

23

BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SUFFERING: THE OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

Ikenna L. Umeanolue

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to survey, from biblical Old Testament perspective, the efforts made to come to grips with the question of human suffering. Here, the biblical concept of God as good, loving, just, faithful, and mighty is seen, just as in the case of theodicy generally, as making very difficult the work of explaining the problem of human suffering, especially when it comes to the cases of innocent suffering. The difficulty lies in trying to reconcile the known attributes of God with the suffering of humans. The paper discovered that beside the Old testament explanation of human suffering in terms of retribution (God's reward for good and punishment for evil), there are other explanations that complement it. Such other explanations are classified as collective suffering, vicarious suffering, purificatory suffering, and medicinal suffering. The study concludes that humans should always work hard in order to conquer the world, but all hard work should be guided by the fear of God. Thus we should submit to God's dealings in our lives even if we do not always understand them. Ultimate success and happiness lies with God. He alone can give perfect answer to all human existential problems.

Keywords: Biblical Response, Human Suffering, God's Justice, Old Testament

Introduction

At one point or another everyone suffers and almost everyone raises the question "Why?". The question of God's justice in the face of human suffering has been perplexing one in biblical theology. What scriptures say is quite relevant to present a biblical perspective on the issue of human suffering. Often an apologetic approach is employed in explaining the problem of human suffering, especially in the Old Testament; God is often defended and human takes the blame. At times, especially in the New Testament, man is excused before the suffering humanity by pointing at the advantages or benefits that accompany suffering, how redemptive it can be.

In the Old Testament, the God who was in a special way revealed in the covenant, and who seriously implicated himself therein, is seen as a faithful and just God. Sequel to this, the Old Testament response to the problem of human suffering is seen as being, essentially, an attempt to offer reasons for human suffering in order to preserve untainted the justice and majesty of God. A look at this attempt takes an important place in the Old Testament response to the issue of human suffering. Here we see that the consideration of the Old Testament reconciliatory view of the justice of God and human suffering, a theme which touches the core of theodicy, leads to a central issue in the Old Testament notion of suffering, which is the question of rewarding good and punishing evil. It is the inherent logical problem that is buried in this concept of retribution that, more or less, created the need for the other explanations of suffering which also forms an important area of this study.

This paper is an attempt to survey, within the Old Testament horizon, the efforts made to come to grips with the problem of human suffering. Here, the biblical concept of

God as good, loving, just, faithful, and mighty will be seen, just as in the case of theodicy in general, as making very difficult the job of explaining human suffering, especially when it comes to the cases of unmerited suffering. The difficulty lies in trying to reconcile the known attributes of God with the suffering of man.

The Old Testament Response to Human Suffering

It is not only a fact that the Old Testament Israel's experience of a revealing God who opened himself to them, appropriated them and swore to shield them did not exempt Israel from wrestling with the puzzling questions of human life, but her experience of Yahweh, seem to raise more questions than it appeared to have solved. Noted as most outstanding among these was the commonly known vexing problem of evil and human suffering.

The Old Testament worldview was extensively theocentric. According to Egbugu (2006), the Old Testament problem with human suffering is seen not so much as that of concrete physical pains or specific misfortunes, as it was a case of reconciling the notion of and belief in God with the presence of concrete sources of suffering, it was that of explaining human suffering in relation to Yahweh. Faley (1977) puts it succinctly:

But far more elusive of explanation, in terms of commonplace experience, were suffering, misfortune, degradation and death. They were difficult enough to endure in concrete, but what made them insufferable in the course of Israelite history was the inability to explain the 'why' behind them. (p. 4).

This does not however mean that concrete human suffering was of no consequence, as to be taken over by mere theoretical speculation or mental exercise. It is not known that Israel was influenced by stoic attitude that was in vogue in the last centuries BC. Actually, Israelite views about 'good life' show the opposite; views in which 'health, peace, family, length of days, food and drink' among others could be seen as the factors for adequate fulfillment of man's deepest desires. Thus life was equated with possession of the promised land (Deut. 4:19), prosperity (Ps. 34:13), money and good wine (Eccl. 10:19). The point is that these goods are beneficent link between the beneficiary and Yahweh; though material, they have theological significance. Life, material possession, and comfort are unmistakable signs of divine favour, which were bestowed by Yahweh on those who deserve them, and their opposites, were, certainly, signs of the Lord's disfavour, and they weighed very heavily on the Hebrew heart when they came.

Here there is a seemingly slight but really significant shift from the general case of the preoccupation of a suffering believer, which generally creates the need for some theodicy. In the general sense, the believer in his/her suffering is weighed down with the thought of why a good, loving, and omnipotent God allows one's suffering and would not heed one's prayer - the cry of his faithful. But in a different sense the Hebrew believer who sees suffering as a sign of God's disfavour is weighed down not only the actual suffering but more so with the thought of being separated from God which the presence of suffering is held to signify. It is most excruciating in this sense as the suffering believer, as in most cases, would not know what he has done badly or where he may have gone wrong. Here the innocent sufferer is shattered with confusion and obvious inability to discern what must have gone wrong. In general, the problem was not so much the misfortune as it was what it signified in relation to Yahweh. It was easy to bear a loss but not the fact of being rejected by Yahweh.

Further, Israel's exuberant joy, which was unknown to the Greek, is on record (Mcdermott, 1990). This peculiar exuberant joy is held to spring from Israel's consequences of a benevolent providence that has ruled her history: Yahweh's creation of the wonders of the world, and the mighty deeds that he accomplished in history for his people, especially the downtrodden and the poor (Pss. 19; 35:10; 68; 108; 136; 146; 147; 148). Here the pious Israelites had, both in the national and the individual senses, a great feeling of confidence and security, as the wellbeing of the present and the future is surely guaranteed by the benevolence of the faithful God. If the knowledge that God brought creation into being and provides for those who are his, especially the down trodden, was a source of exuberant joy for Israel, the presence of suffering, especially as it was indiscriminate, could not but be quite painful and exceedingly puzzling. By indiscriminate we mean the suffering that hardly admits of any logical explication that is not governed by any rules, the suffering that can befall anybody, even children.

The question of human suffering becomes especially acute in cases of innocent suffering when individuals undergo suffering for no apparent reason. Such was the case of the biblical Job (Ugwueye and Umeanolue (2012). The problem innocent suffering is much more compounded by the thought of Yahweh's justice and fairness which were beyond dispute for Israel; that the innocent could suffer before him or in his 'just and fair hands' was completely incomprehensible, and could not, theologically, be thought of. The problem was basically theological and therein lay the agony. If it could have been posited that Israel's God was unjust, capricious or treacherous, this would have said little about God but would have gone a long way in explaining misfortune. The fact is that Israel was unwaveringly committed to the belief that Yahweh was just and fair; while much about him remained inexplicable and 'wholly other', he was the God who, unlike men, remained beyond reproach. In Hebrew thought generally, all events or happenings are directly in the hands of God (Ugwueye, 2002).

A clear distinction is made between Yahweh and Greek deities. Utterly foreign to Hebrew theology was the wanton arbitrariness of Greek divinities with their petty disputes into which men were embroiled willy-nilly to suffer the consequences (Mcdermott, 1990). Israel's sense of this justice and her belief that Yahweh consistently ruled her with this justice was part of what led to her gradual recognition that Yahweh, her God 'was not just one national God among many, nor even the strongest of the gods, but the one God, supreme Lord of heaven and earth' (cf. Deut. 32:4; 2 Chr. 12:6; Ex. 9:15; Neh. 9:32f; Pss. 92:15, 99:4; Is. 5:16; Jer. 9:24, 12:1; Ezek. 18:25). Here it is to be noted that, though not always progressive, the development of the Hebrew monotheism has always attracted considerable attention, and this, at least, intended fidelity to Yahweh says much about how faithful Israel herself saw Him (Albright, 1957; Bright, 1966). Recognizing Yahweh not only as their God, who really intervened in history to form a people uniquely his own, but also as one who in his rule of his people is qualified to be and is really a universal God, who merits universal worship and adoration, it became Israel's duty to defend this Yahweh's justice in the face of human suffering. This defence or explication which is the retribution thesis, and which actually forms the core of the Old Testament theodicy, is what is presented here as the main Old Testament response to human suffering. Though, beside explaining human suffering in terms of this retribution (Yahweh's reward for good and punishment for evil), there are other explanations that, apparently, complement it.

The OT Traditional Thesis of Retribution: Rewarding Good and Punishing Evil

The view of misfortune as Yahweh's answer to some evil perpetrated by the victim is a central and most significant concept in Old Testament explication of human suffering and evil. Here the unfavourable effect of sin on the relationship between God and man, and the anger of God, which follows it is held as the cause of human suffering and pain. According to Ferguson (1972), "The basic attitude of the Old Testament to suffering is that it is punishment for sin" (p. 59). It is along this line that Bukovsky cited in Egbuogu (2006) notes that, in the first place, the Mosaic Law presupposes strict retribution as God's way of dealing with sin and thus sanctioned suffering inflicting procedures as punitive measures and these were to be applicable both to the nation as a whole and individuals (cf. Lev. 26; Deut. 27).

The question of man's transgression and the consequences that follow therein can hardly be seen expressed in a more concrete way than in Old Testament. This, first and foremost, is due to the connection with Yahweh; within Israel there has always been established a strong and essential nexus between law and Yahweh, its author. A man was observant because such was Yahweh's will, which would have also fixed the price to be paid for the disregard of divine mandate. However, it may not be said that Israel had no idea of the intrinsic consequences that human acts carry with them. It is noted that Israel may not have been unaffected by the Ancient Near Eastern thought where, in spite of the fact that no direct connection was made between man's moral conduct and a divine lawgiver, sufficient reason was still seen for avoiding misdemeanor for the inherent consequences believed to be buried in human acts. Thus, Von Rad (1965) has this imagery:

Like stone thrown into the water, every act initiates a movement for good or for evil; a process gets underway which, especially in the case of crime, only comes to rest when retribution has overcome the perpetrator. But this retribution is not a new action which comes upon the person concerned from somewhere else; it is rather a last ripple of the act itself which attaches to its agent almost as something material. (p. 370).

At any rate, it has to be noted that the recognition of this intrinsic consequences buried in the nature of evil acts is only an additional concept, and is really secondary in Israel's concept of retribution, even though it helps to show how real, inescapable and dreadful the idea of retribution could be in Hebrew thought.

Along this line, then, the concept of rewarding good and punishing evil in Hebrew thought is a theme seen to be grounded directly in the covenant, which clearly defined what God considered good and evil actions. Whether Israel remained faithful or slipped into infidelity determined its faith (Mcdermott, 1990). That the justice of Yahweh is found expressed in the covenant is certainly one of the dominant ideas in the Bible; though the Torah is basically taken as the prime expression of Yahweh's love and mercy, it is known that "reciprocal commitment and/or promises were therein involved.

This notion is seen providing a notion that is most consistent in the Deuteronomic history, and this is most obviously legible in the book of the Judges. Faley (1977) puts this quite clearly as follows:

The Deuteronomic leitmotif of sin and its consequences appears with particular clarity in the book of the Judges. In recounting the celebrated deeds of these legendary figures of Israel's past, what we may call the 'rhythm of evil', with its sequence of sin, punishment, repentance and deliverance, appears repeatedly. (p. 40).

Here historical circles often repeat themselves. At one time Israel is seen to fall away into infidelity, next we see her punished until the people call out for mercy. Invariably Yahweh is moved to pity, he intervenes by raising another Judge to save his people, this went on and on.

Further, this notion of retribution, reward for good and punishment for evil, is given some ample elaboration in the first and second books of Kings, where the sins of Israel and Judah against the covenant was seen as being responsible for the catastrophes of 721 and 587 BC - the fall of Israel the Northern Kingdom, and finally the destruction of Jerusalem. It is made clear that in this line of thought the massive superiority and terrific nature of the Assyrian military force with their excessive imperialistic intent was no explanation for Israel's fall and exile, as far as Deuteronomist was concerned. The reason was clear: "This happened because the Israelites have sinned against Yahweh their God who has brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the grip of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods, they followed the practices of the nations - that Yahweh had dispossessed for them" (2 Kg 17:7-8).

With time the prophets took up the explanation of the nation's plight along the same line of sin and punishment (cf. Is. 3:16-26; 22:1-14; Jer. 2:19; 4:18). It was in the individual case that the logical problem of retribution glaringly surfaced. It is noted that within the contemporary circles of the author of the book of Job, the individualization of this doctrine must have substantially taken form, and that could explain the hardened position of his friends (Rowley, 1980). Here we have the quite striking and most celebrated Isaiah's Vine Yard Song, where Judah's lot is seen to serve her right for her failure to yield the most expected fruit: "I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield sour grapes instead..., I will take away its hedge for it to be grazed on, I will knock down its wall for it to be trampled on" (Is. 5:4-5). Along this same line, as Yahweh declares his inheritance forsaken, he abandons his heritage, his house, thus delivering what he had so dearly loved into the hands of the enemy (cf. Jer. 12:7-8). In this sense the invaders of Israel become the "rods of the Lord's wrath".

The thought of suffering as punishment of sin was not only seen in the national sense; it was equally widely applied in the individual cases, and in the people's thought. It was in the individual case that the logical problem of retribution glaringly surfaced. It is noted that within the contemporary circles of the author of the book of Job, the individualization of this doctrine must have substantially taken form, and that could explain the hardened position of his friends. Though the plot of the book of Job stands in opposition to this, it, at the same time, stands as a strong proof of the fact that it was a belief that had taken root in the people's view of God and his covenant relation with his people. Though Job was a man quite conspicuous for his wealth and all-round good fortune, he was "not less so for his character, which was beyond reproach from either God or man" (Driver, 1921). This was a fact Job himself knew too well, that is why he is seen expressing the feeling that what he got from Yahweh was not what he expected, in other words, what he merited. Uprightness or justice (*Sedaqah*) and judgment (*mishpat*) are two key words in the Bible. Job had made their practice a permanent part of his life ('my cloak and my turban'). It thus is noted: "Job has asked for justice and not been heard; yet he himself has heeded the cry of the poor. He says, therefore, in sad disillusionment: 'I hoped for happiness, but sorrow came; I looked for light, but there was darkness (30: 26)'" (Gutierrez, 1991).

Extolling the man who keeps or rather lives by the law of the Lord, and marshalling

out his favours, Psalm 1, which is held to have emerged from the Sapiential tradition and is seen attached as late preface to the whole Psalms, clearly states what awaits the evil doer:

It is not like this with the wicked, nothing like this,
No, these are like chaff blown away by the wind...
For Yahweh takes care of the way the virtuous go,
but the way of the wicked is doomed. (Ps 1:4-6).

Many other psalms reflecting the fact of retribution include: Psalms 10, 13, 16, 26, 27 among others.

All over the book of the proverbs are scattered expressions regarding acts and consequences; these include: Prov.3:33ff; 10:29; 13:21; 15:3-9; 25f, 29; etc. In spite of odds, this belief was deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Whether the defence of the simple norm of justice was due to an almost mystic love of the law, as in Psalm 1, an embattled theodicy, or pious, utopian dreaming, many Jews trusted firmly in a just God who rewards good and punishes evil. So deep was the conviction that suffering was linked to sin that often people concluded from the pain in which a person found himself the sinfulness of the sufferer.

The Weakness of the Old Testament Traditional Thesis of Retribution

In spite of its “smart/convincing” appearance in theory, life experience stands in very strong disapproval to this simple equation-type of theodicy. According to Faley (1977), “To say that virtue brings good and misconduct spells disaster is a good principle of indoctrination and in terms of a God who is just, it is good theodicy, as well. The problem arises in starting with day-to-day experience and then making the principle fit” (p. 22). Pointing to what he calls “a law of life”, which for him could also be termed “the wrath of God”, Ferguson (1972) acknowledges the reality of this problem; he indicates that the law permits us to “easily” draw a line from sin to suffering, but “it does not permit us to draw the line backward from suffering to sin on the part of the sufferer” (p. 59). Here the case of Job remains paradigmatic. It is a known fact that a central point in the plot of the book of Job is not just suffering but the suffering of the innocent, and if the innocent can suffer then the thesis of retribution is in trouble. But the book of Job established, at the same time, both the innocence of Job and the suffering of Job, thus giving the said thesis a decisive blow. Israel could say, and rightly so, that sin brings suffering, but could Israel, rightly, say that every suffering was as a result of sin? Here is one of the areas the rob exists. In this sense it is noted how hard or rather impossible it is to suppose that the reader of the Bible is expected to conclude that Abel, Uriah the Hittite, and Naboth were murdered because they deserved it.

Further, and equally important, Israel could not also say that every sin at every time brings the deserved or merited punishment. This is seen as what led to the cry: “How long, O Lord, how long?” that was not infrequent upon Hebrew lips and in the Hebrew Heart (cf Pss 13: If; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84; Jer 12:4; Hab 1:2. etc.). In all these cries of “why” or “how long” the justice of God is put in question. They came partly from the hearts and lips of innocent sufferers who yearned for God as he appeared to delay indefinitely in intervening to bring them justice, and partly from baffled general public who could not understand the logic behind the progress of the sinner (Mcdermott, 1990). In these cries, the ones against the progress of the sinner will ironically make greater cases. The cry of the individual innocent sufferer is certainly of a greater moral implication but will generate less public concern; how do we know who is innocent?³³ But the sinner can be known. Some sins are overt thus we have the publicans, prostitutes, etc.

That the overtly sinful could be seen in excellently good health, and prosperity, and in their usual arrogance and flamboyance could display their wealth was simply incomprehensible, and therefore an insurmountable huddle to the logic of retribution. It has to be noted that we do not mean that the problem of identification or verification does remove entirely the importance of innocent suffering from the public eye. When a good number of individuals suffer in convincingly clear conscience, with time it will come to be known publicly that people could suffer for no cause, when it becomes a fate shared by many, though individually.

It is here noted that the question of the consolation that comes from the consciousness of the fact that the sinner cannot carry his wealth to the grave (Ps. 37:11, 10-21; Job 20) has little meaning considering the Hebrew notion of 'good life', as mentioned earlier, and their anthropology, where the whole person dies, and all shares the same fate (Faley, 1977; Mcdermott, 1990). As the unjust would not take his ill-gotten gains to the grave, so was the just unable to enjoy any material rewards once dead. Certainly, "sheol offered no hope of either positive or negative retribution. Death was the common end, and the lot of men thereafter was the same for all, therefore if one's guilt is destined to catch up with him it must happen within the context of the present existence".¹⁸

Finally, it is necessary to take a look at a problem more theoretical but which is, at the same time, quite fundamental to the problem of retribution. As mentioned before, the Hebrew view of reward for good and punishment for evil is grounded on the covenant justice, but behind this covenant and its justice are God's loving kindness (*hesed*) and his merciful compassion (*rahamin*) which led him to elect and to nurture and to sustain Israel as his own possession, 'as his own first-born'. The problem here, then, becomes that of reconciling the justice of God, heavily permeated by love and mercy, with the question of crushing punishment for sin. In the case of Job, suppose he sinned, how could such devastating misfortune be reconciled with God's *hesed* and *rahamin*. This fact led Von Rad (1965) to tend to see the whole Old Testament notion of retribution as a contradiction. He writes: "The notion of a punishing justice (*seclakah*) cannot be verified; it would be a *contradictio in adjecto* (contradiction in the adjective)" (p. 389). Though this may appear a bit exaggerated, it certainly portrays the benevolence of God's dealing with his people, and makes for a rethinking of the reality of the 'arithmetical' nature of the Old Testament logic of divine justice as held in the connection between sin and suffering (Faley, 1977).

Other Old Testament Answers to Human Suffering

In addition to the above seen main Hebrew explication of suffering in terms of sin-punishment nexus, there are other, more or less, subsidiary explanations which are generally, also, connected with sin. Here, suffering is either a share in the lot of others brought about by sin, or it is an occurrence through which the sins of others are expiated. In the case of being medicinal and purificatory, suffering is meant either to cure, purify, or to protect with regard to sin and its deadly consequences.

i. Collective Suffering

Here, as in the main doctrine of retribution, suffering is seen as some punishment for sin. But this time the misfortune is brought on someone who is not actually responsible for the sin. While, in essence, some evil is seen punished, the victim of the punishment is not the culprit. Here, the doctrine of retribution could be seen to be broadened to incorporate or address the case of the suffering of the innocent. But what makes a greater substantial

difference here is that some good at times is seen to come from suffering.

Here, punishment for sin is, more or less, contagious. It touches the contemporaries of an offender and can move to his offsprings, spreading to generations. For a general principle, the term ‘corporate personality’, in modern biblical scholarship, has been coined to designate some Old Testament sense of reality whereby the individual is a representative as well as a constitutive member of the group to which he belongs. Among the main characteristics of the ‘corporate personality’, it implied an extension beyond the present into the past as well as the future (Mcdermott, 1990).

If solidarity existed in time, it certainly existed as well among contemporaries or members of the same generation. Thus if one person broke the covenant all that form the solidarity would suffer for it. Here, the sin of “Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zera of the tribe of Judah” was a most striking case in point. He laid his hands on something that fell under the ban, and the anger of Yahweh flared out against the Israelites (Josh 7:1) and Israel was defeated at Ai (Josh 7:4-5). Israel was to remain under sanction until the evil was atoned for and the situation rectified (cf. Josh 7:13-14). When, after the rigorous process, the lot fell on Achan and he owned up, he and the whole family were seen extirpated (Josh 7:25-26). At the murder of Naboth the Lord threatened the same against Ahab’s family (1 Kg 21:21). Also when David’s sin resulted to pestilence, ten thousand people were reported dead. Here attention is drawn to the fact “that when asserting personal responsibility in order to protect his people, David could not separate himself from his family” (cf. 2 Sam 24:17). Justifying the suffering that comes as a result of the sins of one’s ancestors or ones immediate relations, the notion of corporate personality became a tenable and, really, most common line of explanation for innocent suffering. Here, as asserts by Ferguson (1972), “the explanation lies in our solidarity with sin” (p. 160).

In favour of the validity of this line of thought, one may ask why one who benefits from the goods of the community could not see it lawful to suffer the ills of the same. If one could inherit the wealth of one’s ancestors, is one not also bound to inherit their debts, misfortunes, or some punishment due to their misconduct? There may be nothing wrong in sharing the ills one has done nothing to deserve if one could receive blessings one has done nothing to merit. As sound as this line of thought may appear, it does not seem to be strong enough for the repulsion against the thought of inherited or ‘infectious’ evil. Agreeing to pay the debt one’s fathers owed is quite a different thing from receiving a mortal blow due to them, especially when such has the stigma of guilt. Thus the thought of an intrinsic inadequacy of this principle gave rise to firm protests against it, especially during the exile (Ferguson, 1972), in which the people complained, “that the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jer. 31:29, Ezek. 18:2). Here we see what became particularly significant in Jeremiah’s thought, as he emphasized what eventually came to be known as the ‘principle of personal responsibility’ which influenced later thought on the problem of retribution (Faley, 1977). His peculiar way of projecting the individuals which Ezekiel is seen to take up, certainly was as a response to the feelings of dissatisfaction, clearly expressed, then, by the populace, over the doctrine of retribution in the collective perspective.

ii. Vicarious or Redemptive Suffering

The vicarious suffering shared some features with the collective notion of suffering in the sense of both being cases where one is seen suffering for some sin one never committed.

However, unlike the latter, the former is not a suffering inherited or shared but rather that which one has to undergo for the well-being of others; often it is imposed, but it can also be voluntary. In each case its purpose is redemptive. The basic concept underlying the idea of vicarious suffering in the Old Testament is found in the institution of the priesthood that taught Israel, brought expiatory sacrifices before the Lord, and prayed for Israel (Deut 33:10; Lev 10:8-26; 12:8; 14:10-32; 15:30; Ex 28:38; I Chr 15:16-27).

However, it is to be noted that it was in the life of the prophets that the link between call and suffering is seen to be quite clearly highlighted. From Moses onwards the prophets announced God's will for Israel, and their message often encountered rejection and this entailed suffering on their part as the messengers. People murmured repeatedly against Moses and his leadership and threatened to stone him (Ex 15: 24- ,16:2-, 17:2f; Num 14:1-10; 21:4f); Moses himself was ready to die for the people (Ex 32:32; cf. 106:23); His death outside the promised land was as a result of the people's sin (Deut 4:21-22). Amos pleaded with Yahweh to have his anger relented in his threat of punishment against Jacob (Amos 7:4-6); shortly he was expelled from Bethel by Amaziah (Am 7:10- 15). For Jeremiah it was all physical threat, maltreatment and hostility as he battled in favour of the observance of the demands of the covenant (11:19; 20: If; 25:7-11; 37:11-38); he mourned for the people's sins (8:18-9:1) and for his mission of woe (15:10,17f).

All these notwithstanding, it is noted that the most famous example of vicarious suffering in the Old Testament is found in the Servant Songs recorded in Deutero-Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:16; 50:4-10; 52:13-53:12). For Ferguson (1972), these passages constitute the most profound expressions of human suffering in the Old Testament. The known uncertainties regarding these songs and the figure of the servant are not seen to affect the understanding of the meaning of suffering expressed in the songs. That which is of interest is that here an important Old Testament interpretation of suffering reaches a greatest height, here the just with his pain and suffering can perform an expiatory action for others; he offers himself as a kind of guilt-offering, and through his suffering others are redeemed from the power of iniquity.

The idea of the practice of substitution or transfer in punishment or suffering was not alien to the Ancient Near East. In Israel the suffering of the prophets, already mentioned, were actually pointers to the notion of vicarious suffering, but the whole idea is much more inherent in Hebrew cult. Specifically, the Suffering Servant is compared to the lamb led to the slaughterhouse, and the fact that the suffering of the servant received the name expiation *asham* (Is 53:10) falls in line with the conception of expiatory sacrifices often offered for the sins perpetrated against God. Here the image of the Servant who carries the sin of others (Is. 53:4) immediately calls to mind the scapegoat which, loaded with the sins of Israel, is lead to the desert at the feast of expiation (Lev. 16:20-22).

All these semblances notwithstanding, the Suffering Servant has some peculiarity, some thing new about it; the *novum* is seen in the willingness, not even some passive resignation, rather the servant goes forward to his suffering. Called by God the servant steps forward "to transform a situation of alienation, estrangement, iniquity and transgression by freely offering himself to experience the suffering which others have merited and he has not" (Ferguson, p. 68). This idea is further expressed in the Maccabees; they accepted their suffering very willingly, seeing it as offering to God in hope for the expiation of sins (2 Macc 7:38).

Though quite noble and elegant, in its expression of selflessness, unlimited sympathy, and disinterested love, which are great virtues in every epoch in human communal existence, the idea of redemptive suffering still carries some question mark: “why must the servant be chosen to suffer so grievously, so disproportionately, for sinners?” (Mcdermott, 1990). Here a serious question of true justice is touched. The whole idea is even seen more repugnant in a world like the present, where justice is seen as dominantly legal and retributive.

iii. Purificatory Suffering

The purificatory and medicinal perspectives of suffering focus on the good that comes or that can come from suffering - suffering can be instructive, curative, preventive in terms of warning against a greater evil etc. The anger of God may bring the evil of pain and suffering, but God himself can, in turn, be moved by this suffering to mercy, and this brings his forgiveness and accompanying favours (Gen 21:17; Ex 2:24; 3:7; 19:6f; 20:5; 22:19; Tob 3:16; Ps3:5; 17:6; 22:24; 86:12- 17; etc.).

Purification as an Old Testament explanation for suffering, to a good extent, overlaps with “Testing”, when the latter is not taken in the sense of subjecting an innocent one to the test to “know that you fear God” (cf. Gen 22:12) but is rather seen as chastising in order to instruct, to purify, to make the best come out of the victim. Emphasizing the great lesson that can be learnt from adversity, and seeing this lesson as being at the core of man’s relation with God, Faley points to the Hebrew verb *yasar* that can mean both “to instruct” and “to chastise”. Here, then, instead of being a probe for fidelity, suffering as “putting one to the test” becomes a chastising act that instructs and purifies so as to get the best out of the victim.

The already mentioned text (Gen 22:1-18) which no Jew could be oblivious of as regards the thought of being put to the test by Yahweh, cannot even be rightfully considered in terms of God's quest for enlightenment about Abraham’s future conduct, as the text explicitly reads (Gen 23:12), but was rather aimed at making Abraham and his descendants (cf. Jdt 8:25-27) “learn both the value of God’s choice of them and what was demanded of it”, and therefore instructive and purificatory. This training by testing, by chastising, purifies and makes one worthy. In the words of Faley (1977) “God instructs through blessings and through trials” (p. 42). Education through suffering will necessarily involve purification from sinful habits (Mcdermott, 1990). It is noted that though some texts tend to stress the lessons one may learn from suffering previously undergone (Prov. 3:1 Iff; 15:5; Eccl 7:25; Sir 34:10), the main weight of Hebrew thought understands suffering as educative principally because it opened the sufferer to an existential recognition of Yahweh in a plea for help (cf. Ps 78:34; Ezek 6:7; 13:14; Job 33:19-28; 36:15f). Here the victim, the sufferer is touched, changed and made more docile to the word of God, and is disposed to take the will of God.

As the purificatory character of suffering is seen essentially overlap with the notion of “testing” as an Old Testament response to suffering so also can it be seen very closely related to the notion of medicinal suffering. In the latter sense, suffering which is consequent to some sin is seen in the sense of a process by which sin and the evil that intrinsically follow it are remedied and the sinner is cleansed and made wholesome again (cf. Jer 6:27-30; Ezek 22:17-22; Zech 13:9). Here, appropriating the traditional theme of the remnant of Israel that will remain faithful to the Lord all through their tribulation, Zechariah talks of two thirds of

the people that will perish, and one third that would survive but that had to be purified. Only after the purification will they call Yahweh by his name and he listens to them and say: “this is my people”, and only then will each respond, “Yahweh is my God”. Zechariah is seen here as recalling the theme of the eschatological woe current, then, in the later prophets. Daniel in this regard made reference to “a time of great distress, unparalleled since nations first came into existence” (Dan. 12:1), but at that time Yahweh’s people will be saved. In the sense of the devastation that comes before salvation, Micah is seen applying to the daughter of Zion the image of a woman in travail; she will be besieged, exiled before her rescue comes (Mic. 4:9-10). Here, the suffering of the just before the end of time is seen as purificatory.

In general, the notion of testing! purification certainly adds to deepening the Hebrew views about human suffering. It is quite understandable as it carries what common sense can approve: that our tears can lead to joy. But the problem is that more often than seldom it is not experienced that way. A good lot of suffering seem to have apparently nothing good as an end from them. Purification is a concept which is quite positive even though it carries pain, but we cannot see this positiveness apply to the darkness of a great number of crushing, deadly human sufferings, quite often so annihilating, so apparently non teleological outlook.

iv. Medicinal Suffering

This perspective of suffering, like the purificatory explanation accepts suffering as a consequence of sin, or rather as that which goes with sin, but does not see it merely in terms of retribution. Here, suffering was not seen as a mathematically calculated payment of debts of sin, nor was it seen as the mere mechanical application of the rule enunciated in the covenant. Much more than that, it was seen as medicinal, it induces the sinner to turn away from sin and return to God. Thus, “behind the punishments the prophets saw the loving hand of God, constantly chastising Israel for its sin, constantly wooing Israel back to his love. Like a medicine that could be bitter and hard to swallow but is at the same time life-saving, these sufferings were for the good of the patient. The sufferings inflicted were to bring Yahweh’s people to reflect and to break sinful stubbornness. God wished to cure and reward Israel.” Here Israel’s suffering is seen as that which with time will show itself as the birth pangs of new era of restoration (Is 25:8; 35:4-10; Jer 31:15-20; cf. Lev 26:40-45; Deut 4:30-31). In this line Yahweh wonders at Israel’s obduracy (cf. Am 4:4-6). Recounting the self-deception, stubbornness and Israel’s chain of punishments, Amos presents Yahweh as being startled at Israel’s obduracy. Here the recurrent refrain “and you never came back to me” (cf. Am 4:6-11), shows that the catalogue of woes imposed on Israel were not just meant to inflict on her injuries commensurate with her sins but rather positively directed towards calling her back to order, to cure her of her sinful obstinate disposition. Along this line, all the calls to repentance, all the emphases on Yahweh’s long suffering mercy (Ex 36:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17,31; Ps 86:15; Joel 2:13f) show that in all, what God wanted was that all who were his lived. He took no pleasure in the sinner’s death (Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11; Lam 3:31-33). With word and the painful illustration with his marriage to a whore, Hosea sharply depicted God as consistently seeking Israel in spite of her infidelity, inflicting suffering on her but still taking her back (Hos 1-3). Ultimately, God was certainly involved in a relation of loving fidelity with Israel; he wonders aloud: “Ephraim, how could I part with you? Israel, how could I give you up?” (Hos 11:18). The book of the Proverbs advises against despising the Lord’s discipline and being weary of his reproof for these were signs of paternal loving



care (Prov 3:11-12). “The man who fails to use the stick hates his son” (Prov. 13:24; cf. Wis. 11:10; 12:2,21).

The exile, in this sense, in spite of being seen as what Israel got for her sins, was also seen as meant to have a medicinal purpose, affecting Israel’s attitude towards the covenant. Despite its devastation, it was seen as having an end that was constructive. Seeing the invaders as “the rod of the Lord’s wrath”, the whole experience of the Babylonian exile was taken to be purificatory. Before the fall of Jerusalem, the prophets repeatedly took to explaining, to Judah, the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the consequent devastation of Israel in terms of medicinal suffering (cf. Is 30:12-33; Jer 3:21-4:2; 7:13; Ezek 16; Joel 2; Mic 7:9; Zech 10; Mai 3:6-12). Thus behind Israel’s chastisement was always the yearning of God’s heart which beat in sympathy with his people (Jer 31:20; Is 63:9f, 15f). In general, the thought of the curative nature of suffering is reasonable; certainly, individuals and communities, for example, may, as backsliding sinners, at times, need a “boot in the backside” but we still see that this curative response cannot explain a good deal regarding suffering. The frequent lack of pattern and rationality, the extreme cruelty often visible in suffering, and its baffling enormity renders the logic of this rationalization quite weak. In cases where suffering is crushing, annihilating, how do we bring in the notion of curation? The explication is even rendered much less convincing by the fact that suffering often appears not to know the way to the domain of the true sinners, who actually need cure, but continues visiting the poor, innocent, vulnerable ones who, at least in human calculations, do not actually need the “medicine man”.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper concludes that the question of human suffering is not an easy one to answer. Israelites’ recognizing of Yahweh not only as their God, who really intervened in history to form a people uniquely his own, but also as one who in his rule of his people is qualified to be and is really a universal God, who merits universal worship and adoration, it became the duty of Israelites to defend this Yahweh’s justice in the face of human suffering. This defence which is the retribution thesis, and which actually forms the core of the Old Testament theodicy, is presented here as the main Old Testament response to human suffering. Though, beside explaining human suffering in terms of this retribution (God’s reward for good and punishment for evil), there are other explanations that complement it. Such other explanations are classified as collective suffering, vicarious suffering, purificatory suffering, and medicinal suffering. What is upheld in this paper is God’s freedom in his dealings with humans. He has his plans but that, at times eludes the grasp of human minds as to warrant calculations in all times. This sense of mystery is fundamental to the the Old Testament response to the question of human suffering. Humans should always work hard in order to conquer the world, but all hard work should be guided by the fear of God. Thus we should submit to God’s dealings in our lives even if we do not always understand them. Ultimate success and happiness lies with God. He alone can give perfect answer to all human existential problems.

References

- Albright, W. (1957). *From stone age to Christianity* (2nd ed.). Garden City: Doubleday.
- Bright, J. (1966). *A history of Israel*. London: SCM.
- Driver, S.R. and Gray, G.B. (1921). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Job*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- Egbuogu, M.O. (2006). *Eschatological hope as Christian theodicy: An appraisal of some attempts at explaining the existence of evil and human suffering*. Enugu: SNAAP.
- Faley, R.J. (1977). *The cup of grief: Biblical reflections on sin, suffering and death*. New York: Alba House.
- Ferguson, J. (1972). *The place of suffering*. Cambridge: James, Clerk & Go.
- Mcdermott, J.M. (1990). *The bible and human suffering*. Slough: St Paul's Publications.
- Von Rad, G. (1965). *Old Testament theology*, vol. I (trans. D.M.G. Stalker). London: SCM.
- Ugwueye, L.E. (2002). *Prophets and prophecy in the Old Testament*. Nsukka: Prize Publishers.
- Ugwueye, L.E. and Umeanolue, I.L. (2022). *Reflections on innocent suffering of Christians: A case study of Job 28*. International Journal of Christian Theological Research. 2. 1. 5-15.