

God's Problem

How the Bible Fails to Answer

Our Most Important Question—

Why We Suffer

Bart D. Ehrman



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Suffering and a Crisis of Faith

If there is an all-powerful and loving God in this world, why is there so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering? The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time. It was what made me begin to think about religion when I was young, and it was what led me to question my faith when I was older. Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith. This book tries to explore some aspects of the problem, especially as they are reflected in the Bible, whose authors too grappled with the pain and misery in the world.

To explain why the problem matters so much to me, I need to give a bit of personal background. For most of my life I was a devout and committed Christian. I was baptized in a Congregational church and reared as an Episcopalian, becoming an altar boy when I was twelve and continuing all the way through high school. Early in my high school days I started attending a Youth for Christ club and had a “born-again” experience—which, looking back, seems a bit strange: I had been involved in church, believing in Christ, praying to God, confessing my sins, and so on for years. What exactly did I need to convert from? I think I was converting from hell—I didn’t want to experience eternal torment with the poor souls who had not been “saved”; I much preferred the option of heaven. In any event, when I became born again it was like ratcheting my religion up a notch. I became very serious about my faith and chose to go off to a fundamentalist Bible college—Moody Bible Institute in Chicago—where I began training for ministry.

I worked hard at learning the Bible—some of it by heart. I could quote entire books of the New Testament, verse by verse, from memory. When I graduated from Moody with a diploma in Bible and Theology (at the time Moody did not offer a B.A. degree), I went off to finish my college work at Wheaton, an evangelical Christian college in Illinois (also Billy Graham's alma mater). There I learned Greek so that I could read the New Testament in its original language. From there I decided that I wanted to commit my life to studying the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and chose to go to Princeton Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian school whose brilliant faculty included Bruce Metzger, the greatest textual scholar in the country. At Princeton I did both a master of divinity degree—training to be a minister—and, eventually, a Ph.D. in New Testament studies.

I'm giving this brief synopsis to show that I had solid Christian credentials and knew about the Christian faith from the inside out—in the years before I lost my faith.

During my time in college and seminary I was actively involved in a number of churches. At home, in Kansas, I had left the Episcopal church because, strange as this might sound, I didn't think it was serious enough about religion (I was pretty hard-core in my evangelical phase); instead I went a couple of times a week to a Plymouth Brethren Bible Chapel (among those who *really* believed!). When I was away from home, living in Chicago, I served as the youth pastor of an Evangelical Covenant church. During my seminary years in New Jersey I attended a conservative Presbyterian church and then an American Baptist church. When I graduated from seminary I was asked to fill the pulpit in the Baptist church while they looked for a full-time minister. And so for a year I was pastor of the Princeton Baptist Church, preaching every Sunday morning, holding prayer groups and Bible studies, visiting the sick in the hospital, and performing the regular pastoral duties for the community.

But then, for a variety of reasons that I'll mention in a moment, I started to lose my faith. I now have lost it altogether. I no longer go

to church, no longer believe, no longer consider myself a Christian. The subject of this book is the reason why.

In an earlier book, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, I have indicated that my strong commitment to the Bible began to wane the more I studied it. I began to realize that rather than being an inerrant revelation from God, inspired in its very words (the view I had at Moody Bible Institute), the Bible was a very human book with all the marks of having come from human hands: discrepancies, contradictions, errors, and different perspectives of different authors living at different times in different countries and writing for different reasons to different audiences with different needs. But the problems of the Bible are not what led me to leave the faith. These problems simply showed me that my evangelical beliefs about the Bible could not hold up, in my opinion, to critical scrutiny. I continued to be a Christian—a completely committed Christian—for many years after I left the evangelical fold.

Eventually, though, I felt compelled to leave Christianity altogether. I did not go easily. On the contrary, I left kicking and screaming, wanting desperately to hold on to the faith I had known since childhood and had come to know intimately from my teen-aged years onward. But I came to a point where I could no longer believe. It's a very long story, but the short version is this: I realized that I could no longer reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of life. In particular, I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it.

The problem of suffering became for me the problem of faith. After many years of grappling with the problem, trying to explain it, thinking through the explanations that others have offered—some of them pat answers charming for their simplicity, others

highly sophisticated and nuanced reflections of serious philosophers and theologians—after thinking about the alleged answers and continuing to wrestle with the problem, about nine or ten years ago I finally admitted defeat, came to realize that I could no longer believe in the God of my tradition, and acknowledged that I was an agnostic: I don't "know" if there is a God; but I think that if there is one, he certainly isn't the one proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one who is actively and powerfully involved in this world. And so I stopped going to church.

Only on rare occasions do I go to church now, usually when my wife, Sarah, very much wants me to go. Sarah is a brilliant intellectual—a distinguished professor of medieval English literature at Duke University—and a committed Christian, actively involved in the Episcopal church. For her the problems of suffering that I wrestle with are not problems. It's funny how smart and well-meaning people can see things so differently, even on the most basic and important questions in life.

In any event, the last time I was in church was with Sarah, this past Christmas Eve, while visiting her brother Simon (another agnostic) in Saffron Walden, a market town near Cambridge, England. Sarah had wanted to attend the midnight service at the local Anglican church, and Simon and I—who both respect her religious views—agreed to go with her.

When I was young I always found the Christmas Eve service to be the most meaningful worship experience of the year. The sacred hymns and carols, the prayers and praises, the solemn readings from Scripture, the silent reflections on this most powerful of nights, when the divine Christ came into the world as a human infant—I still have a strong emotional attachment to the moment. Deep down I am profoundly stirred by the story of God coming into the world for the salvation of sinners. And so I was prepared, even as one who no longer believes, to find the service on this Christmas Eve to be moving and emotional.

It was emotional, but not in the way I had expected. Hymns were sung, the liturgy recited, the sermon delivered. What moved me

most, however, was the congregational prayer, which did not come from the Book of Common Prayer but was written for the occasion, spoken loudly and clearly by a layperson standing in the aisle, his voice filling the vast space of the cavernous church around us. “You came into the darkness and made a difference,” he said. “Come into the darkness again.” This was the refrain of the prayer, repeated several times, in a deep and sonorous voice. And it brought tears to my eyes as I sat with bowed head, listening and thinking. But these were not tears of joy. They were tears of frustration. If God had come into the darkness with the advent of the Christ child, bringing salvation to the world, why is the world in such a state? Why *doesn't* he enter into the darkness again? Where is the presence of God in this world of pain and misery? Why is the darkness so overwhelming?

I knew that the very essence of the message of the Bible lay beneath this heartfelt and well-meaning prayer. For the authors of the Bible, the God who created this world is a God of love and power who intervenes for his faithful to deliver them from their pain and sorrow and bring them salvation—not just in the world to come but in the world we live in now. This is the God of the patriarchs who answered prayer and worked miracles for his people; this is the God of the exodus who saved his suffering people from the misery of slavery in Egypt; this is the God of Jesus who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and fed those who were hungry. Where is this God now? If he came into the darkness and made a difference, why is there still no difference? Why are the sick still wracked with unspeakable pain? Why are babies still born with birth defects? Why are young children kidnapped, raped, and murdered? Why are there droughts that leave millions starving, suffering horrible and excruciating lives that lead to horrible and excruciating deaths? If God intervened to deliver the armies of Israel from its enemies, why doesn't he intervene now when the armies of sadistic tyrants savagely attack and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries? If God is at work in the darkness, feeding the hungry with the miraculous multiplication of

loaves, why is it that one child—a mere child!—dies every five seconds of hunger? Every five seconds.

“You came into the darkness and you made a difference. Come into the darkness again.” Yes, I wanted to affirm this prayer, believe this prayer, commit myself to this prayer. But I couldn’t. The darkness is too deep, the suffering too intense, the divine absence too palpable. During the time that it took for this Christmas Eve service to conclude, more than 700 children in the world would have died of hunger; 250 others from drinking unsafe water; and nearly 300 other people from malaria. Not to mention the ones who had been raped, mutilated, tortured, dismembered, and murdered. Nor the innocent victims caught up in the human trade industry, nor those suffering throughout the world from grinding poverty, the destitute migrant farmworkers in our own country, those who were homeless and inflicted with mental disease. Nor to mention the silent suffering that so many millions of the well-fed and well-tended have to experience daily: the pain of children with birth defects, children killed in car accidents, children senselessly taken by leukemia; the pain of divorce and broken families; the pain of lost jobs, lost income, failed prospects. And where is God?

Some people think that they know the answers. Or they aren’t bothered by the questions. I’m not one of those people. I have been thinking intensely about these questions for many, many years. I have heard the answers, and even though I once “knew” and was satisfied with these answers, I am no longer satisfied.

I think I know when suffering started to become a “problem” for me. It was while I was still a believing Christian—in fact, it was when I was pastoring the Princeton Baptist Church in New Jersey. It was not the suffering that I observed and tried to deal with in the congregation—failed marriages, economic hardship, the suicide of a teenage boy—that prompted my questioning, but something that took place outside the church, in the academy. At the time, in addition to working in the church, I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation and also teaching part time at Rutgers University. (It was a busy

time. On top of it all, I was also married with two young children.) One of the classes I taught that year was a new one for me. Until then, I had mainly taught courses on the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the writings of Paul. But I had been asked to teach a course called “The Problem of Suffering in the Biblical Traditions.” I welcomed the opportunity because it seemed like an interesting way to approach the Bible: examining the responses given by various biblical authors to the question of why there is suffering in the world, in particular among the people of God. It was my belief then, and continues to be my belief now, that different biblical authors had different solutions to the question of why God’s people suffer: some (such as the prophets) thought that suffering came from God as a punishment for sin; some thought that suffering came from God’s cosmic enemies, who inflicted suffering precisely because people tried to do what was right before God; others thought that suffering came as a test to see if people would remain faithful despite suffering; others said that suffering was a mystery and that it was wrong even to question why God allowed it; still others thought that this world is just an inexplicable mess and that we should “eat, drink, and be merry” while we can. And so on. It seemed to me at the time, and seems so now, that one of the ways to see the rich diversity of the scriptural heritage of Jews and Christians was to see how different authors responded to this fundamental question of suffering.

For the class I had students do a lot of reading throughout the Bible and also assigned several popular books that discuss suffering in the modern world—for example, Elie Wiesel’s classic *Night*,¹ which describes his horrifying experiences in Auschwitz as a teenager, Rabbi Harold Kushner’s best-selling *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,² and the much less read but thoroughly moving story of Job as rewritten by Archibald MacLeish in his play *J.B.*³ In the class students wrote a number of papers, and each week we discussed the biblical passages and the extra reading that had been assigned.

I began the semester by laying out for the students the classical “problem” of suffering and explaining what is meant by the technical term *theodicy*. Theodicy is a word invented by one of the great intellectuals and polymaths of the seventeenth century, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who wrote a lengthy treatise in which he tried to explain how and why there can be suffering in the world if God is all powerful and wants the absolute best for people.⁴ The term is made up of two Greek words: *theos*, which means “God,” and *dikē*, which means “justice.” Theodicy, in other words, refers to the problem of how God can be “just” or “righteous” given the fact there is so much suffering in the world that he allegedly created and is sovereign over.

As philosophers and theologians have discussed theodicy over the years, they have devised a kind of logical problem that needs to be solved to explain the suffering in the world. This problem involves three assertions that all appear to be true, but if true appear to contradict one another. The assertions are these:

God is all powerful.

God is all loving.

There is suffering.

How can all three be true at once? If God is all powerful, then he is able to do whatever he wants (and can therefore remove suffering). If he is all loving, then he obviously wants the best for people (and therefore does not want them to suffer). And yet people suffer. How can that be explained?

Some thinkers have tried to deny one or the other of the assertions. Some, for example, have argued that God is not really all powerful—this is ultimately the answer given by Rabbi Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. For Kushner, God wishes he could intervene to bring your suffering to an end, but his hands are tied. And so he is the one who stands beside you to give you the

strength you need to deal with the pain in your life, but he cannot do anything to stop the pain. For other thinkers this is to put a limit on the power of God and is, in effect, a way of saying that God is not really God.

Others have argued that God is not all loving, at least in any conventional sense. This is more or less the view of those who think God is at fault for the terrible suffering that people endure—a view that seems close to what Elie Wiesel asserts when he expresses his anger at God and declares him guilty for how he has treated his people. Others, again, object and claim that if God is not love, again he is not God.

There are some people who want to deny the third assertion; they claim that there is not really any suffering in the world. But these people are in the extreme minority and have never been very convincing to most of us, who prefer looking at the world as it is to hiding our heads in the sand like ostriches.

Most people who wrestle with the problem want to say that all three assertions are true, but that there is some kind of extenuating circumstance that can explain it all. For example, in the classical view of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, as we will see at length in the next couple of chapters, God is certainly all powerful and all loving; one of the reasons there is suffering is that his people have violated his law or gone against his will, and he is bringing suffering upon them to force them to return to him and lead righteous lives. This kind of explanation works well so long as it is the wicked who suffer. But what about the wicked who prosper while the ones who try to do what is right before God are wracked with interminable pain and unbearable misery? How does one explain the suffering of the righteous? For that, another explanation needs to be used (for example, that all will be made right in the afterlife—a view not found in the prophets but in other biblical authors). And so it goes.

Even though it was a scholar of the Enlightenment—Leibniz—who came up with the term *theodicy*, and even though the deep

philosophical problem has been with us only since the Enlightenment, the basic “problem” has been around since time immemorial. This was recognized by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment themselves. One of them, the English philosopher David Hume, pointed out that the problem was stated some twenty-five hundred years ago by one of the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Epicurus:

Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered:

Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent.

Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Whence, then, evil?⁵

As I was teaching my course on biblical views of suffering at Rutgers, more than twenty years ago, I began to realize that the students seemed remarkably, and somewhat inexplicably, detached from the problem. It was a good group of students: smart and attentive. But they were for the most part white, middle-class kids who had yet to experience very much pain in their lives, and I had to do some work to help them realize that suffering was in fact a problem.

As it turned out, that was the time of one of the great Ethiopian famines. In order to drive home for my students just how disturbing suffering could be, I spent some time with them dealing with the problem of the famine. It was an enormous problem. In part because of the political situation, but even more because of a massive drought, eight million Ethiopians were confronting severe shortages and, as a result, starving. Every day there were pictures in the papers of poor souls, famished, desperate, with no relief in sight. Eventually one out of every eight died the horrific death of starvation. That’s one million people, starved to death, in a world that has far more than enough food to feed all its inhabitants, a world in which American farmers are paid to destroy their crops and most

Americans ingest far more calories than our bodies need or want. To make my point, I would show pictures of the famine to the students, pictures of emaciated Ethiopian women with famished children on their breasts, desperate for nourishment that would never come, both mother and children eventually destroyed by the ravages of hunger.

Before the semester was over, I think my students got the point. Most of them did learn to grapple with the problem. At the beginning of the course, many of them had thought that whatever problem there was with suffering could be fairly easily solved. The most popular solution they had was one that, I suspect, most people in our (Western) world today still hold on to. It has to do with free will. According to this view, the reason there is so much suffering in the world is that God has given human beings free will. Without the free will to love and obey God, we would simply be robots doing what we were programmed to do. But since we have the free will to love and obey, we also have the free will to hate and disobey, and this is where suffering comes from. Hitler, the Holocaust, Idi Amin, corrupt governments throughout the world, corrupt human beings inside government and out—all of these are explained on the grounds of free will.

As it turns out, this was more or less the answer given by some of the great intellectuals of the Enlightenment, including Leibniz, who argued that human beings have to be free in order for this world to be the best world that could come into existence. For Leibniz, God is all powerful and so was able to create any kind of world he wanted; and since he was all loving he obviously wanted to create the best of all possible worlds. This world—with freedom of choice given to its creatures—is therefore the best of all possible worlds.

Other philosophers rejected this view and none so famously, vitriolically, and even hilariously as the French philosopher Voltaire, whose classic novel *Candide* tells the story of a man (Candide) who experiences such senseless and random suffering and misery, in this allegedly “best of all worlds,” that he abandons his Leibnizian

upbringing and adopts a more sensible view, that we can't know the whys and wherefores of what happens in this world but should simply do our very best to enjoy it while we can.⁶ *Candide* is still a novel very much worth reading—witty, clever, and damning. If this is the *best* world possible, just imagine what a worse one would be.

In any event, as it turns out—much to the surprise of my students—this standard explanation that God had to give human beings free will and that suffering is the result of people badly exercising it plays only a very minor role in the biblical tradition. The biblical authors did not think about the possibilities of *not* having free will—they certainly didn't know about robots, or indeed any machines that more or less did what they were programmed to do. But they had many explanations, other than free will, for why people suffer. The goal of the class was to discuss these other views, evaluate them, and try to see if any resolution of the problem was even possible.

It was, in fact, fairly easy to show some of the problems with this standard modern explanation that suffering comes from free will. Yes, you can explain the political machinations of the competing political forces in Ethiopia (or in Nazi Germany or in Stalin's Soviet Union or in the ancient worlds of Israel and Mesopotamia) by claiming that human beings had badly handled the freedom given to them. But how can you explain drought? When it hits, it is not because someone chose not to make it rain. Or how do you explain a hurricane that destroys New Orleans? Or a tsunami that kills hundreds of thousands overnight? Or earthquakes, or mudslides, or malaria, or dysentery? The list goes on. Moreover, the claim that free will stands behind all suffering has always been a bit problematic, at least from a thinking perspective. Most people who believe in God-given free will also believe in an afterlife. Presumably people in the afterlife will still have free will (they won't be robots then either, will they?). And yet there won't be suffering (allegedly) then. Why will people know how to exercise free will in heaven if

they can't know how to exercise it on earth? In fact, if God gave people free will as a great gift, why didn't he give them the intelligence they need to exercise it so that we can all live happily and peaceably together? You can't argue that he wasn't *able* to do so, if you want to argue that he is all powerful. Moreover, if God sometimes intervenes in history to counteract the free will decisions of others—for example, when he destroyed the Egyptian armies at the exodus (they freely had decided to oppress the Israelites), or when he fed the multitudes in the wilderness in the days of Jesus (people who had chosen to go off to hear him without packing a lunch), or when he counteracted the wicked decision of the Roman governor Pilate to destroy Jesus by raising the crucified Jesus from the dead—if he intervenes *sometimes* to counteract free will, why does he not do so more of the time? Or indeed, all of the time?

At the end of the day, one would have to say that the answer is a mystery. We don't know why free will works so well in heaven but not on earth. We don't know why God doesn't provide the intelligence we need to exercise free will. We don't know why he sometimes contravenes the free exercise of the will and sometimes not. And this presents a problem, because if in the end the question is resolved by saying that the answer is a mystery, then it is no longer an answer. It is an admission that there is no answer. The "solution" of free will, in the end, ultimately leads to the conclusion that it is all a mystery.

As it turns out, that *is* one of the common answers asserted by the Bible. We just don't know why there is suffering. But other answers in the Bible are just as common—in fact, even more common. In my class at Rutgers I wanted to explore all these answers, to see what the biblical authors thought about such matters, and to evaluate what they had to say.

Based on my experience with the class, I decided at the end of the term that I wanted to write a book about it, a study of suffering and biblical responses to it. But the more I thought about it, the more I

realized that I wasn't ready to write the book. I was just thirty years old at the time, and although I had seen a lot of the world, I recognized that I had not seen nearly enough of it. A book like this requires years of thought and reflection, and a broader sense of the world and fuller understanding of life.

I'm now twenty years older, and I still may not be ready to write the book. It's true, I've seen a lot more of the world over these years. I've experienced a lot more pain myself, and have seen the pain and misery of others, sometimes close up: broken marriages, failed health, cancer taking away loved ones in the prime of life, suicide, birth defects, children killed in car accidents, homelessness, mental disease—you can make your own list from your experiences of the last twenty years. And I've read a lot: genocides and "ethnic cleansings" not only in Nazi Germany but also in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and now Darfur; terrorist attacks, massive starvation, epidemics ancient and modern, mudslides that kill thirty thousand Colombians in one fell swoop, droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis.

Still, even with twenty years' additional experience and reflection, I may not be ready to write the book. But I suppose in another twenty years, with the horrible suffering in store for this world, I may feel the same way then. So I've decided to write it now.

As I've already intimated, my basic goal in writing the book is to explore the biblical answers to the problem of suffering. I think this is an important task for a number of reasons:

1. Many people turn to the Bible as a source of comfort, hope, and inspiration. Even for those people who do not, the Bible lies at the foundation of Western culture and civilization, providing the background for the ways we think about the world and our place in it (in my opinion this is true for all of us, believers and unbelievers alike; the Bible informs our thinking in more ways than we are inclined to allow).

2. The Bible contains many and varied answers to the problem of why there is suffering in the world.
3. Many of these answers are at odds with one another, and at odds with what most people seem to think today.
4. The majority of people—even “Bible believers,” as well as regular people on the street who might have some kind of vague respect for the Bible but no particular commitment to it—have no idea what these various biblical answers to the problem of suffering are.

Over the years I've talked with a lot of people about issues pertaining to suffering, and I am struck by the kinds of reactions I get. A lot of people, frankly, just don't want to talk about it. For them, talking about suffering is kind of like talking about toilet habits. They're there and can't be avoided, but it's not really something you want to bring up at a cocktail party. There are other people—again, a lot of people—who have simple and pat answers for the problem and really don't see why there's such a problem. I imagine a lot of people reading this first chapter are like that. When I go on about all the suffering in the world, they're tempted to write me an e-mail to explain it all to me (it's because of free will; suffering is meant to make us stronger; God sometimes puts us to the test; and so on). Other people—including some of my brilliant friends—realize why it's a religious problem for me but don't see it as a problem for themselves. In its most nuanced form (and for these friends everything is extremely nuanced), this view is that religious faith is not an intellectualizing system for explaining everything. Faith is a mystery and an experience of the divine in the world, not a solution to a set of problems.

I respect this view deeply and some days I wish I shared it. But I don't. The God that I once believed in was a God who was active in this world. He saved the Israelites from slavery; he sent Jesus for

the salvation of the world; he answered prayer; he intervened on behalf of his people when they were in desperate need; he was actively involved in my life. But I can't believe in that God anymore, because from what I now see around the world, he doesn't intervene. One answer to *that* objection is that he intervenes in the hearts of the suffering, bringing them solace and hope in the time of their darkest need. It's a nice thought, but I'm afraid that from where I sit, it simply isn't true. The vast majority of people dying of starvation, or malaria, or AIDS feel no solace or hope at all—only sheer physical agony, personal abandonment, and mental anguish. The pat answer to *that* is that it doesn't need to be that way, if they have faith. I, on the other hand, simply don't think that's true. Look around!

In any event, my ultimate goal in this book is to examine the biblical responses to suffering, to see what they are, to assess how they might be useful for thinking people trying to get a handle on the reality of suffering either in their own lives or in the lives of others, and to evaluate their adequacy in light of the realities of our world. As I've already intimated, what comes as a surprise to many readers of the Bible is that some of these answers are not what they would expect, and that some of the answers stand at odds with one another. I will try to show, for example, that the book of Job has two sets of answers to the problem of suffering (one is in the story of Job found at the beginning and end of the book, the other is in the dialogues between Job and his friends that take up most of the chapters). These two views are at odds with each other. Moreover, both views differ from the views of the prophets. And the prophetic answer—found throughout much of the Hebrew Bible—is at odds with the views of Jewish “apocalypticists” such as Daniel, Paul, and even Jesus.

It is important, I think, to realize that the Bible has a wide range of answers to the problem of suffering because this realization reveals the problem of thinking that the Bible has one simple answer to every issue. Many people in our world take a smorgasbord ap-

proach to the Bible, picking and choosing what suits them and their views without acknowledging that the Bible is an extremely complex and intricate concatenation of views, perspectives, and ideas. There are millions of people in our world, for example, who suffer social estrangement because of their sexual orientation. Some of this social alienation originates among simpleminded Bible believers who insist that gay relationships are condemned in Scripture. As it turns out, that is a debated issue, one on which serious scholars disagree.⁷ But apart from that, this condemnation of gay relations “because the Bible condemns it” is a case of people choosing to accept the parts of the Bible they want to accept and ignoring everything else. The same books that condemn same-sex relations, for example, also require people to stone their children to death if they are disobedient, to execute anyone who does any work on Saturday or who eats pork chops, and to condemn anyone who wears a shirt made of two kinds of fabric. No special emphasis is placed on one of these laws over the others—they are all part of the biblical law. Yet, in parts of society, gay relations are condemned, while eating a ham sandwich during a lunch break on a Saturday workday is perfectly acceptable.

It is important, then, to see what the Bible actually says, and not to pretend it doesn't say something that happens to contradict one's own particular point of view. But whatever the Bible says needs to be evaluated. This is not a matter of setting oneself up as God, dictating what is and is not divine truth. It is a matter of using our intelligence to assess the merit of what the biblical authors say—whether this involves questions of suffering, sexual preferences, working on weekends, or culinary and sartorial choices.

Having said this, I should stress that it is not the goal of this book to convince you, my reader, to share my point of view about suffering, God, or religion. I am not interested in destroying anyone's faith or deconverting people from their religion. I am not about to urge anyone to become an agnostic. Unlike other recent agnostic or atheist authors, I do not think that every reasonable and reasonably

intelligent person will in the end come to see things my way when it comes to the important issues of life. But I do know that many thinking people think about suffering. This is in no small measure because all of us suffer, and many of us suffer a lot. Even those of us who are well off, who are well educated, who are well cared for—even we can experience professional disappointment, unexpected unemployment and loss of income, the death of a child, failed health; we can get cancer, or heart disease, or AIDS; all of us will eventually suffer and die. It is worth thinking about these things, and in doing so it is worth seeing how others have thought about them before us—in this case, those others who produced the books that became the Bible, the best-selling book of all time and the book that lies at the core of our civilization and culture.

And so my goal is to help people think about suffering. There are, of course, numerous books about suffering already. In my opinion, though, many of these books are either intellectually unsatisfying, morally bankrupt, or practically useless. Some of them attempt to give an easy or easy-to-digest answer to the question of why people suffer. For people who prefer easy answers, those can be useful books. But for people who struggle deeply with life's questions and do not find easy answers at all satisfying, such books merely irritate the mind and grate on the nerves—they are not helpful. Still, there is a good deal of simplistic schlock written about suffering. Pious-sounding or pat (and very old, unimaginative) answers sell well, after all these years.⁸

Other books are morally dubious, in my opinion—especially those written by intellectual theologians or philosophers who wrestle with the question of evil in the abstract, trying to provide an intellectually satisfying answer to the question of theodicy.⁹ What I find morally repugnant about many such books is that they are so far removed from the actual pain and suffering that takes place in our world, dealing with evil as an “idea” rather than as an experienced reality that rips apart people's lives.

This book will neither provide an easy solution nor attack the question philosophically by applying difficult intellectual concepts and making hard-to-understand claims with sophisticated and esoteric vocabulary. My interest for this book is instead with some of the age-old and traditional reflections on evil found in the foundational documents of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The questions I will be asking are these:

What do the biblical authors say about suffering?

Do they give one answer or many answers?

Which of their answers contradict one another, and why does it matter?

How can we as twenty-first-century thinkers evaluate these answers, which were written in different contexts so many centuries ago?

My hope is that, by looking at these ancient writings that eventually came to form the Bible, we will be empowered to wrestle more responsibly and thoughtfully with the issues they raise, as we ponder one of the most pressing and wrenching questions of our human existence: why we suffer.

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