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052109903X - Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World

John Bowker

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

How much misery is presaged to us, when we come so generally weeping into the world, that, perchance in the whole body of history we reade but of one childe, *Zoroaster* that laughed at his birth: What miserable revolutions and changes, what down-falls, what break-necks, and precipitations may we justly think ourselves ordained to, if we consider, that in our comming into this world out of our mothers womb, we doe not make account that a child comes right, except it come with the head forward, and thereby prefigure that headlong falling into calamities which it must suffer after.<sup>1</sup>

John Donne, whose words those are, may well have been a man of unusually pessimistic temperament: he dwelt frequently on death, wrote his own epitaph and had his portrait painted in his shroud. And yet in that passage he is simply stating one of the most obvious facts of human existence, that suffering is the common lot of all men. It is because suffering, in one form or another, is a common experience that religions give to suffering a place of central importance or consideration—indeed, it is often said that suffering is an important *cause* of religion, since the promises held out by religion represent a way in which men can feel reassured in the face of catastrophe or death. It is, many would add, an inadequate or immature way of seeking reassurance, because it rests in illusion: it is an attempt to control the real world by means of the wish-world, and it was this insight which formed the basis of Freud's critique of religion:

The assertions made by religion that it could give protection and happiness to men, if they would only fulfil certain ethical obligations, were unworthy of belief. It seems not to be true that there is a power in the universe, which watches over the well-being of every individual with parental care and brings all his concerns to a happy ending. On the contrary, the destinies of man are incompatible with a universal principle of benevolence or with—what is to some degree contradictory—a universal principle of justice. Earthquakes, floods, and fires do not differentiate between the good and devout men, and the sinner and unbeliever. And even if we leave inanimate nature out of account and consider the destinies of individual men insofar as they depend on their relations with others of their own kind, it is by no means the rule

<sup>1</sup> Donne, *Sermon III*, Nonesuch edn. (ed. J. Hayward), London, 1962, p. 588.

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that virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished, but it happens often enough that the violent, the crafty, and the unprincipled seize the desirable goods of the earth for themselves, while the pious go empty away.<sup>1</sup>

That passage, as an account of religion, is vastly over-simplified, not least because religions tend to start, not end, with exactly those observations of Freud. But it does effectively isolate the crucial importance in any religion of the account it gives of suffering. There is nothing theoretical or abstract about it. To talk of suffering is to talk not of an academic problem but of the sheer bloody agonies of existence, of which all men are aware and most have direct experience. All religions take account of this; some, indeed, make it the basis of all they have to say. Whatever theoretical constructions may be built, the foundations are laid in the apparent realities of what it is like to be alive. Thus what a religion has to say about suffering reveals, in many ways more than anything else, what it believes the nature and purpose of existence to be.

This to a great extent explains the purpose of this book. There are few better ways of coming to understand the religions of the world than by studying what response they make to the common experience of suffering. Obviously, a book which deals with several of the major religions at once cannot hope to be comprehensive. It would be possible, as indeed it has been done, to write a book on each of the religions on its own. But there is a quite separate value in studying religions in conjunction with each other. It brings out very clearly the extent to which they have contributed to each other, but even more than that, the extent to which they remain inescapably distinct. What has been attempted in this book is the description and illustration of some of the main themes and ideas in connection with suffering in each of the religions treated.

The title of this book refers to 'problems of suffering' in the plural, because there is no single, definable 'problem-of-suffering' which appears in all religions in the same form. On the contrary, it will be seen that suffering occurs *differently* as a problem in each religion. There is, of course, considerable overlap, particularly in closely related religions of either the Western or the Eastern

<sup>1</sup> *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 1933, pp. 228 f.

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traditions. But the overlap is usually in general terms rather than in points of specific application. So, for example, it can be said that in general both Marxism<sup>1</sup> and Islam have an instrumental theory of suffering, but in point of detail and application the instrumental theory in Marxism is completely different from that of the Quran. If the different religions have a common factor in their treatment of suffering, it is that they start with the facts of suffering as they are, not with suffering conceived as a theoretical problem. Suffering becomes a problem when it is related to other facts or other propositions which seem to be contradicted by it. Insofar as those other facts and propositions differ in the various religions, to that extent suffering is located differently as a problem in them; insofar as the facts and propositions coincide, to that extent suffering is located as a problem similarly. Thus one of the purposes of this study is to explore in what ways and for what reasons suffering became problematical in each religion, and also to show what responses to suffering have been proposed or advocated.

In writing this book, three general principles have been kept in mind: (1) No *extensive* knowledge of other religions has been assumed; an attempt, therefore, has been made to explain the basic features of each religion as they occur, so far as they are relevant to this study.<sup>2</sup> (2) So far as possible, each religion has been allowed to speak for itself, hence the very large number of original quotations in the book. The intention has been to supply sufficient original material to make the arguments within each religion intelligible. The book would perhaps have been strengthened by the inclusion of additional illustrations from other sources, such as art and music, but that would have produced a work of quite unmanageable length.<sup>3</sup> In selecting illustrations I

<sup>1</sup> Marxism has been included in this study because of its derivation from a religious tradition, and because of its continuing connections with that tradition; furthermore, its ostensible repudiation of religion has an obvious bearing on religious responses to suffering. Its inclusion does not imply an answer to the disputed and usually academic question of whether Marxism is or is not a religion.

<sup>2</sup> A *general* knowledge is obviously necessary: many books are now available summarising the beliefs and practices of different religions; a particularly useful and readable one is *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, ed. R. C. Zaehner.

<sup>3</sup> Limitations of length were in any case imposed on this book by the fact that its material first took shape as a course of University Lectures which, in turn, were intended to provide a basis for class or seminar work. In that context, collecting further illustrative material from musical and artistic sources is in itself a rewarding project.

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have concentrated on the sources which are of particular importance and value to each religion in the formation of the attitudes of its adherents. (3) On those foundations I have then, more briefly, illustrated some of the ways in which those basic and fundamental attitudes have been developed and applied down to the present day. It would, obviously, be quite impossible to include everything that every religion has ever said on the subject of suffering, but it *is* possible to isolate certain prevailing characteristics and give them a reasonably detailed examination.

It is possible that such an approach may seem academic and detached—and to some extent, in a book, it is bound to be so. For that reason it must be emphasised that the facts and instances of suffering occur first, not the problem, and that the many passages quoted in this book come more often from experience than from a desire for intellectual satisfaction. The realities of suffering are common to us all, and it is not hard to feel a very real identification with those who have expressed their feelings about this common experience—no matter what their time or place or generation may be:

I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.  
 The disdain and calmness of martyrs,  
 The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her  
     children gazing on,  
 The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing,  
     cover'd with sweat,  
 The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the  
     murderous buckshot and the bullets,  
 All these I feel or am. . . .  
 Agonies are one of my changes of garments,  
 I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the  
     wounded person,  
 My heart turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. Whitman, 'Song of Myself' from *Leaves of Grass*, Nonesuch edn. (ed. E. Holloway), London, 1964, p. 63.

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## 1

## JUDAISM

## THE FOUNDATIONS

You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

There can be few sentences which express so briefly, but at the same time so clearly, the essence of Hebrew and Jewish religion: relationship with God has, in immediate terms, practical rather than speculative consequences; and the imperative (or in this case the prohibition) is based on an appeal to history, not on an appeal to authority or to revelation in abstract form. Among the many cultures and religions of the ancient world, Israel stands out as distinct and different from them all. The religion of Israel drew on many alien sources, and it often made use of foreign practices and ideas, but always it constructed out of them something distinctively its own. The distinctive genius of Israel lay in its realisation and acceptance of the possibility that God might disclose himself in the events of history. It would be absurd to say that no one else in the ancient world believed that that might be so, just as it would be absurd to say that in Israel there was no other way in which God was believed to reveal himself. In point of fact, God was believed to make himself known in a great variety of ways—in creation, for example, or in the natural order, in the lives of exemplary men, in the words and actions of inspired individuals, in carefully ordered rituals, or even in the chance occurrences and accidents of life. In a sense it could be said that God is knowable in all things since all things are his creation. Yet still the fact remains that the distinctive and controlling factor in Israelite religion was the conviction that in the past God had unmistakably shown his hand in particular events, and that consequently in the present there were good grounds for believing that he would do so again. A foundation of this belief was laid in the sequence of events known as the Exodus. Under the banner of a newly-discovered (or perhaps newly-rediscovered) god, Yahweh,

<sup>1</sup> Exod. 22: 21; see also 23: 9, Lev. 19: 33 f., Deut. 10: 19, 24: 17 *et al.* Note that in this chapter the words 'Scripture' and 'Biblical' refer to *Jewish* Scripture.

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a tiny handful of enslaved tribes made their escape from Egypt. The success of that escape and of their subsequent efforts to establish themselves in Canaan, not only vindicated their faith in Yahweh; it vindicated Yahweh himself. It showed, to put it crudely (as it would be put crudely in those early days), that Yahweh was up to his job—he was worth trusting.

Yahweh I sing: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea . . .

Yahweh is a warrior;  
Yahweh is his name.

The chariots and the army of Pharaoh he has hurled into the sea;  
the pick of his horsemen lie drowned in the Sea of Reeds . . .

Who among the gods is your like, Yahweh?

Who is your like, majestic in holiness,  
terrible in deeds of prowess, worker of wonders?<sup>1</sup>

That understanding of God's activity has given to Judaism its capacity, not simply to survive, but also to sustain and inspire people down to the present day. Its roots are planted, not in mythology, but in history, or at least in an interpretation of historical events. This is not to say that mythology is absent from Scripture: on the contrary, it plays a prominent part, but almost invariably it is as a vehicle, conveying the significance of an experience and interpretation of history. From that central core of events in the Exodus the people of Israel gradually unified history by extending it backward to creation and forward to their own time, and by seeing it all as the arena of God's activity. In that process, random elements of tradition and mythology were gathered in, but only to serve the unifying vision of faith, that God is a potential participant in the affairs of men. Frequently, in early days, this was expressed in direct and simple terms as the participation of Israel's God, Yahweh, on behalf of his people to secure their welfare. Gradually (though by no means invariably, even down to the present) the crudity of this was transformed, and it was realised that knowledge of God demands more in the way of obligation than it offers of privilege or of immediate, effortless victory:

You alone of all the families of earth, have I acknowledged, *therefore* it is for all your sins that I mean to punish you.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exod. 15: 1, 3, 4, 6, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Amos 3: 2.

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Decisive in this development was the application by the Hebrews of the concept of Covenant to religion. Clear covenant-forms were used in the Ancient Near East, particularly by the Hittites, to govern relations between nations or states. Those covenant-forms were used by the Israelite tribes to express the relationship which they believed to exist between themselves and God.<sup>1</sup>

In those covenants the conditions obligatory on both sides were laid down, and at the same time a summary was usually given of the historical circumstances on which the covenant-relationship was based. The application of the covenant-form to religion gave natural rise to the integration of law and narrative which together constitute Torah,<sup>2</sup> and which are so characteristic of Israelite religion. The obligations expressed as Law were subsequently accepted in their own right as being the revealed will of God, but the guarantee of that revelation, the guarantee, almost, that it is revelation, lay in God's self-disclosure in historical events.<sup>3</sup>

It may seem that this brief summary of the importance of history in Israelite religion has little direct relevance to the problem of suffering, but in fact this simple belief, that God has shown his hand in history, remains the key with which the Jewish people can hope to turn the lock of suffering. Yet at the very same time it also *creates* the problem of suffering, because the more firmly it is believed that God has participated in historical events the more inevitably it is bound to be asked why he does not participate more often. Why does he not always intervene to deliver his faithful servants? Why do the innocent suffer?

This at once begins to isolate the particular way in which suffering occurs as a problem in Scripture. On the whole, there was no great anxiety about the actual occurrence of suffering, or why it should exist. Those questions were certainly raised, as particularly in the opening chapters of Genesis, but there the fundamental assertion is made that the created order is 'very good',<sup>4</sup> and that evil and suffering, summarised in death, are a

<sup>1</sup> For general treatments of this theme, see G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant* (Pittsburgh, 1955); D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> The word Torah means, roughly, guidance for life. It is sometimes translated 'Law', but it has a more extensive reference than that. It was applied particularly to the first five books of Scripture, the Pentateuch, which includes not only the laws revealed to Moses, but also long sections of narrative which are equally regarded as revelation. See further p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> For a particularly good example of this interaction between history, faith and law, see Ps. 105, especially vss. 42–5.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 1: 31.

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consequence of Man (Adam)<sup>1</sup> alienating himself from God. In other words, dualism<sup>2</sup> was excluded, and the existence of suffering and death was located in the choices of Man which open up those possibilities inherent in creation. There is no second principle or creator responsible for evil. Indeed, it might even be said that Genesis does not portray a single 'fall of man', but rather a gradual extension and exploration of the human capacity to corrupt the gifts of God. The opening chapters of Genesis are a progressive illustration of the effects of the alienation of men from God, particularly in self-centredness, rivalry and murder, exploitation and lust in sexual relationships, the abnegation of responsibility in wilful drunkenness, tension and rivalry between nations; and set against them, immediately and directly, is the covenant promise which offers the restoration of relationship, and which in itself asserts that God is in purposeful control:

Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing.'<sup>3</sup>

Thus although the opening chapters of Genesis are aetiological, attempting to explain the origin of particular examples of suffering and evil, the explanations do not call into question the purposefulness and supremacy of God. This absence of dualism has had profound effects in the Western tradition, because although dualism, which in many ways is the most obvious explanation of evil, has at times asserted itself, it has always been as an alien element. Zoroastrianism, for example, had an important imaginative influence on Judaism and Christianity, but its direct effect was slight, and it found more congenial ground for development in the East.<sup>4</sup> In face of the idea that the world is a battle-ground between the forces of light and the autonomous forces of darkness, Deutero-Isaiah<sup>5</sup> asserted that God creates both light and

<sup>1</sup> The name Adam = Man.

<sup>2</sup> On the meaning of dualism see pp. 270–84, esp. p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 12: 1 f.

<sup>4</sup> On Zoroastrianism, see pp. 270–4.

<sup>5</sup> Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40–55) was almost certainly written during the exile of many of the Jews in Babylonia, after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. It was during this period that Cyrus rose to power at the head of the Persians and overthrew the Babylonians; and it was also at about this time that the prophet Zoroaster lived, who, although he was not himself strictly dualist, proclaimed a religious message with discernibly dualistic tendencies (see pp. 271–3). The reaction of Deutero-Isaiah against dualism is, therefore, particularly interesting.



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darkness, weal and woe; and in this he is consistent with the Biblical understanding and experience of God. There is scarcely ever any question that God cares for the world he has made. As the book of Job puts it:

His works are great, past all reckoning,  
 marvels, beyond all counting,  
 He sends down rain to the earth,  
 pours down water on the fields.  
 If his will is to rescue the downcast,  
 or raise the afflicted to the heights of joy,  
 he wrecks the plans of the artful,  
 and brings to naught their intrigues.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the many tragic experiences of the Jewish people, it might seem odd that this conviction remained credible. But it was, of course, guaranteed by precisely that understanding of historical events which saw them as the disclosure of God. If God has once delivered his people from ‘the iron furnace of Egypt’,<sup>2</sup> this remains the case, no matter how great the suffering of a particular individual or generation in subsequent times. There is no other furnace of suffering, however great, which can possibly falsify this or count against it, once that interpretation has been accepted as the only credible explanation of those original events. This explains why, in Scripture, suffering is usually accepted quite simply as one of the facts of existence. It is a part of the way things happen to be. The problem in Scripture is not why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not others. The problem is not the *fact* of suffering but its *distribution*. Why do the wicked prosper, while those who try to keep faith with God suffer?

The acuteness of this problem can be seen quite easily by reading through the Psalter. There are very few Psalms which do not have something to say about it, and many of them arose as a direct response to it. Furthermore, the problem became steadily more acute, not less, as the people of Israel explored and developed the implications of their faith and trust in Yahweh. The faith of Israel, as recorded in Scripture, is remarkable for the quite extraordinary degree of integrity with which that exploration was carried out. The conviction that God had taken the initiative in

<sup>1</sup> Job 5: 9–12.<sup>2</sup> Deut. 4: 20.

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creation and redemption meant that individuals could live with God in their own time in an entirely open-ended way. The implications of accepting the reality of God and of his involvement in the affairs of men were known in general but not in detail, and they had to be discovered by living with God faithfully in actual events. This is why the writings of Israel so often reveal a conflict between those who were content with a traditional or conventional idea of God, and those who searched for a deeper and more realistic understanding of what it ought to mean to live with God in their own time and generation. The Prophets, for example, often found themselves not only *contra mundum* but also *contra fidem*—against, that is, the prevailing understanding of faith amongst their contemporaries. It was in the integrity of this experimental faith that Israel came to realise the universality of God (no longer the deity of a particular group of tribes), his power in creation, his overriding justice and retribution, and his constancy.

He lives above the circle of the earth,  
its inhabitants look like grasshoppers . . .  
'To whom could you liken me  
and who could be my equal?' says the Holy One.  
Lift your eyes and look.  
Who made these stars  
if not he who drills them like an army,  
calling each one by name?  
So mighty is his power, so great his strength,  
that not one fails to answer.<sup>1</sup>

But the more it was believed that God was in control of the situation, the more his control in the distribution of suffering ought to have been apparent. The more profound their understanding of God became, the more acute became the problem of distribution; and it is significant that the passage quoted above, extolling the majesty and creative power of God, immediately goes on:

How can you say, Jacob,  
how can you insist, Israel,  
'My destiny is hidden from Yahweh,  
my rights are ignored by my God'?<sup>2</sup>

The doubt was bound to be expressed; but what answers could be given to it?

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 40: 22, 25 f.<sup>2</sup> Isa. 40: 27.