Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thought about Evil

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Befriending Job: Theodicy Amid the Ashes

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Abstract: What role should theodicy play in the face of loss and acute suffering? Should it keep its distance and remain respectfully silent or should it step forward to illuminate the opaque reality of evil, especially untimely death? In my article, I explore the fraught relationship between the personal experience of loss and its theological interpretation through an analysis of three related bereavement autobiographies: C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*, and William Abraham's *Among the Ashes*. Invoking Job's "friends" as a theoretical framework, I analyze each author's attempt to reconcile the lived experience of suffering with the theoretical task of theodicy: to explain suffering. I conclude with my own constructive proposal on the place of theodicy in the realm of human anguish.

Keywords: the problem of evil, theodicy, suffering, bereavement, grief, mystery, silence, Job

1 Introduction

When Job's friends learn of his dramatic demise, they decide not to send flowers with their deepest condolences – thoughts and prayers – but rather to "go and console and comfort him."[1] Who knows from what great distances they traveled, at what expense, and what hardships they endured to be with their friend in his hour of need? They are not remembered for this kindness. No, Job's much-maligned friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – have a decidedly deprecatory legacy. They are the cautionary tale of practical, pastoral, and anti-theodicies, exemplifying the dangers endemic to detached, abstract responses to suffering: emotional insensitivity, theological speciousness, and philosophical overreach.[2] Given their sullied reputation, it is easy to overlook that "they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."[3] What a beautiful silent gesture of friendship and solidarity, eclipsed by the vitriol of the poetic dialogues, for which they became proverbial.

1 Job 2:11. In his textual note for this verse, James L. Crenshaw comments "Job's *three friends* are placed in the vicinity of Edom and Arabia. The former was famous for wisdom, according to various OT texts" (Crenshaw, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, NRSV, 753). I will utilize this version for all biblical quotations. For more extensive etymological analysis of the names and countries or vicinities of Job's friends, see Pope, *Job*, 23–4.

2 For a particularly egregious example of the harmful misuse of theodicy, see the anecdote in John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, 19.

3 Job 2:13. "The intermezzo of silence has powerful psychological force" (Crenshaw, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 753). The verse serves as the narrative bridge between the prose prologue and the poetic discourses. Pope notes that the gesture of silence comes from ancient grief rituals, in essence saying that Job seemed as good as dead: "Seven days and nights are devoted to mourning for the dead, Gen. 1 10; 1 Sam xxxi 13; Ecclesiasticus xxii 12. Comforters are not permitted to say a word until the mourner opens the conversation" (Pope, *Job*, 25). David J. A. Clines underscores the point that they "treat him as if he were already dead" (Clines, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 737, notes 11–13).

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Job's infamous friends – whom I do not intend to rehabilitate, although I do wish to complicate their legacy in passing – serve as a helpful biblical starting point for our considerations of three contemporary "Jobs": C. S. Lewis, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Abraham. As they journeyed through their shadowlands of grief, they wrote bereavement autobiographies, roughly 30 years apart: *A Grief Observed*, *Lament for a Son*, and *Among the Ashes*.[4] These three deeply personal and poignant accounts of bereavement probe into the problem of suffering and its theological implications, particularly the place of theodicy amid loss.[5] In what follows, I will briefly summarize their experiences of loss, link them to the problem of evil, and analyze their divergent perspectives on theodicy within the crucible of loss. I will conclude with specific recommendations for engaging in theodicy in the context of bereavement, where theological missteps can have ruinous emotional and spiritual consequences.

2 C. S. Lewis: the bolted door

In the *Problem of Pain*, Lewis ambitiously strives to "solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering."[6] He states the problem of evil in its classic syllogistic form, despite his avoidance of technical philosophical terminology for the sake of his general audience: "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."[7] Then through an analysis of the meaning and implications of divine omnipotence and goodness for fallen humanity, he arrives at his famous "megaphone theodicy": "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, and shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[8] Tellingly, Lewis wrote a letter to his brother Warren at the time of his composition of *The Problem of Pain*, where he posits a personal disjunction between theodicy and experience:

> If you are writing a book about pain and then get some actual pain... it does not either, as the cynic would expect, blow the doctrine to bits, nor, as a Christian would hope, turn into practice, but remains quite unconnected and irrelevant, just as any other bit of actual life does when you are reading and writing.[9]

At this insulated stage of his life, Lewis compartmentalizes his experience of suffering from his reflections on the purpose of pain.

Lewis's intellectual firewall did not hold up, however. His wife's death altered his tone. The sad circumstances behind Lewis's *A Grief Observed* are well-known, but I will briefly recount them. Lewis, a confirmed bachelor, married Joy Davidman Gresham late in life, despite opposition from some of his friends, including J. R. R. Tolkien.[10] Their love blossomed after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. When Joy inexplicably recovered for 3 years, they enjoyed a trip to Greece and the simple, unheralded pleasures of married life. Lewis shared with a friend, "I never expected to have, in my sixties, the happiness that passed me by in my twenties."[11] The unexpected happiness did not last long, sadly, and

4 Lewis, *A Grief Observed*; Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*; Abraham, *Among the Ashes: On Death, Grief, and Hope*.
5 For an introduction to the problem of evil and the task of theodicy, see Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil*.
6 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.
7 Ibid., 16.
8 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 91. For a discussion of Lewis's "megaphone theodicy" and its affinities with Hick's soul-making theodicy, see Scott, "C. S. Lewis and John Hick: An Interface on Theodicy."
9 Lewis, "Letter to Warren Lewis, December 03, 1939," 302.
10 They were married in a civil union on April 23, 1956, and in a Christian service on March 21, 1957. See McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, 384.
11 Coghill, "The Approach to English," 63.

her cancer returned with force. When Joy died soon after, Lewis was devastated.[12] It felt like a cruel joke, especially after her seemingly miraculous recovery. He wrote *A Grief Observed* to process his feelings of loss, fear, and anger. Throughout he engages the problem of evil at an unsystematic, visceral level.

"Meanwhile, where is God?" Lewis asks in the opening pages of *A Grief Observed*.[13] When we are happy and need God least, Lewis notes, we feel enveloped by his loving presence. When we are miserable and need him most, God seems alarmingly absent: "But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence."[14] Divine absence and silence haunts Lewis in the early stages of his grief. All of his brash confidence – his bold claim to have "solved the intellectual problem raised by suffering" – in the *Problem of Pain* has vanished.[15] The emotional experience of suffering has crippled him spiritually, and the theological casuistry of his younger self offers him no consolation or direction. He feels shut out of God's goodness. Perhaps God does not exist, perhaps God is cruel, or perhaps we will never know. Lewis no longer has all the answers ready at hand: he finds himself bemused.

Lewis, like Job, is confused and angry. He wonders whether God's goodness can be reconciled with Joy's suffering and death and with his subsequent emotional anguish.[16] From his vantage point, God's benevolence remains hidden at best. At worst, God seems to delight in torture: God the "Eternal Vivisector,"[17] the "Cosmic Sadist, the spiteful imbecile," he inveighs.[18] Lewis dismisses the theological coherence of these dark thoughts, but nonetheless registers the troubling, lingering question: why, in the midst of suffering, does God seem absent, silent, and even cruel? He entertains various versions of his "megaphone theodicy," that is, his proto-soul-making theodicy that argues that God employs suffering benevolently to summon our attention but to no avail.[19] It brings no succor. Slowly, however, he begins to feel the shut door crack open slightly.[20] He starts to perceive the incomprehensibility of God and suffering.[21]

3 Nicholas Wolterstorff: the unsolvable puzzle

As the Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University, Nicholas Wolterstorff was deeply familiar with the problem of evil and theodicy, but nothing he had studied or taught prepared him for the unexpected loss of his son, Eric. On June 11, 1983, Eric died in a mountain-climbing accident in Germany at the age of 25. When the authorities notified his father over the phone, he was understandably shocked after an initial – almost mystical – interlude of peace: "For three seconds I felt the peace of resignation, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone – Someone. Then the pain – cold burning pain."[22] In *Lament for a Son*, Wolterstorff details his grief journey. The slender book is beloved for its honesty, vulnerability, and

12 In a recently unearthed correspondence between Lewis and an American professor who lost his son, Lewis writes "You tell a most moving story. I too have lost what I most loved. Indeed unless we die young ourselves, we mostly do. We must die before them or see them die before us. And when we wish – and how agonizingly we do, o how perpetually! – it is entirely for ourselves, for our sakes not theirs" (Letter 5, October 26, 1963, in Peterson, *C. S. Lewis and the Christian Worldview* 187).
13 Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 5.
14 Ibid., 6.
15 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, xii.
16 Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 27–8.
17 Ibid., 38.
18 Ibid., 29–30, 38.
19 Ibid., 38, 43.
20 Ibid., 46.
21 Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 69: "When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze."
22 Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 9.

deeply sensitive exploration of a universal human experience: "What I have learned, to my surprise," Wolterstorff shares in the preface, "is that in its particularity there is universality."[23]

Wolterstorff juxtaposes his interior state with Lewis's, which demonstrates both the irreducible particularity of grief and its vast emotional range: "C. S. Lewis, writing about the death of his wife, was plainly angry with God [...] I am not angry but baffled and hurt. My wound is the unanswered question."[24] For Wolterstorff, the loss of his son knocks him into a spiritual tailspin that threatens to destroy his faith and compromise his emotional stability. If he were in the safe and familiar confines of the classroom, he could merely let the problem fade with the sound of the dismissal bell. Suffering, however, entered into his life not as an intellectual puzzle to solve but as an unwelcome invasion to endure. He cannot evade it as insoluble or dismiss it as a theological or philosophical surd. Nor can he cloak his pain in theodicy because it rings hallow to him in his state of grief. The unsolvable puzzle of God and suffering pushes him to the brink.

The more he strives for conceptual clarity and existential integration, the more it recedes. Despite his stellar academic credentials and obvious noetic prowess, he finds himself stumped. No explanations satisfy; no answers convince. He bravely confesses that he simply does not know how to reconcile his faith with his experience. They coexist in an irresolvable tension that mystifies him:

> I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.[25]

He does not condemn theodicy for its failure to console; he simply notes that it fails to allay *his* suffering. Whereas Lewis implicitly appeals to theodicy, Wolterstorff explicitly rejects its value for him.

In his recent autobiography, he reflects on the origin and shape of *Lament for a Son*. While in transit, transporting Eric's body back to the United States from Germany, Wolterstorff felt paralyzed by grief. Unable to read or function, he "began to write, pouring out my feelings and trying to put into words who Eric was. That was the beginning of my book *Lament for a Son*."[26] Wolterstorff, like Lewis in *A Grief Observed*, wrote not to solve the problem of evil but to survive it. His book was literary catharsis, not philosophical theology: "Why did I write? Out of helplessness[...] What else was there to do but write?"[27] As he wrote, he found his thoughts were disjointed and fragmentary. Rather than force a facile "continuous flow," he accepted it as an unavoidable literary expression of his internal fragmentation, which had important theological and practical significance: "My life had been fragmented, so my lament would have to be fragmented as well. I think of the white space between fragments as silence. In the face of death, we should not talk much."[28] Silence sanctifies the solemnity of loss, for Wolterstorff.

Wolterstorff received a critical review and several recriminating letters about the "heretical theology" of *Lament for a Son*. Rather than defend himself, he simply ignored the accusations: "But I found myself incapable of arguing theology with these critics – my grief got in the way. I did not reply."[29] Throughout *Lament for a Son* he inspects several theodicies, including providence, soul-making (invoking Lewis), punishment theodicy (invoking Job's friends), divine solidarity and impotence in the face of suffering (invoking Harold Kushner, but process theodicy would also serve), and, finally, a greater goods global theory but found and still finds them faulty.[30] "I did not think long and hard about these proposals for making sense of it all. Neither, after rejecting them, did I try to think up a new and better

23 Ibid., 5.
24 Ibid., 68.
25 Ibid., 68.
26 Wolterstorff, *In This World of Wonders*, 197.
27 Ibid. Later he remarks: "*Lament for a Son* is not a book about Grief—it's a *cry of grief*" (199).
28 Wolterstorff, *In This World of Wonders*, 197.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 208–9.

theodicy."[31] In the end, he vaguely affirms a cosmic battle/cruciform theodicy, but, interestingly, he has found that Eric's death and his grief prevent him from engaging the problem of evil: "I would begin reading some new treatment of the problem of evil, and find I had to put it down. I did not understand then – nor do I understand now – why that was, nor why it remains the case to this day."[32] In the face of the void, God has become a mystery, and theodicy unsolvable: "I live with the mystery."[33]

4 William Abraham: the black hole

William J. Abraham is the Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies and Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. In *Among the Ashes: On Death, Grief, and Hope*, Abraham reflects on the devastating death of his eldest son in several registers, especially theologically and emotionally. At the outset, he succinctly details the loss that ushered him into his unexpected journey in grief: "On Monday, June 4, 2013, at precisely 11:16 p.m., my beloved son Timothy died in Baylor Hospital in Dallas at the age of forty-two."[34] Notice the stark, journalistic specificity of his opening sentence, tenderly accented with the simple, evocative word "beloved." Nine days prior, Timothy's vital organs shut down due to hepatitis. When he heard the news, Abraham flew back home from Scotland to say goodbye to his son. Despite fervent prayers, Timothy passed away.

Understandably, the entire process, from the initial news of his medical crisis to the painful decision to remove the life-support systems, shook Abraham to the core. He describes it as a "nightmare" where "deep anguish and despair ripped through every fiber of my existence."[35] For him, the loss of Timothy was "to fall precipitously into a deep black hole.[36] It was a hole of darkness, numbness, despair, and waves of excruciating pain."[37] Timothy's death became a dividing line in his life – a before and after moment – which forged a "new identity."[38] Bereavement shaped how he lived, felt, and thought. On the one hand, he was grateful God answered two of his desperate prayers: he saw Timothy before he died, and he told him he loved him when he was briefly conscious. He was grateful to be present at his death too. On the other hand, he wrestled with the unanswered prayers for healing and for his life.[39] Where was God?

That brings us to the difficult terrain of theodicy, which Abraham traverses through the path of unanswered prayer:

> Given that God is good and almighty, how come our prayers for healing are not always answered? If God is good, God will be motivated to heal; if God is almighty, God has the capacity to heal. So how come our prayers for healing are given a negative answer? Or if this is too abstract, how come God heals in some cases and not in this one?[40]

Abraham resists the bifurcation between philosophical and pastoral perspectives on theodicy that sidelines the former until the latter cauterizes the wound. He argues that he did not "shelve" theodicy in the midst of his grief, even though he found it personally unhelpful: "I know all the standard moves in theodicy and even endorse a robust and integrated set of those moves," but, he continues, they were

31 Ibid., 209.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Abraham, *Among the Ashes*, 1.
35 Ibid., 2.
36 Wolterstorff employs the same term when describing his journey to retrieve the body of his son: "My flight to Luxembourg was one long black hole" (Wolterstorff, *In This World of Wonders*, 196).
37 Abraham, *Among the Ashes*, 4 (cf. 6–7, 69).
38 Ibid., 5.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 9.

"utterly empty in wrestling with the problem of the loss of my son."[41] So does the emotional impotency of intellectual theodicy discount it? Abraham answers "no."

Within the black hole, or darkness, of grief and suffering, theodicy may be "inappropriate or vacuous" but that does not negate its cogency or necessity.[42] The subjective or "first-person" perspective of suffering clouds the "third-person" or objective perspective of theodicy.[43] Suffering operates in the apophatic realm of unknowing and ineffability, while theodicy operates in the cataphatic realm of knowing and saying.[44] The gap between them prevents productive interchange, but it does not invalidate either. When emotions overwhelm, the mind cannot engage theodicy: "Considerations at the level of third-person perspectives fail to register; they become at best empty and hollow; at worst they are insensitive and otiose."[45] For Abraham, it does not follow that we should reject theodicy because it fails to bring solace to those in grief.[46] They may not interpenetrate, but they do not mutually exclude. Instead, he advocates for the contextualization of theodicy based on the sufferer's epistemic abilities and emotional needs.

5 When words fail: speaking into the void

As these three theologians illustrate, intelligence does not shield academics from the "slings and arrows" of life. Their sophisticated understanding of the problem of evil did not soften the blow when the dreaded day dawned. Intellectual and experiential familiarity with suffering yield two different types of knowledge. Knowledge *about* suffering, especially on a global scale, enables scholars to reflect on its theological and philosophical implications and significance. Knowledge *of* suffering, especially at a visceral, emotional level, raises different questions for scholars when they must endure the pain rather than elucidate it. Intellectually, scholars analyze the meaning of suffering globally within different theological and philosophical paradigms. Experientially, the scholar must reflect on the meaning of *their* suffering, and, for the theodicist, whether theodicy plays a constructive role in the experience of suffering.

While Lewis, Wolterstorff, and Abraham understood the standard Christian explanations for evil, when the hammer struck, their theodicies shattered. Lewis's "megaphone theodicy" lost its piercing, clarion quality, which forced him to recalibrate it to include mystery – the absence of answers – to supplement his belief that suffering chastens and teaches. Wolterstorff's familiarity with theodicy did not ameliorate his anguish. Instead, he found it intellectually unpersuasive, even while he probed it for insight in *Lament for a Son*. Abraham refused, *contra* Wolterstorff, simply to reject the cogency of traditional theodicy. Rather, Abraham differentiated between the optimal and suboptimal existential contexts for theodicy, arguing that acute suffering impairs our ability to analyze theodicy aright: tear-stained eyes cannot see clearly enough – they blur our theological vision. Do they reject theodicy? Not precisely. Rather, they refine (Lewis), redeploy (Wolterstorff), and reassign (Abraham) it.

Their engagement with theodicy, however, yields several insights about the experience of suffering and the limits of theodicy, from which I wish to draw some preliminary conclusions. First, in the midst of suffering, it is normal to experience a whole spectrum of feelings: fear, anger, confusion, hopelessness, disillusionment, and many others. Theodicy should not suppress these feelings or deny their legitimacy; it must always make room for lament and protest. Second, when we encounter the Jobs in our lives, silence is a powerful option. It acknowledges the depth of human suffering and respects the mystery of evil. It

41 Ibid., 11.

42 Abraham, *Among the Ashes*, 12. "However, my experience of Timothy's death took the family and me across a threshold of grief and agony where you simply hit rock bottom[…] There is nothing below it; it is darkness all the way down" (13–14).

43 Abraham, *Among the Ashes*, 14.

44 Ibid., 14.

45 Ibid., 16.

46 "Furthermore, the incomprehensibility of much suffering is not a license to eschew the pursuit of theodicy, that is, the effort to justify some of the ways of God as they relate to suffering as we speak to ourselves and to our critics" (Abraham, *Among the Ashes*, 82).

hallows the sacredness of their wounds. Third, in the face of human misery, we should entertain theodicy by invitation only and with the upmost sensitivity and skill. There is a time and place for everything under the sun, including intellectual disquisitions. Fourth, and finally, we should acknowledge the limits of theodicy. There is no "silver-bullet" theodicy – one decisive, definitive solution to the global problem of evil – and no theodicy, however compelling, can heal the deepest wounds of life.

As theodicists, we routinely offer our considered opinions in the face of difficult questions, so it is natural that we would want to have something to say in the face of suffering.[47] Remember Job's friends, however, and the valuable lessons they impart to us. They went astray when they interpreted Job's plight *for him*, and, in the process, claimed to have all the answers. In the divine speeches, God indicts them for intellectual overreach: they wrongly presume to know the mind of God, which forgets that God stuns with unapproachable light and hides in inaccessible darkness. Whatever we say, therefore, must be tentative, provisional, and modest. Job's friends, then, supply us with a negative example, noted by pastoral and practical theodicists and anti-theodicists but also with a positive example: the gift of silent presence. As Wolterstorff says "To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench."[48]

Silent presence shows our support during the hardest times of life: illness, loss, and grief. It signals our solidarity with those who suffer and the inadequacy of words in those moments. Let me end with a brief anecdote about the power of silent presence. When my friend's 5-year-old daughter died of leukemia only days after her diagnosis, he and his wife were plunged into the abyss of grief, lost in its bottomless darkness. Looking back on it, decades later, he reflects on the healing power of presence, embodied by their friend Dean:

> I am sure that we spoke but I don't remember what we talked about. What I do remember is that I didn't feel quite as alone when Dean came into the room. Later I came to realize that Dean had given one of the best gifts of comfort that we can give each other. It's the gift of presence.[49]

In short, then, our silent presence speaks volumes to those in the throes of acute suffering, amplified by our willingness to befriend them in their time of need when words fail, theology fumbles, and God seems silent.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, let us remember that the problem of evil for most people is not an academic area of specialization, but a gaping emotional or physical wound, so let us proceed with care, caution, and compassion. Moreover, let us remember to employ theodicy by invitation only and with the greatest possible sensitivity, so that we do not compound suffering with specious slogans or pernicious theories. Professor David Kelsey urges intentional "stuttering" when talking about suffering in order not to trivialize it with slick theological maneuvering. He says that if your theodicy is "getting fluent you might pause and ask why because it's a bad sign."[50] Like Job's friends, we sometimes have to face our beloved Jobs in their hour of need, when suffering besets and bewilders. Let us try to remember the wisdom of the friends of the prologue (Job 1–2) and to avoid the foolishness of the friends of the poetic dialogue (3–37). Thanks to Lewis, Wolterstorff, and Abraham, we have some new tools and techniques to befriend better in these difficult times.[51]

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47 On the moral and theological imperative for sensitive and sensible Christian discourse on theodicy, see Long, *What Shall We Say?* The value of silent presence does not negate the need for thoughtful Christian theodicy: we must speak but at the right time and in the right way.

48 Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 34 (cf. 63). For a discussion of Wolterstorff's analogy of the mourning bench as it relates to theodicy, see Scott, "Companion Theodicy," 17–8.

49 Crichton, Crichton, and Scott, *Blindsided*, 47.

50 Kelsey, "Our Anguish and God's Power."

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