Sin And Its Place In The Experience Of Suffering: Presenting The Basis For A Sound Theodicy

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ABSTRACT

SIN AND ITS PLACE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING:
PRESENTING THE BASIS FOR A SOUND THEODICY

by

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Title: SIN AND ITS PLACE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING: PRESENTING THE BASIS FOR A SOUND THEODICY

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One of the most significant issues in theism is the obvious existence of evil and suffering. Thus many philosophers (especially Atheists) propose this fact alone negates the existence of an all-loving, omnipotent, and caring God. This attacks both the integrity of God and the coherence of the scriptural accounts. In response, theologians around the world proposed theodicies to show that the existence of a God, as portrayed in the Bible, is coherent with suffering in this world.

Purpose

The different approaches to this problem are categorized in four categories, outlined, and evaluated in one chapter about the most noteworthy theodicies. In the
following chapter relevant Bible text passages about sin and Sin, as well as three narratives about suffering are carefully examined and their correlation is established. Because this new basis has some theological, apologetical, and practical consequences, the implications of it will be discussed in another chapter before coming to a final conclusion.

Sources

Throughout each period of time, there appeared one of (at least) four groups of scholars and theologians who tried to promote their opinion. Some pointed to the educational value, some to God’s foreknowledge, some to our free will, and others to the cosmic conflict behind the scenes. But this study indicates that important biblical aspects have been neglected and a closer examination of biblical narratives reveal the correlation between the creator-creation divide and our suffering.

Conclusions

A more in-depth study reveals four important biblical principles that are necessary for the basis of a sound theodicy: One, suffering is always fundamentally and directly linked to Sin (the creator-creation divide) as its causation. Two, there is primarily no higher cause for suffering – suffering is pointless. Three, God is mightier than Sin and its consequences. Four, there is always a higher cause for how God acts in our suffering.
SIN AND ITS PLACE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING:
PRESENTING THE BASIS FOR A SOUND THEODICY

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Roman Wiens
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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>Seventh-day Adventist</td>
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To Arthur, my Brother
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Topic

When we look closely, we can see that God is under fire. By now maybe just as many books are attacking God as are exploring his being. Today the logical approach to attacking God, is to attack his integrity or the coherence of the scriptural accounts. One of the most significant issues in theism is the obvious existence of evil and suffering. Thus many philosophers – and especially Atheists – propose this fact alone negates the existence of an all-loving and caring God. This attack encompasses both: the lack of his integrity and the lack of coherence of the scriptural accounts. In response, theologians around the world proposed theodicies to show that the existence of a God, as portrayed in the bible, is coherent with suffering in this world.

This question might be the most fundamental and hence it is valid to be asked. If there are no sufficient scriptural or reasonable grounds to uphold a sound coherence, we ought to dismiss the idea of such a God – but if there are, they must be explored.
Statement of the Problem

Reading all of these approaches to form a solid theodicy, ranging from being rooted in our own free will to God’s supreme foreknowledge\(^1\), I soon wondered why almost no approach considered Sin\(^2\). Since Sin is evidently so fundamentally involved in suffering and evil – from a biblical viewpoint suffering only entered our reality after Sin did – it is astounding why it is basically left out of the equation. Even though it isn’t left out of the explanation of evil, it is left out as a decisive factor in any prominent theodicy.

So what is the true correlation between these two? The question of God versus evil/suffering deserves a sound answer. But every answer has a ripple effect throughout every aspect of our theology and impacts our lives at the core level. Not recognizing the importance of this correlation skews our view of God in every theodicy and its subsequent consequences of such an approach.

Importance of the Study

Many books\(^3\) have been written and are published almost on a daily basis regarding this question. Some aid in dealing with suffering, emphasizing coping mechanisms and trust in the providence of God. Others are serious discussion about the problem of evil. But as already stated, these books predominantly focus on our psychology, pastoral approaches or plain philosophical reflections. The topic of this study is relevant, because a holistic biblical approach is necessary. If we want to understand the

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\(^1\) I will show that most of the suggested approaches are predominantly based on philosophical/logical reflections – although I don’t dismiss philosophy as such, a holistic biblical basis is necessary. There are only few mainstream theological/biblical approaches to this question.

\(^2\) Here I’m not just talking about personal sin (sinful acts), but about Sin as a principle. I shall address this difference later in chapter 3 “Sin: A basis for a new approach”.

\(^3\) The selected bibliography of this paper already hints at the vast amount of books available.
true impact on our lives, since Sin is a theological concept, biblical scholars should focus more on holistic biblical concepts in order to be true to Holy Scripture.

The claim of this paper is that the place of sin in the experience of suffering has not been fully acknowledged so far (if at all) and forms a sounder basis for a theodicy than a purely (or predominantly) philosophical approach. Even though this is a very difficult topic, the bible gives enough evidence to see that Sin causes suffering and evil and by understanding this correlation properly it lays a basis for a sound approach to a satisfactory theodicy. The ramifications of this approach would help in the areas of apologetics, counseling, theology in general, and our personal experience with suffering, - eliminating any shaky compromises. On this basis many of the already existing theodicies can be used for explaining specific instances; without this basis they can’t be viewed as a general explanation. While such approaches usually search for meaning and purpose in suffering and evil – or at least a legitimate reason – the bible shows that Sin is without meaning and purpose. Thus Sin only dissociates from God and consequently suffering is without meaning or purpose.

Biblical scholars and sincere theologians ought to be clear about their understanding of Sin and its correlation to suffering. All the more when they try to approach the question of God versus evil. The Bible states that God created us with no suffering and no evil intended for human beings. The Bible also states God is all-loving and purely good, and is working to restore (in a new creation) the state of creation before Sin entered our reality. If theologians thus fail to explain what they mean with the term “Sin”, its correlation to our experience of suffering, or fail to base their approach for a theodicy on a solid foundation, it may cause an interpretation that is disconnected from
the Bible and even taints or hinder our relationship to God. This study thus suggests a sound basis and an eclectic framework as an approach.

**Delimitations**

In order to focus on the main topic, this paper has to be delimited. I am aware that this topic touches upon many other aspects\(^4\). Also the topic of Sin in general is much broader and I’ll only be able to present the most important aspects, instead of an in-depth research – the same can be said about the summery of already existing approaches to a theodicy; only a short comparison and analysis will be provided to highlight the issue. Furthermore, there are many biblical passages that deal with suffering or evil; yet, not all of them can be examined in this study, and only a selected few will be considered as most relevant. Also, not all scholars can be considered, but the focus needs to be limited to the most relevant contributors throughout the centuries.

**Keywords**

Particular terms, which were already used in this introduction, will be important throughout the study. Thus a few short definitions:

The term *Sin* (capital letter ‘S’) refers to the concept of Sin in general – as a principal, so to speak. It is distinguished from personal *sin*, which includes ones sinfulness or sinful acts (transgressions of the law, rebellion or moral mistakes).

The term *principle*, in connection with Sin (Sin as a principle), is not referring to an ethical or logical principle and thus demand some form of necessity. In one way it

\(^4\) Such aspects are: Is the Bible a complete literal composition or rather the result of a long history of redaction (since I’m looking for a holistic understanding)?
rather expresses our ontological state of being as sinners and in another it expresses the
creator-creation divide with its ontological state and its effects/consequences.

While suffering includes every form of suffering, this study first and foremost
deals with apparent unjust suffering. Suffering as a consequence of one’s own fault can
easily be understood as a natural consequence or even punishment, but unjust suffering is
much harder to place in a coherent biblical worldview.

I also want to distinguish between challenges and suffering. God always planned
on challenging us in order for us to grow and mature (even before the fall recorded in
Gen 3), some might call it testing, but I intentionally call it challenging, so we avoid the
nuance of suffering at all. God made it as clear as possible that he intends no suffering or
evil for us. By understanding the difference between God challenging us to grow and
suffering, we avoid the concept of suffering as a necessary tool for us to grow, like some
propose – the Bible clearly distance itself from this, as there will be no suffering in God’s
kingdom (Rev 21) and yet we will still grow in maturity and understanding.

In this paper the terms suffering and evil, as well as evil and sin, are sometimes
used synonymous, in their respective context. As this study shows, all evil and all
suffering is the result of Sin (as they were not present before Sin was), thus they are used
synonymously in this context. This study also leads to the conclusion that all evil is sinful
and every sin is evil, thus they are used synonymously. Yet, this does not equate suffering
as being sinful, as the context of the respective terms is different – one is a causal
context, the other is the effective context.
Methodology

To show this claim, I’m first going to explain the main approaches scholars put forward. Although many scholars provide summaries and categories for them, I will group these approaches in four categories and rather try to differentiate these four clearly, instead of every approach there is. With every category I will also show the resulting apparent or implicated problems with such an approach, thus why such an approach is insufficient (especially on its own) to solve the problem. This will show why it is so important to explore Sin as the basis for any subsequent approach.

Then I will establish a fundamental concept of Sin and analyze its place in the experience of suffering. Since there are no verses explicitly stating such, I will analyze stories, by using exegetical tools, about the experience of suffering and evaluate their relevance for this question. The bible is not a systematic corpus of different topics (such as hamartiology), but rather a corpus of narratives conveying theology. Thus several narratives of suffering will be the foundation in understanding the biblical view of Sin in relation to suffering – especially unjust suffering and how this builds a solid foundation for a sound theodicy.

Finally, before coming to a final conclusion, I will explore four important areas of implications in order to show the significance of this correlation and how it impacts much more than just “who has the better argument”. The implications might be the most important part, as they show the practical impact and secure the coherence of the presented holistic approach.
CHAPTER 2

A GOOD GOD, BUT AN EVIL WORLD?

Evil is a reality – we witness it on a daily basis. Our loved ones, friends, and often enough we ourselves suffer. We are confronted with suffering almost every time we read a newspaper or turn on the Television. Yet, the Bible asserts that God is good – this dichotomy is exponentiated in the face of horrific evil. As a result most Atheists believe that one of the strongest arguments against theism – with a God as portrayed in the bible: omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving – is the apparent evil in this world. It is often expressed in the following phrases: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not omnipotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call Him God?”

These words quite accurately reflect the thinking of many individuals, revealing the problem at hand. Unde malum, whence cometh evil – how can a powerful and loving God permit suffering? Such a question is legitimate and should in actuality be asked; it affects us all and touches us at the depth of our core as human beings. Many scholars

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1 David Hume assigns these words (most likely erroneously) to Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, in David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1907), 134.

2 This Latin phrase refers to both, the objective evil, as well as the subjective evil (suffering). It became terminus technicus in theology, referring to the whole issue and was popularized by Augustine of Hippo in his book “De Natura Boni”. See especially Ch. 4 of Augustine, De Natura Boni: Die Natur des Guten, trans. Brigitte Berges et al., vol. 22, Opera: Werke - Augustinus (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010).
tried to answer this question and subsequently formed a “theodicy”, because they believed that God and evil are not incompatible at all. Furthermore Wendy Farley points out the importance of a theodicy by saying “the way we interpret suffering has a great deal to do with how we experience suffering.” We will now take a look at the most significant theodicies.

Theodicies

There are of course many different angles and points of view: some try to redefine God, others shift the problem, or even dissect the affected planes (our reality, God’s reality). As I try to summarize in a nutshell the most significant approaches presented by scholars, I will also evaluate them by applying certain criteria. David Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic Studies in the Department of Religion at Emory University stated that a good theodicy is one that meets three characteristics. Blumenthal used these tools to come to a different conclusion, most likely because he defined these criteria differently. The first three criteria are his, but the explanations are worded for this study and are thus adapted. Despite his different conclusion, it is overall a good idea of having clear criteria.

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3 The German philosopher Freiherr Gottfried Willhelm von Leibniz coined this term in the early 18th century, which means “vindication of the justice of God”.

4 Wendy Farley, “The Practice of Theodicy,” in Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine, and Faith, ed. Margaret E. Mohrmann and Mark J. Hanson (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 103.

5 In my categories I intentionally neglect any approach that reasserts God’s characteristics, as they fail the second and fourth criteria, I’m going to mention, by default. To limit God’s omniscience or omnipotence stand in contradiction to biblical truth. I acknowledge such an approach would satisfy the first and third criteria sufficiently, but since they are failing the other by default, they are not of interest for me.


7 Blumenthal uses these criteria, usually applied in dealing with cognitive dissonance, and concludes that a more realistic view is that God doesn’t have to be perfect and sometimes uses evil, which is a side of him. As he puts it “…so having a mature understanding of God enables one to become a more mature servant”, see Ibid., 106.
to assess the different approaches. The fourth criterion is my own addition, thus my list reads:

1. “It should leave one with one’s sense of reality intact.” – meaning known facts are acknowledged; a horrific evil remains what it is: horrific.

2. “It should leave one empowered within the intellectual-moral system in which one lives.” – meaning one is enabled to live, instead of resulting in being utterly helpless and completely at the mercy of circumstances. Since our system includes the reality of God, this criterion is met when God, heeding our freedom, gets rid of evil and suffering in the end; thus not powerless.

3. “It should be as intellectually coherent as possible.” – By affirming evil’s existence and Gods’ (complete) goodness, one still isn’t left torn by contradiction.

4. “It should be as biblically coherent as possible.” – Every biblical aspect, in its holistic concept is encompassed and does not deny or exclude certain facets.

Keeping these criteria in mind, let us move on to the approaches themselves.

Suffering as a Reform Mechanism

It seems to be a widespread understanding that we can learn more from hardship and pain than by contemplation – a negative experience seems to be a stronger catalyst than a positive one. The fitness-industry (through Jane Fonda) even coined the phrase “no pain, no gain”\(^8\). Naturally there is a correlation between the rate at which we learn and the

\(^8\) This phrase originally came from the Mishna, in the Pirkei Avot 5:21, where it says “Rabbi Ben Hei Hei says, “According to the pain is the gain”.

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intensity of the situation. Who, at some point in their life, has not had a painful experience that turned out to be something educational? This principal is applied to a variety of areas, such as fitness, psychology, sociology (those who suffer often want to help others in order to help them avoid the same pain or at least get through it), or even theology.

Probably the most dominant theodicy over the centuries was the idea that God uses evil and suffering to teach and reform us. Irenaeus is recorded as the first to approach the justification of evil in this manner and called it “soul-building.” The basic premise is that God is good, but permits evil in order to help us reform our current state as sinners and grow to a mature faith. Even though we were created in his image, Irenaeus sees human kind as immature when created and in need of disciplinary measures to grow into the intended state. In his understanding we are still created in God’s likeness, because we have the potential for moral perfection, just like God. John Hicks explains that according to Irenaeus we were created in a fallen state with a journey of growth ahead of us and says, “A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges.” Thus God uses and allows suffering in order to lead human kind to perfection, to the maturity he intended for them. This has biblical grounds, as often Paul is cited as saying “…we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

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9 James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 99–101. Although Irenaeus never formulated a complete concept, his ideas were used to express the first concepts in that manner.


11 Ibid., 374.
perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom 5:3,4) or “…we know that all things work together for good to them that love God…” (Rom 8:28). Edward Martin explains this shows “there has to be a structure in place whereby the intrinsic evil of suffering can “produce” this sequential process.”12 Irenaeus concludes that if we were created to be perfect, there would be no value in it and thus God permits or even brings about evil and suffering, so we can benefit from it – this world is the perfect environment for our development and growth.

Others, like the famous writer Clive S. Lewis, followed the general thread of this idea. Lewis states that “man, as a species, spoiled himself”13 (speaking about the fall of the human race) and therefore is in need of correction – pain is defined as “God’s megaphone” which focuses our attention on him. He states that “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.”14 So suffering re-orientates us towards him and causes us to long for him – by doing so, in this fallen “spoiled” state of humans, pain can serve as remedial.15 His go-to example is, “What do people mean when they say, “I am not afraid of God because I know He is good”? Have they never even been to a dentist?”16 For Lewis pain is not a necessity, but an assistant tool, which is much stronger than anything else. Suffering is justified by bringing about a greater good: reminding us that something greater awaits us, so we don’t “mistake them [the pleasures he provides] for home”17.

14 Ibid., 51.
15 Lewis states clearly that though not every pain is intended as remedial, it can often serve as such.
Suffering, “sterilized or disinfected evil”\textsuperscript{18} as he calls it, has no tendency of its own, as Sin does, and thus points us to God and lets us grow towards him.

Hick’s developed this idea most extensively and refined it. His approach affirms our freedom and God’s providence. God actively wants to use suffering for our best, but he “does not will all the suffering that flows from our mistakes.”\textsuperscript{19} Hicks first and foremost wants us to change our perspective, as suffering isn’t necessarily negative, since God can use it for our benefit. He popularized the phrase “call the world, if you please, a vale of soul-making.”\textsuperscript{20}

According to this approach, moral growth or character development is the best explanation of apparent suffering – at least in a justifying sense. This may be the reason why this approach is so popular and attractive for many.\textsuperscript{21} It gives assurance that your pain was not for naught – because to know the “why” for a pain, makes it bearable. It can be a great comfort to know there is meaning or even purpose for the loss or pain experienced. Adding to that this approach underlines that in every suffering, God’s goodness outweighs the negative; God achieves this “by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person’s relationship with God.”\textsuperscript{22}

The Problem with this approach is that God is not vindicated. He still could be considered the cause of suffering and in many cases actually is – this explanation only

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Hick, \textit{Evil and the God of Love}, 336. Here Hick also acknowledges that the soul-making process fails at least as often as it succeeds, in our world.
\textsuperscript{21} When people experience suffering they often conclude in hind side, that it was for their best, as they learned something valuable or a character flaw has been corrected. As a pastor this is one of the most explanations I hear from church members who had to suffer terrible experiences.
gives him a semi good reason in doing so, that’s all. It rather delimits God, since he has
to resort to evil in order to educate us. It might answer the question why God permits
evil, but it begs to question if it is just.\footnote{That is why Lewis pointed to the responsibility of humans, as they spoiled themselves – this differs from Irenaeus view.} Especially when asking if this instrument really
reaches its goal: if this is the best method to educate us by, then why are there only so
few who reach a certain maturity, despite all the suffering in this world? Furthermore, it
begs the question if it is “cost effective […] it is hard to imagine that they [the
improvements] justify the massive amount of suffering in the world.”\footnote{Rice, \textit{Suffering and the Search for Meaning}, 69.} Also, a puristic
approach would mean everyone would react to pain and turn to God, “as Hick describes
it, then, universal salvation is a necessary corollary of soul making theodicy.”\footnote{Ibid., 71.} Of course
some, especially Lewis, do not use a puristic approach. However, this approach, is not
biblically coherent for suffering to be the main catalyst for salvation. The only catalyst is
the action of the Holy Spirit.

Coming back to the four criteria, it seems only the second criterion is met: with its
premises its goal is to empower us, as God wants us to grow. The first criteria is not met,
since some evil acts might be reduced or belittled. The third one isn’t met, since it does
not explain all evil, but rather only some. Also, God only remains good, if I define evil as
not evil, when God uses it – hence it isn’t intellectually coherent. The fourth criteria is
also not met, since its implications for salvation, as well as the lack of any
acknowledgment of the great controversy and Satan’s or Sins role, are not biblically
coherent – at least not in its holistic sense.
God has Sufficient Reason

Since Alvin Plantinga the more common approach is to suggest that God has sufficient reason to permit evil. Is not God omniscient? The emphasis of this approach is on God’s wisdom and foreknowledge. How often have you heard someone say “all of this was part of God’s plan for my life”? The Bible does state that God has a plan for everyone individually and that he has foreknowledge of what is going to happen, allowing events or even shaping the present to fit his plan. If this is so and God is benevolent, then it is the right thing to trust in his providence. This approach is utilizing these premises and has a strong sense of God’s sovereignty at its center.

This idea started out quite differently than the more refined approach today. Although theologians and philosophers often pointed to God’s omniscience for answers, possibly the first one to present a proper theodicy with this approach was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his earlier essays. In short Leibniz “laid it down that God, having chosen the most perfect of all possible worlds, had been prompted by his wisdom to permit the evil which was bound up with it”. According to Leibniz evil was not actual evil, but rather the result of “universal harmony of things, which sets off a picture by shading, consonance by dissonance.” In general Leibniz employs a “greatest-good defense”, although not necessarily on a global scale; he has a personal level in mind. Yet, Leibniz has more than a “greatest-good defense”, as he incorporated two additional

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26 This used to be my favorite, because it is philosophically/logically sound and on a firm basis.
28 By this time we realize that some of the approaches are overlapping, but with distinct emphases.
30 Leibniz was bound by his deterministic understanding and had a much harder time to imbed this into his worldview than with his general idea.
aspects into his theodicy.\textsuperscript{32} First, some suffering might result straightforward from the sin of that creature. And second, some instances of suffering do not follow one’s own wrongdoing, which leads Leibniz to add a teleological notion: there will be an eschatological compensation. With these additions, Leibniz refined his idea of “the best possible world” and his resulting “greater-good” approach.

Since Leibniz, the core idea of God having sufficient reasons to permit evil matured a lot. It was Alvin Plantinga who put a theodicy (build on this idea) on a firm basis, free from any deterministic tendency. The underlying reasons for this idea is our limitations as humans. We can’t see the future or what ripple effects our actions or the actions of others could have; on the other hand God can. Some go as far as stating that everything is an active, intentional act of God. Estes, for example, says “when God allows something, he is acting deliberately – he is decreeing that event.”\textsuperscript{33} However, Plantinga is less radical, showing – by abiding in the rules of logic – that “the price for creating a world in which they produce moral good is creating one in which they also produce moral evil.”\textsuperscript{34} In other words, he [God] isn’t decreeing this evil, but has to allow it.\textsuperscript{35} William Lane Craig Picks up this line of reasoning and concludes that, since he sees the end of history, “God may have to allow a great deal of suffering along the way”\textsuperscript{36} to accomplish his goals. So even “suffering that appears pointless within our limited

\textsuperscript{32} Mark L. Thomas, “Leibniz and the Problem of Evil: Suffering, Voluntarism, and Activism” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001), 44. As his thinking shifted through the years, he later made these additions.

\textsuperscript{33} Joni E. Tada and Stephen Estes, \textit{When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 82. This is also rooted on biblical grounds, like Rom 8:28 or Isa 46:9-11.

\textsuperscript{34} Plantinga, \textit{God, Freedom, and Evil}, 49.


\textsuperscript{36} William Lane Craig, \textit{On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision} (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 158.
framework may be seen to have been justly permitted by God within His wider framework”.

Before the eschaton, we might not have access at all to this wider framework, but God’s omniscience is why there has to be a just reason for God permitting certain evil. Of course this is only dealing with the internal problem of the intellectual branch and not with the emotional aspects. For Craig the “chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God” – if God’s main purpose is to provide a comfortable life, then it is incompatible with evil. Therefore, since God wants to lead us all into a relationship with him, into the knowledge of him, God might have sufficient reason to allow suffering. From our limited perspective we just are unable to see that. This reason may only emerge centuries later: hence “only an all-knowing God could grasp the complexities of directing a world of free people toward His envisioned goals.”

For many this approach might be very attractive, because it reassures us that God is in control – nothing just happens randomly, there is order and a plan. Instead of despairing because of chaos we can trust in God’s plan and sovereignty. This also means there is meaning and purpose for my suffering, even if I only discover this purpose much later. Even if I don’t know the exact “why”, I can trust completely that there is one and nothing hinders God’s plan for me.

37 Ibid.
38 Plantinga shows that God’s omnipotence doesn’t mean he can do whatever he wants, but that he can actualize any state, which is true. This means they have to be logically coherent – thus the phrase “can God create a stone so heavy he can’t lift it anymore” is not objecting to his omnipotence, since it is logically incoherent. Thus the common definition of omnipotence is a logical fallacy. His in-depth reasoning can be found in Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil, 48.
40 Ibid., 94.
41 Yet, for Craig only the knowledge of God brings eternal happiness. At the same time, the fellowship with Him is taking care of the emotional problem of evil, he suffers with us and accompanies us in our pain – especially then He is near.
42 Craig, On Guard, 160.
The Problem with this approach is that although this might be probable, the question still exists to what sufficient reason could God possibly have for permitting a child being raped and killed – what greater good could come from it or what greater evil could have been prevented by it? It is hard to fathom why this massive amount of evil would be necessary. Why not at least a little less? This applies both, to a global (the holocaust) and a personal (atrocious personal loss) scale.

When compared to the four criteria, the second and third criteria are definitely fulfilled – with its premises, its goal is to empower us since God has a plan and is doing everything in his power to get us there. It is also intellectually coherent and logically sound. Craig even states, “it is now widely admitted that the logical problem of evil has been solved.” In part, even the first criterion is met since it affirms horrific evils, but it leaves room for doubt. But the last criterion is not met: the correlation between Sin and suffering, Satan’s role, and the wider arch of the great controversy are not (fully) acknowledged.

Suffering as the Consequence of our Decisions

Yet many completely reject the idea that God is in some way responsible for suffering. This is why more and more philosophers and theologians respond with “free

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43 Of course Craig would point to our human limitations in understanding and show that this argument again aims at the emotional level, not the logical. I am inclined to agree, but some horrific evils just seem to be over the top.


45 It leaves a bitter after taste – yet, I agree with Craig that this just might be the emotional scale of the problem, which needs to be addressed elsewhere.

46 Plantinga and Craig explain that God couldn’t have created a world containing moral good, without moral evil, because of our free will and the possibility of our rebellion. But it still means God is permitting evil because of a greater plan and not because of a consequence of Sin – thus “not fully acknowledged”. This is the reason I cannot fully concur with this approach anymore – the holistic concept of the Bible is not fully met.
will” – evil is in this world, because we have freedom of choice and some choose to
misuse this freedom. This approach is often expressed as “well, if you wouldn’t have
done…” For example, if a man smokes for years he might suffer from cancer, or if a
woman commits adultery she might suffer from a broken relationship.

Thus, a third approach is rooted in our free will – almost implying
consequentialism. Basically, this means there are consequences to my actions and the
consequences show if an act was evil or good. Suffering is thus the proof that our
freedom of choice can be misused, therefore even proving the existence of our free will in
the first place.\footnote{47 Because this reasoning often is considered circular reasoning, most of the time our free will is
just the premise and suffering is considered its natural consequence.}

In general suffering is considered a consequence of our decisions as free
agents\footnote{48 Lewis, The Problem of Pain, 16.}: One, either as a natural law\footnote{49 Daniel Howard-Snyder, “God, Evil, and Suffering,” in Reason for the Hope Within, ed. Michael
J. Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 227.} meaning there has to be a natural order with
predictable outcomes, otherwise it is not a free choice and – in the best scenario – only a
guess. So if we have a free will it means our actions will either have a good or bad
consequence. Or two, even as a form of punishment for my wrongdoing (especially death
as the final punishment).\footnote{50 Paul W. Kahn, Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil (Princeton, NJ: Princeton
University Press, 2010), 46.} This stretches the idea even further, as it is not just a natural
consequence, but rather an intentional intervention of God in order to make such
consequences visible – he said “don’t”, so don’t do it. Hick explains that theologians, like
Schleiermacher, went as far as stating that suffering and evil are the punishment for our
sinfulness as a race.\footnote{51 Hick, Evil and the God of Love, 227.} A more moderate view is often rooted in biblical texts like “God
hath said, ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Gen 3:3), or as
Crenshaw points out, the substitutional suffering of the servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 shows that suffering is borne either by us or by Jesus; but in both instances it is the result of a free choice. Because God upholds our free will we can choose to sin, but he also warns us that sin would have consequences (in form of punishment or natural consequences). As Richard Rice observes, this means that such a view relieves God from the responsibility “for the mistakes humans make, [and] the suffering that these mistakes lead to, because God is not the only one who contributes to the course of events.” In the most radical view it is our own fault if we suffer. In a moderate view our capacity for free-will is responsible for suffering and evil. Plantinga best summarizes this idea, stating:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.

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52 Crenshaw, Defending God, 141.
54 Rice, Suffering and the Search for Meaning, 45.
55 Alvin Plantinga and his free-will defense are not undisputed. Aleksandar Santrac for example is stressing that Plantinga is putting too much value on our freedom. While I agree that the point on its own is not sufficient, I believe Plantinga has a good case in showing the importance of our freedom, which often is overlooked as a decisive factor. For Santrac’s critique see Aleksandar S. Santrac, An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga’s Free Will Defense: Whether Our Power to Do Bad Is Something Good (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).
56 Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil, 30.
An adapted version of this concept is the “Openness of God theory”, as it is modified in that it rejects the absolute foreknowledge of God.\textsuperscript{57} 58 God is just as surprised as we are and is just as affected as we are.\textsuperscript{59} But in its core it still is just a free will defense.

The Problem with this approach, as Daniel Howard-Snyder correctly figures, is that it only accounts for some forms of suffering, but not for “undeserved suffering and horrific wickedness.”\textsuperscript{60} He also observes that it only accounts for human suffering, pointing out “if God regularly prevents nonhuman animals from harm when they collide with solid objects, nobody's freedom will be undermined.”\textsuperscript{61} The free-will defense only accounts for some human suffering, but not for the apparent suffering of all creation and the evil within it.

When comparing with the four criteria, only the second criterion is fully met – what can be more empowering than being endowed with free will and having full responsibility for it? The first criterion is only partially met, as horrific evil is recognized as what it is, but accounts only for some of it. The third criterion is also partially met, as it is intellectually coherent in some instances only – and one has to admit that in these

\textsuperscript{57} Rice, \textit{Suffering and the Search for Meaning}, 94.
\textsuperscript{58} I doubt it is necessary to reject God’s absolute foreknowledge in order to justify the existence of evil. Craig provides a very satisfying case to reconcile God’s foreknowledge and our freedom of choice – they both appear to be important and necessary aspects of God’s character. See William Lane Craig, \textit{The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom}, Reprinted. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).
\textsuperscript{59} God’s affectedness is a major aspect in this modified version, but it is not strictly limited to it. Actually almost every theodicy is emphasizing that God is deeply affected by our suffering – except some deterministic approaches.
\textsuperscript{60} Howard-Snyder, “God, Evil, and Suffering,” 224. According to him, this only could be considered if reincarnation is real, as then it could be the punishment or the consequence of previous lives. But evidently, this is biblically false.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 231.
instances it works out great, but in others it leaves you torn by contradiction. The fourth criterion is not met, because the lack of any acknowledgment of the great controversy, Satan’s role, and Sin’s role are not biblically coherent; at least not in its holistic sense.

Looking at the Big Picture: A Conflict on a Cosmic Scale

If you step out of your house and find a bomb on your land, the reasonable thing would be to suspect an enemy has done this. What if God is not to blame, but in the same manner, someone else other than God and ourselves? This is the core idea when people answer with “an enemy has done this” (Mt 13:28). It’s best exemplified by a phrase Rice quotes his professor saying “there’s a great war going on in the universe between good and evil, and I am one of the casualties of this conflict.”

Although some authors, like Plantinga, describe Satan as a potential explanation for some evil, the adversary of God usually is left out of the equation. In recent times a predominantly Adventist approach has been presented to look at the big picture. Mainly Adventists implement the theme of the great controversy into their argumentation regarding suffering and evil. In general, this is a significantly extended “free-will” approach. In other words, this approach additionally takes into account that God is not isolated in regard to this question and the “origin of evil is celestial and not earthly.”

Further it not only is celestial, but there is another side to this cosmic conflict: Satan and

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62 Rice, Suffering and the Search for Meaning, 76.
63 Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil, 58.
64 This has been a popular view in the early church, but lost its popularity and value through the centuries. Adventists rediscovered this biblical truth and are proclaiming it today. See Sigve Tonstad, “Theodicy and the Theme of Cosmic Conflict in the Early Church,” Andrews University Seminary Studies 42, no. 1 (2004): 169–202.
his fallen angels; thus pain “originated when the adversary became the adversary.”66 Ed Christian rightfully explains that we are caught up in this great controversy and this model “suggests that much suffering happens simply because of the nature of things in a war zone.”67

Two authors in particular place a lot of emphasis on this wider arch: Gregory Boyd and Ellen White. As Martha Duah states “both are convinced that any feasible explanation of the problem of evil must assume warfare between good and evil.”68 Boyd answers the question “is God to blame?” with a resounding “no”.69 He explains that God has enemies, Satan and his fallen angels, and the resulting conflict is the cause for suffering and evil. Thus the age-old question “why” disappears, when we understand the overreaching arch of the cosmic conflict (warfare worldview). We do not suffer because of God’s will, but because of God’s enemies. As Boyd observes, we are caught up in the crossfire of a cosmic war “by our own rebellion […] and we suffer accordingly.”70 God’s response is trying to relieve suffering and end evil, as Jesus’ life exemplified. Ellen White has the same basic concept and affirms that every evil and suffering is a direct result of a freely chosen rebellion and thus a cosmic conflict.71 But she also explores as to why God permitted the rebellion in the first place. White states, “this terrible experiment of rebellion was to be a perpetual safeguard to all holy intelligences, to prevent them from

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69 Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003). In previous books he established the concept called “Trinitarian warfare worldview”.
70 Ibid., 105.
being deceived as to the nature of transgression.” 72 Concluding Norman Gully poses an interesting question:

Every act of God must be consistent with His attribute of love. The cosmic controversy issue of God's justice before the universe allows time for God to reveal His justice and Satan to expose his injustice, the one an outworking of His nature as love and the other an outworking of his nature as loveless. Who would be more likely to cast created beings into an eternal hell – God or Satan? 73

The appeal of such an approach is that God is vindicated – “an enemy has done this” (Mt 13:28), not God. Further such an approach is including supernatural forces and other parties, as they are clearly described in the Bible. As Rice observes, “certain forms of suffering are of such duration, intensity or magnitude […] only a cause of […] near-cosmic proportions, it seems, could account for them.” 74 It asserts God as a refuge we can lean on – we have reason to completely trust in God, he doesn’t want to harm us. It also shows us why God has taken so long to get rid of evil – there is a war over the character of God and it has to be made clear who and how God really is. 75 This might be the only approach, which touches upon so many aspects at the same time. It reassures us how God is, where suffering comes from, and that it is going to come to a just end.

The stain of this approach is that it tends to be incomplete. In other words, this view is often used to blame everything solely on Satan or our warzone environment. 76 To

74 Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 87.
76 I believe that Ellen White has a very balanced understanding and doesn't suggest such a view. She is very particular about our own responsibility and Sin as the cause for even the rebellion of Satan. Yet, most are not following her balanced view, but take the chunks they like and dismiss parts they dislike or don’t understand. I will show in my third chapter as to why I think she is describing an approach which
reduce everything to the results of a cosmic war is too broad of an approach, as even prayer can be seen as an instrument of this war.\textsuperscript{77} This approach may be the closest to a sound theological explanation, but I would like to modify this view to show in which way Sin (not a person) ought to be the basis for a sound theodicy. To just blame a person or a war is not pervasive enough.

When compared to the four criteria, all of them seem to be met. It asserts our sense of reality and doesn’t ridicule them, it empowers us (since God is fighting for us, aiming to relieve us of suffering), and it is intellectually coherent. Yet, even though it would be reasonable to say it is biblically coherent, the focus still is too much on a person and intentional acts of war to be a sufficient answer.\textsuperscript{78}

**Evaluating the Different Approaches**

The Holy Scripture clearly states that the whole point of salvation is to deal with Sin (in its holistic meaning)\textsuperscript{79} – a thriving relationship with God only works without Sin and only works here, because of Christ’s intermediary work in the heavenly sanctuary and the work of the Holy Spirit here on earth. Suffering and evil were not intended for human kind from the beginning and only entered our reality after Sin did – so why then is Sin basically left out of any explanation of suffering? Of course all of them mention Sin, places Sin as the foundation of a theodicy and then eclectically builds upon that (she does that narratively not systematically).

\textsuperscript{77} Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 291. It begs to question if that would mean such “instruments” aren’t necessary after the end of the war?

\textsuperscript{78} Is my toothache a strategy of Satan? Is a gazelle, being violently killed by a leopard in Africa a strategy of war? To reduce such events just to “collateral” isn’t really doing this approach justice, since it blurs the line: where do you draw the line? What is still just collateral and what is the doing of Satan and his demonic realm?

\textsuperscript{79} This involves the two-phased judgment, which provides forgiveness by paying for sins and getting rid of Sin all together.
as it clearly is the beginning of suffering, but after stating this fact they move on to their core concepts, which neglect Sin.

The four categories for theodicies presented all failed to sufficiently satisfy the four criteria that were established in the beginning. And as we observed they usually do not fail intellectual coherence – with their premises they are logically sound within set boundaries. Yet, these premises mostly fail to be biblically sound and thus fail biblical coherence. Only the fourth approach seems to fulfil this criterion, but tends to misplace its emphasis.

These approaches tend to be grounded more in philosophical theology, as they root their results in philosophical reasoning and observation. They are not unbiblical, but tend to neglect holistic biblical concepts, acquired through diligent biblical study. The argument is not against the very useful instrument of logic, since this is God-given, but it also has to be balanced and checked by biblical revelations. Though these concepts are probable, it must be kept in mind that on a philosophical level this might be enough, but for a theological approach it is not – after all, dealing with a deeply theological issue, this needs to be addressed biblically. Biblical scholars have to heed that. The concerns I mentioned after each category are serious and have to be dealt with.

Furthermore, the biggest issue is the attempt to justify evil or give a purpose to suffering as a necessity, even if only in a few instances. For most theodical approaches, suffering and evil are to achieve a greater good, at least within the boundaries of this present world. Not all of them have an eschatological scope to it, thus giving a possible purpose to evil and suffering beyond this world.\(^80\) This is not biblically coherent and

\(^{80}\) Only the fourth category asserts that there is a bigger picture to consider and thus only gives evil a place, but not a purpose.
neglects several important aspects. Although the bible doesn’t systematically state why there is evil, giving a reason for it or justifying it, consequently means legitimizing it – in the next chapter I will show that this cannot be upheld biblically.

Despite their respective appeal, as a general answer these approaches are insufficient – they might be reasonable for certain instances under certain premises, but won’t suffice for broader applications. Many people get a lot of comfort from a particular mentioned view, but the implicated consequences of such views skew our understanding of God.\textsuperscript{81} That is why a sound biblical basis needs to be established, on which we can build.

\textsuperscript{81} Such will be discussed in the next chapter, as we examine biblical stories of suffering.
CHAPTER 3

SIN: THE BASIS FOR A NEW APPROACH

Most of the approaches we have examined lack biblical coherence. They usually neglect the correlation between Sin and suffering. Genesis 3 clearly states that suffering and evil only entered our reality after Sin did, just as Revelation 21 shows that as Sin leaves our reality (when it is finally destroyed in Rev 20), so do suffering and evil of any kind. Thus we realize the necessity of Sin to be the basis for any biblically coherent approach when we understand that suffering and evil only exist within these boundaries. This chapter will focus on this essential foundation. First we need to define what Sin actually is, then see how biblical narratives show its relation to suffering, and from there infer what a sound basis should look like.

What is Sin?

Asking the question “what is Sin?” usually prompts a short answer, like “it is the transgression of the law”. Although such a response might be partially correct, any kind of simplification does not do this question justice. The problem of Sin is of such immense complexity that solely the blood of the incarnated God himself could pay for it. Thus our response to any simplification are best fitted with the words of Anselm, Archbishop of
Canterbury: “You have not yet considered how grave sin is.”¹ And yes, we have to concur with him – how could any simple word, any simple phrase or any simple answer possibly suffice to describe the gravity of Sin? Commonly, the question what Sin is seems to be clear to most, but is it so? When one examines it, one gets the usual answers (which are completely correct aspects) like 1) missing the mark, 2) step over (transgress) 3), and refrain from doing good deeds (1 John 3:4; 5:17; Jam 4:17). Intriguingly, these definitions all deal with actions. The complexity of Sin becomes even more apparent, when we take a look at the different words used by the Bible to describe sin of any kind. Charles Ryrie explains “there are at least eight basic words for sin in the Old Testament and a dozen in the New.”² Let us take a brief account of the most significant.³

**Words for “Sin” in the Old Testament**

The primary word for sin in the Old Testament (OT) is נָפַל (naphal), which basically means to miss the mark – not passively missing the right mark (as in by accident), rather missing and hitting another mark. Thus sinning is not only to miss the right, but also to actively hit the wrong mark. In all of its morphologies this primary word for sin occurs about 520 times in the OT. It is predominantly used for moral evil, idolatry, and “religious disqualification” (Ex 20:20; Judg 20:16; Prov 8:36; and 19:2).⁴

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³ Most of the following biblical references are according to Ryrie, which I believe to be a good selection. The explanations for the terms are summarized from Gerhard J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Alten Testament, 11 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973); Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament, 10 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933).

The OT also uses several secondary words:

One of these secondary words is עון (awōn) and is used around 220 times in the OT, which includes the ideas of iniquity and guilt (Ps 51:7 – awōn refers to being born with “guilt”). It’s also used in the context of the Suffering Servant and the guilt that is laid upon him (Isa 53:6). In some instances it is connected with a rebellious sin (Num 15:30–31; 1 Sam 3:13).^5

Another important word is פשע (pāša-). It generally means to rebel, revolt or refuse to subject oneself to rightful authority, and it is used 134 times in different morphologies throughout the OT. Although the core idea of this word is “to rebel”, it is often translated as “transgression” (Gen 50:17; 1 Ki 12:19; Prov 28:21; Isa 1:2; Dan 8:12-13). It is a very conscious breach of the law and denotes probably the most severe breach.6

רעים (rāša-) is primarily the opposite of righteous; i.e., its measure is in contrast to the character of God (Ex 2:13; Ps 9:16; Prov 15:9; Ezek 18:23). In its more than 340 uses, it connotes wickedness, guilt, and ungodliness.7

Another word is אשם (˒āšam) and almost all of its 84 occurrences are contextually found in the rituals of the tabernacle and the temple in Leviticus, Numbers, and Ezekiel. Because “guilt before God is its principal idea, it designates the guilt and sin

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offerings and therefore includes both intentional and unintentional guilt (Lev 4:13; 5:2–3) – it primarily denotes guilt in a cultic sense.  

Another common word is רָעַׁע (rā˓a˓), which can be understood as the opposite of “good” and means ruin, destruction or evil. The approximate 440 uses connect the evil action and its result. It often describes calamities and thus may indicate something damaging, but nevertheless also something morally wrong (Gen 3:5, 38:7; Judg 11:27).

The last important connotations are conveyed through the words שָגַׁג (šāgag) and תָעָה (tā˓â). Primarily they both mean to err or to wander off (like sheep or a drunkard) and denote a movement. Yet they are often used in a theological sense – meaning to (deliberately) go astray from God. (Isa 28:7; Lev 4:2; Num 15:22; Ps 58:3; 119:21; Ezek 44:10).

For this exemplarily study Ryrie aptly concludes:

(1) Sin may take many forms, and because of the variety of words used, an Israelite could be aware of the particular form his sin took. (2) Sin is that which is contrary to a norm, and ultimately it is disobedience to God. (3) Although disobedience involved both positive and negative ideas, the emphasis is on the positive commission of wrong and not merely on the negative omission of good. Sin was not only missing the mark, but hitting the wrong mark.

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8 Ryrie, Basic Theology, 240.
13 Ryrie, Basic Theology, 240.
Words for “Sin” in the New Testament

The primary and most frequent word for sin in the New Testament (NT) is ἁμαρτία, which means to miss the mark, missed mark or failure – similar to its OT counterpart. It is used more than 300 times in its morphologies and most of the time this word is the object of forgiveness and necessitates salvation (Acts 2:38; Rom 5:12, 6:1; 2 Cor 5:21; James 1:15; Rev 1:5).14

Just like the OT the NT makes use of several secondary words to express the spectrum behind the concept of “sin”:

One of these secondary words is κακός, which generally means bad or misery and especially the adjective typically denotes moral badness (Matt 21:41; 24:48; Mark 7:21; Act 9:13; Rom 12:17; 13:3–4; 1 Tim 6:10).15

One frequently used word is ἁδικός. This word connotes the OT juxtaposition righteous – godless, as well as any unrighteous demeanor in the broader sense (Rom 1:18; 2 Thess 2:10).16

Another important word is πονηρός, which means evil or bad, but with the idea of corruption or waste. This term almost always connotes moral evil (Matt 7:11, 12:39; Acts 17:5; Rom 12:9; Heb 3:12). In some instances it is even used for Satan (Matt 13:19; 1 Joh 2:13–14) or fallen angels (Luke 11:26; Acts 19:12).17

παραβαίνω is another word that expresses a transgression or stepping over a line (Rom 4:15). Schneider points out that this word is seldomly used, because the NT rarely describes sin simply as trespassing a line, but rather “as a demonic force”\(^\text{18}\). This word describes conscious and willing transgression of God’s law.\(^\text{19}\)

Another word is παραρτωμα, which denotes falling, stumbling or a hindrance – while the core means falling away, most occurrences connote it as deliberate. (Rom 5:15–20; Matt 6:14; Gal 6:1; Eph 2:1).\(^\text{20}\)

Again, Ryrie correctly concludes:

(1) There is always a clear standard against which sin is committed. (2) Ultimately all sin is a positive rebellion against God and a transgression of His standards. (3) Evil may assume a variety of forms. (4) Man’s responsibility is definite and clearly understood.\(^\text{21}\)

**Summary**

Although these were just a selected few words, it already shows how sin touches upon many different areas – it comes in many different facets and faces. Yet, they all describe a voluntary and mostly a deliberate act.

As Berkouwer aptly observes, this “very multiplicity in expressions should caution us against a preference for any single term. For that kind of preference is bound to lead to a biased presentation and a failure to appreciate the richness of the biblical language.”\(^\text{22}\)Inferring from these multitude of possibilities, it then results in a definition

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\(^{19}\)Schneider, “Παραβαίνω.”


of sin as a “lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition, or state”\textsuperscript{23}, but I prefer Buswell’s conclusion, that “sin may be defined ultimately as anything in the creature which does not express, or which is contrary to, the holy character of the Creator.”\textsuperscript{24} Sin is not something passive, it cannot be, it is very much an “activity, a person’s cognitive and conative evil, as well as actions or inactions that express that evil.”\textsuperscript{25} But is that all? Nevertheless, all of these definitions and explanations refer to sin, as in sinful acts – but how do these acts have such a vast array of effects on the creation?

**Yet, it is Even More: Sin as a Principle**

While reading through the Bible one gets the unshakable impression that Sin is more than that, or at least has more to it than just being an action.\textsuperscript{26} Right after Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced the first changes: they were afraid and realized they were naked (Gen 3:7-10), a loving relationship turns into blame-shifting (v. 12-13), pain and hardship enter into their lives (v. 16-17), and even nature sprouts something new (“thistles and thorns” – v.18). How can one “action” change so much?\textsuperscript{27} It corrupted

\textsuperscript{23} Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 549.


\textsuperscript{26} This shows again that we have to be careful how we treat Sin (epistemologically speaking) – Heinrich Vogel even claims that the Bible doesn’t allow us to talk about Sin the same way we talk about other objects of our cognition, as it has a “peculiar correspondence to the mystery of God” (original: “seltsame Entsprechung zum Geheimnis Gottes”). See Heinrich Vogel, “Die Sünde Im Biblischen Verständnis,” *Evangelische Theologie* 19, no. 10 (October 1959): 439–452.

\textsuperscript{27} Some refer to Gen 5:29 and claim that these changes are not the result of “Sins power”, but of God’s curses – even if we claim that God willingly changed his creation (as a punishment), this only would relate to some of the changes mentioned. Yet it is debated if God actively curses his creation here or if he just states the “curse of Sin” – in the second case Gen 5:29 would be just a human perception, rather than divine revelation. Furthermore this dispute cannot deny that Sin changed at least something (v. 7).
human kind so deeply that God states “every inclination of the thoughts of their minds was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5) – we now have a “moral vitium”\(^{28}\). John Frame describes this effect as “Sin [attaching] itself to the heart, the very unity of human personality.”\(^ {29}\) Jesus also described Sin as something that enslaves us and submits even our will to the devil (John 8:44). Isaiah, Jesus, and John – describing God’s kingdom – underline how God first has to re-create his creation and make everything new, not just humans, because everything has been affected. Paul especially points to the devastating ramifications of Sin, describing how Sin changed human kind and degenerated it (Rom 7), that we are slaves to Sin (Rom 6:6), how all creation is longing for salvation, because it also has been affected by Sin (Rom 8:19-21) or that Sin is dwelling in human kind and corrupting it (Rom 7). Again, how can a “simple” action do all of that? As Matthew Croasmun points out “the noun ἁμαρτία is used as the subject of an active verb no fewer than 11 times in this brief passage [Rom 5-8].”\(^ {30}\) Paul is personifying Sin here – it is ascribed power to take captive, degenerate, and change, not only the first ones to sin, but also all of creation. Everything that was under the rightful rule of human beings, became subject to these changes.\(^ {31}\) In Romans 1:32 Paul argues that even though the wicked know that the reward for sin is death, they still continue sinning. Frame picks up on this thought and exemplifies it through Satan, who knew more about God than any other


\(^ {30}\) Matthew D. Croasmun, “The Body of Sin: An Emergent Account of Sin as a Cosmic Power in Romans 5-8” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2014), 5.

\(^ {31}\) Even Jesus, after becoming “flesh”, became susceptible to some of the suffering, inflicted by Sin – not his sin – upon this creation. By becoming human, he also became victim of the effects of Sin. This example already shows that some suffering is not due to any purpose, but simply because it is a natural consequence to Sin. Furthermore this is why Jesus, without sinning himself, can not only empathize, but also truly sympathize with us in our suffering.
created being and yet he wanted to replace God (Isa 14:13-14), thus he concludes “sin affects not only our behavior but our intellect as well.”\textsuperscript{32} Biblically, Sin is perceived as the origin of everything that stands in contrast to God’s “it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Berkouwer states in his discussion about the essence of Sin that “sin is no “mere deficiency” or pure “not-being” but is rather a \textit{cataclysmic and disruptive power}. […] Sin is not “material” but is \textit{parasitic} on creaturely reality.”\textsuperscript{33} With this statement Berkouwer refers to the remarks about Sin by Apostle John in his first letter.

At this point it is important to note and to clarify that I reject the notion of Sin as a cosmic power on its own (in any form) – the Bible plainly shows that there is now cosmic dualism of good and evil. Already the Church Fathers recognized that “sin (or evil) has no inherent "being” in itself because it was not created by God.”\textsuperscript{34} Origen, for example, argues the gift of free-will was granted, “so that the good which was in them might become their own through […] their own free-will. But sloth and weariness in the preservation of good supervened […] and so the withdrawal from good began.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus, for Origen, evil entered creation, because humans abused the gift of free will. Moreover, by describing evil as the “withdrawal from good,” Origen denies evil its own ontological value. Herman Bavinck phrases this dichotomy of seemingly having power, but not having an ontological value by saying “Sin is not but wants to be; it has no true reality and never attains any. It is a lie in its inception and a lie in its end.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{32} Frame, \textit{Salvation Belongs to the Lord}, 101.
\textsuperscript{33} Berkouwer, \textit{Sin}, 261. (Emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{34} Croasmun, “The Body of Sin,” 328.
\textsuperscript{35} With Origen other Church Fathers like Augustine, Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa, and many more held such a view.
\textsuperscript{37} Original: “De zonde is niet, zij wil zijn; zij heeft geen waarachtige realiteit en komt daar nooit
to show its power as a principle: by driving a wedge between the source of life (God) and his creation, and destroying this precious relationship, all of the mentioned effects manifest. Thus Sin would fundamentally be an absence of some kind. The underlying principle is the “creator-creation divide.”

This creator-creation divide generates suffering and degradation – by cutting the cord, we rob ourselves of God’s creative power that sustains everything: flowers wilt, we get sick and die, love dwindles and hate grows. But even worse, these effects are not causally triggered every time I (or someone else for that matter) sin, but the creator-creation divide generates suffering, evil, decay and misery as a natural state in this sinful world. Berkouwer points out that Jesus rejected a causality of sin and the sad lot of the Galileans (Luke 13:2-3), for example – yet Jesus doesn’t give a reason to this terrible incident, except the creator-creation divide affecting us in terrible ways.

Wayne Grudem explains that it would be blasphemous to blame God for Sin (referring to Deut 32:4; Gen 18:25; Job 34:10; Jame 1:13). By examining the biblical account we rightfully conclude that Sin and consequently the creator-creation divide was neither created, nor intended by God; it “is a surd, it ought not to be” then where did it come from? So in addition to unde malum, we have to ask unde peccatum – whence

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38 I first encountered this expression in Graham Redding, Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ: In the Reformed Tradition (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), 74. I will use this expression synonymous to “Sin as a principle” from here on. For me, this expression encompasses much more than just a description of a state of being. It expresses most aptly what Sin becomes after sin (an action) brought it into our reality, with all of its consequences and effects.

39 This stresses that Sin is not an agent operating or effecting on itself. As footnote 45 shows, it always needs an effective cause – it needs a voluntary contact with it.

40 Berkouwer, Sin, 22.

41 Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 492.

42 George R. Sumner, “‘You Have Not Yet Considered the Gravity of Sin’: A Key Retrieval for Our Time,” Pro Ecclesia 25, no. 3 (2016): 262.
cometh Sin? In the case of our world we can trace Sin back to the Garden of Eden, and we have to answer with “because of human kind’s rebellion”. But the Bible allows us even to trace Sin back to its origin on a cosmic scale. Ezekial 28 and Isaiah 14 allow us a peak behind the cosmic curtain and tell us that Lucifer was the first one to misuse his gift of free will. But how Sin started in him cannot be answered. We cannot go any further than that. 43 Ellen White states that it is an “intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin.” 44 Thus the brief answer is: it is a mystery why and how Sin started in Lucifer, but it is an inherit possibility of free-will. 45 Therefore, to give a reason for Sin would be illegal and irrational. 46 Berkouwer clarifies that this is much more than just an “epistemological hiatus” we could overcome some day, it is an actual limit to our understanding. I concur with Berkouwer, that “we are of the opinion that an explanation for sin is truly impossible. […] For the riddle of sin is […] completely sui generis.”48

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43 It is indeed perplexing how a perfectly created being, which had everything one can imagine, closest to God, could decide to rebel against his creator. One of the greatest mysteries, we will still be studying in heaven.
44 White, The Great Controversy, 493.
45 Duah explains that Ellen White does give a cause to Sin in the universe: Lucifer. See Duah, “A Study of Warfare Theodicy.” 216. Yet we have to be careful what she means by “cause”. There are actually several different conceptions of “cause” – Aristotle for example names four. Bertrand Russel illustrates these four in Bertrand A. Russel, History of Western Philosophy, and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946), 169. Aristotle comes down to four different types of “cause”: material, formal, efficient, and final cause. Russell exemplifies these with a marble statue. The material cause of course would be the marble itself – the statue originated from marble. The formal cause would be the pattern or form of the statue; that which makes the statue a statue and not a chair – the statue originated from the pattern of a statue. The efficient cause would be the source of change; the contact with the chisel for example – the statue originated from the contact with something that changed it into what it is. The final cause would be the vision the sculptor has in mind, a purpose – the statue originated in the vision of a sculptor. Ellen White has only the efficient cause in mind. Sin entered the (rest of the) universe because of contact with Satan. She makes it abundantly clear that there never can be a material, formal or final cause for Sin.
46 Berkouwer, Sin, 17.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 26.
Concluding, we see when God created human beings in the beginning, they were perfect – stainless, without Sin. All creation was perfect – that was what God actually intended for his creation, “it was very good.” But when humans chose to sin, by disobeying God, they let sin into their lives and Sin changed everything. It enslaved human beings and degenerated creation, it even seemed to have changed natural laws.\(^\text{49}\) We see, therefore, that the creator-creation divide has far-reaching ramifications and is the primary cause of everything contrary to God’s “it was very good”. Thus, Sin is not just an action, but both: actions and also an effect. This also shows “there are “unspeakable” depths in sin as there are also “unspeakable” depths in God (Rom 8:39; Rev 2:24; 1 Cor 2:9; Rom 11:33).”\(^\text{50}\) Sin is so much more than just a “simple” action – to reduce it to such is illegitimate. The creator-creation divide has corruptive power, but is not one.

**Suffering in the Bible**

After establishing what Sin is, we have to take a closer look at the correlation between Sin and suffering. Genesis 3 shows the first correlation between Sin and suffering – but what about afterwards? Since the Bible is not a systematical corpus but primarily consist of narratives, we have to ask which narratives exemplify the correlation of Sin and suffering and in which ways do they do so. Three narratives are selected, which I believe are the most significant in regards to this question. First I will briefly examine the key aspects of Job’s story, since he is the example par excellence when it

\(^{49}\) How else could it be that animals kill each other to survive, while this was not necessary before Sin? This is also underlined by the fact that as soon as Sin is disposed of, animals coexist in peace again. Animals did not sin in the beginning, yet they and the natural laws concerning them are changed by Sin, as well. This kind of evil and disasters are often referred to as “natural evil” – this separation is artificial, all creation suffers under Sin and we have to acknowledge all of that suffering and evil.

\(^{50}\) Berkouwer, *Sin*, 283.
comes to undeserved suffering. Then I will take a closer look at the story of Joseph, who experienced the unspeakable. Finally, I will study the encounter between Jesus and the man born blind, since here the causality question is verbally raised.

Job: The Immovable Rock

Job has always been the example par excellence, because he had to deal with the most unjust suffering one can imagine and as a result, he even became the center of many proverbs regarding suffering. Job, a wealthy and influential man, who has everything one can desire, loses everything he has. From the very beginning Job is introduced as a righteous and faithful man – it is “established beyond all doubt that Job is innocent.”51 The book opens with the theme of righteousness and innocence in order to oppose it to injustice.52 As we get to know Job we learn that he first loses all of his possessions and servants, and then even all of his children. As if this wasn’t even already enough, while he is mourning, he loses his health and all of his earthly relationships – it truly is a tragic story of unjust loss; loss of everything. The first two chapters are the most significant for this study.

During that time it is made abundantly clear that God is on Job’s side – yet, Satan tries to prove God wrong. Subtly Satan accuses God, and “in order to win his case, he involves Job in his acute argument against God, and his evil devices go to the very root of his dispute with Him.”53 Usually theologians have the spotlight only on God and equate

52 I won’t argue here about Job’s general sinfulness – it is clearly stated by Paul that we all are sinners, Job included. Righteousness and innocence refer here to what is about to come – it isn’t asserting his past, but his present state. This state was also only established because of his relationship with God and His transforming grace.
his actions with the cause of Job’s suffering.\textsuperscript{54} Some, like Clines, insist that Satan is not necessarily an antagonist in the usual sense and that God is testing Job – through Satan as an agent ("royal spy")\textsuperscript{55} in order to assess Job’s piety.\textsuperscript{56} Others directly give suffering this place, according to the book of Job.\textsuperscript{57} But as Walton points out, the "narrator concludes that Job does not attribute wrongdoing to God."\textsuperscript{58} God cannot be held accountable for the calamity that is coming over Job – he is not using any agents. Then who is testing Job? The answer is Satan, who "hoped [to] break his will."\textsuperscript{59} Although many theologians assert this to be a "wager/bet"\textsuperscript{60} or a "challenge,"\textsuperscript{61} this claim is weak. God is not entering into a wager or challenge, he is only asking questions – the only one acting is Satan. This scene doesn’t show that God is betting against Satan, with us as collateral. It only shows that God still is the sovereign whom Satan can’t overrule. Hartley observes that Satan is asking God to "stretch out his hand" – yet God refuses to do so.\textsuperscript{62} Here we get to the heart of the cosmic conflict. Most biblical scholars miss this important theme here. Satan does what he always does: accuse God and those who are serving him faithfully.

\textsuperscript{54} God even is often portrayed as apparently unjust here. This is best seen in C. L. Seow, \textit{Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary}, Illuminations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 101–108.
\textsuperscript{57} Larry J. Waters, "Elihus’s View of Suffering in Job 32-37" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998).
\textsuperscript{58} John H. Walton, \textit{Job}, The NIV Application Commentary 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 71.
\textsuperscript{60} Longman, \textit{Job}, 84.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 73.
In the book of Job we have the veil pulled aside and the theme of the great controversy revealed – of course just for the reader, for Job it remains “full of mystery.”

We see that Satan is causing the evil surrounding Job, not God, and this is clearly stated (Job 1-2). Sin even twists our reality and causes righteous to suffer and unrighteous to prosper – God’s justice is at stake. Job himself does not know anything about the actions behind the scenes. As Daniel Bediako explains, this shows a conflict between Satan and God, which must have originated before Job was brought into the picture – this narrative rather allows a closer look on how this cosmic conflict “transfers […] from heaven to earth” – i.e. how the cosmic conflict affects our creation. Bediako also aptly concludes that Job’s suffering has to be understood against the background of the great controversy – he might suffer because “of the result of the struggle between good and evil.”

Satan is involving Job as a piece in his attack against God (not the other way around). We might ask “is God justified in permitting such evil”, but Satan asks a different question: “Is God just when He is justifying us?” The book of Job is revolving around the great controversy, which itself is revolving around this question – in essence the question of God’s character. A close study of the text reveals “it is [clearly] Satan – not God – that strikes Job.”

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67 Ibid., 17 note 10.
book of Job reveals Satan as “the prime mover behind sin, evil, and suffering”\(^{70}\) – although God permits it. We have to keep in mind the right order: God permitting it doesn’t give Satan (or Sin for that matter) power, but limits it. Because we are sinners we are in the realm of Satan and he rightfully can “stretch out his hand” – it is an act of grace that God limits these, not an act of divine evil.

But although Satan is accounted as the cause of Jobs suffering, we should keep in mind that he is using Sin in this world to cause pain, and he himself is affected by Sin (or he wouldn’t act accordingly). If there were no Sin in this world, Satan wouldn’t have these possibilities.\(^{71}\) Despite Georg Fohrer concluding that God caused Job’s suffering for a higher purpose, he correctly observes that this suffering “strikes him, because God is right”\(^{72}\) – God is right in claiming that Job’s faithfulness is not dependent on his circumstances – even if Satan would remove the blessings of God and let the effects of Sin reign more freely in Job’s life, he would still be faithful. Satan claims the opposite and thus causes his suffering. But the conclusion is that “God and good people do not do things ‘for nothing’; Satan does.”\(^{73}\) Satan was proven wrong and God right.

Without Sin there would not be catastrophes, slaughter or illness, and Satan could not have affected Job with any of that. Satan’s ultimate goal is to separate us from God, by these means.\(^{74}\) Thus we can see that ultimately the creator-creation divide, Sin as a principle, is the cause of suffering. All the suffering and pain Job experienced was


\(^{71}\) A quick look at creations state before the fall reveals that Satan’s powers were even more limited – he first had to persuade Adam and Eve into sinning, before he could affect them with suffering and death (Kain killing Abel).


\(^{73}\) Alden, *Job*, 64.

pointless.⁷⁵ There is even a “divine admission about the futility of Job's suffering.”⁷⁶ It did not do any good for Job himself – but God was with Job all along and strengthened him; the evil could not move Job away from God. Job left stronger and more confident in God, not because of the suffering, but because of God’s hand in his life during his suffering. Thus we may conclude that the Job narrative shows clearly that there is a correlation between Sin and suffering. It was not God’s plan for Job to experience such suffering and be tested – the creator-creation divide caused his suffering and the testing by Satan. This narrative also shows that God works with us in our suffering, not through it. Some terrible things just happen, because they happen, but by His grace and power he can accomplish great things if we fully trust him; despite the evil, not with it.

Joseph: Trustingly Bearing the Unspeakable

Joseph truly experienced something unspeakable: his own brothers where jealous of him and intended to kill him – they already prepared everything, but instead sold him into slavery. Joseph then ended up in a foreign country and had to work, enduring hardship every day. Finally he was unjustly thrown into jail for a crime he did not commit and was treated as a criminal – all of this completely undeserved⁷⁷ and at a very

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⁷⁵ God even states himself that it was for naught (2:3) – Although Hartley tries to argue that the accusations by Satan were futile (without reasonable grounds), it is more likely that it refers to Job’s suffering, which is without cause, pointless, unnecessary. For this discussion see Hartley, The Book of Job, 80; Longman, Job, 88.


⁷⁷ Some argue that his proud demeanor and his arrogance led to his brother’s betrayal. This is just an assumption so far, which is based on him telling his dreams. It might even be that he (knowingly or unknowingly) provoked his brothers – but we have only weak support for that claim in the Bible. We want his brother’s to have a reason to act as they did, since we also experience jealousy. We should be careful what presuppositions we read into a story. As far as we know, Joseph did nothing to provoke this reaction – and this is my biblical basis for the analysis of this story. Ellen White only explains that God taught him a lot about his character during his hardship, which he wouldn’t have learned elsewhere.
young age. When he finally reveals himself to his brothers (that he still is alive), they are afraid of retribution. After his father’s death, his brothers approach him with this fear, because they still felt the guilt of their horrible actions and are aware of their evil – his answer is intriguing and I believe it shows a lot about the correlation between Sin and suffering.

Here we have an example of a person talking about the personal experience of suffering to those who seemingly caused his suffering. In Genesis 50:20 he states that “as for you, ye devised against me evil - God devised it for good, in order to do as [at] this day, to keep alive a numerous people” (Young’s Literal Translation). Jürgen Ebach refers to the typical interpretation, according to which this shows that God is pulling the strings – but as he opposes Gerhard von Rad he poses the questions “is God the big ‘puppeteer’ […]? Can a marionette become guilty?” This is an apparent problem: How can God ask responsibility from the brothers, when he was pulling the strings? As Ebach expresses it, Joseph doesn’t state that the wrongdoing of his brothers led to this outcome, but God’s “turning the minus-sign into a positive-sign in this ’calculation’ […], in order to keep alive a people.” The order of things is vital: God didn’t orchestrate Joseph’s suffering for a higher purpose – what his brothers did was terrible and unspeakable, but as Nahum Sarna states “God may use man’s evil purposes […] for ultimate good.”

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81 Ibid., 662. (Original: ‘Die Rechnung der Brüder wird […] mit einem anderen Vorzeichen versehen […] es war darum zu tun ,ein großen Volk zum Leben zu bringen‘.”)
with the broken pieces human beings present. The biblically presented order is: Terrible evil happened and then God worked with the situation to accomplish something marvelous. The underlying theology of Joseph is that evil always succumbs to God’s plans, not that evil is part of it.\textsuperscript{83} Although Victor Hamilton seems to equate the suffering with a “means of the salvation of Jacob’s family”\textsuperscript{84} – he rightfully points to the parallel with Jesus: He also had to suffer betrayal (Judas), which God turned into salvation.

Indeed, Joseph’s dream came to be true, as an “echo of the opening scene of [his] narrative.”\textsuperscript{85} But here we have to be careful. God, prophetically showing what was going to happen, didn’t include the path to that moment. How dare we just assume that God wanted Joseph to be sold into slavery? Couldn’t he have had another path in mind? And even if his foreknowledge included this path (as in the story of Jesus), as Craig shows, God knowing what is going to happen doesn’t cause it to happen or even prove that He wanted it to happen.\textsuperscript{86} This narrative doesn’t show that God’s plans involve suffering; it rather shows that God’s plans are unstoppable, despite the evil.\textsuperscript{87} Joseph does not state “you intended to harm me, but God actually planned this, because he wanted me in this position.” God does not need any evil to accomplish his goals. His plans apparently included Joseph being in Egypt, yet he could have gotten him there without the evil doing of anyone. So even the terribly evil actions of his brothers couldn’t deter God’s plan.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{85} Sarna, \textit{Genesis}, 350.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Craig, \textit{The Only Wise God}, 52–53. Here he shows how arguing that God’s foreknowledge means we do not have free-will, since God basically causes everything he predicts, is a logical fallacy. In the subsequent chapters he shows how his foreknowledge and our free will are still compatible and he isn’t causing our actions by knowing them – we just can’t say that without proof, and we have no biblical proof in this case.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Genesis}, A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching 1 (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 376.
\end{itemize}
Joseph understood that clearly. He knew his God good enough to know that God would not cause his brothers to sell him or Potiphar’s wife to try to seduce him, just so He could get Joseph somewhere. Joseph saw that these terrible things happened because of Sin and acknowledged them as “evil”. God does not want us to suffer. By pointing to the source of everything good that came to be, Joseph states that God is mightier than Sin and always can make something great out of a bad situation, “he can handle every situation [and] bring good out of human hate, greed, and jealousy”88 – Joseph points to God’s plans as the source of good, not the source of his suffering. Sin and the corruption of human hearts through Sin caused Josephs suffering, but God is bigger than that. As John Walton explains, this truth shows the true character of God: not the source of evil, but characteristics like “his sovereignty, his love, his mercy, his justice, his faithfulness, and his goodness – […] obstacles will melt away.”89

Thus we may conclude that the Joseph narrative shows clearly that there is a correlation between Sin and suffering. It was not God’s plan for Joseph to bear the unspeakable – the creator-creation divide caused his suffering and the evil of his brothers. This narrative also shows that God works with us in our suffering, not through it. Some terrible things just happen, because they happen, but by His grace and power he can accomplish great things if we fully trust him; despite the evil, not with it.

89 John H. Walton, Genesis, The NIV Application Commentary 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 723.
A Blind Man: For the Sake of the Cause (?)

It is a horrible thing to live your whole life without seeing anything. Most of us cannot even imagine what that might be like. In the Gospel of John, we read a narrative in which the disciples of Jesus encounter a man born blind. Since it was a common train of thought to assign the cause of suffering to sin,\(^90\) they asked Jesus what he or his parents did to cause the blindness – linking suffering causally with personal sin, either by him or his parents, since he was born\(^91\) blind. Contrary to what his disciples expected, Jesus clarifies that no one caused it (John 9:1-3). Jesus rejects any causality between sin and suffering, at least in this particular case.\(^92\) Jesus’ answer is short and direct: “Neither did this one sin nor his parents, but that the works of God may be manifested in him […]” (v.3). Jesus words are crucial: This man’s suffering was not the result of someone’s actions. Yet, his words can be perplexing at the same time – was he made blind for the sake of the cause?

It is widely acknowledged that Jesus rejects the causal link between sin and his blindness.\(^93\) The perplexing and challenging part is the second clause. While most conclude that this clearly shows that “even evil ultimately contributes to the glory of


\(^{91}\) James McGrath shows that some argue that this difference proves this narrative has no synoptic parallel, but is indeed unique, opposed to some who believe it to be a parallel. See James F. McGrath, *John’s Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 184.

\(^{92}\) Köstenberger, *John*, 281. Here Köstenberger explains that biblically it can be held that in some instances sin can cause suffering (referring to John 5:14; Ps 89:32) – but a generalization is not legitimate.

God”\(^{94}\), others are more reluctant to accept such a view. As Gary Burge states that “while a sound theology cannot doubt God’s sovereignty to do as he pleases, thoughtful Christians may see this as a cruel fate in which God inflicts pain on people simply to glorify himself.”\(^{95}\) Such a view, biblically speaking, is very shaky. How else can we understand this passage then? Some suggest that it is at least grammatically possible to understand it as an imperative.\(^{96}\) Others suggest understanding the second clause, introduced by the “\(\text{ἵνα}\)”, as a result, rather than a purpose. If it is understood as such, the blindness “offered an occasion for the power of God to be revealed.”\(^{97}\) Probably the most convincing and biblically coherent view is that the second part is to be understood as a “purpose clause […] which should be applied to 9:4 […] which explains that Jesus must work so that [God is glorified].”\(^{98}\) This becomes even more evident through John Poirier’s article, where he claims that a shift of the punctuation changes the meaning towards a more intelligible and biblically coherent one.\(^{99}\) The Greek New Testament, according to NA\(^{26}\) has the punctuation as the following:

3 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· οὕτως ἐμαρτέν οὕτος οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ Ἰνα φανερωθῇ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ. 4 ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με ἑως ημέρα

\(^{94}\) Köstenberger, *John*, 281.


\(^{99}\) We have several biblical instances where it is apparent that the punctuation already is an interpretation. One of such crucial texts would be Luke 23:43. The punctuation, as it is, lets the text being read as “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” But with a shifted punctuation it would read “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.” This different reading greatly impacts the theology regarding the dead and whether we rest in death (as Prov 9 suggests) or whether we go directly to heaven or hell. The difference is where the ‘today’ belongs – does Jesus say it ‘today’ (as opposed to: at the judgment day) or will the man be in paradise ‘today’. 

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But by shifting the punctuation, i.e. the full stop at the end of v.3, towards the middle of v.3 we would get the following meaning:

3 Jesus answered, ‘it was not that this man or his parents sinned. [3b-4] But in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him, we must work the works of Him who sent me while it is yet day; night comes in which no one can work. [5] While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’

This reading fits much better with John’s theology and would be intelligible, even under ancient presuppositions. As Poirier points out, one of the three things this new punctuation does, is that “it relieves the text of a bizarre theodicy.”

It is not just reasonable to follow this interpretation, but even more coherent with the theological theme in John (and the Bible in general for that matter).

100 NA²⁷ and NA²⁸ also have this punctuation. See John 9:3-4 in Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., Novum Testamentum Graece, 27. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001).


103 Poirier, “Punctuation,” 294. The other two being that it lets Jesus make an apodictic statement in anticipation of what the Pharisees would claim and it leads the theme of work into better coherence with the theme of light.

104 Admittedly a weakness of this reading is that we have to leave the first clause as an open clause. It is uncommon to start a negative clause without showing the necessary opposition with a second. But it is not uncommon for John to start sentences with “ἀλλά” (for a few instances see 4:23; 6:9; 6:36; 6:64; 11:15; 11:22; 15:21; 15:25; 16:2; 16:4). It is worth mentioning that no opposition to this reading has utilized this weakness so far – usually the parallelism to 11:4 is used as an argument (see note 105).


106 The main reason, usually given, not to adopt such a view is the seeming parallelism to one verse: John 11:4 where Jesus refers to Lazarus’s sickness and states, “this sickness is not for death. No, it is for God’s glory.” Yet, we have to bear in mind that there is a vast difference of someone suffering for years, being an outcast, viewed as a sinner, and dying in order to be resurrected by Christ. In the case of Lazarus we also have to establish that God didn’t make him sick for the sake of the cause – he got sick because of Sin. Because of His grace God decided to use these broken pieces also to make something glorious. Thus this parallelism does not really constitute a case against the different reading of 9:3.
Jesus doesn’t really go into the discussion of causality and thus forgoes it. He rather shifts the focus from “blame to grace in the face of human need.” God didn’t make this man blind – rather, he “sent Jesus to do works of healing in order to show his glory.” This would mean that Jesus is referring to his healing and not to his suffering when stating it was to glorify God. Where would that leave us? Jesus’s assertion shows that he is moved by the fate of this man and shocked by the presupposition of his disciples. Because Sin made us susceptible for such sicknesses and deformities, the man was born blind – this was a terrible fate in biblical times: An outcast, always dependent on help, and always questioned regarding cultic purity. But Jesus can glorify God by removing these effects of Sin and show a glimpse of the world to be, in which no such effects of the creator-creation divide are existent.

We need to be clear about the following: God didn’t create this evil. He permitted the suffering (caused by Sin, which made us susceptible for sicknesses such as blindness), because we are under the reign of Sin in this world. But God can work with broken pieces and healed him. The order here is of vital importance. He was not made blind for the sake of the cause. It happened that a man was born blind – his suffering was also pointless, but God decided to make something great out of it and use the given

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109 We have at least three alternatives which do not involve God intentionally making a man blind, in order to glorify him by healing him again – this idea sounds very contradictory to begin with. Thus we have reasonable doubt to read this text in a way that burdens God further instead of redeeming him of such an accusation. Ellen White is supporting this alternative reading, when saying “while Jesus corrected their error, He did not explain the cause of the man’s affliction, but told them what would be the result. Because of it the works of God would be made manifest.” See Ellen Gould Harmon White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 471.
situation for His glory. Furthermore God strengthened the faith of this man through Jesus, as the following verses show – he now saw the “light”.

Thus we may conclude that the narrative of the man born blind shows clearly that there is a correlation between Sin and suffering. It was not God’s plan for this man to be blind – the creator-creation divide caused his suffering and the mean demeanor of his fellows towards him. This narrative also shows that God works with us in our suffering, not through it. Some terrible things just happen, because they happen, but by His grace and power God can accomplish great things if we fully trust him; despite the evil, not with it.

**Forming a New Approach**

At this point one could ask the provocative question: “so what?” The analysis of these narratives shows us four important principles regarding the leading question:

1. Suffering is always fundamentally and directly linked to Sin (the creator-creation divide) as its causation.
2. There is primarily no higher cause for suffering – suffering is pointless.
3. God is mightier than Sin and its consequences.
4. There is always a higher cause for how God acts in our suffering.

These four biblical principles have to be seen as the basis for a sound theodicy. In order to properly understand this basis, we will explore these principles briefly.

1. Principle: *Sin* is the Cause for Suffering

   Genesis 3 clearly states that suffering and evil only entered our reality after Sin did, just as Revelation 21 shows that, as Sin leaves our reality (when God finally gets rid of it in Rev 20), so do suffering and evil of any kind. Thus any explanation for suffering
and evil has to be rooted in Sin – it cannot be anything else.\textsuperscript{110} To degrade the cause for suffering to God’s choice of educational instruments, his greater plan, or as a punishment undermines the atrocity of Sin.\textsuperscript{111} The Scripture does not paint a picture of suffering that justifies it in any way, nor does it “allow a causal or a simplistic explanation for the calamities of others,”\textsuperscript{112} – on the contrary. How little would God be, if he had to create suffering to get our attention?\textsuperscript{113} Does the Bible really teach that we find the source for evil in God? How could it? As we have seen in our analysis of Sin – as well as the exemplary narratives – suffering and evil never come from God, but are caused by the creator-creation divide, i.e. \textit{Sin}. In addition to this “natural state,” Satan utilizes this division in his warfare against God and plagues us with suffering and evil. Thus the Bible clearly teaches that God is not to blame for any suffering or evil – the creator-creation divide is. Suffering is always fundamentally and directly linked to \textit{Sin} (the creator-creation divide) as its causation.

\textsuperscript{110} I admit that the discussion is more complex, because one could charge me with just shifting the problem onto another plane. Consequently one could ask with Hick “why has an omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good and loving Creator permitted sin in His universe?” - Hick, \textit{Evil and the God of Love}, 265. Although the answer to this might sound simplistic, I don’t believe it is a simple shift in reasoning, but rather a biblical reassertion of the key aspects in their appropriate places. The brief answer to Hick’s question is found in our free-will. God let humanity choose and as humanity chose to sin, \textit{Sin} entered this world and enslaved us. Jesus explained in the parable of the weeds (Matt 13:24-30) that Sin has to become visible as to what it really is first, but on judgment day Sin will be rooted out.

\textsuperscript{111} We often look at the warnings of God and ask, “what is so bad about it,” because we do not realize how terrible Sin is. The creator-creation divide fooled us into believing being separated from God is not that bad – what a terrible delusion. By acknowledging what Sin truly is and what its consequences are, we acknowledge how horrid the creator-creation divide is and why God despises it that much.

\textsuperscript{112} Berkouwer, \textit{Sin}, 22.

\textsuperscript{113} C.S. Lewis is right in asserting that we mostly turn to God in our darkness. But to conclude that God thus creates suffering to get our attention is overhasty (even if we just call it “permitting evil”). What the Bible attests to is that God withdraws his grace and thus we feel more of our natural state (the creator-creation divide) – some respond, and rightfully so, by realizing that we need God others respond by denying God. But God does not ‘use’ or ‘create’ suffering for that purpose.
2. Principle: Suffering is Pointless

As we understand Sin to be meaningless, unjustifiable, irrational, and fundamentally without purpose, we must conclude that suffering and evil are as well—since they originate in Sin. They are also pointless, irrational, and fundamentally without purpose. Berkouwer aptly summarizes we often “try to find some sense in the senseless, some reason in the irrational, and some legitimacy in the illegitimacy of sin.” Why are we trying to do the same with suffering and evil? If there would be a purpose or meaning in suffering, it would legitimize and justify Sin. Consequently, the only logical conclusion is that suffering and evil have to be primarily pointless. How small would God be if he had to resort to evil to educate us? Does the Bible really teach that spiritual growth comes from something un-spiritual? How could it? The narratives show us: the suffering of Job, Joseph, and the man born blind did not add to their lives; it robbed them of so much. There is primarily no higher cause for suffering—suffering is pointless.

3. Principle: God is Mightier than Sin

Furthermore, apart from vindicating God, the Bible clearly shows that God is mightier and greater than Sin—he does everything to bridge that gap. This means the Bible shows that God can work with us and reach us despite the consequences of Sin. His

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114 Berkouwer, Sin, 26.

115 This encompasses all suffering—if Sin is pointless and suffering is its consequence, then all suffering has to be pointless, too. This includes the suffering of Jesus. Isaiah 53 only states that the “suffering servant” will suffer, not that he has to. God didn’t use Jesus’ suffering as an instrument of our salvation, but his sacrifice (just as every OT sacrifice was not meant to suffer). The suffering of Jesus did not add to the value of his sacrifice—he mostly suffered because of the wickedness of human kind. Although Hebrews 2:10 seems to suggest that his suffering was instrumental in some way, we have to keep the context in mind: Verse 9 states that “he suffered death”—thus the suffering of death, i.e. his sacrifice is meant. Revelation 5 is joining in that theme by declaring that Jesus is worthy to rule because of his sacrifice, not because of his earthly sufferings. This means we are right in concluding that all suffering is pointless indeed.
sacrifice proved that he is mightier than Sin – God paid for it, thus his grace and blessings negate some of the consequences here on earth already, and at the eschaton He’s getting rid of Sin and its consequences all together.

But this principle also explains that God has other means to achieve his goals (whether it’s his divine plans or our growth): Challenges. We often confuse suffering with a divine challenge\textsuperscript{116}, but there is a difference between suffering and challenges; they are not the same! God challenges us; so we can grow in a sinful environment, but he does not want us to suffer – never! So he does not cause suffering in our lives. Of course a challenge can turn into suffering if we turn away from God, but a challenge is not intrinsically linked to suffering. In Genesis God already challenged Adam and Eve to grow in their relationship with him, by giving them a choice with the two trees. This challenge was never meant to be painful, unless they turned away from God.\textsuperscript{117} God’s plan for us involved growth long before Sin entered our reality. He wanted to educate us in a paradisiac environment, without Sin. Thus, educating us and letting us grow through his divine challenges does not involve suffering; not even in this sinful environment. God is mightier than Sin and its consequences.

\textsuperscript{116} It seems most people mean more or less the same with “trials” as this paper is laying out with “divine challenge.” But since “trial” is often closer associated with suffering and already branded with certain concepts, I intentionally use the term “challenge” to distance it from any association with suffering. Ellen White also seems to understand it that way, as she is very cautious when talking about trials – she never equates suffering with a trial, but rather says that God chose to use suffering (as a result, not a purpose) and challenge us in our suffering, not with it.

\textsuperscript{117} Caution: This again does not result in a bi-directional principle, meaning that if I suffer it proves that I turned away from God. This would be a logical fallacy. It is a mono-directional principle, which only shows that if I turn away from God in his challenge, it might turn into suffering – and not even then does it necessarily have to.
4. Principle: God Works with our Broken Pieces

Suffering is part of our reality, part of our world, because of Sin – not because of a greater plan or something similar. Thus, in general, suffering and evil is the natural state, just as Sin is. Only this suffices as a general answer.

We often ask “why me” (or, to put it less self-centered: why this evil?) and imply that God was not justified to permit that evil or has some obligation to intervene – but this question is wrong, to begin with. Since our natural state is the creator-creation divide, e.g. suffering, it would be just for God not to intervene, since this suffering is the result of Sin (and we evidently all are sinners). James Keller recognized that, by saying “that even theists should not claim that God has actually worked miracles, lest they imply that God is unjust.”\(^\text{118}\) 119 The question should not be “is God justified to permit this evil”, but rather “is God justified to intervene”. As sinners, we are in a state of rebellion and experience the natural consequences of Sin, so for God to permit evil is the only logical reasoning. In other words, the question shouldn’t be “why does God not intervene”, but rather “why does God intervene at this moment?” The answer is always because he is justified to intervene and “for his glory”. God wants to intervene and he is able, but prior to the eschaton he is limited by our free-will and the great controversy behind the scenes. God’s intervention is always an act of grace and mercy, never an obligation – it is his blessings that we do not deserve, not the suffering.


\(^\text{119}\) Keller concludes that every miracle would prove God as unjust – although his observation at this point might be right, his conclusion is not. It is God’s legitimate right to be gracious and merciful, and by paying for it, he is doing justly so through the blood of Christ.
It is quite marvelous and precious how God acts in our suffering. He is closest to us during such times and is deeply affected, as well. Thus it is, as Ellen White phrases it, “the most weighty trust and the highest honor […] of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men [to have] fellowship with Christ in His sufferings.” Therefore, it is imperative that “while we need not assume there is a divine purpose leading to our suffering, we can and must trust that there is a divine purpose that follows from it (sic).” We do not grow because of our suffering, but because of how God interacts with us in our suffering: God can and wants to work with our broken pieces – there is always a higher cause for how God acts in our suffering.

**Conclusion**

So what place does Sin have in the experience of suffering? We have seen that Sin, as a principle, is the neglected cause of suffering. The whole creation has been corrupted and degenerated by this creator-creation divide. Sin is pointless and without purpose – thus suffering is pointless and without purpose. People tend to ask “why?” because they want their pain to be justified, and of course it is easier to bear pain if you know why. The truth is that only some suffering has a higher reason – but most of it is indeed pointless. The analysis of the three narratives reveals Job suffered because Satan utilized Sin to prove his point, but failed; Joseph suffered because Sin affected his brothers and his keepers in Egypt; and the man born blind suffered because Sin made us susceptible to terrible sicknesses. Some terrible things just happen because they happen - because of Sin in this world. God doesn’t create or cause evil, Sin does. Augustine

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120 White, *The Desire of Ages*, 224.
122 Such instances would be cosmic conflict scenarios and some punishments.
already alluded to this direction by explaining that in the beginning everything was good – evil is a corruption of this good (*corruptio boni*) and this corruption originates in Sin as a deviation from that good; thus it has to be understood mono-directional. But God *can* always make something good out of it. Also, every narrative reveals that God is with us in our suffering and can do great things despite the evil.

Finally, coming back to my four criteria from chapter 2 – how would Sin as a basis hold up? The first criterion is met, as it even emphasizes how horrific some evil and suffering can be – it leaves our sense of reality intact. The second criterion is met, since it empowers us by showing that God is mightier than Sin and is willing to intervene on our behalf (through Christ he has already done this). The third criterion is met, as it reconciles intellectually coherent the existence of all suffering with a God as portrayed in the Bible. Lastly, the fourth criterion is met as it incorporates a holistic view, acknowledging all aspects of biblical teachings. Furthermore, on top of such a basis for a theodicy one can put the theme of the great controversy and God’s supreme foreknowledge, without having the problems mentioned in chapter 2. Therefore, this approach implies that Sin is the ultimate cause of suffering, but in specific instances one can build eclectically from the other categories above, as long as it does not violate any of the four criteria in that instance.

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CHAPTER 4

IMPLICATIONS

Three main implications follow from the topic that has been discussed. The way we answer “unde malum?” affects our theology, our apologetical approaches, and our fundamentally practical issues. All of them have caused major arguments, which get out of hand at times, and will be discussed briefly in this chapter.

Theological Implication

Any approach that justifies evil or gives reason to suffering paints a bizarre picture of God. Even if it is praised as God’s greatness to adapt and incorporate suffering into his higher purposes, how is this compatible with the God portrayed in the Bible? The words “how dare you”1 of the actor Stephen Fry still hold true; although he refers to God willingly creating evil, while the mentioned approaches refer to Him willingly using evil and suffering. How does this picture fit with Jesus unremittingly walking about healing, soothing, and fixing what Sin has done, while God is incorporating suffering into the lives of these people? Such an understanding will lead to a dichotomy instead of relieving of it. On the other hand, an understanding, as presented in this paper, upholds the picture

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1 “How dare you? How dare you create a world to which there is such misery that is not our fault. It’s not right, it’s utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain? That’s what I would say.” Taken from his Interview with Gay Byrne: Stephen Fry, “The Meaning of Life,” interview by Gay Byrne, RTÉ One, January 28, 2015.
of God as portrayed in the Bible. It even underlines that God is suffering with us and is fighting for and with us against evil and suffering.

Furthermore, it relieves the Holy Scriptures of some seemingly apparent inconsistencies. One example was discussed in chapter three: If we read John 9:3 as God intentionally making this man being born blind, this could be considered wicked, no matter the outcome (the same can be said about Job or Joseph). But Job 34:12 clearly states, “for a certainty, God does not act wickedly.” While some view the Scriptures as inspired by God, others view them as the result of a long history of redaction and addition – where Christian theology has to be separated from myths, legends, or personal opinions which have influenced the writing process.\(^2\) If we implement an approach that portrays God so bizarrely, it is only reasonable to either reassert God or come to Bultmann’s conclusion. But biblically God cannot be both – he is either good or wicked. The approach presented in this paper thus also reaffirms the unity and harmony of the Holy Scriptures.

Another aspect is that every approach that tries to give reason to suffering focuses on us. Asking the question “why me”\(^3\) illustrates that the best: We are trying to figure out why “I” suffer and thus our thinking revolves around ourselves. But by understanding that primarily there is no reason for my suffering I can focus on God. It is not wrong to ask the question, many biblical Characters did, but their answer always focused on God.

\(^2\) Probably one of the best examples for such a view is Rudolf Bultmann. See Alexander Bennie, “Bultmann and the Theological Significance of Myth,” Anglican Theological Review 42, no. 4 (1960): 316–325.

\(^3\) Even if we phrase it as “why does God permit this suffering?” the focus is still on ourselves and not on God.
and their relationship with him again. The Bible is clearly theocentric, thus we should not make our theology anthropocentric by shifting the direction.

The answer to “unde malum?” affects (and reflects) our understanding of who God is and the unity and harmony – as well as the focus – of the Bible.

**Apologetical Implication**

Paul often is cited calling himself to be “appointed to defend the gospel” (Phil 1:16). We are not engaging in a “blind faith,” but rather are called to base our faith on the word of God, which gives good reason to believe (John 20:31; Rom 10:17). The core question has been, whether God can be vindicated from these accusations. The answer has to be a resounding ‘yes’ – biblically God can be and is acquitted from these charges. While most theodicies (predominantly of philosophical nature) do not really vindicate God, but rather only give him a semi-good reason for his actions, the approach presented in this paper shows how a holistic understanding of the Bible does vindicate God. Furthermore, while this is not proof for God’s existence in itself, it takes the wind out of the sails of any argument against God that utilizes this theme.

Many struggle in their faith and try to reconcile what they know about God from the Bible and what they experience – a proper understanding of the correlation between Sin and suffering aids in doing that. God is justified in permitting evil, even horrific evil, because it is the natural consequence of Sin. God has to let Sin run its course until the “harvest is ripe” (Matt 13:29), i.e. it is apparent for the whole universe what the natural

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4 Apologetics is often misunderstood to be some sort of “apology” for our faith, but since it derives from the Greek word for “defending”, it is the teaching of defending our faith. First and foremost to ourselves, only then to others – we have good reasons to believe and should not hide behind the “mystery of God.”

5 Although we are called to blindly trust God, the Bible never calls for a blind faith – otherwise the whole revelation of God would be nonsensical.
consequences of Sin (rebellion against God) are, as well as a real relationship with Him. His character is under fire, but at the eschaton it will be apparent to everyone that God is truly loving and just. By taking all biblical aspects into account we see that God is vindicated. So if the question is raised, whether God would create a world without suffering with the stated premises, the answer is a clear ‘yes’ – because he did. Suffering and evil were an addition to God’s creation through Sin.

Furthermore, this approach reveals what the right questions are. Apologetics often argue against the question “is God justified in permitting evil,” while in actuality the right question should to be “is God justified in intervening?” We confuse our assumptions of our natural state with our true natural state. God is treated as if he is obligated to intervene. But a diligent study of what Sin is reveals that he was obligated to leave us to the consequences of the creator-creation divide. Only by paying with the blood of Christ was he justified to intervene – not the other way around. Every blessing, every miracle, is an act of grace.

Only a proper understanding of the correlation between Sin and suffering shows the right order and directions, thus truly vindicating God.

**Practical Implication**

As Craig remarks, there is a difference between the intellectual and the emotional problem of suffering. While, as he states, “as a philosopher I’m called upon to say what I think about some question, not how I feel about it. And as difficult as the problem of suffering may be emotionally, that’s no reason in and of itself to think that God does not exist.”\(^6\) While the apologetic implication deals with the ramifications of the intellectual

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\(^6\) Craig, *On Guard*, 152. (Emphasis as in the original)
problem of suffering, at some point we also have to address the emotional problem of it – after all we encounter it in our practical work. The conclusions presented by this paper also have significant practical implications on our counseling, as well as on our own personal experience of suffering.

Counseling

Some might want to argue that such an approach is inadequate for counseling, because it leaves you with the unfairness of life. But in actuality its implication for counseling are quite profound. While other approaches would want you to find the reason for your suffering or at least believe God has one, we have seen that biblically this cannot be true. It would leave us with a false sense of meaning and thus betray us. God deals in terms of truth, not of false perceptions (these would be the preferred terms of Satan). The approach outlined by this paper readjusts the necessary focus.

As Lori Raible observes, “we don’t want closure as much as we want an end to suffering.” By examining the book of Job, especially the speeches of Job’s friends, Raible concludes aptly, that it is more important to be present in the suffering of others, than handing out explanations. This is modeled after the attitude of Christ, who did not focus as much on the causes and explanations for suffering, but much more on acknowledging the pain of others and making an effort to soothe it. Concluding his book “God in pain”, David Asscherick exclaims three times “His pain is real.” God is never far away – he suffers with us and is closer than ever. God is not causing suffering for a

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higher purpose, to test us, or to teach us; He suffers right there with us and his pain is also real.

Thus, the apt attitude in counseling is to, first and foremost, acknowledge the pain of the person who suffers. If we understand that suffering is primarily pointless and just a terrible consequence of the creator-creation divide, we won’t be as quick to try and give a reason for it. If there is a cause or reason, it might have been prevented – it gives us the illusion of control. But because of Sin there is so much beyond our control. Some things just have to be accepted.\(^9\) Then the focus needs to be readjusted towards God. He can intervene, even if this intervention means to “just” give us the strength needed to bear it, as He did with Paul (2. Cor 12:8-10).

Our counseling work should be marked by this readjustment of our focus, not by affirming false reasons for suffering. What if someone is content with his suffering, because he “found” a reason? Should I strip that peace away from him? I do not believe we should actively “disillusionize” such individuals, but we should refrain from affirming such beliefs. Rather we should guide them towards a holistic biblical understanding and help them to focus on God, rather than their (most likely false) reasons. By showing the creator-creation divide as the true cause for suffering, it helps in trusting God and to focus on him –vindicating him from the notion of him being responsible for it (even if the intentions are claimed to be good). The goal is thus to nurture the faith of the sufferer.\(^{10}\)

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Furthermore, this approach affirms the eschatological scope. We can trust that God will put an end to Sin and suffering, soon. Justice in this unfair life is not upheld by giving meaning to our suffering, but by God’s judgment and retribution. Ellen White upholds what the prophets said about the new earth and describes it as “the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” in comparison to our suffering here. We can and have to trust that something better awaits us.

In counseling we need to readjust this focus: The creator-creation divide is causing a lot of terrible and pointless suffering, as well as horrible wickedness. As Hick puts it “we thus have to say, on the basis of our present experience, that evil is really evil, really malevolent and deadly and also, on the basis of faith, that it will in the end be defeated.” God is mightier than that and he will put an end to it all!

Experience of Personal Suffering

Besides counseling, the approach laid out in this paper has implications for our own experience of suffering. How am I to face suffering and evil?

First of all, we have to acknowledge our pain and give it the space it deserves. God is there with us, too. In our pain and suffering we can lean on God and will receive comfort from Him – there is no doubt about that.

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13 Russell L. Meek, “Truly God Is Good: Suffering in Old Testament Perspectives,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 9, no. 2 (2016): 162. Meek underlines the “retribution that awaits us” in light of a form of suffering I intentionally neglected: persecution and martyrdom because of the gospel and our faith. This of course is a valid cause for suffering, but this paper tries to include all forms of suffering and evil.
Secondly, if we are experiencing suffering, we should indeed search our hearts to see if there is any sin. The reason being that, although the thought I was meant to go through this suffering/experience comforts us in a way (since the suffering was not in vain), it is in some way also very dangerous, delusional and sometimes even secretly or unintentionally egotistical, since it “excuses” the mistakes that were made. If God “orchestrated” everything for me to have this experience so I can learn a valuable lesson, then the mistakes were maybe also meant to be – otherwise I wouldn’t have had that pain, in order to learn. Yet, just as Joseph did not absolve his brothers of their responsibility, we have to take responsibility for our mistakes, since we made them, not God. However, God is greater and takes our broken pieces, helping us to understand what went wrong, so that it is not repeated again, but rather than as the means to an end.

Additionally, we should learn to hold our faith, despite the circumstances. Our faith is not in vain. This approach affirms that also good people suffer. We should not expect to be exempted from suffering. This is not because God wants us to, but because of the creator-creation divide. In light of this, as Eric Orlund puts it, “Job-like suffering becomes a context to love, honor and remain faithful to God for God’s sake, irrespective of any secondary blessings he might give, as we accept his present administration.” Job concludes that he wants to trust God and remain faithful to him, no matter what. We should adopt the same attitude towards suffering – holding our faith proves that God is just and deserves adoration, since he is not in any way the source of our suffering.

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Finally, according to this approach, suffering shows us the true character of Sin. In light of this aspect we should choose to nurture repulsion towards Sin and seek a closer relationship with God. Only if we understand the true correlation of suffering and Sin – that suffering inherently is without meaning – only then will we be able to truly dislike Sin, as God wants us to.\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, how God treats us in our suffering and how he works with our broken pieces shows us the true character of God: He is truly an all-loving and omnipotent God. Thus, suffering in the light of a proper and holistic understanding of these biblical aspects, will reveal the true characters of Sin, Satan, and God.

\textsuperscript{17} Otherwise there would always be the possibility to spawn some sort of appreciation or even admiration for Sin, as Sin revealed how truly contingent we are upon God (at least on this world). Such a view would legitimize Sin, which is biblically incoherent, as we have seen.
CHAPTER 5

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

We have looked at four major categories of approaches towards a sound theodicy. As we encountered problems or gaps in these approaches we also saw that they are mostly founded on logical reflection and mostly left out the place of sin in suffering. As this paper established that Sin, as a principle, is more than a sinful act, it also showed how this creator-creation divide changed everything and degenerated us as human beings.

The stories we reviewed and analyzed showed that God cannot be considered the cause of suffering and evil, but Sin is. However God is greater and mightier than Sin and is willing to make something good out of the bad. The analysis revealed four important biblical principles, which are needed for the basis of a sound theodicy.

1. Suffering is always fundamentally and directly linked to Sin (the creator-creation divide) as its causation.
2. There is primarily no higher cause for suffering – suffering is pointless.
3. God is mightier than Sin and its consequences.
4. There is always a higher cause for how God acts in our suffering.

As a result, this paper proposed a new approach: Sin is the basis to properly answer the question “unde malum?” While this approach states that Sin, as a principle, is the cause of every suffering and evil, it leaves room to build upon other approaches with this as the foundation. It underlines that Sin causes pointless suffering without any
purpose – terrible things sometimes happen just because they happen, not because God wants to punish me, teach me, or prevent some greater evil. Such an approach is more honest and true to the text of the Bible and takes a holistic view into account. The order (mono-directional) is vital. Such a basis allows us to establish a theodicy that avoids the problems and gaps we have encountered with other approaches. Thus, the concept laid out in this paper is meant to be the basis for a sound theodicy, not a stand-alone approach. To get a comprehensive approach one then can build eclectically upon this basis.

Yet, the implications asserted we also have something to say when facing evil and suffering: God is mightier and is able to make something great out of it! Because the understanding of the place of Sin in the experience of suffering deeply impacts our theology, apologetics, as well as our counseling work or personal experience of suffering, it is of utmost importance to incorporate this basis into our approaches and heed the principles it reveals.
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