion."

It could also be argued that the pantheistic explanation of evil and suffering does not make sense intellectually. Ravi Zacharias tells the humorous story of India's leading philosopher, Shankara, who had just finished lecturing the king on the deception of the mind and its delusion of material reality when an elephant went on a rampage. Promptly, Shankara climbed up a tree to find safety. When the king asked him why he ran if the elephant was non-real Shankara, not to be outdone, said, "What the king actually saw was a non-real me climbing a non-real tree!" Zacharias offers this addendum: "One might add, 'this is a non-real answer.'"¹⁰ Blocher concludes that the system of optimism "clearly lays itself open to the charge of wishful thinking, by evading what it cannot accept."¹¹ In other words, this solution fails to do justice to the human experience of suffering and evil.

B. Dualism

Another system which has been formulated to explain this mystery could be categorized as dualism. Historically, this system - which holds that we are living in a world where good and evil are co-eternal, equal and opposite - was propagated by followers of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Gnosticism. Blocher describes and then critiques dualism this way:

"Reality is constituted and governed, like two poles, by the two principles of Good and Evil. From all eternity these two have been in conflict: a conflict that can never end in peace but which, after all, makes the world go round, as the opposition of positive and negative poles gives rise to electric current ... Dualism takes evil as one of the pillars that upholds the order of what is; so one's indignation will be no longer directed against evil, but against what is - or, rather, against nothing at all, because what is more stupid and pointless than being indignant against what is?"¹²

C. Pessimism

Another example of an explanation that does not make sense logically or emotionally is atheism, which Blocher would place in the category of pessimism. L.T. Jeyachandran describes this system as follows: We are living in an impersonal, accidental universe in which some people get lucky and others don't. There is no point of thinking of a creator-god to whom we can attribute goodness or badness - it is all matter plus time plus chance. We are part of a cosmic casino and no questions should be asked.¹³

Many atheists and skeptics begin their challenge to God's existence by saying, "God can't exist because evil exists." However, there are logical problems with this statement.

Consider the following dialogue by Ravi Zacharias and a university student from a question and answer session:¹⁴

Student: There is too much evil in this world; therefore, there cannot be a God!

Speaker: Would you mind if I asked you something? You said “God cannot exist because there is too much evil.” If there is such a thing as evil, aren’t you assuming there is such a thing as good?

Student: I guess so.

Speaker: When you accept the existence of goodness, you must affirm a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil. But when you admit to a moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver. That, however, is who you are trying to disprove and not prove. For if there is no moral lawgiver, there is no moral law. If there is no moral law, there is no good. If there is no good, there is no evil. What, then, is your question?

Student: What, then, am I asking you?

The student just realized that the question of evil and suffering is only valid if God, in fact, exists. As soon as you take God out of the picture, terms like “Good” and “Evil” can only be defined by conflicting human opinions and personal feelings. If morality is defined by human opinion, we are reduced to asking ourselves - which human’s opinion do we choose to follow? “Seen in this light, the reality of evil actually requires the existence of God rather than disproves it.”¹⁵ So, atheism’s explanation for the problem of evil and suffering does not make sense logically. Also, it does not make sense emotionally. Listen to what Oxford University professor, Richard Dawkins, says about why people suffer:

“In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”¹⁶

Would Dawkins honestly tell a rape victim that the rapist was merely dancing to his DNA?¹⁷

If it is true that the question of evil is valid only if God exists, how can the stark reality of suffering in the world possibly be reconciled with the Christian affirmation that God is sovereign, just and good?

IV. Four Possible Worlds

Why did God create a world where suffering exists? Most human suffering can be put into two broad categories: 1) Suffering caused by moral evil or sin. 2) Suffering brought on by natural causes. When examining the question of responsibility and origin of these two categories it is helpful to consider the possible worlds God could have created.

A. No World

One option is that God could have created no world at all. Would a non-world be better than our world? While this might be an interesting question for philosophers to wrestle with, it is not very helpful to our discussion for “something” and “nothing” cannot be compared. As Norman Geisler put it, “comparing apples and non-apples, insisting that non-apples taste better.”¹⁸

B. A Good Only World

Another option is that God could have created a world where only goodness could be chosen. In this type of world, suffering caused by moral evil would not exist. While this sounds wonderful at first glance, the result of creating this type of world would be the negation of free choice. In fact, if God created a non-free world it would also be a non-moral world. Freedom of choice is necessary if the word “morality” is to have any meaning. Again, Geisler sums this up well: “A non-moral world cannot be morally better than a moral world.”

If God did not create us with the freedom to choose we would be like robots. Certainly, God could have created humans that had no choice to love him or not. This, however, would have made real love impossible. Any expression of forced love would be no more meaningful than a man who programmed his computer to say “*I love you!*” every few minutes.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the freedom and ability to choose. However, free choice always leaves the possibility of a wrong choice. “Not even an all-powerful God, “ John Stott reminds us, “could give man freedom and at the same time guarantee that he would use it wisely.”¹⁹ In other words, “it is not possible to force people to freely choose the good. Forced freedom is a contradiction.”²⁰ In his celebrated book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes:

“God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata - of creatures that worked like machines - would hardly be worth creating.”²¹

God does not force us to love him or obey him. If we choose to love God, it should follow that we will seek to obey him. If everyone chose to love and obey God, evil would not result. If people choose not to obey God, evil will result. This is where suffering caused by evil comes from. It comes from disobedience and the misuse of freedom. It does not come from God.

As we consider the issue of free will, another question emerges that needs to be addressed: If God caused everything and evil is a “thing” humans are confronted with, can’t we deduce that God created evil?

In addressing this question it is good to carefully consider the nature of evil. Christian thinkers, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas developed the idea that evil should not be defined as a “thing” or an “initial ingredient of existence”²² but, rather, the absence of something. Michael Ramsden offers this helpful illustration: In order to make a room dark, we do not switch darkness on - we switch the light off. Darkness is a negative entity that can be explained only as the absence of light. So it is with evil. Negative entities are not created. Blocher agrees with this assessment and adds, “such an understanding [of evil] not only avoids dualism, it also makes clear that evil cannot proceed from God, or exist apart from creatures that are good as such.”²³

This understanding of the nature of evil is in harmony with the first chapters of the Bible which teach that in the beginning God created a good world without suffering and uncontaminated by evil. Genesis 1:31 tells us, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Angelic beings were also created as a part of God’s good creation. Finally, God created human beings and blessed them with the capacity to love, grow, learn and mature. In order to do this, it was necessary to create an environment where individuals possessed the freedom to obey or disobey, love or ignore their Creator. A particular created spirit called Satan - who was not created as evil - at some point, misused the freedom he was given and chose to rebel against God’s authority. This “fallen angel” eventually tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and “sin entered the world.”²⁴ Evil and suffering were now a part of human existence. Thus, according to the Bible, suffering caused by evil is an “alien intrusion into God’s good world”²⁵ and “arises from the misuse of created freedom, that of the devil and then that of human beings.”²⁶

C. A World Without Suffering Due To Natural Causes

A third possible world God could have created is one where there was no such thing as suffering due to natural causes. As we have seen, the original creation is described in Genesis as being “very good”. This implies that events such as tsunamis, hurricanes, cancer or death due to natural causes would not have been a concern. However, when Adam and Eve misused their freedom the results were catastrophic. Humanity became alienated internally (with shame, guilt,

fear, anxiety), spiritually (with God), socially (with others), vocationally (with work) and even ecologically (with nature). Death, disease and decay not only became a part of the human experience, but nature itself became contaminated. We now live in a fallen world where even the ground is cursed.²⁷ Because of sin, we are subject to suffering due to natural causes that would not have occurred had humans remained obedient to God. John Blanchard writes, “the world as we now see it is not in its original condition, but it is radically ruined by sin, and we live on what someone has called a ‘stained planet.’”²⁸ The Bible describes it this way:

“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”²⁹

D. Our World

The fourth possible world to consider is the world as we know it - where good and evil exist along with the possibility of choosing either. In his classic commentary on the problem of pain, C.S. Lewis writes the following:

“We want ... not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven - a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all’ ... I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.”³⁰

This marvelous quotation brings up an important question - What was God’s purpose for creating everything in the first place? If God’s intention was to produce an environment where free humans could develop character and grow in their love for God and each other, then he succeeded. In the final analysis, of the four worlds described - ours is the only one where love is possible.³¹

V. The Question of Permission

Thus far I have hoped to show that when looking for someone to blame for the origin of evil and suffering, we are not in a position to point an accusing finger at God. There is, however, another troubling question that emerges: Why does God *permit* so much suffering and evil in our world? Can’t partial blame be attributed to someone who has the ability to stop suffering yet does not do so?

To address this question, let us now turn to the classic Biblical case study on the problem of suffering - the book of Job. Although Job’s saga supplies no exhaustive or definitive answer to the problem of evil and pain, there are many crucial

teachings that are relevant to our discussion. Job is introduced as a good, blameless, upright, wealthy man who “feared God and shunned evil.” Meanwhile, in a heavenly dialogue with God, Satan insinuates that the reason Job is so good and faithful is because he has been blessed with a great family, riches and health. In response, God permits Satan to test Job and violent waves of death, destruction and carnage begin to crash in on his life. In a matter of hours, Job loses his livestock, servants and children. Yet, “in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”³² So, Satan again challenged God, “... stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”³³ Again, God allowed Satan to test Job. “So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.”³⁴

What can we learn from this episode about affixing blame for human suffering? Who is responsible for Job’s suffering?

The book of Job investigates this question in depth. Job, himself, is interrogated throughout as a possible suspect. “Surely these things wouldn’t be happening if Job was not hiding some secret sin,” reasoned Job’s “comforters”. However, the message of the book teaches just the opposite. If “Job’s sinfulness” is not to blame, what is? We could certainly identify wicked people³⁵ and bad weather³⁶ as the culprits.

On a deeper level, Satan is clearly to blame.³⁷ Yet, it is the deepest level of understanding that is so troubling. Yes, the direct blame should go to bad people, bad weather and a bad angel. However, this does not tell the whole story. Indirectly, does not God share part of the blame? It is the awareness that God himself allowed, and even authorized, Job’s sufferings that is so unsettling. What are we to make of this?

First of all, this is not an issue that is particular to the book of Job. God’s supreme authority over all that happens on earth is a consistent teaching throughout Scripture. Indeed, whatever we can think of in this world that brings about suffering, we can find a biblical verse claiming God’s sovereignty over it.

Second, if we are disturbed by the idea that God screens evil, consider how disconcerting it would be to find out that he didn’t. Steven Estes responds to God’s sovereignty in light of Job’s suffering this way:

“Satan acted freely; no one forced his hand. God’s reaction to the devil was merely to lengthen his leash ... What’s clear immediately is that God permits all sorts of things he doesn’t approve of ... Do we find repulsive a God who gives the nod to our tragedies? What if your trials weren’t screened by any divine plan? Try to conceive fo Lucifer unrestrained. Left to his own, the

Devil would make Jobs of us all ... If God didn't control evil, the result would be evil uncontrolled. God permits what he hates to achieve what he loves."³⁸

Could it be that God allowed these events in Job to show humanity what it would be like if he let go of Satan's leash? Is it possible that these events were recorded in Scripture so that everyone could vividly witness what the devil is really like and the suffering that he would inflict without God's restraining? Perhaps, the book of Job is an inspired glimpse of what hell is like and, just briefly, God deemed it necessary to pull back the curtain so that we could get a good look at the true character of this fallen angel we so flippantly flirt around with.

Job never received an exhaustive, theoretical answer as to why he was suffering. It is unlikely that a "reason" would have satisfied him anyway. In the end, the only thing that could fill the void in Job's afflicted life was the very presence of God. Indeed, the very thing that Job wanted and needed was given to him - the opportunity to see God. Rather than revealing any ultimate "solution" to the problem of pain, God reveals himself. For Job, this was enough, as is evident in his response, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."³⁹

The book of Job illustrates that it is less important to know all the answers than to know and trust the one who does."⁴⁰ Job's saga ends with God presenting him sixty two questions. These questions seem to have answered Job's. But have they answered ours? Rather than thundering out unanswerable questions at a wounded man, wouldn't it be more meaningful if God came down from the safety and comfort of heaven - into our world - and had to experience our pain? What if God actually accepted the blame and the punishment for the evil in our world? It is here that the Christian gospel becomes extremely relevant to our discussion.

VI. Biblical Perspectives on Suffering

In the remainder of this essay, I shall consider the problem of suffering from a biblical point of view and offer several points brought out by scripture, culminating with the Christian affirmation that God did enter our world, experience our pain, accept the blame for our evil and take our punishment.

A. God uses suffering to develop our character and lead us to maturity

Suffering is not always evil. Often, it is a good thing in the human experience and essential for our survival. The pain sensors in our central nervous system serve as necessary warning-signals. Without them our lives would be "fraught with danger, and devoid of many basic pleasures."⁴¹ Dr. Paul Brand, one of the world's leading experts on leprosy, discovered that the most dangerous aspect of this disease is actually the absence of pain. The more pain that is muffled in

a person's body, Brand's research revealed, the more likely that person will destroy it. Pain not only serves to protect the body, but also to strengthen it. A classic example is watching a butterfly struggling to get free from a cocoon. It certainly doesn't look like it is having a good time. In fact, it looks like it is suffering. However, if we feel sorry for it, intervene and tear the cocoon open to set the butterfly free, it will die. The struggle strengthens the butterfly so it can survive.

The same type of thing could be said about a human's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development as the following New Testament verse points out:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."⁴²

Someone once asked the great Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo, "How can you take a huge hunk of granite and turn it into David?" He reportedly answered, "That hunk of granite is David. I just have to remove everything that does not belong." How can God take a sinful, imperfect, flawed human being and make them into a mature, complete, holy, blameless, Christ-like person? God has to remove everything that does not belong and that process, though necessary, is often painful. At times God uses affliction "like a hammer and chisel, chipping and cutting to reveal his image in you. God chooses as his model his Son, Jesus Christ."⁴³

B. Suffering helps us realize that we need God

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."⁴⁴

This famous quote from C.S. Lewis reminds us that sometimes suffering is the only thing that has the potency to jolt us out of our attitude of self-sufficiency and turn us away from a path of destruction.⁴⁵ Suffering can purify our faith, encourage holiness, promote humility, cause us to repent and bring us closer to God. Paul recognized that the "thorn in his flesh" was to keep him "from becoming conceited."⁴⁶ Peter even goes on to say, "... he who has suffered in his body is done with sin."⁴⁷ The writer of the 119th Psalm would agree, for he admitted "before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word."⁴⁸

C. Our suffering can help us understand the suffering of others

The apostle Paul writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."⁴⁹

D. Sometimes we suffer because of personal sin

“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction ...”⁵⁰

We must not overlook the fact that many of our wounds are self-inflicted. A majority of the suffering in our world is directly caused by humans doing things that God commanded us not to do. The Bible is also clear that some suffering is due to God’s discipline.⁵¹ However, it is important to point out that Jesus rejected the idea that there is always a necessary direct correlation between our personal sin and our suffering.⁵²

E. God never intended this world to be our ultimate home

Suffering, says, Joni Eareckson Tada, reminds us that we should never get too comfortable in this fallen world which is destined for destruction and decay. She writes:

“Earth’s pain keeps crushing our hopes, reminding us this world can never satisfy; only heaven can ... Suffering keeps swelling our feet so that earth’s shoes won’t fit.”⁵³

In Hebrews 11, after recording a litany of faithful sufferers, the writer says this:

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth ... Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”⁵⁴

Paul adds this hope, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”⁵⁵

F. Life and good health are gifts from God

Why is it that we are quick to question God’s character when we are faced with hardship, yet scarcely acknowledge him when enjoying good health and things are going well? Where does life and good health come from in the first place?

The Bible clearly claims “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” and “the wages of sin is death.”⁵⁶ Therefore, if God were to eliminate all humanity this instant, he would not have compromised his justice or righteousness. The astonishing reality is that we are only alive today because God “does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”⁵⁷

G. Where is atheism when people suffer?

Christianity offers hope, peace and comfort in the midst of affliction. What does

atheism offer comforts or gives hope when experiencing pain? The question is often raised, "Where was God during the Holocaust?" An appropriate response can be, "Where was atheism during the Holocaust? Was it not the natural outworking of atheism that fueled the Holocaust?"⁵⁸

It would be appropriate here to discuss the Holocaust in further detail as it is extremely significant when discussing the problem of suffering and evil. Questions about the Holocaust are obviously difficult for anyone to address. What person from any religious background or worldview could rightly proclaim, "I have adequate and satisfactory answers to all the questions raised by the Holocaust?" The Holocaust has caused many to abandon the notion of an all-loving, all-powerful God. The Jewish author, Richard Rubenstein concluded, "... we stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?"⁵⁹

What can Christians offer as a response to this? First of all, it is important to remember that Hitler's goals were clearly stated: "I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality ... We will train people before whom the world will tremble. I want young people capable of violence - imperious, relentless and cruel."⁶⁰ The Holocaust was planned and executed by people who were following a message that was the absolute anithesis of the Christian message.

The underlying issue raised by an event such as the Holocaust can be stated this way: The evil and wickedness during the Holocaust was at such an appalling level that God should have intervened.

How might we respond to such a statement? Perhaps we should consider the questions that would immediately emerge if God would have intervened and thwarted all attempts of evil during this time in history. If this "level of wickedness" was extracted from human history, what about the next level? What about the horrendous atrocities Joseph Stalin inflicted on his own people? Again, God could have foiled all plans of human wickedness during Stalin's regime - but, what about the next level of evil intentions, and the next, and the next? If God intervened and stripped away every "level" of evil and wickedness it would soon get personal. Eventually, God would reach the level of evil in our hearts, minds and behavior. Years ago, *The Times* solicited a group of famous British writers to respond to the question, "What is wrong with the world?" The shortest and most profound reply was written by G.K. Chesterton. He wrote the following:

"In response to your question, 'What's wrong with the world?' - I am.

Yours faithfully,
G.K. Chesterton."⁶¹

Commenting on this issue, Michael Green offers the following insights:

“Suppose for a moment that God were immediately to wipe out all evil? Would not humanity be destroyed? For which of us is free from evil? Far from remaining an abstract intellectual problem, evil is a very pressing moral problem within each of us. We ourselves are the problem of evil! And if simple eradication were the answer, we would have no hope.”⁶²

H. In Christ, all suffering is temporary

The Bible encourages us with the following verses:

“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”⁶³

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”⁶⁴

The Bible not only promises that everything in heaven will be new, pure and unblemished, but also that God’s resurrected children will be given new resurrected bodies.⁶⁵ In Philippians 3:20, Christians are promised that Christ will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Commenting on this, Joni Eareckson Tada (who was disabled in a diving accident and is now a quadraplegic) writes:

“I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness - powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal-chord injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts and minds. Only in the gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.”⁶⁶

I. God is not finished yet!

One of the unique features of the Christian faith is the assurance that although evil and suffering persists in our world today, they will be abolished in the future.

Put another way, “the existence of evil does not eliminate the possibility of God, but the existence of God guarantees the elimination of evil.”⁶⁷ Christians embraced

the biblical teaching that justice delayed is not justice denied.⁶⁸ Peter Kreeft reminds us, "... criticizing God for not punishing evil people right now is like reading half a novel and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot."⁶⁹

J. God experienced human suffering

The book of Hebrews encourages those who suffer with these words, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin."⁷⁰ The Christian faith proclaims that God took the pain of his creation onto himself. He entered our world of evil and suffering in the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that Christ, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!"⁷¹ "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."⁷²

These profound statements proclaim that God loves us so much that he chose to take on our condition and experience our suffering. While Jesus lived with us on earth he became hungry, thirsty and tired.⁷³ He wept over the death of a friend.⁷⁴ He knew temptation of every kind. He knew the agony of being lied about, betrayed, misunderstood, abandoned, abused, violated and beaten. He even experienced the cruelest form of death. God's response to the problem of evil is that he came right down into it, experienced it, and finally, conquered it.

K. God's Answer: The Cross of Christ

"From the cross there will spring light sufficient to illuminate even the darkest night ... A ray of light pierces the gloom ... the impenetrable mystery of evil meets the paradoxical mystery of the cross."⁷⁵

The cross of Christ is God's answer to the problem of suffering. Michael Green eloquently remarks:

No other faith suggests anything remotely comparable. The cross shows that God is no stranger to pain and evil. God does not allow us to go through what he himself avoids. He came face to face with concentrated evil in this world when he came among us in the person of Jesus ... He did not give us an exhaustive answer to the problem of suffering: he shared it.⁷⁶

L. We are called to be part of the solution of the problem of pain

"We usually think of the problem of pain as a question we ask of God, but it is also a question he asks of us. How do we respond to hurting people?"⁷⁷

Just before Jesus was crucified he told his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."⁷⁸ He taught that rather than continuing to be a part of the problem, we should become part of the solution. He instructed that in "ministering to the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner, we would be ministering to him, indicating that he identified himself with all needy and suffering people."⁷⁹

VII Conclusion

Is God to blame for human suffering? In a word: No. Human suffering is never the will of God. He may permit it, screen it, even use it for his good purposes, but he is not the cause. Lamentations 3:33 gives us this assurance about God, "... he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men." However, because of his unfathomable love for us he willingly chose to accept the blame and the punishment for all the evil that humans have ever committed. Let us conclude by hearing these powerful words of John Stott:

"I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross ... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood and tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering."⁸⁰

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- 46 2 Corinthians 12:7
- 47 1 Peter 4:1
- 48 Psalm 119:67
- 49 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

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- 50 Galatians 6:7-8
- 51 See Hebrews 12:5-11; Deuteronomy 28:15; Psalms 32:3-5; 38: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 11:30; Psalm 107:17
- 52 See John 9:1-3; Luke 13:1-5
- 53 Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 202.
- 54 Hebrews 11:13-16
- 55 Romans 8:18. See also 1 Corinthians 2:9.
- 56 Romans 3:23; 6:23.
- 57 Psalm 103:10. The Christian lecturer, Michael Ramsden, suggests "maybe we struggle with suffering so much in the West because we are so comfortable most of the time that we feel we don't need God. We don't rely on Him on a daily basis, and so we don't really know Him as we should. When suffering comes along, therefore, it is not so much that it takes us away from God, but that it reveals to us that we haven't really been close to Him in the first place." Scottish theologian James S. Stewart brings up another important point, "it is the spectators, the people who are outside, looking at the tragedy, from whose ranks the skeptics come; it is not those who are actually in the arena and who know suffering from the inside. Indeed, the fact is that it is the world's greatest sufferers who have produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith." - Warren W. Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons on Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1984), 92.
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Is God to Blame for Human Suffering?

Elizabeth James

*I walked down the hallway and I heard his door slam
 I walked down the courthouse stairs and I did not understand
 And I played my guitar through the night to the day
 And the only tune my guitar could play
 Was, 'The Old, Cruel Rain and the Wind'*

These lyrics depict the utter bewilderment of the narrator, which has been caused by the senseless suffering of his friend, the old cruel rain and the wind, and the heavy-handed and uncaring response of the judge, here representative of a harsh and higher justice, in the timeless conundrum of all human life. The trope of human suffering has threaded its way through many of man's creative and intellectual aspirations: medical science, in prolonging the human life-span; technology, in the pursuit of greater ease and convenience; the arts, in reflecting back to us of human suffering; philosophy, in rationalising the contradiction; theology, in attempting to reconcile the chaos of human suffering with an ordered cosmology. It is in a particular type of ordered cosmology that the contradiction especially lies: believing in a benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient deity and seeing manifold examples of human suffering all around us. Indeed, the pathos that *we do not understand*² is the driving force that has defined and underpinned the human response to tragedy. We suffer, we cry, we mourn, we grieve; and after the lamentation is done, we ask *why*, in the literary genre of tragedy, the intellectual pursuit of philosophy and the emotional ordeal of faith.

To answer such a question has been one of the most pressing philosophical and theological quests of humanity. It is not an intellectual bagatelle, it is not something that can be explained away easily and it is not a superficial question to ask. Human suffering has perplexed humanity since we first began to think and reason, which is why it is not the aim of this essay to come to a definitive answer here now. It is also not the aim of this essay to attempt to prove or disprove the

existence of God, as if such a thing were possible. Instead the purpose of this essay is to examine some of the variety of philosophical and theological responses to the problem of suffering, and more importantly, to consider what this tells us about those who have adopted and believed in them. The response given by art, by the great tragedies (whether in drama or in song) is of another kind, and is not the immediate subject of this essay.³

The logical problem of evil

Thus far, an assumption has been made in order to illustrate the prominent role this 'conundrum' has played in human intellectual history, but this shall have to be clarified before further examination can ensue. The 'conundrum', as I have been calling it, has been neatly stated before in the form of a logical problem:

- God is benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent and the creator
- Suffering exists
- God cannot be both benevolent, omniscient and an omnipotent creator.

Put simply, we can conclude that according to many (but not all) systems of ordered cosmology, God has the three key qualities listed above: benevolence (which we may take to mean perfect compassion), omniscience (perfect knowledge) and omnipotence (perfect power). However, suffering also exists. Thus, one of the assumptions about the qualities of God must come under question: Why would a *benevolent* creator God let his creation suffer? Since suffering does exist, this implies that God does not have the benevolence that we expect from any decent member of humanity.⁴ Why would an *omniscient* creator God let his creation suffer? Since we know about human suffering, God could not be unaware of the suffering of most of creation and yet remain omniscient.⁵ Why would an *omnipotent* creator God let his creation suffer? Since we all have it in our power to alleviate some suffering, however small, an omnipotent God would have that power many times over.⁶ In sum, God has created us as we are, with the foresight of what we would do, with the capability of perceiving our suffering and with the power to do something about it, and yet suffering continues.

But is there a problem at all?

So far our neat conundrum seems insoluble. Which ever way we turn, we run into difficulties which would challenge our definitions of the nature of God. However, as mentioned, this syllogistic argument itself rests on two important assumptions, namely: that suffering does in fact exist, and secondly, that God does in fact exist *as described above*. The first of these must be established if there is to be any discussion at all, while the second leads us into consideration of alternative cosmologies or conceptions of the divine may reconcile belief in a deity with human suffering.

Does suffering exist?

The immediate response is a resounding 'yes'. It seems nonsensical to try and deny the existence of human suffering, since we all have empirical (that is, sensory) evidence of it.⁷ There is not one human who has ever lived under the sun and who has never felt any kind of physical pain, nor who has felt for the sadness and pain of death, either on behalf of oneself, or on behalf of those we love: the fact of death is probably the oldest and most enduring strand of human suffering. There is also not one human alive and capable of the most rudimentary thought who has not felt that life is somehow unequal, if not to himself, then at least to some of those others around him, however much that one in question lives a charmed life himself, and however much that one believes that this inequality is somehow justified so that it remains *unequal*, but not *unfair*.

The semantics of suffering and Evil

So suffering exists: none can deny, but there is a semantic distinction between 'suffering' and 'evil'. The reason for this becomes apparent now: there is an important semantic differentiation between the two, and they are not to be used interchangeably, if confusion is to be avoided. Suffering, according to the OED, is an experience, something which is undergone, involving pain or grief. This is quite different from evil, which the OED defines as 'bad' or 'harmful'. Thus, the term evil implies that we have made a *moral* judgement already - evil is something which is *not good* (in the moral sense) and is thus something, possibly with a supernatural dimension, defined as the opposite of goodness. Suffering has no moral judgement attached, suffering just is; it is the name we give to the portion of life that involves pain, grief or death, but whether it is 'good' or 'evil', and whether or not this 'evil' exists on a supernatural plane, is a different question. If we accept human suffering, but not evil, then we have not yet solved any problem, in fact, we only defer the question. If we postulate the omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God, we have only moved the question up a level: God is responsible for our suffering because he created us as carbon-based life-forms able to experience *and cause* pain, rather than because he allows evil to exist and have power enough to cause humanity to suffer. Thus, we are still at the point where God is responsible for human suffering.

Evil and Suffering are Illusory

The discussion of the *logical* problem of evil, and the solutions put forward, are most certainly characteristic of the later Church Fathers, that is, the discussion postdates the Bible. One of the most influential Church Fathers is Saint Augustine, who in his early years was greatly attracted to the Manichaean dualist position - that good and evil are opposing and equal forces - which he would later go on to reject. Augustine prefers to read Christianity through the prism of Platonism (a

trend that would only be reversed come Aquinas, who rather set Aristotle as the standard of Christian philosophy),⁸ and so places God on the same level as being (not *above* being, as many Neoplatonists such as Plotinus or even Church Fathers such as Origen would do). Augustine reads Exodus 3:14 as stating that God is most definitely a being. In which case, the higher up the scheme of being, the *better* it is, the more worth it has. God IS more than we are ('I am who I am', though it would not have been understood by the ancient Hebraic culture with such an ontological spin).⁹ This hierarchy means that nothing *by its existence* can be considered evil: evil has *no* existence on its own. We cannot place evil on any hierarchical scale, because it is a lump of *non-being*. Evil is simply a lack of being. It is a falling short or a falling away from the mark, a privation of *something which ought to be there*. Evil is thus *disorder*; it is things not as they should be.

An analogy may serve better: Hunger is lack of food, thirst is lack of drink, pain is lack of health. All these cease to exist once food, water, health and well-being abound. God is being is good: only God is immutable and eternally in and of himself alone. It is only allowed to God to be eternal and unchanging and to have full and perfect being. By virtue of our 'creaturliness', and our existence as mutable, destructible, changeful beings, we are lower down the hierarchy. Usually, we should love those things higher up the chain of being than ourselves; by doing so, we do not let evil intrude into an otherwise good system. However, our free will gives us power to let base and ontologically 'lower' beings down on the hierarchy to rule us. This is *contra* the way things ought to be: thus, we let our hunger rule us and we become gluttons, our thirst rule us and we become drunkards, our lust rule us and we become lechers, our will to power rule us and we become despotic tyrants.

Is this a successful explanation?

If we accept this explanation of the nature of evil, then we do at least have a framework for placing evil within a system created by a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God. This is because it does not try to do away with any crux of the argument. Instead, it accepts that there is a paradox, and that paradox lies in our free will, in other words, our power to *disorder* the orderly system that God created. And it is the motif or order that we shall notice running through this and future arguments: it seems to be an innate human tendency to assume that there is justice in the system: whether or not the justice is apparent in day-to-day life is another matter, since it is quite possible to redress the balance after death. This would account for the general belief, in various cultures and religions, in a judgement post-death, accompanied by purification of all that is corrupt, such that it is sufficient to be accepted into the after-life.¹⁰ Interestingly, there is modern psychological evidence to demonstrate some proof of this speculation:

a psychologist called Melvin Lerner showed a cognitive bias towards thinking that innocent victims somehow deserved their suffering: likewise those who have had good fortune befall them.¹¹ This bears striking resemblance to the principle of karma, and could be caused by the need for people to see the world as a place fundamentally ruled by order to avoid mental chaos. In which case, if we believe in order, then we must ask why free will, a force for disorder *par excellence*, has been allowed (by God) to intrude in an otherwise potentially perfect, ordered system.

Free will and evil

The question of our free will is invariable linked to the existence of evil on the supernatural plane: the Devil. Christian theologians ascribe humanity's first act of free will, Eve choosing to eat an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*eritis sicut deus scientes bonum et malum*)¹², as brought about by the temptation of a malign serpent.¹³ Thus, our world is a fallen one, and one in which humans are free to make their own choices, rather than one in which there is no choice to be made, as in the Garden of Eden before the apple was offered to Eve. So where does this belief in a malignant force, upon whom we might blame our morally suspect free-will choices come from?

Though sin features heavily in the world views of both Christ and Paul, the devil does not, though Jesus famously had an encounter with him after his forty days' solitude in the desert.¹⁴ What are the origins of a belief in the devil? To answer this, we need look further back than the Medieval incarnation of the devil. The word 'satan' originally meant simply an 'adversary', and this term could be applied to anyone human or divine, who stood in the way of personal ambition.¹⁵ It was being used by the Jews before the exile in the sixth century BC in Babylon. It was only after the exile that we find reference to 'the satan'. This 'satan' has now become an accuser of man before God.¹⁶ However, it is in the Book of Job that 'the satan' begins to play a foremost role. Here, he most definitely appears malign; it is he who wreaks such destruction on the lives of Job and all his family. But the Satan is only acting under the supervision of God, who seems to think that he is performing a useful function: that of testing the faith of those who seem outwardly faithful in fair weather, that is, men just like Job. As is human nature, those who perform the unwanted tasks, the grave-digger, the undertaker, the tempter of men all become tainted by the job they do. Thus, it was assumed that the ill-will that humans felt towards this destroyer of men equated to an enmity in Heaven: between God and the Satan. Once this separation into good and evil became fixed, it was possible for later Jewish writers to ascribe to 'the satan' those more objectionable deeds of Jehovah. Thus, we find in 1 Chronicles 21:1 a re-telling of the story of God's vengeance for David's census in 2 Samuel 24:1, separated by roughly four centuries. In the later story, it is no longer

Jehovah who is responsible for giving David the idea in the first place, but 'Satan'. And this is the one and only use of 'Satan' as a proper name in the Old Testament.

Thus begins the theology surrounding 'Satan' as God's traditional enemy, though it was not until Christ's time, who firmly believed that the world and all its values were under the domination of Satan, that he came to have a history and symbolism of his own. Other old Jewish references to vengeful angels (such as in the non-canonical 1 Enoch) combined with this idea of an adversary of God to create the figure of the Devil.¹⁷ To a great extent, it was the Christians who gave Satan the status and power of a God.¹⁸ In the vision of Revelation 12:3-12, all these traditions swirling around Satan, involving demonic animals and rebellion against God, are drawn together. Here we find the seven-headed dragon Leviathan, the war in heaven, and the fallen angels, who are all associated with Satan. It was finally the Christians who created the mythology behind Satan, and contrasted him against the ultimate purity of the goodness of God.

The Rehabilitation of Suffering

Having considered the problem of free will, there are more ways we might opt for, which I shall bracket together under the generic heading of 'rehabilitation of suffering'. The easiest way to do this is to claim that all suffering is somehow justified, though this argument may take many forms. The first is to see suffering as something which is not to be questioned, but instead accepted as a fact of life: "theirs was not to reason why, theirs was but to do and die".¹⁹ This may have given some comfort to many, but will not suit anyone of intellect, since it is an abnegation of the human capacity for reason, and thus one of the greatest of human gifts: the ability to construct logical argument based on ordered premises. This is a function of higher thought, and to try and skirt round the problem of suffering by stamping on human intellect is not, for the intellectual especially who might be interested in such matters, particularly satisfying. Therefore, the more successful version of this argument does not entirely seek to exclude human suffering from the field of human discussion. Since it is clear that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike while we are on earth, and since most humans like to believe in an ordered system, the natural human response is to claim that the unjust part of that suffering will be justified in the future. This was put forward by Kant, in the form of what has been called 'the moral argument for the existence of God' that in order for suffering and the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient God to co-exist, a future justification, in the form of an afterlife, where all wrongs would be righted, and where all shall be well was a necessary corollary to belief in God, though this is clearly only satisfactory if one has a belief in such a God in the first place. If it is in doubt, then belief in a happier and better afterlife existence still leaves one asking *why* suffering - of unbearable and disproportionate kinds - happens on earth.

The Pragmatic Rehabilitation of Suffering

A second category within that of 'rehabilitating' suffering is to approach suffering as something from which we may learn. Suffering is our teacher: "Life may be compared to a piece of embroidery, of which, during the first half of his time, a man gets a sight of the right side, and during the second half, of the wrong. The wrong side is not so pretty as the right, but it is more instructive; it shows the way in which the threads have been worked together."²⁰ Suffering is a test of human character, but more so, a part of human experience to be patiently borne in order not to complain, but to learn. The paradigm of this would be those who have ever aspired to the heights of enlightenment have learnt to endure suffering as part of the necessary preliminary training that they must undergo.²¹ God has employed suffering in all its forms, in order for humanity to recognise *itself* and to therefore become more fully realised. It is one thing to adopt this strategy when dealing with a personal crisis of one's own, yet another when this confronts religious belief, especially with regard to the unfair distribution of human suffering that is patent. It is still very difficult to maintain this conviction when confronted with the particular problem of *disproportionate* suffering, and of course, the old question of *why* God might create a system in the first place in which we have to suffer in order to learn. A benevolent God, we might think, would not have created a system into which suffering was necessarily built.

The second pragmatic rehabilitation of suffering is to go to the root of pain. I shall term this the 'biological' argument: What we would call suffering is in fact the rightful retribution for our excess. We suffer because we act wrongly (not necessarily sinfully), and thus pay the price. I indulge in gluttony, and I get stomach ache. If we are in any way immoderate or excessive, then there will be a just retribution in the form of suffering. Pain thus acts as a deterrent; as a method of correcting the flaws in our nature. This is satisfactory when we consider the pain that ensues from skin contact with hot metal, thus prompting the instinctive reflexive withdrawal away from the offending source. Here, pain clearly teaches the human animal that not all objects or situation are benign, and there is obvious evolutionary advantage to this. As a species, we would have not evolved as far as this without a honed survival instinct. This is all very well when we limit ourselves to those situations which produce an immediate, and potentially instructive pain, but quickly falls apart when we consider *unfair*, or suffering disproportionate to any supposed act of wrong: here we are back at the dark heart of the dramatic trope of tragedy, and it is here that the biological understanding of the purpose of pain becomes inadequate.

Karma

Thus far, the focus of this essay has been predominantly focussed on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whose monotheisms come from the Middle-Eastern: it is not

the intent of this essay to focus exclusively on those ideas which have shaped the western consciousness. While it will not be possible within the scope of this essay to develop a further full range of non-monotheistic ideas, there is one broad idea that fully deserves mention here: karma. This can be thought of as a religious interpretation of the 'biological' argument. The word karma, from the Sanskrit root 'kri' translated as 'to do' or 'deed', is the name given to the universal law and functioning of the universe; that of cause and effect. It can no more be escaped than can gravity (if a brick is about to fall on your head, then no amount of argument will convince it to deviate on its course towards the ground) and is simply understood as the sum of all that an individual has done and is currently doing. The effects of those deeds combine to create your present and future experiences, which therefore makes you entirely responsible for everything which happens in your life, and so also entirely responsible for your own salvation. This can extend not only to your life here and now, but also to all future lives, if incorporated with a belief in reincarnation.

The law of karma is not restricted to one religion alone, but it rather a key concept in the religions stemming from India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism (though is not identical in each).²² Especially in Hinduism, the law of karma seems to exist mainly in order to answer the problem of evil, since karma states that inevitably each evil deed will be repaid in kind, as will each good, though how long it will take for the karma to rebound back on a life cannot be said. Karma is thus no punishment or retribution, since it is entirely impersonal: thus you wouldn't curse gravity when the brick hit you, but instead your own bad luck for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Moreover, it is a grave mistake to wish that you might have an instant solution to your 'karmic debt' (the accrued backlog of karma that will one day rebound on your future incarnations) because in doing so, you would stop the process of karma and thus any chance that you may have for evolution. Likewise, if you wished for the brick to freeze in its fall to the ground, you would not have learnt the impact a falling brick can make, and thus would have no experience or mechanism for dealing with the next falling brick, which would likely hit you with all its sudden and unexpected force. Karma is not about good and *per se*, but is rather more impersonal: karma can be caused not just by doing harmful things, but can also be brought about by being sad, or obsessing on one subject, or by refusing to see through the layers of self-deception that you have built for the ego. Good karma (that is, karma that will not rebound harmfully) can be generated not solely through being virtuous, but also through creativity, or through stripping away the layers of delusion that can surround the self.

The Biblical 'rehabilitation' of suffering

The response of the Bible is certainly not to trivialise suffering, but nor is it to

wholly satisfactorily answer the question of why disorder - in the form of free will and thence the choice to cause suffering - has been allowed to intrude. Whilst never denying the existence of human suffering, it roots suffering very firmly as *mystery* both in the divine and human, implicitly beyond our understanding. Why we suffer is part of the human mystery, yet is not wholly confined to us, since God also allowed himself to suffer on the cross, thence the mystery of the incarnation. Christ's suffering is thus seen as the divine response to human suffering. It is part of the paradox of God that through Christ's suffering, we are absolved of ours through grace. St. Paul holds the position in Christian theology of being the first systematic interpreter of the man Jesus Christ. He holds this position, despite spending the first part of his career as a Christian persecutor; a fervent Jew who believed absolutely in his pious duty to exterminate what seemed a heretical sect. After Paul's conversion experience (itself a barely recorded event) he spearheaded the conversion of the Gentiles and also took up the challenge of systematising the thought and theology of a man who had never written anything down. It does not take a professional Biblical scholar to read the Pauline corpus and notice a carefully balanced, cross-referenced framework of interlocking themes, at times seemed tightly tied up into an inextricable knot. These themes, variously of sin, redemption, faith, the law, justification, sons of Adam and sons of Christ, death and life, the spirit and the flesh are often in a barely sustainable conflict with each other.

St. Paul accounts for the existence of sin (and this is the cause of suffering) by imputing its existence to the law given originally to the Jews by God. The law is not of course impure or even evil in and of itself, but its very existence provides us with a yard-stick against which we measure ourselves and find ourselves sorely lacking. As Paul tells us, we would not have known what coveting was in the first place if the law had not forbade it.²³ In fact, it is only when we quantify and qualify something, even if we are doing so in order to *forbid* such a thing, that we, paradoxically, also affirm its very existence. This is what Paul means by saying that sin only came into being with the creation of the law, the old moral code given by God to the Jews.²⁴ The Law gives us a rule-stick against which we might measure ourselves, but since we are human and imperfect, we always find ourselves lacking.²⁵ We suffer because we are human, and it is in the nature of a created being to be imperfect, and thus even when we think we are doing good, we often unwittingly do bad²⁶ and thus cause suffering: we cannot live up to the letter of the law. Thus, even well-meaning humans often do wrong, which only serves to heighten the gap between us and God. No matter how hard we try, none of us is able or competent enough to wash ourselves clean enough for God.

This state of affairs therefore shows us how much we need the mystery of the incarnation resurrection - the mystery of divine Grace - in order to achieve

salvation. Therefore, our only hope is justification by faith, because the Law isn't enough and it can't guarantee goodness. It must be a more personal relationship with good, a sincere striving for goodness and the expectation of the Last Days when the limbo state of living in Christ will result in a final salvation; whereby the gentiles will partake of the Kingdom of Heaven which is also the birthright of all Hebrews. Thus, suffering is a necessary partner to the complex relationship we have to God - it serves to remind us that we are *not* God, and also *underlines* the whole point of justification by faith, which is that we absolutely need God.

The Existence of God

And so we come to the second axiom which the argument assumes. The problem of specifically the monotheistic systems deriving from the Middle East is to reconcile belief in the kind of God they describe with the suffering observed from the world around them. This is an acute problem in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because of belief in a supremely ethical God, thereby entailing a belief in a theodicy. As stated, the fact of human suffering poses a great challenge to faith, and indeed, the lack of satisfactory explanation has often served as reason enough to reject a belief in a beneficent creator God. There have been many, made increasingly possible in a modern secular society, who have looked at creation and have not seen that it was good. Therefore, it would seem that the simplest answer to the question of the title is that God is not to blame for human suffering because God does not exist (though we do then have some searching questions to ask about our own human nature, and the depths to which it may sink).

But which God does not exist? It is entirely possible that the beneficent creator God described by the highly intellectual men of faith such as Augustine and Aquinas does not exist. Still less should it be taken for granted that Yahweh, in any of his manifestations in the Old Testament, are one and the same as the God of the philosophising Church Fathers. There are as many gods as there are faces of man; each society creates for itself a god which reflects its desires and leanings. When such a god becomes unnecessary, then belief in that deity is quietly buried, and a new god rises afresh to fill the spiritual vacuum created. As such, the statement 'I believe in God' only makes sense within a context: we still need to answer the question of *which* God one is claiming belief in. Likewise 'I do not believe in God' only makes sense within a context. Well, *whose* God is it that you do not believe in?

Why believe?

If there is no wholly satisfactory way to balance human suffering against a belief in a beneficent, omnipotent and omniscient creator God, then why believe in

any God at all? The secular society we live in now is an experiment on a grand scale. Never before have humans created a culture where the rites to God do not form a large part of day-to-day living. There are benefits to such a system, to be sure, but the fact remains that this is highly unusual for the history of humankind. Humanism would take this development as evidence for humanity's evolution towards more and more enlightenment, finally coming to the stage where belief in God has finally been eradicated. As Nietzsche claimed: God is dead.²⁸ This solves no problem: if God is dead, then it becomes necessary to put something in its place. Humans have a need for meaning, and if this cannot be found in the God society ordains, then it will be sought elsewhere. As such, many in today's western societies who have long been dissatisfied with Judaeo-Christian monotheism are now looking either towards the fringes of religion, in the areas of occultism, or else are turning their attention further East, especially towards Buddhism, which seems to answer much that 21st century man asks. This shows us both that regardless of how fertile the soil is for an atheistic humanism to flourish, belief in and fervent desire for something beyond the human²⁹ been a characteristic of human society ever since the first days of our existence as conscious bipeds. Religious belief was never something imposed on the people by a despotic aristocracy or priestly caste as a method of control, but in fact is an answer to the deep-seated human desire for that which is beyond the human. Thus, if we can justify belief in a God, then it becomes the case that maybe our current image of God is the one that needs to undergo a paradigm shift.³⁰

The Dualist Alternative

This is not to say that 'paradigm shifts' have never occurred before. One such instance is in the case of the heretical sect of Gnosticism, who in their reading of the Pauline corpus, went so far as to see the entire material world as inherently evil, and thus rejected the creator God of the Old Testament as an evil demagogue by *virtue of the fact* that he had created the prison of the material world.³¹ Gnosticism therefore holds a moral and then a metaphysical dualism. Belief in a dualistic world implies that the whole of creation is a battle-ground for the forces of good and evil. Unlike Christian orthodoxy, these are equally matched. This world view was also transmitted to the Asian religion of Manichaeism, founded by the Persian prophet Mani, who claimed to be the last and greatest of the prophets in the line of descent from Jesus. Manichaeism thus entails a denial of the doctrine of creation: "devil ruled the evil domain of matter",³² moreover, it is the God of the Old Testament who is actually to blame for being the creator of the material universe. It is only the spirit that still belongs to the *true* God. Thus, Manichaeism postulates an *independent* force of evil, not subject to and not created by God.

The Mystic Way

The reconciliation of all opposites to such an extent that there becomes no more distinction between the object and subject, the viewer and the thing viewed is commonly associated with what has been called 'mysticism'. It is the mark of the various mystic paths to treat pleasure and pain as imposters both, and thus to assimilate the transcendence that is divine: no more this and that, *yours*, or mine; his suffering, my pleasure, my pain, her pleasure. If we contrast that to the nature of suffering, then we find a paradox that in the midst of suffering, in that the human subject is turned in upon their own ego, and thus becomes focussed on *their* pain and *their* suffering, in an act of egotism that excludes any possibility of this 'transcendent' viewpoint. However, a further understanding of suffering is to see that *my* pain is the same as *your* pain, and thus that there is nothing individual, unique or particular about pain, whilst at the same time pain is only manifest in the unique and particular individual.

Conclusion

We can conclude that to live is to suffer, and that despite the original dry statement of the problem of evil as if it were a mere logical problem, the question of suffering itself resonates far deeper than the intellect, because it concerns itself with one of the essential mysteries of what it is to be human. In the Judaeo-Christian response there is paradoxical transcendence, as there is in the broad-sweep of the Buddhist response, where we are taught to have calm detachment from the worries and desires of the ego, so we might flow with our karma as it comes. And still, neither view-point really tells us *why*, because there is no answer. The rain falls on the just and on the unjust alike: what rhyme or reason could the old cruel rain and wind possibly have? And yet, our position is not so hopeless, because it is in trying to come to terms with God, in trying to come to terms with the *why* of suffering, that we also find our own humanity.

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1. Bob Dylan 'Percy's Song', released on the 1985 album *Biograph*
2. A fine Biblical example may be found at Job 38 - 40 where God taunts Job for being a finite, bounded and mutable being, in other words, those qualities the opposite of which God embodies.
3. It would entail an essay on the (frequently) absent God of the tragic trope. This absence occasions a vacuum in which the characters of great tragedies live out the implications of unjust and wildly disproportionate suffering. This setting: suffering amidst the absence of higher justice or benevolence to whom appeal may be made, provides ample catalyst to want to know *why*: This reflects back to us, the audience, the classic human response to tragedy.
4. See Matthew 5:48 on Christ's exhortation to copy the example set by God of perfect compassion.
5. See Matthew 6:25-34 on the hubris of trying to ensure our physical needs are met, when an omniscient God is already perfectly aware of them already and will provide and care for his creation.
6. See Matthew 5:34-36 on the given of Christ's teaching that the earth and all of humanity is under the dominion of an omnipotent God. I have chosen all these three examples from the Gospels, rather than the later Pauline corpus, to exemplify the fact that these assumptions about the nature of God have been implicit in Christian teaching from the first.
7. A useful subdivision of the categories of human suffering is between 'moral': suffering caused by the decisions and actions of us and others, and 'natural': caused by the environment and world in which we live, e.g. earthquakes, droughts or floods.
8. Runciman, 1947, *passim*. Aquinas was of course heavily influenced not only by Augustine, but also by the resurgence in the Middle Ages of Gnostic-influenced dualistic sects, such as the Cathars. Pagan Classical culture, alongside Christianity, formed the intellectual background of his day.

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9. Armstrong, 1993, 30.
10. A belief in a form of judgement post-death may make itself manifest in Dante's elaborate system punishments devised for each types of sin, in the *Inferno*, or in the Egyptian 'devourer' god Amemait, who swallowed up all sin in his part-lion, part-hippopotamus and part-crocodile form.
11. In his 1965 study, Lerner told various participants that a fellow student had won the lottery. They tended to believe that had deserved this good fortune through his hard work. In a similar study a year later, participants tended to believe that a fellow student had deserved his bad fortune. This human tendency Lerner called the 'Just World Hypothesis'. It has significant knock-on repercussions not only on the academic study of ethics or philosophy, but also on the judicial process.
12. Genesis 3:5
13. Not necessarily 'The Devil', though Christians have often interpreted the serpent as such.
14. Matthew 4:1-11
15. See 1 Samuel 29:4 for 'satan' used to refer to David as an adversary.
16. Zechariah 3:1-2
17. The word 'devil' is not from the Hebrew at all, but comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek word for an accuser (implying also one who gives false witness) is a *diabolos*.
18. Cavendish, 1967, 322.
19. From Alfred Tennyson, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.
20. *Essays from the Parerga and Paralipomena*.
21. Louth, 1981, writes on the similarities between mystics in the Western (Christian) tradition, specifically the so-called 'dark night of the soul', and agonising period where one's faith is tested through a severe period of self-abnegation.
22. Though Karma has also been taught in western esoteric movements, such as in the three-fold magical law, established in the Neopagan movement.
23. Romans 7:7
24. Romans 7:8
25. Romans 7:9-10
26. Romans 7:19
27. Armstrong, 1993, 4-5
28. "Where had God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers." From: *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, s. 125. Ayer, 1994, 317. Nietzsche does not of course mean a literal death of God (still less is any reference to the crucifixion of Christ intended) but rather the death of the shared nexus of cultural beliefs in the Judao-Christian God.
29. See Otto, 1923, 29-30, where he terms the human sense of the non-human the 'numinous' and gives this sense three parts: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.
30. This can be seen vividly in action in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's Satan is by far the more attractive character than Milton's God. The former seems to embody many of the qualities of the men of the age: he is fearless in dealing with oppressive authority, he has integrity and is an intrepid explorer. God, by contrast, is omniscient, but by virtue of this

indifferent, callous and down-right incompetent for not preventing The Fall despite knowing full well that it would happen. God, it would seem, does not want any enforced obedience, but one would have thought that God should have been able to fix up an easier redemption for mankind than the one described to Adam in Book XI-XII.

31. Coogan & Metzger (eds.), 1993, 208.
32. Moynahan, 2002, 118.

Book Reviews

Dale C. Allison. *Resurrecting Jesus*. 2005. London T & T Clark pb £19.99. 404pp. ISBN 0.567.02910.7

As is often the case, this series of essays by the professor of New Testament Exegesis and Early Christianity at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary were written on various occasions (including one on a long train journey) for a variety of different reasons. They all focus around the person and work of Jesus and specifically address problem areas. Although it is probably not intended, there is a common theme running through the book. This is the conviction of the author that Jesus was a millenarian prophet. In this he was much influenced by the work of Albert Schweitzer, whose *Quest for the Historical Jesus* he first read when he was sixteen - no mean achievement in itself! It is therefore no surprise that the first essay 'Secularising Jesus' reviews various quests for the historical Jesus. Allison concludes that there is no real modern quest. The age of giants has passed and at present we just have a group of scholars each following his own agendas. Another essay, 'Apocalyptic, Polemic, Apologetics' follows in the wake of Schweitzer and addresses the problems of Jesus' apparent belief that the second coming and final judgement were imminent and whether Jesus was mistaken in this belief. As far as the latter is concerned Allison does not hesitate to assert that Jesus could have been mistaken and argues that popular Christianity is in danger of embracing the Docetic heresy by insisting that Jesus was at least three quarters divine and only a quarter human.

In an interesting study entitled 'The Problem of Gehenna' the author contrasts the restrained language, literal or figurative, used in talking about hell by Jesus with the horrific portrayal by later Christian interpreters. Although he rejects the latter as obscurities he accepts that hell should not be rejected as mythical because, "Hell, is, in the Bible, a penalty imposed at the eschatological judgement. It is punishment due a crime with staggering consequences. One cannot imagine a stronger statement of human responsibility: what we do really matters, and our accountability does not forsake us." (97) Two other essays deal with difficult sayings of Jesus such as, 'Let the dead bury their own dead' and that those who

do not hate their parents cannot be his disciples and the apparent contradictory attitudes adopted by Jesus to the Jewish law. Both of these dilemmas he sees as resolved by considering the historical context in terms of both the audience addressed and the fact that the Kingdom of God had come and the world will soon come to an end and therefore following Jesus, the Messiah, took precedence over all else. The essay, interestingly entitled 'Torah, Urzeit, Endzeit' shows that Jesus was both a faithful Jew who accepted the Law (Torah), but also, along with the rabbis and the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, he saw that fulfilment of all things (the *Endzeit*) on the horizon. The rabbis believed that the *Endzeit* marked the return to Eden when the law would be written on the heart and the primitive Torah (*Urzeit*) would be superseded. The world in which Jesus and the disciples lived was coming to an end and therefore, to use Schweiter's expression, it was a time for 'interim ethics'.

The major part of this book is taken up with the subject of the resurrection of Jesus. This is a truly amazing *tour de force*. Allison seems to have read virtually everything written on the subject. He critically examines the biblical and extra-biblical evidence and evaluates the various theories that have been presented to explain away the resurrection. There is a valuable section in which he evaluates the resurrection narratives in the light of modern accounts of visions of loved ones who have recently died. Although he finds it almost impossible to believe in a literal resurrection in the light of modern knowledge, he nevertheless finds himself wanting to believe. He writes, "A final cause for my finding the literal resurrection of Jesus congenial is that it entails his surviving death; and hope for a life after this one is, despite modernity's objections to it, very near the center of my own faith. I cannot believe in a good God and simultaneously disbelieve in a life beyond his one. Otherwise I find the world irredeemably bleak," (217) Allison is primarily an historian but, as a Christian, he can say, "although ignorance should not be the mother of devotion, true religion nevertheless involves realms of human experience and conviction that cannot depend upon or be undone by the sorts of historical doubts, probabilities and conjectures with which the previous pages have been concerned." (352)

Many of the readers of this journal may be put off by the fact that Allison is not an evangelical and is prepared to question the authenticity of particular scriptures. However they would be wrong to refuse to read this volume on that account. Here is liberal scholarship at its best. Allison is a fair and judicious scholar, who is prepared to interact as much with evangelical scholarship as with more liberal-minded critics and will not dismiss anything out of hand without a thorough examination. This is a scholar's book, but will bring great rewards to those who persevere in reading it.

Reviewed by Reg Luhman.

K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (W.B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids and Cambridge U.K., 2003) xxii + 662 pages £32.95.

Many of us will have benefited from the small book *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* published first in 1943 by F.F. Bruce, one of the former Presidents of the Victoria Institute, and repinted and revised many times since. Professor Kenneth Kitchen introduces this substantial volume with a reminiscence of a conversation many years ago with Professor I. Howard Marshall who reflected that there was a need for a book which would do for the Old Testament what Bruce had done for the New. This welcome book is his response to this reflection, presenting in definitive form material in defence of the reliability of the Old Testament which he has been making available for many years in lectures and talks particularly to students, as well as in shorter publications. Those earlier volumes remain valuable, but this contains much up to date information together with 100 pages of endnotes giving full bibliography. As an author who knows how to help the reader, he has provided these notes with the page numbers to which they apply in the headings. The book is also provided with 40 plates of maps and line illustrations executed in the author's own distinctive style (pp. 603-420).

In the study of the Old and New Testaments there is a difference in the balance between the input of ancient texts, and of "dirt archaeology", and the evidence of biblical manuscripts. For the New Testament the evidence concerning the biblical manuscripts is extensive and complicated, and, while Bruce discussed some material concerning archaeology, he concentrated mainly on textual matters. On the other hand, when it comes to the Old Testament, though the manuscript discoveries at Qumran have opened a new field of study on the text, the archaeological, including ancient textual, evidence for the much longer period covered by it are so extensive that they warrant concentration on them independent of the former.

Professor Kitchen is well qualified to deal with ancient Near Eastern texts. His main specialization has been Egyptian (now Personal and Brunner Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool), but he has long been competent in other ancient languages, notably Akkadian (Babylonian and Assyrian) and Hittite (including particularly Luwian, the language of the so-called "Hittite Hieroglyphic" inscriptions), and also of course Hebrew and Aramaic. This volume therefore takes account of the ancient texts relevant to Biblical study.

In an era when anyone seeking to keep up with Biblical studies has to contend with a deluge of publications which undermine the reliability of the Old Testament, this well organised compendium of data actually based on original rather than

secondary sources is very welcome. When it comes to the format, the reader is not confronted with unrelieved masses of text, and the material is presented in logical headed sections. The main part of the volume sets out the data and discussion in chapters arranged in chronological order. These work backwards, so to speak, basically from the best known later periods to the less well known earlier ones, rather in the manner of an archaeological excavation, with the exceptions that the Exile and the Divided Monarchy are treated in their natural order, and that there is a substantial chapter on the Prophets.

The chapter titles, consisting of rather jazzy first headings followed by more traditional forms, indicate the subdivision of the material: "In Medias Res" - the Era of the Hebrew Kingdoms (chapter 2); Home and Away - Exile and Return (3); The Empire Strikes Back - Saul, David and Solomon (4); Humble Beginnings - around and in Canaan (5); Lotus Eating and Moving On - Exodus and Covenant (6); Founding Fathers or Fleeting Phantoms - the Patriarchs (7); A Vitamin Supply - Prophets and Prophecy (8); Back to Methuselah - and Well Beyond (9).

The author cites not only the standard recent discoveries that support the Old Testament but also less known material. For example he deals with the fairly well known eighth century Aramaic inscription found in 1993-94 during the excavations at Dan in northern Israel which mentions *bytdwd* in a context where to an unbiased enquirer it represents the place-name "House of David" = "Judah", and demonstrates that such a person as David existed [on this see also *Faith and Thought Bulletin* 21 (April 1997), 2 - 4]; but in addition he sets out the possibility that in a damaged passage in the Moabite Stone, also of about the eighth century, it is reasonable to restore *bt[d]wd*, giving another reference to Judah; and he mentions a third distinct possibility nearer the time of David, first observed by himself, in the account of the campaign of the Egyptian pharaoh Shoshenq in Palestine in which the place-name "heights of *dwt*", may plausibly be rendered "Heights of David" (pp. 92 - 93, with copies of the three inscriptions, fig. 13 on p. 615 = pl. XIII). This is just one instance of the helpful material contained in this volume.

The main substance of the volume is the historical setting of the Old Testament, but the important topic of Covenant, Law and Treaty is given a good survey (pp. 283 - 307), and that of Wisdom Literature (relating particularly to the book of Proverbs), to the study of which Professor Kitchen has made significant contributions, is outlined fairly briefly (pp. 134 - 36) but with essential basic bibliography (p. 534 n. 165). The chapter on the Prophets (8) is more substantial (pp. 373 - 420), with discussion of similar activity in the ancient Near East in general and its relationship to the Biblical record. Sound judgement is brought to this, as for instance concerning the discovery a few years ago at Kuntilet Ajrud in southern Palestine of Hebrew inscriptions on pottery vessels which

included some instances associating the name Yahweh with Asherat, something which made quite a stir at the time, but explained here as simply one example of the kind of foreign cult condemned by the prophets (pp. 413 - 15).

These are largely textual examples, but dirt archaeology is not neglected. There is a useful discussion of the sites in Palestine which are relevant to the Hebrew conquest (pp. 182 - 190), probably but not dogmatically in the 13th century B.C., in which the contentious case of Jericho receives a good summary (pp. 187 - 88) with pertinent bibliography.

Those who have valued the work of Professor Kitchen over half a century will know that, as the title of the book indicates, he takes a strong but rational view of the reliability of the Old Testament, and while the main part of this volume sets out the factual situation, he deals specifically in a final chapter (10) with some of the principal recent critical (and often destructive) books on the Old Testament. One publication of this kind which is still in the bookshops, I. Finkelstein and N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York, 2001), receives a trenchant and useful assessment (pp. 464 - 68).

With this volume in his hands the reader has a compendium of reliable historical and literary information, which can encourage him to have confidence in the reliability of the Old Testament.

There is a serviceable Subject Index and an Index of Scripture References.

Reviewed by T.C. Mitchell.

***Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute,
continued (after Vol. 90) as Faith and Thought.***

1979 (Vol 106) to 1983 (Vol. 110)

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The first part of this index was published in Bulletin 27 (April 2000) and covers volumes 1 to 43 [1866 to 1911]; Part 2 (Bulletin 28) volumes 44 to 70 [1912 to 1938]; Part 3 (Bulletins 29 - 31) volumes 71 to 100 [1939 to 1973]; Part 4 (Bulletins 32 - 33) volumes 101 to 105 [1974 - 1978]. Part 5, which began in Bulletin 34 and is continued below, covers volumes 106 to 110 [1979 - 1983].

Abbreviations

Asterisk (*) - the first page of an article; **c** - correspondence; **d** - contribution to a discussion; **f** - and pages following; **r** - review; **rw** - writer of a review.

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Faith & Thought is published by The Victoria Institute and mailed free to all Institute members, along with *Science & Christian Belief*.

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ISSN 0955-2790