

I was looking around for an interesting post from a few years ago, and I found this one, from March 2013, which, as it turns out, is relevant to what I am going to want to say in the thread I've just started on views of the afterlife that developed in ancient Israel (leading up to the Christian views that eventually came to be so dominant throughout the West.). The post provides, in a nutshell, three major views about why there is suffering. Why is that relevant? One of my theses I have going into my research for my next book is that views of the afterlife developed originally as a way to explain why there are such inequities in the present life. Here's the post:

I'm in New York City for a few days. Last night I gave a lecture at NYU; they had asked that I talk about "God, The Bible, and the Problem of Suffering." That's the topic of my book God's Problem, and so I spun off a talk from there. Part of the point of the book is that the Bible has a large number of views about why people - especially the people of God - suffer, many of these views are at odds with one another, and most of them are different from what people, even highly religious people, even highly religious people who think they based their views on the Bible, tend to think.

The lecture was only to be 50 minutes so I couldn't spend much time on this that or the other view, and in fact could not deal with most of the biblical perspectives. I didn't talk about Job, for example (which, in the judgment of most biblical scholars, is made up of the work of two different authors who in fact have different views of suffering) or with lots of other things. Instead I chose the one view of suffering that I think is widely held by many of the authors of the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophets, and which I therefore call the prophetic view, and the one view that I think is most widely held by the authors of the New Testament, which I call the apocalyptic view, and finally the one view that I find most sensible personally but which is not widely shared by biblical authors, the view of the book of Ecclesiastes.

In a nutshell, the prophetic view is that the reason the people of God suffer (military defeat; political, economic, social nightmares; natural disasters) is because they have sinned against God and are continuing to avoid following his law and his ways, and so God is punishing them for it as a way of getting them to wake up, take notice, and return to his ways.. As an example I read selections from Amos chs. 1-5.

The apocalyptic view, in my opinion, was a later reaction to this prophetic view. In the apocalyptic way of understanding things, it is not God who is causing his people to suffer, but forces aligned against God and his people, evil cosmic powers that have this world in their grip and that are making the lives of the righteous miserable as a result. But according to this view, God is soon to intervene in history to over throw the forces of evil and set up his good kingdom. So people need to hold on to their faith and remain true to God, so that they will be rewarded when history comes to a crashing halt in the very near future. I think this was the view of Jesus and Paul and others among the early Christians.

I personally find the first, prophetic, view to be rather unhelpful. (The reason you are suffering is because God is punishing you for your sin.) The second was one I used to subscribe to as a Christian, but eventually I came to think of it as too thoroughly rooted in an eschatological hope that I thought, at the end of the day, was simply unrealistic and untrue. I'm afraid I no longer think that God is going to make right all that is wrong.

The view of Ecclesiastes is more in tune with how I look at the world today. A key term in

Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word "HEVEL," which sometimes gets translated (unhelpfully) as "vanity," or "futility." HEVEL is a term that refers to something that is transient and fleeting; it is the mist that appears above the ground early in the morning that then is burned off. It's here for a little bit, and then is gone. Life, for Ecclesiastes, is like that. Everything is fleeting and impermanent. It comes, it goes, it disappears; then it comes again, and goes, and disappears. HEVEL of HEVEL, all is HEVEL, begins the book.

And that includes us. We are here for a little while and then we are gone. So what's the point? You make a lot of money and then you die, and, well, what good does your money do you? You become well known and influential, you have a fantastic career, you are admired by all - and then you die. Your children will remember you. But your grandchildren, not so much. And your great-grandchildren, forget about it. In 100 years, probably no one will even think of you any more than you think of your ancestors who died 100 years ago. And that's only 100 years. What about 200 years? Or 1000 years? Or 10,000 years? Or ... pick your number of years. And so what's the point?

For Ecclesiastes, the point is that you should enjoy life as much as you can as long as you can, since you won't be here long. I resonate with that. And I do not find it at all depressing. On the contrary, I find it completely liberating. We should live for now. This is not a dry run for something else or a dress rehearsal for the real thing to come. This is IT. And we should enjoy it fully.

I went on to say that in my opinion it is not possible to enjoy life fully if we are not ourselves helping others who are in need so that they *too* can enjoy life fully. During the question and answer period, a number of people found that hard to believe; these people appeared to think that if life is short and then it's over with, that should necessarily lead to a kind of rank hedonism. I don't think so. I *absolutely* don't think so. I think a life helping others is part of what it means to life live to its fullest.

If you don't belong to the blog yet, join! You get 5-6 posts a week on important topics you'll be interested in. It doesn't cost much to join, and every dime goes to charity. So think about it!!!



[Why I Am Not A Christian](#)
[Thinking about Hell](#)