QUESTION:

I would like to know more about your personal beliefs regarding the god issue and human suffering in all of its forms...all forms...war, poverty, governmental responsibility in suffering, population explosion, church persecutions and tortures...everything. I’m not just referring to your book on the history of the problem of suffering (God’s Problem) but your personal thoughts about it and how you are involved to help alleviate suffering and what you think the future of humanity is since there seems to be no stop to suffering. Suffering (not just people but animals) is of great concern to me and I see no solution...ever.

REPLY:

For the past week or ten days I’ve been answering questions one at a time, one post per question. This is the kind of question that makes me feel a whole series of posts coming on, a real thread. We’ll see.

The first thing to say is that God’s Problem is not really about the history of the problem of suffering, or the history of the discussion of the problem of suffering, so much as it was about the various biblical responses to suffering. Of all the trade books I’ve written now (eleven; with two more currently in press), God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails To Answer our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer is the one that most obviously stands out from the pack. It is the one book for a popular audience (or any audience, for that matter) that is not strictly about the New Testament or the history of early Christianity. Of course, the New Testament is an important component of the book, but the book is not about what scholars are saying about the New Testament so much as it is about what the New Testament authors themselves were saying, about this one problem of why there is suffering. Moreover, in this book, unlike the others, much more attention is paid to the Hebrew Bible than to the New Testament. That’s because the Hebrew Bible has a lot more to say about suffering than the New Testament does, in no small measure because it’s a much bigger book with many more authors and far more perspectives on this that or the other issue.

I have long thought – for nearly thirty years now – that many of the authors of the Bible were either directly or indirectly wrestling with precisely this question of why there is suffering given the fact that God – the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, the God of the Christians – is obviously able to intervene to prevent or stop suffering, that he has done so in the past for his beloved chosen people, and yet is just as obviously not doing so now. God’s Problem was written to deal with what different authors of the Bible had to say about that. Part of the thesis of the book was that different biblical authors had very different – even contradictory – views of the matter; and part of the thesis was that most of these views really cannot be seen as acceptable in our day and age.

The dominant view in the Bible is found in the Hebrew prophets (but also Psalms, Proverbs, parts of the NT, etc.), that God certainly can stop suffering for his people but he won’t for now or any time soon. In fact, he’s the one who is making his people suffer – famine/starvation, drought, epidemic, economic collapse, brutalities of war. Why would God do such things? Because his people have sinned and he is punishing them in order to get them to repent. When they do, he will relent and the good times will return. You don’t need to trust me that this is what the prophets say: simply read them! A good starting point is Amos 3-5; but really you can plop down in most places in the prophets and you’ll see this...
is their view.

Sometimes this view gets generalized, as in Proverbs and places in the Psalms. The way the world works is that if you are good and hard working and upright and moral and kind then you will be rewarded and have a good life; if you are evil and lazy and sinful and immoral and mean, you will be punished and have a rotten life. So hey, if you have a rotten life, it’s your own fault!

There were obvious reactions to this view. The book of Job is the best known reaction, but the book is complicated because it embodies the work of not one author but at least two, and these two have not the same point of view but radically different points of view. Maybe I’ll devote a post to that. Neither point of view finds the prophetic understanding that I mentioned above acceptable however; both authors of Job know that the righteous suffer, often worse than the sinners.

The apocalyptic authors of the Bible knew that as well (Daniel; Paul; book of Revelation; in fact most of the NT writers, and Jesus himself). In this view it is not because they sinned against God that the people of God suffer, but because they were righteous; in this view it is not God who is causing suffer but the forces of evil who are aligned against God who cause suffering; in this view repentance will not end the suffering because sin is not what is causing it; it is instead the destruction of the evil forces opposed to God and his people that will bring an end to this miserable state of affairs.

There are other views of suffering in the Bible: it can be redemptive; it can have a silver lining; it is a mystery that cannot be explained (one of the authors of Job thinks this); it is a test to see if God’s people will remain faithful even if they have to suffer for it (this is what another author of Job thinks); and so on.

At the end of my book I do get around to saying what I think myself. And I think maybe I’ll spend at least one post or more indicating here on this blog what I think, as one of the things I think is that this is the biggest issue that any and all of us can deal with, whether we are suffering ourselves or are deeply concerned about the suffering of others or are simply thinking people who want to understand our world and our place in it better.

The Two Books of Job
Jesus’ Literacy