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The Issue of Suffering: Nine Christian Responses

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On the question of suffering, atheism shares certain common ground with most world religions. Holocaustic misery being prerequisite to evolution, directed or otherwise, pain is evidently not a problem to the authentic evolutionist. C. S. Lewis shares this cynical view of life, reflective of his pre-Christian mind set:

And what is it like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die.¹

Other world religions respond hardly any differently to the inescapability of pain. *Dukka*, the first of the four noble truths which undergird the nontheistic religion of Buddhism, posits “that life inevitably involves suffering.”² Similarly, and in a context as polytheistic as Buddhism is nontheistic, pain is close to the heart of Hinduism’s vedic worship. Vedic sacrifices are calculated to keep the world in “proper order” by mirroring “the original personal sacrifice by which the universe was created, namely the dismemberment of the *Purusha*, the primal Being, by the gods.”³

In a context which holds pain to be so normal, there exists only limited justification for describing it as evil or problematic. How could that be wrong or evil which is deemed so essential to life’s processes? Indeed, James Stewart’s discussion of “God and the Fact of Suffering” includes the observation that

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 1, 2.

²Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, 3rd ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 132.

³*Ibid.*, 76, 75.

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“There is no real *problem of evil* for the man who has never accepted the Christian revelation.”⁴ Stewart may be referring here to the biblical position that God is nothing if not love (1 John 4:8). Outside of such faith, moral and ethical perplexity remain essentially alien notions, given the presupposed chaos and accident of the naturalistic view of existence, the irrelevant God of deism, and the brutal deity of theistic evolution. Thus, it must be something of an irony that unbelief should contribute any arguments on such an ethical dilemma as the problem of suffering. And yet, humanity’s collective inadequacy before great tragedy has expressed itself, upon occasion, as conviction against the adequacy of deity. If God is, then he must be in some sense incompetent. More probably, he is neither competent nor incompetent. He simply is not. Stewart’s radical disagreement with such thinking is expressed in the following incisive comment upon the different reactions to pain of believer and unbeliever. “I,” says he,

as a believer in God, have to face—as the unbeliever does not—the mystery of the existence of evil. I admit that. But here is the other side of it: the unbeliever has to face—as I, who believe in God, do not—the mystery of the existence of good. And his problem is definitely more insoluble than mine.⁵

In this essay Stewart is one of more than half a dozen Christian apologists whose responses to the issue of suffering provide a focus for reflection and discussion.

Eight Christian Answers

Stewart’s treatment of the issue of suffering appears in a series of four sermons entitled “God and the Fact of Suffering,” which address several popular explanations of suffering.⁶ He begins by offering three negations: He denies 1) that all suffering is traceable to God; 2) that all suffering is traceable to sin; and 3) that all suffering is explainable as an illusion. At the same time he affirms the following: 1) that suffering derives from the beneficence of inexorable law—we could not reasonably play any game if the rules kept changing or if the boundary line kept shifting; 2) that suffering is a function of our mutual dependence—we miss one another when separated only because we belong to each other; 3) that it is the evidence of the impartiality of God—all sense of morality would disappear if certain behaviors were consistently rewarded; 4) that it arises from the need for the awakening of humanity’s conscience, upon which depends the development of character—suffering contributes to the moral development of its victim; 5) that [because of the cross] God shares the sufferer’s pain;⁷ and 6) that

⁴James Stewart, “The Burden of the Mystery,” in *Classic Sermons on Suffering*, compiled by Warren Wiersbe, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 63–73; 66; emphasis original.

⁵*Ibid.*, 68.

⁶In Wiersbe, *ibid.*, “The Burden of the Mystery,” 63–73, “Lights in the Darkness,” 75–84, “Wearing the Thorns As a Crown,” 87–97, and “The Cross of Victory,” 99–107.

⁷*Ibid.*, 103.

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by the same token, “you are in it with God, sharing His redemptive activity and His victory.”⁸

Stewart’s views on character development attract further comment: He holds, in common with most, that the greater a given misery, the more meaningful the Christian’s service in the midst of that need, and the clearer the revelation of Christ’s character. It is but a restatement of the claim that suffering betters personal morality. However, Stewart also finds it true that multiplied problems provide better satisfaction of the human hunger for danger. As he states, “it takes a world with trouble in it to satisfy man’s demand for a dangerous universe.”⁹ In his thinking, any question of the logic of suffering must be answered in context of this given of “a dangerous universe.” For him, the ethical dilemma of a universe inherently perilous finds no resolution. On the contrary, the problem is simply aggravated. Stewart seems to overlook the fact that a universe divinely designed as fundamentally dangerous offers less than comfort to minds in search of a satisfactory answer to the question of suffering, whether it be of trilobites, of dinosaurs, or of human beings. The Christian obligation must then be to believe in a God whose purpose cannot exclude pain.

Often enough, Christians must discharge this obligation even as they struggle to relate to a context of pervasive pain. In the words of Nathan A. Scott:

Of the myriad issues of life which the Christian pulpit is required to handle there is none so pressing, so inescapable, and so burdensome for the preacher as the problem of suffering, the mystery of iniquity, the strange and brutal haphazardness with which, as seems at times, acute misfortune is distributed amongst men.¹⁰

Scott’s sense of the burdensomeness and prominence of this issue nevertheless allows him to warn the Christian preacher against what he calls “the great mistake”:

Now the great mistake, of course, that is made by the pulpit when it risks any sort of rational account of evil is that of permitting itself a view of things *sub specie aeternitatis*. For this is precisely where the preacher never stands, under the aspect of eternity: his view of the world, like that of everybody else, is always *sub specie temporalitatis*. And thus what is perhaps always the wisest course for him is that of carefully forswearing any and all attempts at explaining why tribulation and suffering overtake us, or how they are ultimately to be fitted into the total economy of an “engodded” world. For the gospel is found to be good news not because it explains how we come to be in what popular existentialism used to call “the human predicament”

⁸*Ibid.*, 105.

⁹*Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰Nathan A. Scott, “The Burdens and Temptations of the Pulpit,” ed. Henry J. Young, *Preaching on Suffering and a God of Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 7–13; 7.

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but rather because it proves itself to be an effective way of practically coping with that predicament.¹¹

So whereas for Stewart, peril is a universal given, even a satisfaction for excitement-hungry humanity, for Scott, the question “why” were better not raised. Scott’s gospel constitutes not a cosmic clarification of the mystery of iniquity and an absolute deliverance from all its consequences, but a coping mechanism for those inescapably damned to be part of the predicament of existence:

So a great reticence needs to be practiced about the issues of ‘cosmology,’ about how the fact of evil requires to be reconciled with a faith in the sovereignty over the world of a gracious and providential Presence.¹²

The concept of “a gracious and providential Presence” proves particularly troublous to Christian thinkers who desire to exculpate the deity while being unable to dispense with the eternity of pain. George W. Truett, a Christian theologian considered “one of the greatest preachers of his time,”¹³ suggests a biblical answer for those who would lay the guilt of sin upon the Christian sufferer:

The Word of God is not that cruel. The Word of God does not teach that doctrine. That doctrine is as false as it is cruel, and as cruel as it is false. When you turn to the Word of God, it is perfectly clear. Listen . . .¹⁴

Whereupon, Truett quotes Heb 12:6–9 and “the beautiful words of Jesus” in Rev 3:19.¹⁵ The difficulty is that both these passages describe God as “chastening” and “scourging.” Truett thus succeeds in reiterating the refrain upon pain as the producer of betterment, but his effort to deliver the deity from blame cannot be considered very successful.

George Morrison’s affirmation of the profit of pain goes even further than those already considered (Stewart, Truett) when he places pain “at the root of life and growth.”¹⁶ This optimistic statement of pain’s virtue potentially credits it with the production of all progress, and includes at least three remarkable submissions: First, “our capacity for pain is deeper than our capacity for joy.” This proves “that we are so fashioned by the infinite, that the undertone of life is one of sorrow.”¹⁷ Second, self-flagellation and self-abuse give evidence that pain is either pleasing, or at least acceptable, to God, offering

¹¹*Ibid.*, 11.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 130.

¹⁴George W. Truett, “The Ministry of Suffering,” in Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 131–143; 133.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶George H. Morrison, “The Problem of Pain,” in Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 145–152; 148.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

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some hope of fellowship with heaven. You may despise the hermit, and you may flout the saint when the weals are red upon his back but an instinct which is universal [practiced by Romans, Indians, Christians, and savages] is something you do well not to despise.¹⁸

Finally, Morrison asserts that

though the fact of death troubled [Jesus'] soul, there is no trace that the dark fact of pain did so—and yet was there ever one on earth so sensitive to pain as Jesus Christ? Here was a man who saw pain at its bitterest, yet not for an instant did he doubt His Father.¹⁹

It is not altogether surprising that, absent a perception of any divine capacity to banish pain, Jesus Christ himself should be characterized as accepting it by faith. In the words of Cecil Wayne Cone, “The Christian answer, too, is in harmony with the answer Habakkuk received: ‘The just shall live by faith.’”²⁰ And William E. Sangster insists that as a child of God “I can wait until I get home and He'll tell me Himself.”²¹

A Comparison With Heathen Responses

A review of the proposals of Stewart, Scott, Truett, Morrison, Cone, and Sangster, as considered thus far, yields the following Christian responses to the issue of suffering, all encompassed by Cone's invocation of the refrain of Habakkuk, “the just shall live by faith”: 1&2) Stewart's discontinuity between suffering and either God or sin, as well as 3) his sense of its integrity with existence, given his sense of the universality of peril; 4) Morrison's sense of pain as fundamental to growth and progress; 5) Scott's insistence on the inappropriateness of the question “why”; Morrison's contention, on the one hand, 6) that pain offers fellowship with heaven, and, on the other, 7) that our question did not in fact trouble Jesus; and 8) Sangster's consolation that God, who understands, will explain it by and by.

Despite the satisfaction that these positions might provide, to some, independently or in combination, a single objection remains sufficient to expose

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 150, 151.

²⁰Cecil Wayne Cone, “Why Do the Righteous Suffer,” in Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 47–53; 52.

²¹William E. Sangster, “When Worn With Sickness,” in Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 193–201; 197. Sangster supports this position with an account from his son's childhood. As a child of three he milled with other small children in a waiting room, as all waited their turn for the same operation to remove a nasal growth. Sangster's son could hear the cries of those who preceded him and see the blood as they emerged from the doctor's office. “Must I go in there?” he asked his father. “Will the nurse be coming for me? Will it hurt? What is it all for?” “Well, what can you say to a child of three and a half? You cannot talk about tonsillitis, or lymphoid tissue, or septic infection. You must just fall back upon generalities. You say: ‘I must not save you from it, dear. You will understand someday. You must trust my love.’ And when the moment comes, you put him firmly in the nurse's arms for an experience which you know will be painful and nauseating, but which, for the child's sake, you are determined to see through. That seems a fair parallel of how God deals with us” (*ibid.*).

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their unacceptability. It is their disturbing similarity to that ancient heathen thinking from which Christianity is generally expected to deliver the believer. In the first instance, they impose severe limitation on Christianity's moral authority. If the Bible offers no explanation of the mystery of misery, then Christianity is hard pressed to prove itself a better religion, and indeed owns small right, if any, to existence as a distinct religion.

In the second instance, the answers thus far considered offer no advance over the concepts of Israel's neighbors of the second and first millennia before Christ. W. C. Gwaltney's analysis of ancient Babylonian laments exposes a popular or cultic mindset of equivalent despair: Human tragedy was accompanied by "a pervading sense of helplessness before the gods' power."²² Again, in terms of causality, "ultimate causation lies in the largely unseen world of the gods . . . The emphasis of the laments is upon the power of the divine, not upon the rightness of the decision."²³ The spiritual alternatives of brute and arbitrary fate or the callous caprice of gods who need give no account, condemn humanity to the curse of senseless existence. Should Christianity's consolations offer no more than a continued sense of earnest trust and mysterious ignorance in a universe of immortal pain, then its optimistic rhetoric upon the hope of heaven still competes with the escapist's dream. Finally, Morrison's note on the virtue of self-flagellation as marking "fellowship with heaven" recalls the action of desperate ninth century B.C. prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In an effort to establish contact with their divinity, undoubtedly the equivalent of Morrison's "fellowship with heaven," they found it necessary to slice themselves with knives and spears until the blood flowed (1 Kgs 18:28).

Looking Elsewhere for Answers

William M. Clow's attempts at an answer to the question of suffering focus directly on Jesus. Like Morrison he believes that though keenly wounded by the world's agony, Christ accepted pain:

To see Jesus moving in the midst of a world of pain, keenly conscious of it and yet forbearing to heal, is, at first sight, both a marvel and a mystery. There were many widows in Israel who mourned for their children, but the Son of man did not regard Himself as sent to them. There were many lepers who prayed for cleansing, but Christ did not heal them. There were more sisters than Martha and Mary who wept beside their brother's grave, but Christ had no word for them. There were lame and crippled and blind in every village

²²W. C. Gwaltney, Jr., "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer, Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 191-211; 207.

²³*Ibid.*

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through which Jesus passed, but they were lame and crippled and blind to the last chapter of their lives.²⁴

Clow’s is an astonishing, eloquent, and quite awkward conviction, as is Morrison’s. It is difficult to know how these interpreters read Christ’s personal mission statement as outlined in Luke 4:16–18, 21. In this passage, Christ expresses his own self-understanding through the deliberate selection of a clearly messianic passage as his manifesto and *raison d’être*. According to Luke’s report, Christ receives the scroll from the hands of the *chazzan*, unrolls it almost completely, and proceeds to read a portion near the end of it which, in all likelihood, he has himself selected. In a sequence of four aorist infinitives, the passage, evidently from the LXX version (the phrase “recovery of sight to the blind” is found in the LXX but not in the Hebrew text), lists five tasks which his messianic ministry will accomplish. The following tables outline these tasks, indicating their origin in OT Scriptures and commenting briefly upon the significance of each:

Table 1: Task & OT Source

Task	OT Source
1) preach good news to the poor	1) Isa 61:1
2) proclaim deliverance to captives	2) Isa 61:1
3) proclaim recovery of sight to the blind	3) Isa 61:1 (only LXX)
4) liberate the oppressed	4) Isa 58:6
5) proclaim the favorable year of the Lord	5) Isa 61:2

Table 2: Task & Significance

1) preach good news to the poor	The poor—those who crouch and cringe, like beggars—“the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, those held back from progress and amelioration by people or circumstances” ²⁵
2) proclaim deliverance to captives	Liberation from captivity
3) proclaim recovery of sight to the blind	Restoration of that which has been lost, in this case, vision
4) liberate the oppressed	Sending away in liberty those shattered, crushed by cruel oppression
5) proclaim the favorable year of the Lord	Announcement of the year of the Lord, the jubilee

This messianic announcement of the year of the Lord is both unmistakable and sensational. The main OT passage behind Christ’s statement of purpose at the Nazareth synagogue, Isa 61:1, 2, includes a double reference to this semi-centennial phenomenon of incomparable marvel in human chronological history. The year of the Lord is the jubilee year (Lev 25:10; Jer 34:8ff). It is a celebra-

²⁴William M. Clow, “Christ in a World of Pain,” in Wiersbe, *ibid.*, 38–45; 40.

²⁵J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 500.

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tion of such social and economic emancipation as no proclamation of human liberation can equal. For all the land and people of Israel, it marks the end of starvation and dispossession, debt and enslavement. More than this, it authorizes to every former debtor and slave the cancellation of every account due, and the liberation from servitude, the restoration of his once forfeited inheritance, and joyous reunion with beloved family members once torn from him by the tragedy of personal financial failure, of subjugation by less than compassionate creditors.

Upon closing the scroll Christ announces to his synagogue audience, mysteriously captivated by his manner (v. 20): “This Scripture is fulfilled today as you hear it read” (v. 21). Through the sermon which follows, he proceeds to represent himself as the healing, liberating power predicted in Isaiah. Though Luke does not report the full text of this sermon, it is apparent, from Christ’s use of Isa 61:1, 2, that he considers the unmodified categories of the jubilee year an apt metaphor of the liberation he has brought to earth:

As the maladies under which humanity groans are here set forth under the names of *poverty, broken-heartedness, bondage, blindness, bruisedness, (or crushedness)*, so Christ announces Himself, in the act of reading it, as the glorious HEALER of all these maladies;²⁶

The views of Morrison and Clow cannot easily be reconciled with this pronouncement on the part of Christ, for Morrison contends that pain did not trouble Jesus,²⁷ and Clow, that he had no word for most sufferers of his day.²⁸ But Christ does appear to speak, by word as well as service, to all sufferers of his day. His Isaianic manifesto shows him to be both aware of their pain and concerned for their well-being. Moreover, he explicitly offers himself to all life’s victims, as the agent and source of liberation from all exploitation, whether spiritual victimization, physical oppression, or social injustice, to which they may be subject. He “announces Himself, . . . as the glorious HEALER” of “all the maladies under which humanity groans.”²⁹

Nor does his ministry fail to confirm the truthfulness of this claim. Physically, he touches and heals lepers, Jewish and Samaritan (Matt 8:1–3; Luke 17:12–16), and raises little girls and grown men from the dead (Matt 9:18–25; Luke 7:11–15; John 11:1–44); socially he calls on and feasts with publicans (Matt 9:9–11; Luke 15:1, 2; 19:2–7), gives to and receives affection from those known as prostitutes (Luke 7:37–50), recognizes and elevates local and foreign women (John 4; Mark 7:25–30); spiritually, he crushes the head of the serpent whose venom of sin once brought us death (Gen 3:15). At the cost of his own

²⁶Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, & Practical, on the Old & New Testaments*, 3 vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 3:238, emphasis original.

²⁷Morrison, *ibid.*

²⁸Clow, *ibid.*

²⁹Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, *ibid.*

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life, he purchases authority over death and hell (Rev 1:18) and gives those who believe in him new right to “more abundant” life (John 10:10) in a land where all things will be new (John 3:16; Rev 21:1–5). Morrison and Clow notwithstanding, Christ’s ministry exhibits neither unconcern with pain nor acceptance of suffering. His life indiscriminately opposed all manifestations of sin, of which pain is surely a conspicuous consequence.

Let us recall Morrison’s understanding of pain as fundamental to growth and progress. Let us, further, concede his consistency in claiming that death troubled Christ while pain did not. Next, let us note what follows from such logic. We are led to conclude that whereas Christ’s death would disarm the devil, the master of death (Heb 2:15), it would, equally, guarantee for those redeemed from death a life of perpetual pain, the fruit of continuous growth and development of our moral personality. Such reasoning would link the human life to pain more permanently than does Hinduism’s karma-run wheel of reincarnations. For while Hinduism’s upward-striving incarnations may result in *moksha*, or liberation from life’s miseries,³⁰ human progress, barring some concept of imperfectible perfection, rests upon the dubious foundation of undying pain.

Fortunately, the Christian interpretation need not immortalize pain. Clow’s eloquent observation upon the sufferers Jesus forbore to heal need not be explained on the basis of the Master’s acceptance of suffering. Far from ignoring pain and suffering, he is described as going through “all the cities and villages . . . healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” as he proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom while bearing his burden of deep compassion for the crowds he served (Matt 9:35, 36). Given his crusade against pain, some further reason must be proposed for the existence of suffering. The notion of God’s original sympathy to pain is unacceptable.

An option which hews more consistently to the Bible’s foundational thesis that God is love appears in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ parable of the tares (Matt 13:24–30): When conscientious servants discover that in the midst of their good seed a crop of tares is emerging, the master explains, “an enemy has done this” (v. 28). Later, in private clarification, Jesus tells the disciples, “the enemy . . . is the devil” (v. 39). Jesus’ answer and explanation appear to suggest that the devil may be properly identified as the architect of contradiction not simply of Christ’s gospel preaching, but generally of programs of good such as God has set in place in the universe.

The Devil [Satan] As an Answer

Taken together, 1 Pe 5:8 and Rev 12:9 indicate that *the devil*, *the adversary*, *the ancient serpent*, *Satan*, and *the dragon* are all names which may be applied

³⁰The goal of the Hindu believer is not so much the most ethical of lives as something beyond this, “a clean escape from the karma-run wheel of birth, death, and rebirth, which is called samsara. To escape from **samsara**, is to achieve **moksha**, or liberation from the limitations of space, time, and matter through realization of the immortal Absolute.” Fisher, *ibid.*, 78, bold type original.

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to the same entity, the being who, defeated by Michael and his angels, “was thrown down to the earth,” where he is now said to get the whole world in trouble (Rev 12:10, 9, 12). This view is not necessarily uncontested. Elaine Pagels considers Satan to be a fairly recent invention. Pagels asserts that

Satan, along with diabolical colleagues like Belial and Mastema (whose Hebrew name means “hatred”), did not materialize out of the air. Instead, . . . such figures emerged from the turmoil of first-century Palestine, the setting in which the Christian movement began to grow.³¹

Pagels explores a variety of Jewish apocryphal stories which propose demons as being produced when angels mate with women, or Satan as becoming the adversary after spurning divine orders to bow to the newly created Adam [sibling rivalry], then continues.

At first glance these stories of Satan may seem to have little in common. Yet they all agree on one thing: that this greatest and most dangerous enemy did not originate, as one might expect, as an outsider, an alien, or a stranger. Satan is not the distant enemy but the intimate enemy—one’s trusted colleague, close associate, brother. He is the kind of person on whose loyalty and goodwill the well-being of family and society depend—but one who turns unexpectedly jealous and hostile . . . Those who asked, “How could God’s own angel become his enemy?” were thus asking, in effect, “How could one of *us* become one of *them*?”³²

Pagels’ admirable insights into the nature of Satan contrast with her explanation as to his origins. He is, as she detects, the intimate who becomes the enemy, the one next to God, who, as we later show, becomes his archrival. As to origins, however, he surely antedates Jewish first century apocalyptic. The twenty-seven OT usages of the term *śtn* display at least four nuances of meaning:

1) Agent of Justice—prosecutor, raised up against Balaam (Num 22:22, 32) and Solomon (1 Kgs 11:14, 23, 25) as these men determinedly contravene God’s will.³³

2) Lover of Cruelty—sadist. In this definition the adversary stands against God’s people—individuals whom God approves of (Job, chaps. 1, 2) or wishes to protect (Joshua, in Zech 3:1–5).³⁴ In both of these passages the role appears to

³¹Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1996), xviii.

³²*Ibid.*, 49, emphasis original.

³³The psalmist’s *śtn* 109:6ff) also fits into this group. The psalmist’s request is that God appoint a *śtn* to condemn the wicked and let havoc follow him, his family, and his possessions.

³⁴The language of Zech 3 and that of Ps 109 reflect a court scene; less so does the prologue of *Job*. But *Job* and Joshua differ from the psalmist’s enemy. The adversary of Ps 109 must stand at the man’s right hand. He also does in Zech 3:1, “to accuse.” He does not in *Job*. He cannot, because

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include a slanderous dimension, as those whom God declares good are accused of moral inadequacy.³⁵

3) Agent of Crime—murderer. The Philistines speak in this sense when they fear for their lives at the hands of David, as Achish takes him out to war against Saul (1 Sam 29:4). Later, after crushing Absalom's rebellion, David worries aloud about the bloodthirstiness of his nephews (2 Sam 19:23).

4) Evil Inspiration. In 1 Chr 21:1, a postexilic rendering of the story of 2 Sam 24:1, Satan works on the "pride and ambition" of David³⁶ and incites him to number Israel, an event of disastrous consequence to both king and nation.³⁷

These cases show both a titular (*a/the satan*) and a nominal (*Satan*) usage of the term *śtn*. In the majority of instances (18/27, 67%) the OT entity identified as *śtn* works against God and his people. In all other cases, as in all four functions listed above, the term stands for disruption of order, or for threat to life and limb. In Num 22:22, 32, where the angel of the lord opposes Balaam, 'adversary' is used only as simile, "I have come out *l'śtn* ["like Satan" or "as an adversary"]" (v. 32). The simile concedes that while God's judgment upon the wicked may resemble the work of the adversary, it is to be distinguished from the latter's. The psalmist's request in Ps 109:6 is perhaps a further corroboration of this consciousness that destruction and havoc are actually the work of the adversary, for it is a wicked man whom he expects will repay his enemy evil for evil. The hostility and destructiveness which characterize the term *śtn* help explain why Satan, as a personal being, may be seen as personifying those properties which the term *śtn* possesses.

The book of Job, perhaps the best known OT case of satanic activity, offers effective testimony to the mystery of his operations. The devastation of Job's herds and flocks, donkeys, servants, camels, and children, may be blamed on Sabaeans or Chaldeans, desert wind or fire from God, but never on Satan (Job 1:13–19). Interpretation of the book's message has frequently been made to depend upon cooperation rather than hostility between God and Satan. The latter is held to be in God's employ, as the prosecuting attorney functions in the service

while the psalmist's enemy is wicked, and Joshua is clothed in garments of guilt, Job is a paragon of virtue.

³⁵On slander as a dimension of the biblical *sātān*, particularly through study of the six occurrences of the root *śtn* (Ps 38:21 [Eng., 20], 71:13, 109:4, 20, 29), see Victor P. Hamilton, "Satan," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols., (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:985–989; 985.

³⁶Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1913), 747.

³⁷The Bible records no specific command, "Thou shalt not number." But it is clear that all concerned were aware of God's will in the matter. Joab opposed it (2 Sam 24:3). David admitted sin (v. 10). God's destroying angel slew 70,000 people in the plague that followed David's disobedience (v. 15). That God and Satan should both instigate the same action (2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chr 21:1) suggests either coincidence (the accident of common action), collusion (a scheme for common action), or ultimate responsibility (an inferior who acts by permission of a superior).

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of the state.³⁸ Divine acceptance of ultimate responsibility (Isa 45:5–7) and the adversary’s skill in preserving his hiddenness combine to promote the categorical position that “The OT does not see the satanic aspect as forming part of its theodicy. A ‘satan’ is not portrayed as the origin or cause of evil.”³⁹ Rather, he is held to emerge as a negative personal force only as a result of Israel’s sixth century contact with the Persians, under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism. The towering monotheism of Isa 45:5–7 allegedly contravenes any possibility of a prevailing challenge to divine sovereignty during most of the OT pre-exilic period.⁴⁰ As D. E. Hiebert acknowledges, “It is a remarkable feature of the theology of the OT that so little mention is made of Satan as the great Adversary of God and His people.”⁴¹ The argument for a sixth century satanic materialization is principally supported by reference to 1 Chr 21:1, as compared with its parallel account in 2 Sam 24:1. The first of these, a post-exilic passage, describes an action which the pre-exilic book of 2 Samuel attributes to God. In Chronicles, Satan tempts David to do that which, in Samuel, God moves him to do. The comparison is intended to show that before the exile Israel knows of no conflict between Yahweh and a personal archenemy called Satan. The divine monopoly over both good and evil (2 Sam 24:1; Isa 45:5–7) betrays this unawareness of distinctly evil agencies. Once Persian influence has contributed the notion of ontologically separate and malevolent powers, so it is argued, this comes to be reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures in such a passage as 1 Chr 21:1.

Nevertheless, the theory falters upon the ground that those OT books most expected to reflect such Persian religion do so not at all. Apart from 1 Chr 21:1, post-exilic works of history (Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther), as of prophecy (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), are equally devoid of dualistic sentiment. Added to that, the intertestamental Qumran texts, famous, *inter alia*, for their depictions of a confrontation between sons of light and darkness, between the Prince of Light and the Angel of Darkness, refer only thrice to any kind of satan, and never as a personal name.⁴² Beyond this, the post-exilic location of Satan’s personal emergence disregards the antiquity of the Zoroastrian texts, which may date as early

³⁸See N. H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job: A New Commentary* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967), 42; Edouard Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. Harold Knight (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 5; Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job & Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago, London: U Chicago P, 1965), 233.

³⁹Bruce Baloiian, *štn* [in Hebrew], in *New International Dictionary of OT Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1231–1232; 1231.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* Others have seized upon just such passages as proof of a light/darkness Zoroastrian dualism. See Motyer, *ibid.*, 359.

⁴¹D. E. Hiebert, “Satan,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 5:282–286; 282.

⁴²Hamilton, *ibid.*, 988.

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as the end of the 13th century B.C.⁴³ In addition to these considerations, a study of this being's actions, when he is specifically exposed, permits sufficient character identification. He is sometimes explicitly identified as "the Adversary" by OT delimitation of the term *sātān* through the use of the article.⁴⁴ Such is the case in the book of Job where he personally contributes at least three explanatory points upon the issue of the presence of suffering in the world. These three are 1) his name, the adversary, in context of 2) the object of his opposition (a God who is love—1 John 4:8), and 3) a relation of his activities (unwarranted assaults against human and animal life with their tally of holocaustic destruction).⁴⁵ Finally, the rarity of cognate occurrences of the Hebrew term *sātān* among ancient Semitic languages⁴⁶ underlines the distinctiveness of theological insight which in yet another way sets the Hebrew Bible apart from other religious documents of its ancient environment. Satan may be more explicitly delineated in the NT, but it would be misleading to speak of him as unknown in or absent from either pre- or post-exilic OT Scriptures. Lewis' reflection on the doctrine of Satan is instructive:

... the doctrine of Satan's existence and fall is not among the things we know to be untrue: it contradicts not the facts discovered by scientists but the mere, vague "climate of opinion" that we happen to be living in. . . .

It seems to me, therefore, a reasonable supposition, that some mighty created power had already been at work for ill on the material universe, or the solar system, or, at least, the planet Earth, before ever man came on the scene: and that when man fell, someone had, indeed, tempted him.⁴⁷

Lewis' subscription to theistic evolutionary cosmology allows for the working of decay before the fall of man. On the other hand, Scripture teaches that all earth's material and spiritual decay is a consequence of human failure (Gen 3:14–21). Lewis' sequence notwithstanding, he is accurate in his insight into the presence of some mighty power for evil as influencing humanity's re-

⁴³Motyer, *ibid.* The antiquity of Zoroastrian material may also have implications for accurate dating of the book of Job. The presence of the *satan* in Job is sometimes cited as proof of the book's late origins.

⁴⁴Hiebert, *ibid.*: "With the article, 'the Adversary,' it becomes a proper name and denotes the personal Satan."

⁴⁵Dhorme describes him personally: ". . . it is Satan, the ancient enemy of mankind, who will perform the nefarious deeds." Dhorme, *ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁴⁶The evidence is uncertain: Hamilton, *ibid.*, 985, finds no cognate for *satan* in any of the Semitic languages, while Baloian, *ibid.*, proposes Arab. *shaitān*, Eth. *s/shaitan*; Tigr. *shētān*; W. Kirchschläger, "Satan (et démons)," *Supplément au dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1928–), xii:1–47; col. 1, suggests Akk. *shattānu*, "to attack," which is rare, as Ludwig Koehler & Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958) observes, and may [*shatānu*] mean just that; see s.v. *štn*, where, as with Hiebert, *ibid.*, Judeo-Aramaic *štn*? [in Hebrew] is also suggested.

⁴⁷Lewis, *ibid.*, 122, 123.

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bellion against God (Gen 3:1–6).⁴⁸ The origins of that mighty power and the story of his own initial rebellion may be discovered in such biblical passages as Isa 14:12–14, and Eze 28:12–19. The first of these, with its reference to the light bearer, son of the morning (*hêlêl ben shahar*, v. 12), has often been linked to and compared with a Ugaritic epic which relates the birth of twins, Shaḥar & Shalim, to the supreme Canaanite deity El.⁴⁹ An examination of Isa 14:12–21 shows it to be much more dense in meaning and significance than is the epic, encompassing far more than the birth of a child to a Canaanite god, or a portion of an ancient theogony accounting for the existence of the morning star. As John Oswalt states, “despite . . . vigorous investigation there is no single mythical story which can be said to be the prototype for Isa 14:12–15.”⁵⁰ Isaiah’s subject and subject matter are readily recognizable as being significantly more awe-inspiring and terrible. The breadth of the prophet’s narrative encompasses the unbridgeable chasm between native creatureliness and the heights of autodeification. His subject is a being of such splendor and exaltation that its predicted destruction will rivet both the gaze and the mind of those who behold (v. 16). And the prophet’s subject matter is a scheme, hidden within the heart of this great one (v. 13), to “seize the throne beyond the stars which stands upon the mountain of God, and upon which the destinies of the whole world are decided.”⁵¹ This is the astonishing rebellion by one next to the throne whose intrigue evokes Pagels’ remarks on the intimate who becomes the enemy.⁵² It is small wonder that this passage has long been recognized as a cryptic description of the ambition and fall of the originator of evil.⁵³ Amplifying this insight, NT passages such as 1

⁴⁸The *Diccionario de la Biblia* (Barcelona: Herder, 1981) is unequivocal, dealing with Satan as one of the devil’s two OT manifestations, the other being the serpent in Eden. See s.v. “Diablo,” cols. 465–467.

⁴⁹See J. C. L. Gibson, “Shaḥar & Shalim,” in *Canaanite Myths & Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977), 123–127, particularly ll. 30–54; see also 28, 29.

⁵⁰John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–39*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 321.

⁵¹Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary*, OT Library, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 41.

⁵²Pagels, *ibid.*

⁵³For a parallel account of his self exaltation and expulsion from God’s presence, see Eze 28:12–19. Ilana Goldberg, “The Poetic Structure of the Dirge Over the King of Tyre,” *Tarbiz* 58/2 (1989) 277–281, provides [in Hebrew] a good analysis of the structure of this passage. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation With Introduction & Commentary*, Anchor Bible Series 22A (NY: Doubleday, 1997), 579–593, is among those who read the passage as a mythical version of the fall of a Tyrian king. But interpreters who resist the identification of Ezekiel’s monarch with this once perfect celestial being are still hard pressed to provide a credible explanation for any of the following three elements of the passage: 1) his unparalleled physical excellence; for this creature originally bore “the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” (v. 12); 2) the pristine setting which he initially occupies (“Eden, the garden of God,” v. 13; “the holy mountain of God,” v. 14); 3) the moral irreproachability which characterized his primordial state (“blameless in your ways from the day you were created,” v. 15). While none of these may with much reason be applied to Tyre’s literal king, they all support the theory of a gifted but ultimately rebellious intelligence being expelled from the presence of God when selfishness enters his heart, and self-

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Pet 5:8, Rev 12:9, and 20:2 leave little doubt as to either this creature's identity or his current activity. He is the devil and Satan. And it is he who is both author and prime agent of all earth's misery.

Unlike the escapism which denies the existence of pain and the pagan acceptance which seeks God through human sacrifice, the Bible admits the reality of suffering and rejects it as incompatible with the character of God. Pain, in proper biblical understanding, is not eternal. It originated when the adversary became the adversary. Danger and adversarial relationships are not inherent to the universe. They originated when one created perfect, designed for the flawlessness of God-ordered eternity, undertook to dispute known concepts of perfection. When this Day Star, Son of the Morning, the anointed covering cherub, elected to dispute the supremacy of his Creator, aspiring to transcend him in position and glory (Isa 14:12–21), his attempt at betterment produced chaos instead. Humanity's choice to follow him (1 Tim 2:14; Rom 5:12) cursed the race, the ground, and all nature (Gen 3:7–24; Rom 8:19–22). The deceptions by which he wrested authority from Adam over this earth now entitle him to such titles as "prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30)—Jesus' own attribution—or "prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2). The misery of natural disasters and nature's cruelty against itself testify to his incompetence to improve on God's way of doing things or carry out the boast of making himself like the Most High (Isa 14:14). The pain and suffering that pervade the animate creation result from the contamination of sin, the biblical name for Satan's rebellion and the state of things it produces. Sin's current impact is capricious, uncontrollable, and global (Eccl 9:2, 3, 11; Luke 13:1–5), except by specific divine interruption (John 9:3), and its ultimate consequence is death (Eccl 7:2; 8:8; Rom 6:23; 5:12; 1 Co 15:56). As God is eternal, as God is life and truth, and the source of life and all good (John 1:1–3; 14:6; Acts 17:25; James 1:17), so his adversary is death and the cause of death and all evil (John 8:44).

Briefly: God's Answer to Suffering

Far from being the cause of suffering in the world, God has undertaken to guarantee that its presence will not be permanent. The horror of the means he has devised gives insight into the offence which sin and suffering are to him and also the value he places upon the safety and happiness of his creation. Jesus Christ, who at his first advent announced himself "as the glorious HEALER" of

glorification takes the place of glory to God. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), p, 196, observes that the being is clothed in attire reminiscent of the High Priest's breastplate (Ex 28:17–20). This supports the sense that the roles of these individuals may have involved common elements, e.g., presentation before the presence of God. Seeing Satan as portrayed in Isa 14:12–14 and Eze 28:12–15 "throws much light on the question of Satan's origin and is in harmony with the scriptural picture of Satan's close relations with world governments (Dan 10:13; John 12:31; Eph 6:12)." Hiebert, *ibid.*, 284.

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“all the maladies under which humanity groans,”⁵⁴ has, by the awful sacrifice of himself, exchanged humanity’s doom for heaven’s original bliss. Those who believe in him are neither doomed to a blighted and abbreviated existence of pain, nor to suffering in perpetuity for the sake of or in the name of self-improvement. Instead, they may participate in an eternity of joy in a land where there shall be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain, because, through Christ, the former state has passed away (Rev 21:4). By bearing, in Christ his son, all the misery he himself so abhors, God has restored the universe to the bliss in which he created all (Heb 5:8; 2 Co 5:21). In Christ’s suffering is our healing (Isa 53:5). The suffering of the perfect one has neutralized sin’s sting, destroyed the destroyer, and swallowed up death in victory (Isa 25:8; Gen 3:15; 1 Co 15:54–57). God has done this for the sake of his creation, because sin cannot stop God from being love.

Conclusion

The continuing presence of pain and suffering in our world may be heard as a challenge to Christ’s claim to victory over sin and Satan. The challenge may also remind us of Clow’s observation that Christ did not heal all the afflicted of his day.⁵⁵ It may tempt us to return to some interpretation of Scripture which teaches the inevitability, eternity, and fundamental morality of pain. But in the end any such recourse would reflect too limited an understanding of the conflict between God and Satan. Even while here on earth, Christ was sometimes inhibited from works of wonder by the unbelief of those he wished to bless (Matt 13:58). Christ’s victory is not mine to share against my will (John 1:12; Rev 3:20). Again, the resurrection of Lazarus produced such hostile reaction (John 11:46–53) that one wonders what might have transpired should Christ have performed more resurrections. Thirdly, Jesus was convinced that such miracles as he did perform were sufficient proof of the truth of all his claims (John 10:37, 38). This is also John’s opinion (20:30, 31). That children, men, or women still suffered and died in Christ’s day or in our time is no proof that pain is unconquerable, inescapable, or acceptable to him. Christ’s claim is that the victory of Satan has been completely won, that the battle is over, that “It is done” (John 19:30). His own earthly ministry, the success of his immediate followers (Matt 10:1, 7, 8; Luke 10:1, 2, 9), the work of his church to this day, and his own climactic action at his second advent (1 Thes 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–57; Rev 20:14; 21:3–5), all form part of God’s response to the experience of suffering brought on by Satan and sin. That the adversary still goes about seeking victims (1 Pet 5:8) is no proof that he is not already a defeated foe (Rev 12:10). When the bankruptcy of his satanic lies is clearly exposed to all eyes concerned, then God will, once and for all, purge the earth and universe of every last vestige of his

⁵⁴Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, *ibid.*

⁵⁵Clow, *ibid.*

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tainting rebellion and reestablish his own kingdom of eternal peace, sanity and wholeness: “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20, NASB). As surely as suffering, and all of Satan’s kingdom, did have a beginning, so sure must it be that God will bring them, one and the other, to an end.

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