

# God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer

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In times of questioning and despair, people often quote the Bible to provide answers. Surprisingly, though, the Bible does not have one answer but many "answers" that often contradict one another. Consider these competing explanations for suffering put forth by various biblical writers:

The prophets: suffering is a punishment for sin

The book of Job, which offers two different answers: suffering is a test, and you will be rewarded later for passing it; *and* suffering is beyond comprehension, since we are just human beings and God, after all, is *God*

Ecclesiastes: suffering is the nature of things, so just accept it

All apocalyptic texts in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: God will eventually make right all that is wrong with the world

For renowned Bible scholar Bart Ehrman, the question of why there is so much suffering in the world is more than a haunting thought. Ehrman's inability to reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of real life led the former pastor of the Princeton Baptist Church to reject Christianity.

In *God's Problem*, Ehrman discusses his personal anguish upon discovering the Bible's contradictory explanations for suffering and invites all people of faith—or no faith—to confront their deepest questions about how God engages the world and each of us.

## God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer Details


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# **From Reader Review God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer for online ebook**

## **Erik Graff says**

Ehrman grew up a conservative Christian, breaking with the faith as a result, he says, of serious biblical study and of the theodicy problem. Not having had such a background, I look at the matter as an outsider, trying to understand how many Christians, Moslems, Jews and Zoroastrians attempt to reconcile human suffering with their notions of a Creator. As ever, Ehrman is a pleasure to read, his exposition of biblical theodicies both sensitive and clear. I do think, however, that he leaves out two important considerations.

First, there is the matter of agency. On the human side of the equation, Ehrman presupposes individualism, that the ethical (and suffering) actors are individual human organisms. This, it seems to me, is hardly adequate in approaching the texts of the bible, particularly the older ones. Therein agency is often seen as collective, most notably as regards the Hebrew people, many texts apostrophizing 'Israel' as a whole. Within that social context, there was no concern with personal perdurance after death, no heavenly reward; the reward was having successful successors. Within that social context, an individual of one group might injure an individual of another and adequate restitution might be that a third individual of the offending group be punished. Within that social context, the replacement of Job's deceased children with another set of children apparently seemed an unremarkable case of divine justice.

Second, there is the matter of god's nature. Here I can't fault Ehrman for neglecting aspects of the biblical text. This is more a matter of fully representing an approach to the theodicy problem arising from the Judeo-Christian tradition, an approach best represented by Reconstructuralist Judaism. Here, understanding the god concept as the collective ideal of a community and recognizing its evolutionary development in the Hebrew canon, Reconstructuralists are able to give an account for how, on the one hand, we can find god recommending infanticide and genocide in some (older) texts while, on the other hand, recommending mercy and charity in other (newer) texts. Obviously, this approach eschews the metaphysical conceits of revealed religion, of 'special' revelations of the divine nature.

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## **John says**

I enjoyed this book. The author looks at a question none of us enjoys thinking of - why is there such overwhelming suffering in the world? Suffering comes in many forms, crimes, thuggery, personal oppression, wars, mudslides, tsunamis, mob mentality and genocide.

The 21st Century American mind finds it hard to comprehend the scope of suffering in the world and in history. Outside of personal tragedies involving disease and accidents, much of our exposure to suffering comes from television, newspapers and history books. An example of how difficult it is for Americans to get their heads around the scope of present-day suffering, a recent interview on Charlie Rose with the former United Nations Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs revealed the following - one thousand million (1 billion) people daily go to bed hungry, without clean water to drink, earning less than 1 dollar a

day, living daily in fear for their continued existence.

So back to the question. The author seems as though he would be OK with the answer - "bad things just plain happen". In fact, breathtakingly staggering bad things happen and they happen on a daily basis (for example - 40,000 humans die every day from complications arising from unclean drinking water). The real question presented by the book is "what does the Bible tell us about suffering?"

Bart Ehrman, the author, is a professor of biblical studies at the University of North Carolina and he takes this question seriously. We learn how the Bible wrestles with the question of suffering throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament. In short, what we find is not satisfying - which is probably why most people don't bring up the Bible when the question of suffering comes up - they bring up modern notions of "free will" - itself an unsatisfying explanation when examined closely (for longer than the 15 seconds its proponents typically give it).

Ehrman's writing is engaging and readable. The author shows clarity of thought and intellectual rigor. In short, his answer to the question of suffering is not just "bad things just plain happen" - it's also that "we must try to be aware of human suffering and to alleviate it where we can" (e.g. the Gates' Foundation's work on malaria). Bravo.

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## **Jessaka says**

### The Blasphemy in the Bible

The word for the day is: blas•phe•my, noun. The act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; profane talk.

I was 8 or 9 years old, my parents were divorced, and we lived in an old house in Paso Robles. Life was good with my mother and siblings, until one day when I was running around in our yard and fell and skinned my knee. I came running into the house, calling for my mother. I needed help, I was bleeding all over the place, and I could even be dying. My mother saw what had happened and while cleaning up my scraped knee, she said this, "God punished you. You must have done something wrong, I thought to myself, "I didn't do anything wrong. I'm your perfect child, (That had been my role for many years), so what are you talking about?" Actually, I just wondered what I could have done that was wrong.

My mother never went to church except for Easter Sunday. She spent some of her childhood years in a boarding house because her mother couldn't take care of her until she had remarried. So where did she come up with this belief? Boarding school? Her mother? I never thought to ask.

Well, that was the first time that I had heard of a God that punishes people during their lifetime on earth and this because they hadn't obeyed him. Obviously, I never forgot this lesson from my mom. Not that I thought about it much.

I began going to church with my brother when I was older, but only because his friend wanted him to go with him to the Assembly of God Church. My only recollection of that church was the cloth pictures of a burning hell being placed on a board. I went home and put the garden hose down a gopher hole and turned

on the water. I was going to put out the fires of hell. It was many years later before I could actually put out those fires.

But let's have some serious talk about this book and God. Why would a loving God create a world where you can get killed by anything that flew into your face, landed on your head, or by your falling off a cliff, drowning or being blown away? Maybe it is because there is no other way to create the universe than to have natural disasters. And then, why would a loving God punish you by causing all the above things to happen to you if you didn't obey him? I don't believe that he would, but that is what the prophets claim. It's their story.

Now, It is time for the word of the day, blasphemy. This is where it comes into play. I believe that the writers of the bible just wrote what they believed God would be like, and so they patterned "Him" after their own punitive rulers. But in writing these things, they had committed blasphemy against God, and in turn they have caused so much harm, not only to their own people, but to all.

Well, the Jews couldn't follow all the laws that were given to them in the Torah, the Old Testament. No one could. I think the only law that makes any sense is, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but that law came much later. Yet, it was even hard for man to follow this law, and God broke it over and over.

Neuroscientists now claim that man's brain goes haywire in the making or sometime in their life. We are not perfect human beings. Many of us try as I had as a child; many could care less.

In any case, the prophets say that if we don't obey these God given rules, we will suffer. I would have run away from a God like that, and I did, just as Erhman had done, and just as the Jews had done. It is no wonder the Jews went off and worshipped other Gods, but they came back to their God, after all, what choice did they have? Obey me or suffer greatly. A leader like this would be called a tyrant. People would live in fear, and if you live in fear, how could you love? That is why God demanded to be loved. He knew it didn't come easy. The bible talks about this fear in Philippians 2:12-13, Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Paul, being Jewish knew all about fearing God, and so did others because there are 32 bible verses about fearing God.

Then, as I was reading this book I wondered why animals had to suffer too. I learned why. It is because of the fall of man. Here is that word again, Blasphemy.

Then there was another kind of punishment in the book of Job. Remember him? I do. Job was allowed to be punished so God could prove to the devil that Job would remain his best friend even though his wife, children, animals were all killed, and he was made deathly ill. Job passed this test. He remained God's best friend. With friends like this who needs enemies? Again, Blasphemy. And there are other reasons given in the bible for our suffering, but they are all just made up reasons. Well, maybe not all of them, after all, people cause others to suffer.

Do I believe in a Creator? Yes, just not the bible's creation of one. Do I know why man suffers? No. No religion does, I know, I have been in many. They think they have the answer, but their answers have never satisfied me. I gave up years ago looking for the answer. I only read this book to help a friend who has asked me for help because he has been told that if he doesn't come back to God, he will burn in hell.

So all we can do is make the best of our life on earth and help others, just as Ehrman has suggested, because there are just so many times that we can all pray for peace before some of us realize that peace isn't coming

any time soon.

Update: By the time I finished this book and this review above, I really liked Bart Ehrman. His book stayed with me. I thought of his becoming an agnostic because of what he had read in the bible, and I am surprised that he hadn't become an atheist. Who knows how he will feel in later years. I don't even know how I will feel because my beliefs have changed over the years. Personally, I don't believe that it matters what a person believes or doesn't believe, as long as those beliefs don't bring harm to others.

Erhman spent a lot of time in his later chapters telling us of all the ways that man suffers, and this grew really heavy on my mind. I imaged that it grew heavy on his as well. I began skipping sections, because it felt like every news story that he had written down had landed in my lap, and it was already heavy enough that I have had to stop listening to the news as much as I had been. It gets heavier still whenever a Christian tells me that there is nothing wrong with separating children from their parents down at the border, because it tells me that they don't see it as causing suffering, but if they do, they do not care.

Erhman has been accused of blasphemy. He has been told that he is going to hell. I thought about that a lot, and it caused me to feel angry towards those accusers. Ehrman was very respectful in his book, as he was only trying to understand the whys and rejected that which he could not accept, and for good reason. And now you know where I came up with the word for today.

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## **Sally says**

Discusses the various, sometimes contradictory, ways in which the Bible explains the existence and meaning of suffering. The author, no longer a believer, explores the reasons behind these explanations being formulated in their own time and evaluates their (in)adequacies generally and for thinking people today. His material on apocalyptic explanations and figures, including Jesus and Paul, was especially interesting to me.

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## **Paul Bryant says**

Updated with a big quotation from an essay by Ron Rosenbaum added at the bottom for those interested.

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Disclaimer : I just reread this review and it's very disrespectful to the topic at hand and portrays complex

ideas in a crude cartoonlike and smirky way. There's a celebrity death match between God and Satan, a nervous Jewish spokesman, and something called The Lone Bangster.

Shakes head.

Shrugs.

Does not get struck by lightning.

Yet!

Okay. It could be that I read this book sadistically, having cruel fun watching the poor Christians run around like rats frantically looking for the impossible way out of the trap that they themselves created, which is:

-God is omnipotent

-God loves us

-We live in an ocean of human suffering which laps and lashes at everyone's life. Just take a look at the news. God loves us? You gotta be joking, pal.

But I believe I read this book with a bit more compassion. And surprisingly, it turned out the author isn't a Christian either. He was, but he lost his faith. Because of the problem of suffering. And he's not caning Christianity in a mean-minded way, not at all. But he does say that Christianity fails to explain human suffering.

### **THIS JUST IN : GOD NOT OMNIPOTENT**

The problem is solved if one of the statements about God is not true. So, perhaps, believers have entirely mistaken the nature of God.

O Abstract Creative Force, which art imbued in the very fabric of the material universe, in every quark and photon, hallowed be thy name.

Might it be that God was just the bang in the big bang – and that's all? Wham, BANG, thank you ma'am! Who was that masked man? Why that was the Lone Bangster. He rides into pre-time-and-space and creates a new universe and he's gone before anyone can thank him. In this version, the ancients were not wrong to state that there was an original creative and sustaining power, I mean, there was, wasn't there!, but because they couldn't conceptualise in any other way, they gave this power all these human attributes. Mistake! Because the Bang isn't compassionate and loving, the Bang is just the Bang!

**Bang!**

Another version in which God is not omnipotent is the

### **GOD VERSUS SATAN : CELEBRITY DEATH MATCH**

In this version, very popular with some Christians, they SAY God is omnipotent, but then they say that here, on this earth where we live, he *doesn't* have power – he's in a perpetual battle with the Adversary – the Evil

One, Voldemort – no, sorry, Satan. That's him. So don't blame God for all the suffering on planet Earth, it's Satan what done it, and for some reason, God can't just reach out and swat Satan like one of those fat greenbottle flies, ugh I hate them, no, he has to put up with Satan and we have to strive on earth to fend him (and his little devilettes, they're always coming round trying to seduce us, in their fetching red boots and glitzy hairdos) off, and exorcise him like in *The Exorcist* when he or a mean old devilkin gets stuck in our psyches (like a clog in a U-bend I suppose). Out, clog, out!

In this scenario, God is able to make commando raids on our planet from time to time, and send in some help, such as when he sent in Jesus and the disciples (the spiritual SAS of the first century) but that's all he can do. We're kind of on our own.

So this is called the Apocalyptic version. And in fact most New Testament writers believed in that, as did Jesus himself, except for the boots and the hairdos, I made that up. So all human suffering is nothing to do with God.

In this version God will be kicking down the door real soon, like a giant supernatural police raid – All right, Satan, up against the wall - ***YOU'RE BUSTED!***

- I'm not coming quietly *Godddd* (pronounced with an insolent sneer) – you're gonna have to come in and get me.

- MY PLEASURE! (Whammm!)

So really, this apocalyptic version of God is a rewrite of the Greek and Roman view of The Gods, whereby the gods fight and carouse and have a wild time throughout the universe and we humans get caught in the crossfire from time to time. This is where sacrifice and prayer come in. These are two forms of pleading to the gods to a) make it rain and b) please go away and leave us in peace, we can't get any sleep when you're around. You're so scary! Meep, meep!

## **WHY WE SUFFER, OLD TESTAMENT STYLE**

1) because you sinned. What, I have malaria and you're saying that it's because I was sinful? Yes, deal with it.

The reasoning here is unexpectedly mechanical. Now, we think of a person's religion as being what they believe, but back then it was to do with what they did – i.e. whether they followed all the complex rules, which for the Jews was the Torah. Man, that's a lot of rules. So, you could always tell an Old Testament Jew – your leprosy is because you wore a garment made out of two different types of cloth. If you don't believe me, check it out. It's in Leviticus.

So you needed a way of saying sorry that you broke the rules, and hence sacrifice. Now exactly why burning & killing animals was so pleasing to God that he would forgive you is not clear. But that was the way you got right.

Later on the idea of the messiah evolved and became strongly associated with the idea of sacrifice, to the point where by the time the gospel writers set down the story of Jesus, they had absorbed the notion that he was in himself the perfect sacrifice for all of mankind's sins. The thinking here is quite complex, or perhaps I mean muddled. Exactly whose sins? And why couldn't God have just forgiven us without all the folderol? I mean, God sends his only begotten son so that he may be a sacrifice to God so God forgives the human race for their poor attitudes to each other and him, and he withholds the punishments they all so richly deserve.

Well, this idea has been accepted by all Christians for the last 2000 years so who am I to say it sounds really loopy?

## 2) Redemptive Suffering

Simply put, it means that there's always a point to suffering. A silver lining. This is the idea that Dostoyevsky takes a chainsaw to in *The Brothers Karamazov*. A Biblical example is Joseph, who has brothers who are so mean they sell him into Egyptian slavery, and he suffers for years. But then he becomes powerful in Egypt so that when his brothers and their clans turn up requesting relief from the drought in Israel, he's able to help them. And this is shown as God allowing them to have sold him into slavery to begin with so that they can benefit from his forgiveness later, and lessons can be learned. You can see the idea of God as a puppeteer of humans here. God contrives the whole situation to prove a point. Later on, Exodus says specifically that God "hardens the heart" of Pharaoh so that he doesn't listen to Moses and doesn't let the Israelites go until the final plague, in order to prove, once again, a point, i.e., that he is very powerful. What a strange way to go about things. But of course it sounds just like the authors had got the stories already and were back-reading the theology into them.

The story of God and Israel in the Old Testament is the tale of an abusive relationship. Israel betrays God and goes a-whoring after Baal, Israel end up in the Accident and Emergency Unit time and time again when God becomes violent; Israel weeps and says sorry but then the whole cycle repeats. It's all there in Kings & Chronicles and throughout the Prophets.

God: I brought you forth from bondage in Egypt.

Nervous Jewish spokesman : Froth?

God : Forth. I meant forth. (Irritably) That was a typo.

NJS: Yes, you did that, but, er, I believe you arranged for the bondage to happen in the first place.

God : No, no, that was someone else. I brought you forth.

NJS: Okay boss, whatever, you know on behalf of the whole tribe, I'd like to say, we adore you.

God: Okay then – no more Baal!

NJS : Absolutely! Baal (mimes kicking someone's behind) is right out!

God : Okay then – I'll have 50 kine, 25 – no, make that another 50 goats, and 25 sheep. Sacrifices to begin a week Friday. Okay?

NJS: Oh, oh – that many? I mean – yes, yes, great.

God : Okay, we're good then. (Disappears.)

**And finally, natural disasters! Yay!**

Alright - I'm glad to say that Mr Ehrman has the same attitude to earthquakes as I do. He's a very affable and readable guy, by the way, and I do recommend this book. So, many Christians like to say - and this

explanation of suffering ISN'T in the Bible - that if we didn't have the FREE WILL to choose to sin, we would be robots, and it's because of sin that there's so much suffering. Mr Ehrman - you can almost hear him pulling his hair out here - says - but what about earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, volcanoes and mudslides? What sin caused all that human grief? His theological students tend to shuffle off gazing at their shoes when he puts that to them. Yes, you can say - at a stretch - that all the genocides were due to human sin. The Holocaust was created by the Nazis. They did it. But one million children died - so even when you accept that human sin comes from our free will you have to accept the notion of millions of completely innocent children victims. (This is what Dostoyevsky rants about.) So that - for me - scuppers the notion of God being in any way loving. Added to the natural disasters, for me that means that, sorry, and all that, but it looks like there's nobody here but us chickens.

Correction - us and the **BANG!!**

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## ADDENDUM

I just read a great essay by Ron Rosenbaum (author of one of my favourite ever books Explaining Hitler) which addresses in anguish and compassion our topic. It's here

<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Nake...>

but I will quote the last half. He was reading Bob Dylan's unreadable anti-novel "Tarantula" and came across a line which set him off thinking hard :

"hitler did not change  
history. hitler WAS history ... "

Whoa. Those eight words... In the 10 years I spent writing a 500-page book called Explaining Hitler, not one of the historians, philosophers, artists, or other sages I spoke to or read ever made as white-hot an indictment of humanity as that. An indictment, implicitly, of God as well.

In those eight words it seems to me, Dylan is not saying Hitler's evil genius was unique, exceptional. He's saying Hitler represents—embodies—a distillation of all the horrors routinely perpetrated by human civilization. The truth about human nature over the centuries. Human civilization reached its true historical pinnacle—its bloody telos—in Hitler. Human nature is Hitler nature. Just as human history is Hitler history. (And please don't tell me Hitler "lost." Tell that to the six million Jews he killed. Each murder a win for him.)

Such an all-encompassing judgment obviously didn't come out of nowhere. It must have come out of long sessions of thought, ones that reach a critical mass in this lightning bolt of dreadful insight. So if this is Dylan's God problem—look upon his works, ye mighty, and sicken—it was time to turn to the second half of the title of my lecture, "Dylan's God Problem—and Ours."

It was here that I found myself growing so harsh and unrelenting in tone (I'd written it out before, but tone is everything) that I now feel the need to apologize. At least to one listener. I didn't realize the degree of anger I still carried around, not just at the Holocaust, but at those who could remain complacent and go on with their

worship of God as if nothing had happened.

"Our God problem," I said, was the abject failure of post-Holocaust Jewish theodicy: The attempt to maintain a belief in a God who had given Hitler free rein to murder. For Jewish scholars and theologians, it seemed to me, post-Holocaust theodicy should be the first, if not only, subject of their study—not a theodicy that reached back to some commentary on some commentary on some commentary on some third-century rabbinic texts rationalizing the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans to somehow explain Jewish misfortune.

The failure of contemporary Jewish sages, scholars, and the rabbinate to come up with an adequate explanation for God's silence, God's absence, is scandalous to me, virtually an admission that there is no good explanation. But must we then reject God? It's a fairly important question to spend your academic or seminary life ignoring. It's the elephant, no, the mastodon, in the room. Something most don't want to talk about. Or claim not to be troubled by.

I've found myself troubled. I've found myself unable to say the Passover prayer anymore, the one about how God always stretches forth His mighty hand—God the superhero—to save us. This historical lie is an insult to the dead who devoted their lives to belief in God and that prayer—and were cruelly betrayed by both.

Not all rabbis and Jewish scholars are so timid. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, a famous dissenter from the complacent rabbinic orthodoxy, wrote, "Jewish history has written the final chapter in the terrible story of the God of History" (sounding a bit like Dylan's "Hitler WAS history"). And "the pathetic hope of coming to grips with Auschwitz through the framework of traditional Judaism will never be realized."

As a cheerful note, he added: "We learned in the crisis we were totally and nakedly alone, that we could expect neither support nor succor from God. ... Therefore, the world will forever remain a place of pain, suffering, alienation, and ultimate defeat."

Other scholars, such as Irving Greenberg ("Not to confront is to repeat" Hitler's crime, he wrote in "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," his influential essay) and the late Emil Fackenheim (whom I interviewed in Jerusalem), have wanted to preserve a belief in God but at least have had the courage to face the failure of explanation to fit the old religion into the new, evil revelation.

But I got carried away during this second half of the lecture. And I disclosed my intellectual—and emotional—distress at the rationalizations of God's role in the Holocaust. What I proceeded to do was ridicule any attempt to maintain that there was some "excuse" for God's absence and silence. The theodicy of the Shas rabbi in Israel, for example, who declared that the Holocaust was God's punishment for European Jews who'd slid away from orthodoxy to secularism. That Hitler was "the rod of God's anger" against them.

Obscene.

No less obscene than those who claimed the Holocaust was "part of God's plan," perhaps His way of hastening the establishment of a Jewish state. Then there was the argument that it was not God's fault—he just gave man free will to use for good or evil. Which prompts one to ask: Was it not in His power to create a being incapable of choosing mass murder so often? A human nature that didn't include childhood cancers, say, and the genesis of holocausts? Are we not allowed to question His creation in the smoking ruins of the death camps? Or, to alter the tone of the much-ridiculed notion: Is this—this! this hell on earth—the best of all possible worlds an all-powerful God could have created?

Then there's the last refuge of theological scoundrels: "It's all a big mystery." It sounds so profound. It's a disguise for willed avoidance.

I reserved my greatest contempt for those, including many intellectually "progressive" rabbis who try to get away with the sophistry that "God was in the camps," that God was there in every act of goodness and self-sacrifice the camp inmates showed one another. Doubly obscene. It steals from those brave souls the credit for their selfless acts and gives the credit to an absent God. Virtually robbing their graves for the sake of making God look better.

How can these rabbis and scholars justify themselves, intellectually and morally, with their ludicrously inadequate theodicies? Perhaps they have too much stake in established religious structure, in the comfy status quo of their institutions, to fear undermining it all by asking discomfiting, subversive questions. It seems to me to be intellectual cowardice.

At this point in the lecture, my anger had gotten the better of me. My condemnation of those who used that ploy spilled over to all the failed theodicies and their self-deceiving believers. But most of the audience seemed to be receptive in the sense that there were no outraged outcries.

It was only toward the end of the question period that a rather frail and aged figure—I believe I was later told he was both a rabbi and religious scholar—stood up almost shaking with rage. His rage was ostensibly at my citation of Dylan's rewrite (in "Highway 61 Revisited") of the Abraham, Isaac, and God human-sacrifice story. Dylan makes it seem like some sleazy transaction between carny hustlers. ("God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son' / Abe says, 'Man, you must be puttin' me on.'")

The enraged rabbi raised his voice to cry out that Jews didn't take this story literally. Well, duh. (Although, of course, millions of Jews do take every word of the Bible as the word of God.) But even if it was only a metaphor about devotion and loyalty to an insecure deity who demanded the willingness to kill one's firstborn as proof of devotion, it was a particularly repellent metaphor. One can only imagine the soul-crushing effect on Abraham—even after his child-murder reprieve—of the realization that he valued an invisible delusion more than a living child.

Afterward, after the question period ended and people began to depart, the questioner approached me at the podium, and I realized that his rage, and the unspoken dissent of others in the audience, wasn't over the interpretation of the Abraham-and-Isaac story. It was (this was later confirmed to me by a colleague of his) because I had sought to strip away any possibility of a grown-up's continuing to believe in the loving and powerful God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob after Auschwitz.

That conclusion he could not abide, logic or no logic. He wanted his God, he wanted the consolation of a God, he needed to pray to him, and I had said doing so was robbing the graves of the dead.

I believe my feelings were as legitimate as his feeling of faithfulness, my anger as legitimate as his desire to continue a lifetime of belief and consolation. But who knows what losses he endured and how he had continued to love God?

In the months that followed, I kept thinking about our confrontation. I had ended it by saying, "We'll have to agree to disagree," but that didn't mollify him, and I kept thinking about his anger. Thinking about the tone in which I had critiqued (slashed away at) the range of theodicies.

I couldn't shake the image of that man shaking his finger at me.

My position, should you care, is that I love everything about Jews and being Jewish—except the Jewish God. (I'm the kind of agnostic who is always arguing with the God he doesn't believe in.) And it wasn't that I couldn't take criticism. But what that man was offering was not so much criticism as shame and reproof for my anger.

But I don't feel shame.

Hitler is dead, and I had nonetheless hurt the feelings of an undoubtedly good man to make a point about Hitler, God, and Bob Dylan. That wasn't my purpose, nor is my purpose here to take pride in my newly awakened empathy for my questioner. It's to register an honest evolution of feeling from an anger that was not sufficiently separated from a desire to hurt those religious figures who assumed some special authority if not holiness, and whom I felt had failed me and their followers. In a place for truth-telling—the academy—I feel remorse for my zeal to make the truth hurt.

And though he and I still may well differ, for that I apologize to him.

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## **Charles says**

Theologically, this book is blasphemous and will send those who believe it to eternal suffering in hell.

However, it is a helpful book in a couple of ways:

1. It gives a pretty good summary of how critical "scholars" view the composition and content of the Scriptures.
2. It is an honest description of Ehrman's path from evangelicalism to atheism.
3. It gives a glimpse into how theodicy is viewed by unbelievers.

Other than the fact that Ehrman is an unbeliever, he has one primary weakness in his understanding of what the Scriptures say regarding suffering, and that is that he doesn't think the Scriptures say anything about suffering.

Instead, Ehrman believes that individual biblical books say things about suffering, these things are contradictory, and the whole biblical corpus has no unified view. Because his reading of Scripture is completely atomized, he misses the point.

He believes that there can be no unified biblical view because he denies that the Scriptures have any internal consistency (even though he acknowledges the influence that older views can have on later ones).

Toward the end of the book he references "Suffering: A Test of Theological Method" by McGill, and if he describes it's position accurately, it sounds like it is the orthodox Christian position on suffering. I may try to get a copy of the book.

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## John says

There's much to say about this book, but let me try to be brief.

First, what's refreshing about dealing with Ehrman as opposed to some of the related writings of the new atheists, is that Ehrman knows the Bible and Christianity well. And while he is given to overstatement and conflation, he does get a number of things right. In this book, for example, the basic categories he lays out in terms of the biblical response to theodicy (the problem of evil) are pretty spot on. The Bible does have a number of ways of dealing with the problem of evil and it often appears difficult to reconcile them. Because of this understanding Ehrman can rightly dismiss someone like Kushner (272) and his perspective of theodicy as not fitting with the biblical witness.

Second, Ehrman seems to lack an interpreter's imagination at many points. It's hard to tell whether this is intentional (Ehrman being the devil's advocate and exaggerating the differences in the text) or really a lack of ability to do constructive biblical theology that requires the ability to prioritize and integrate. Despite everything else, this is probably my biggest issue with the book. Ehrman often acts as though there is no way the various perspectives on theodicy can be possibly reconciled or integrated when even a someone educated Christian could come up with a reasonable explanation for how this could take place.

In the final chapter Ehrman comes pretty clean, though. Despite his tendency to emphasize the lack of "fit" on the biblical witness in regards to suffering, he seems to show his cards (264, 273) in a) recognizing there can be a framework that makes sense of this, and b) he is uncomfortable with the kind of God he believes this would mean exists (a God whose ways seem capricious and whose ends (in Ehrman's mind) can't justify the means).

The pull of Ehrman and those like him is strong. I think there are impulses of honesty in Ehrman -- if he was able strengthen these impulses I think the debate would be greatly strengthened.

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## John Willis says

Very interesting book written by a former pastor, who is now agnostic. I enjoyed his perspectives on suffering. I love his view at the end that we can all do so much more to help with the suffering, poverty, income inequality, etc, etc, etc, than what it seems that we as a nation of Christians actually do.

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## Trevor says

Read this book.

I don't care if you are a fundamentalist Christian or a wishy-washy Christian or a lapsed Christian or a never was Christian – the discussion here in this book is so important and so well put together that I would find it hard to believe that any thinking human being would not get something worthwhile out of it.

I've only recently finished reading another of his books – *Misquoting Jesus*. I came away from that book not really knowing if the author was a Christian or not – and really not caring. What was utterly clear was that this guy knows his stuff. Having been that most rare of God's creatures – a Fundie with a brain – he has

researched and studied the Bible in more depth than most of us would ever dream of doing. His command of his subject matter is inspiring. For this alone reading this book is worthwhile – it is an article of my faith that when people write about subjects that truly concern them they almost invariably write well.

But this isn't just a well written book. This is the story of why a man who spent years trying to become a better Christian finally had to give up on Christianity. The problem that ended his faith and the problem in the title is the problem of suffering.

Suffering is one of those things that is supposed to drag people into churches. And this isn't something the Churches themselves try to hide – we have all heard that 'there are no Atheists in the fox-holes'. So, this book seeks to discuss the answers presented in the Bible to explain suffering and asks whether these answers are good or bad answers.

One of the things people might find surprising is that the Bible doesn't have one answer for why there is suffering, but many. Also that of these many some of the answers are mutually exclusive and contradictory. I've no real problem with that – the Bible is supposed to be a book about life and life is, if anything, contradictory and full of mutually exclusive answers.

The first major explanation for suffering in the Bible is that it is God's punishment for us not following his laws. But this doesn't make a lot of sense – as some of us are punished without having committed any sin. Children born with AIDS, for example.

There is an extensive discussion of the book of Job and this was utterly fascinating. I didn't realise Job was two books that had been rather inexpertly patched together – a prose book and a poetry book. You'd think I'd have noticed such a thing. I am going to have to read this book of the Bible again at some stage. It is, beyond question, the strangest book of the Bible. Take a man without sin and make his life an utter misery – kill his kids, take away his property, give him sores – and just to see if he ever gets around to cursing God. And this all done by God so he can win a bet!

I also hadn't realised that the Jews didn't originally have a notion of eternal life and going to 'heaven'. Ehrman points out that whoever wrote Ecclesiastes clearly felt this life was all there was and that we should live life in this life so as to enjoy it to the full. In fact, Ehrman says that if he is a follower of the Bible at all – then this is the book of the Bible that he follows. There is no eternal fame or anything like it – there is here and now and everything you love is set to perish – so live and love and share and engage and make the world a better place. This is all there is and welcome the joy and beauty and utter wonderfulness of it.

I've never quite gotten as far as Ecclesiastes in my readings of the Bible – but I definitely will have to read it now.

Also discussed are the standard religious views of suffering – that suffering is good for you as it focuses the mind on God and doesn't make us too 'uppity'. That suffering now is part of the way to ensure you get good stuff in the next life – for he who is last shall be first.

Ehrman rejects each of these views in turn as a basis on which to build a good or moral life.

Oh, I should have expressed the problem by now – I'll do it immediately. The problem is: why is there suffering in the world? If God is all 'good' and all 'powerful' – then why does he allow suffering? The answers to this question have tortured people of faith throughout time. Which is why we end up with answers like, "It is God's punishment." Which is appalling. There is a really nice bit in the book where Ehrman

explains why he doesn't say Grace for his food. The problem being not in feeling grateful for the abundance of food he has – but because thanking God for this abundance also implies its opposite, that God is responsible for the shortage of food that confronts and that kills so many people around the world today.

I never have been religious, I find it hard to understand how anyone could be religious, so it really isn't my place to go recommending books to the religious, I guess. Whatever you get out of 'religion' is forever barred to me, I suspect. All the same, if any part of the religious experience is open to rational discussion then this book should be essential reading for all Christians. I don't mean that it will end your faith – that isn't Ehrman's intention – and even his wife is still a believer (and let's face it, if you can't even convert your wife - who has to put up with you all day long - you're not doing a terribly good job of converting people). What it will do is make you think about the nature of suffering and perhaps see that the message Jesus was giving wasn't, "I want you to be rich" – but something a little different. I think I could almost put up with Christians if one of two of them were a little more Christian.

This book isn't about converting people to atheism, nonetheless, it presents the problem of suffering in a way that ought to be a challenge to anyone's faith. This is a problem that made the writer lose his faith. He is a compassionate, interesting, intelligent and thoughtfully close reader of Biblical texts. You may not agree with his conclusions, but you ought to read him all the same.

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## Ian says

I don't like the title of this book. I think it should have been called *Our Problem*. And I don't mean *Our Problem* as in "reconciling human suffering with a loving creator-god is a problem, or puzzle, to be worked through." Likewise I don't mean *Our Problem* as in "we're the ones with a problem here, not God, because we're the small-minded creatures who can't understand the Creator's good plans for us all." No, I mean *Our Problem* as in "human suffering is a real problem in the world, and it's our responsibility to solve it, not God's."

I'm not the only one who doesn't like the book's title. Some say, pithily, that it should have been called "Bart's Problem" because we all know the Bible provides all the answers if only you look and have faith, and it's Bart's problem that he can't see them. Everybody knows how to reconcile the existence of human suffering with a loving Creator, right? I mean, come on, it's easy! Our loving God allows bad things to happen in the world because ... (insert your favorite Christian platitude here).

But platitudes are just that; they say very little and explain even less. And each of Christianity's attempts to reconcile human suffering with a loving God turn out to be little more than platitudes when they are subjected to a bit of critical thinking. Indeed, in my opinion, it is not difficult to refute Christianity's standard answers to the question of why a loving creator-God allows so much human suffering. That human suffering and a loving creator-God are irreconcilable is, at this point in my theological/philosophical evolution, a given.

Now, I don't want to start listing all the answers to the question of why God allows so much suffering and then shoot them down in turn. That's what the book is for. (That's not *all* the book is for, incidentally; Bart Ehrman has much more to say in *God's Problem* than simply "Christians can't explain suffering.") But feel free to fire off your favorite answer in the comments to this review and I'll explain why it's just a platitude, cliché, or tautology.

So, no, shooting down the answers isn't what's important to me. In fact the answers themselves aren't important to me, and thus neither is arguing about them (though I do enjoy the argument). My faith certainly isn't what it used to be, but if you want to hold on to the "standard" Christian views that's your business. I can think you're misguided and you can think I'm misguided but there's something we can, something we *should* agree upon: our response to suffering. Oh, we'll have different responses to philosophical quandaries about god and suffering and good and evil, but I'm talking about *action*. We need an active response to actual human suffering going on today in the world around us. It's our responsibility, as Jews, Christians, Hindus, agnostics—as whatever we are—to *do* something about it.

The world is full of people less fortunate than us. People experiencing real suffering even as you read this. People dying from lack of clean drinking water. Little children dying of AIDS and starvation. Women being raped and murdered. People the world over being ravaged by cancer. Men, women, and children dying of malnutrition. That's all real; it's all happening. And it's up to us to make the world a better place, through charitable giving, through volunteerism, and through the voting booth. This we can—we must—agree on. For if we don't do something about it, who will?

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## **Martin Beamer says**

As a pastor, I went in already hating the book. So, if I'm being honest, the author already had that against him as I went to read. However, before I bring anything negative up about the book, I do think the book was worth my read (and I think every pastor should read it) for a few reasons:

- 1) The author isn't antagonistic like many other authors toward Christians. He does, sometimes, say things off-handedly about the Bible and other facets of the Christian faith that I think are unnecessary without proper context. But, in comparison with other people I have read (like Dawkins), he writes with a gentle spirit. He never directly calls Christians stupid for their beliefs but instead just wants Christians to be intellectually honest with what they believe. I can agree wholeheartedly with that.
- 2) The author is honest about his own personal stance. He is an "agnostic" and doesn't give any claim to knowing all the answers. As he was calling Christians to be honest, he was also.
- 3) The author made me take suffering seriously again and took it seriously himself. It is good to get a jolt like this every once in a while. I think it is so important for Christians to stop giving simplistic answers to a complex question. The problem of suffering is a real problem and we shouldn't just push it aside because it makes us uncomfortable.
- 4) He interpreted many Christian texts correctly (and I would argue quite a few incorrectly as well). There were many times while reading where I marked in my margin, "Yep, that's exactly what it's saying!" He took the interpretation of the Christian texts seriously.

Now, here is some of the major problems I have with the book:

- 1) This book, as it stands now, is practically and wholly unhelpful to the average person. His goal in this book is to deconstruct people's worldview to simply tell them, "I don't know"? How is that helpful at all? By taking the stance he took, the book becomes pointless. If there isn't an answer and isn't a God, why even waste his time writing this book? How many hours did he spend writing this book when he could have been

off helping people? Spending time with his family? Further, If he thinks we should just be helping people, and living life to the fullest, wouldn't it be better to just allow people to hold on to their hope? How bad could that be? But, instead, he desires to rip away any real meaning of hope and then leaves you empty.

2) The title is misleading. The title should say, "God's problem: How the Bible Fails to Give Me the Answer I Like." The author does a great job of telling you all the different answers the Bible does give. So, it doesn't fail to answer the question, it just doesn't give the answers he was hoping for.

3) Every argument against the Bible is based on experience. In each chapter, the author spends a couple pages giving you really sad cases of suffering (sometimes not even connected with the argument of the chapter), then 10-20 pages explaining that view of suffering based on a particular section of Scripture, then 1-2 pages telling you he doesn't like it with no real argument. Every argument he brings up is, "Here is a case of suffering that seems like it doesn't fit with that, so it can't be true." But, anyone who has studied argumentation will tell you that inductive reasoning can't prove anything. I just expected a more thorough attack of the Biblical perspective than I got. This leads to the next critique:

4) The author segments each answer to the problem of evil instead of seeing that there can be multiple answers. Why does it have to be one answer? What if sometimes suffering is punishment, and sometimes it is a person's actions against another with "free-will" and at other times the Apocalyptic view is in mind and still other times discipline? Of course, if you segment the Scriptures and try to apply one section of Scripture to all of life it isn't going to match. No person who is serious about the Scriptures would argue that the "punishment of sin" approach should be put in every case of suffering. It is unfaithful to the document as a whole.

5) The author has a misunderstanding of the Bible's doctrine of sin. Sin doesn't simply affect people, but the whole earth and all of creation. By not taking seriously what the Bible has to say about sin, specifically or generally, we cannot understand suffering in the world.

6) The repetition of the book can get daunting. We all understand the "free-will" defense is stupid (at least in most circles I am in). You don't need to bring it up in every single chapter how unhelpful it is. He does this with multiple examples.

7) Just because we don't know many things, doesn't mean we can plead ignorance on everything. I'll be the first to admit that I have no idea every detail of why people suffer or why God has allowed some things to happen. But, just because I can't give answers to every example he gives, that doesn't mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ is untrue. That isn't a one to one correlation and that is what he is trying to prove. Saying that because we don't know an answer to a specific example does not make the entire system crumble.

Overall, I was pretty disappointed with the arguments but came away grateful I had read it. I think it is essential that pastors don't try to give simplistic answers to why there is evil and suffering in the world. I think it is unfaithful to those who are asking for our help and unfaithful to the text of Scripture. This book did reaffirm this. As a pastor, I am dealing with real people with real problems in a real world. That is a message I do think many pastors need to hear.

But, what I think the world needs to hear even more than the different views of suffering as presented in the Scriptures is the gospel of Jesus Christ as the focus of Scripture. Sure, I don't know much, but instead of focusing on that, I want to focus on what I do know of God's character as He has revealed it. Namely, God looked at our main problem in the world, which isn't suffering, but sin, and sent His own Son to suffer for that sin. Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and raised from the dead and all those who confess Him as

Lord, repenting of their sins, will be saved. I don't know why an all-powerful God allows it all the time, but I know He sympathizes with it. It is on the gospel that I build my hope, not on my, or the world's, circumstances.

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## Thomas Ray says

If *you* were creating a universe, would you create it without suffering?

If you did, people would need neither intelligence nor compassion. We could live as pigs, just satisfy our desires of the moment, and everything would be fine. (With nothing to strive for or avoid, life likely could never have developed.)

Also, if everything were perfect all the time, *we wouldn't know it*.

As Mark Twain noticed, happiness isn't a thing in itself, merely a contrast with something unpleasant.

We have the *concept* of health *because* there's disease. Ditto justice/injustice, and so on.

Twain shows that it's *because* we suffer that we know joy:(view spoiler)

If you suffer enough that the title question *doesn't* sound inane to you, the Bible *does* speak to it:

Job 38–42's answer is, God is all. You, and your complaints, are small. You can trust God, or, you can despair. [biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+...](http://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+...)

The Bible answers the question. Just not the answer you may want.

The author is from an Evangelical tradition that thinks, “God’s our pal. We have all the answers.” He’s starting to see the cracks, but still wants it to be true.

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## Michelle says

My mum died from lung cancer, and experienced a level of suffering I never knew, and wish I didn't know, was possible. I remember the day she died - I asked my step dad's vicar why people suffer. She gave me some tin pot answer about free will which seem to imply that my mum had chosen to get lung cancer, that she 'deserved' it. My mum never smoked a day in her life and even if she had, does any 'deserve' or ask for that level of suffering? Isn't it bad enough that we have to die, that we have to lose people we love - why do some of them have to suffer so much? This book doesn't have the answer, because the Bible doesn't either. And I was reading, I started to think maybe we're asking the wrong question. Asking 'why God allows' people to suffer assumes that there is a God in the first place, that there is someone or something looking down and keeping tabs on what's going on. Well if such terrible suffering exists, and it does, I've seen it for myself, then why instead aren't we asking 'why not?' instead of 'why?' Why shouldn't people suffer? If there is no God, or he doesn't care or isn't willing to get involved, then why not? Once you see that it is so random, that there are no rules as to who suffers and who doesn't, who dies and who, for now, lives, then you start to see that there's no one, and nothing, in control. So why not suffering? Why not? Because that question, I suppose, is even harder to contemplate than a God who sees suffering, and allows it.

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## A.J. says

Ever since reading *Misquoting Jesus*, I have been a fan of Bart Ehrman's. His books have the refreshing quality of being both informative and unpretentious. He doesn't bother with constructing academic or flowery prose, but is instead content to let simplicity carry the day. I believe his reward is a considerably larger audience than most authors in his field enjoy.

The thesis of this book is that the bible provides us with a number of views on suffering, and some of them are contradictory. You don't need to read much further than that before we run into a problem. What is the bible? As most reasonably aware people already know, the bible isn't a book. It's a collection of books, fables, poems, wisdom literature, apocalypses, borrowed myths, pseudepigrapha, historical and pseudo-historical narrative. To call the views within it 'contradictory' is only a point if your active assumption is that sixty-six books authored by different people—and sometimes a single book is the product of several sources—are all conspiring to make a cogent point about why we suffer. You might as well accuse your local newspaper being self-contradictory.

Even so, *God's Problem* is not so easily dismissed. More apparent than the so-called contradictions is the individual stupidity and absurdity of the different views. Take the Classical view, which is that people suffer as a result of their sins, and the righteous do not suffer, but rather are rewarded. What an insane and stupid concept. A man I work with has a son with leukemia. The child is three. I could bore you with the details, but to meet a child who is suffering from the effects of this alleged 'Intelligent Design' is enough to put this disgusting idea to rest.

My personal favorite part of the book was Ehrman's ballistic deconstruction of the book of Job. Job is a book I have long considered to be one of the most immoral and repugnant stories about suffering ever crafted by human hands, or as it happens, a couple pairs of human hands. One of the most basic techniques you learn about in the study of literature is dramatic irony. It is essentially what happens when a viewer knows more than the character does in a given scene. If you have just read that an axe murderer is hiding in a closet and that the protagonist is about to open the door for his coat, viola, dramatic irony.

The book of Job is only profound insofar that you forget the beginning and ignore the end. There once was a rich man who came upon a sudden tragedy. An evil supernatural force conspired to have his flocks and herds destroyed, his ten children murdered, and his body stricken with sores and boils. His friends come to console him and to reason with him as to the cause of his suffering. Perhaps he sinned? Perhaps he did it without knowing? Eventually God himself makes an appearance in what has to be one of the more underwhelming *Deus ex machina* scenes in history. According to God, the reason Job suffers is that God does not owe him a damn explanation for anything. He's God. You don't like it? You're SOL. Job says, "Oh yeah, you're right," and God rewards him by giving him ten new children, kind of like how you'd get your girlfriend a new puppy if the old one died.

What the deranged sadist of an author seemed to forget was that the audience had already been given the explanation for Job's suffering on page one. God, having nothing worthwhile to do, is approached by 'The Adversary' who places a friendly celestial wager. The only reason that Job loves God, he says, is that God gives him everything. Take that away, and he'd tell you to f&^k off. So the God character, who already foreknows the outcome of the wager, who can not be bettered one iota by winning it or deprived of anything by losing it, driven by psychotic disregard for the wellbeing of an innocent man, allows unspeakable misery and cruelty to fall on Job. The reader is perfectly aware of this throughout the entire narrative, making it both overlong and the ending a complete failure at every level.

If there is a highlight to biblical musings on suffering, it is Ecclesiastes, the most human, poetic, and beautiful book in the bible. I won't go into a soliloquy on it, but I will recommend that every literate person find a way to read it at least once.

I appreciated this book, which is a habit of mine when it comes to Ehrman's work. He brings the expertise of a scholar as well as an understanding of his audience and an unapologetic openness. There is no answer from Ehrman on why we suffer. Which is good, because there is no answer in the bible, either. There are plenty of hypotheses to go around, and maybe one day there will be a final reckoning, but the importance is what we do to stop it. With our science, our money, our time, our economy—what we humans do to better our world. As the saying goes...

"A single pair of hands at work is worth more than a million clasped in prayer."

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## **Jodi says**

Why we suffer? This is a question that I continue to ask of my Christian faith. I was excited when this book was recommended to me because I hoped to get some insight into this question although once I checked it out from the library I kept putting it to the side and reading other things. Perhaps I didn't want to find out the answer to the question. I was forced to finally start the book this week as it is coming due, and I am so glad that I took the time to read it. The author examines the various explanations for suffering: punishment for sin, suffering is a test, suffering is beyond comprehension, suffering is the nature of things, and the apocalyptic view that there are evil forces in the world and God will eventually right all that is wrong with the world. The author provides many familiar examples from the Bible along with modern day examples to support each explanation. This book was definitely well worth my time.

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## Paul says

This book is well written, no doubt there. Ehrman has a knack for writing to the “man on the street.” As such this book reads fast and smooth, much like his *Misquoting Jesus*. Thus, my low ranking is due to the *content* of the book, the cogency of the argumentation. This book is so chalk full of errors that the measly 10,000 characters goodreads gives isn’t enough. I could use 100,000 characters.

God's problem is that suffering exists and the Bible can't explain it. Ehrman tries to show this by noting myriad biblical explanations for suffering and then showing how these answers are “contradictory” (19) with each other. I count roughly 7 explanations for suffering: punishment for sin (Ch.2 & 3); sinners cause it (Ch.4); greater good (Ch.5); no reason (Ch.6); apocalyptic view (Ch.7 & 8); God isn’t all powerful to stop it (Ch. 9); Christ’s suffering is God’s answer (Ch. 9).

Ehrman fails to show how these are *contradictory*, though. Not sure he knows what a contradiction is. For example, the first view Ehrman admits wasn’t meant to be applied universally: “I should stress that the prophets themselves never state this as a universal principle, a way of explaining *every* instance of suffering” (53). But he later acts as if this view is “at odds” with *some* instances of suffering: “The classical view of suffering just didn’t work, for me, as an explanation for what actually happened in the world” (96). That may be true. But, it’s hardly coherent to claim a view as *contradictory* which you admit has exceptions and qualifications! Ehrman repeats this blunder several times in the book (47, 53-55, 90, 96, 120, 203, 214). Moreover, many of his critiques beg the question. If this is *punishment* for crimes, why complain? I don’t see him complaining that child molesters are made to “suffer” in jail for their crimes. How dare we punish criminals.

Ehrman also creates straw men. He pretends that many of the answers don’t work because if God helped his people in the past he should help them now: “If God intervened before to help us, why doesn’t he help us now?” (89, also cf.16). Not only does this ignore the fact that God frequently did not intervene to help his people, it ignores the uniqueness of theocratic Israel. Ehrman seems to read the Bible as if there weren’t hundreds and hundreds of years between events. As if miracles and God delivering his people were every day occurrences back then. This is how a 5 yr. old reads the Bible, folks. He also seems to make rather large non-sequiturs that if God did x then, he should do x now. Bart can therefore disbelieve the Bible every time he comes face to face with a bush that is not burning and God not commissioning him to go deliver his people and take them to a bit of physical land in the middle east. Another straw man is the idea that we aren't supposed to suffer given Christianity.

Ehrman also puts himself up as the standard of rationality and what is acceptable for an explanation. Frequently, at crucial points in the argument, he simply dismisses views because he doesn’t think they work. “I could no longer reconcile,” “I simply could not believe,” “I could not explain,” “I don’t think so,” “an answer I could understand,” “I refuse to think,” “I just don’t see,” “I refuse to believe,” etc., etc., etc! He also shows his presuppositions when he claims, “Suffering is not only senseless, it is also random [and] capricious” (61). And he says that there are “those who suffer for no reason and to no end” (p.157). But of course this begs the very question at hand! If suffering really is random, capricious, happening for no reason whatsoever, then of course there can be no explanation! If you think something is random and happens without reason, you don’t go looking for an “explanation.” He also just inserts gratuitous suffering right into the argument, but this is what needs to be debated. His only argument, though, for gratuitous suffering is that he “doesn’t see” a reason, therefore (?), there is none? But thinkers like Bergman and Howard-Snyder have effectively rebutted the poor inference from “noseeum” to “thereisnun.” So rather than cogent argumentation, we get stuff like the above, or emotion laden, question begging epithets: “atrocious,”

“egocentric,” “cold-hearted,” “self-centered,” “raving,” “hasn’t matured,” etc! When your argument is paper thin, resort to rhetoric.

Ehrman also applies double standards. In his continued demonstration of his inability to either put forth a cogent argument, or interact with any, he on the one hand claims that the answers put forth by “intellectual theologians or philosophers” seek to give “intellectually satisfying answers” but are “repugnant” because they are “removed from the actual pain and suffering” in the world, only worried about giving answers that are intellectually satisfying (18), but on the other hand complains that the answers he looks at (from the non-scholar) are not “intellectually satisfying” (274)! He also somewhat sympathizes with Ivan from Brother’s Karamazov who says that even if God gave him an answer for all the suffering, one that showed that it was necessary and for a greater good, Ivan would reject it. But it is irrational to reject the truth. So Ehrman avoids full endorsement of Ivan. His “more rational” position is to admit that he would accept God’s explanation, but only if it made sense to him and he could understand it. But this too is irrational. If God says x is the case, then x is true. To argue or disbelieve would be to argue or disbelieve the truth. So if God said that there was a good reason for suffering, and that we could not understand the reason, then that would be true. To hold out seems to me like what a 5 yr. old might do when he can’t understand something his parent says, “Nuh-uh, the moon is really following our car, I can see it!”

Ehrman critiques the apocalyptic view by claiming that it presents a utopia, “utopia is that perfect place that ... does not exist” (89). But when presenting his own view of what the world would look like if he had his way, it looks like a utopia. He offers such clichés and platitudes as: “We should love and be loved. Make money and spend money. The more the better. Enjoy food and drink. Make love, have babies, and raise families. Travel and read books and go to museums and look at art and listen to music. We should love life. Say 'Never Again' to holocausts, murder, crimes, and meanness. Alleviate suffering and bring hope to a world devoid of hope. No poverty. Redistributed wealth. No people sleeping on streets, and no children dying of malaria. No more starvation, no loneliness either” (pp.276-277). Ah, the humanistic Messiah preaches the gospel of a humanistic heaven. No more crying or curse. Notice, too, that the way to live life is the way of the Western intellectual elite. Drink wine, eat cheese, go to art museums and listen to Mozart. I bet a billion Chinese have a different idea. Who is Bart to tell us how to live? Of course his ethic of qualitative hedonism seen above (cf. x, 195) suffers from numerous problems Ehrman is either ignorant of, or too self-serving to mention.

Another critique of the apocalyptic, a view Ehrman says provides the best answers, is that it is false and based on mythology. This is based on a rather odd interpretation of Scripture. Ehrman expects the writers of Scripture to speak in scientifically precise terms. [I rebut that view here](#) .

Ehrman seems ignorant of Israel’s theocratic uniqueness, the role the covenant of works plays, the concept of federal headship, the nature of the new covenant, the already/not yet view of prophecy, various eschatological hermeneutics that would undermine his minimalism and reductionism, and offers horrible exegesis of Job and Ecclesiastes. For example, he takes a disputed passage in Job as claiming there is no after life. Not only is this uttered by a man undergoing an extreme time of crisis, Old Testament scholars (Ehrman is a *NT* scholar) like Daniel Block have demonstrated Job meant quite the opposite (see Block’s *Hell in the Old Testament in Hell Under Fire*). And Ehrman seems to operate under the hermeneutic that whatever was *reported* in the Bible was *endorsed* in the Bible.

His critique of the greater good theodicy was incompetent. Essentially it runs like this: I can’t see the greater good, therefore there isn’t one. That’s how my 11 month old reasoned when he was getting vaccination shots!

He is completely sophomoric in his comments on sovereignty and free will. Shows he’s not trained in this

field, or ethics for that matter.

He frequently critiques *Christians* rather than the Bible. But the subtitle of the book is how the *Bible* can't answer the question.

Of course Ehrman puts forth no explanation of how his naturalistic and evolutionary worldview can make sense of the existence of good and evil. He just assumes they are features of the world. But given his worldview, this is far from obvious. In fact, I'd argue doesn't have the metaphysical resources to do the heavy lifting an argument for his presuppositions would require. Ehrman borrows from something like a Christian theistic worldview in order to undermine it.

He also offers no argument for why we should live the way he tells us to. If we only go around once, why not grab for all you can get?

And in the end, Ehrman admits that there is no explanation for suffering. It just happens by chance. No reason for it. So when your friend tells you her daughter has died, if you remove the Ehrman platitudes, the answer is: Shit happens.

I wish I had more key strokes...

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## David says

Ehrman is a very talented writer. In this book he tackles difficult topics in a way that should be easily understood by the average reader. Each chapter begins with real-life illustrations of sufferings. Some of these are from Ehrman's life, he gets very personal discussing his father's experiences in World War II, while some are from the news, such as hurricanes, tsunamis and mudslides. These illustrations then lead into a discussion of the biblical data, with each chapter looking at a different way the Bible explains suffering. Ehrman shows that sometimes the Bible speaks of suffering as punishment from God, sometimes as a result of human sin (i.e., humans cause suffering), sometimes suffering is redemptive (for the greater good), sometimes suffering has no explanation, sometimes suffering is caused by evil spiritual forces who will be dealt with by God (apocalypticism).

A major premise of the book is that the various answers the Bible does give for suffering are contradictory. What is missing is an explanation of how those who put this Bible together, as well as those who have read it over the centuries, accept the various answers the Bible gives as contributing to the complex issue of suffering. Maybe if individual prophets such as Isaiah or Amos give two different explanations of suffering at two different times they are not contradicting themselves, but rather each part of a complete answer. If these answers were all accepted in the same Bible (or simply, in the same book of Isaiah or Amos), maybe they do work together somehow?

Furthermore, should we expect the problem of suffering to have an easy answer? If the Bible only had one simplistic answer we would accuse it of not taking suffering seriously. The Bible seems to fit our experiences: sometimes suffering may be punishment, sometimes it may be to teach us, sometimes it is because of free will, etc.

Basically, Ehrman is giving us an autobiography. He found the problem of suffering unsolvable and left his

childhood faith. But if he interacted with theologians and philosophers, why not show us more of his own journey? It is not like he is the first person to notice suffering. And many people still have faith through the suffering. Why doesn't Ehrman at least offer a bibliography (or more extensive footnotes) that shows the depth and breadth of his journey? He definitely has interacted with many other authors, why not show us who? Why not go deeper into why he finds those answers and interpretations wanting? Or put them in the bibliography so those interested can find them? He gives a little bit of this, but more is needed.

Finally, Ehrman's last couple pages end up illustrating the problem he is now in, and may not even realize. He states that this life is all there is. Later, in the same paragraph, he asserts that because this life is all there is we should try to make the world a better place for ourselves and for others in it. But why does that conclusion (we should try to make the world better) follow from the premise (this world is all there is)? Where does this "should" come from?

He talks about how the wealth could be redistributed so the poor have enough. But if this life is all there is, why should the wealthy give up their wealth? For no apparent reason they ended up wealthy. If they choose to enjoy life and not help anyone is there any reason, in Ehrman's view that this life is all there is, that we can say they are wrong? In these final pages he uses the word "should" a lot. He speaks of how we should visit soup kitchens, give to charities, work to help others. I agree we should do these things. But in Ehrman's view that this life is all there is, why should we do them? Can he really go up to someone who is enjoying their own life and tell them they should spend the only life they have at a soup kitchen? He has no reason for such a request. If we believe that there is a God who created us in His image and humans have worth and that we are called to make this world a better place in preparation for the better future that God is bringing, then we have a reason to help. Ehrman quotes Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov* a lot, but fails to quote the statement made in it, "If there is no God, all things are permissible." The fact is, if there is no God, if this world is all there is, there is no way to get from what IS to what OUGHT TO BE. So Ehrman has no basis to say to others what they ought to do.

So it is not as simple as rejecting the Bible's answers to suffering and then getting on with life by working to alleviate suffering. If God is removed, everything changes. If God is removed, where does human worth come from? Why should I care about those who happen to live on the other side of the world and are suffering? The problem of suffering is HUGE for Christians, but it is equally problematic for agnostics/atheists. This is something Ehrman must take into consideration.

Overall, Ehrman offers a good summary of the answers to suffering given in the Bible. He pulls no punches, taking suffering very seriously. He finds the Biblical answers wanting and contradictory. I think finding them contradictory is off the mark, instead they are complementary answers to horrible questions. I think the Biblical answer is much more appealing than the answer Ehrman gives, for ultimately his answer puts us on a road to nihilism.

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### **Alan Fuller says**

"...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."  
p. 4

Ehrman claims to be open to some god other than the Judeo-Christian one, but later he says;

"But there is no God up there, just above the sky, waiting to come "down" here or to take us "up" there." p. 259

He later says there is no God waiting to come down, excluding any other kind of God.

"God knows how many Iraqis have died..." p. 262

Finally, he thinks that only God knows how many Iraqis died during the war. This indicates that during the process of writing Ehrman went from agnostic to full atheist, but by the time he finished the book he had regained his faith. Is this a fair assessment? No, but it is typical of the way a historical-critical interpreter, like Ehrman, analyzes a text, or at least that's the way it appears to me. For instance;

"...in many respects their views stand at odds with Paul's: Matthew, for example, appears to teach that followers of Jesus do need to keep the Law (see Matt. 5:17–20); and there is a real question of whether the Gospel of Luke teaches a doctrine of atonement." p. 142

For Ehrman, there is no harmonizing of the scriptures. Omissions or minor differences are seen as contradictions. Paul spoke against this type of literal interpretation (2 Co 3:6). The writers of the NT didn't interpret the OT that way (John 5:39, Luke 24:44–47). The historical-critical interpretation wasn't developed until after the Enlightenment, so why would the biblical authors write in a way that could only be understood by that method?

People do evil things to other people. Natural catastrophes cause evil things. People get old, suffer and die. Ehrman doesn't believe there can be a loving God in heaven because of these things. Sometimes he speaks like he is the only one to ever think about it. He says that he lives a great life, but apparently, the fact that many people have good lives is no reason for thinking there might be a God. It's all about what God can do for me. Since God is presumed to have made the rules for creatures, he has to abide by them.

So how convincing are Ehrman's arguments? He admits his wife is an intelligent Christian that doesn't share his views.

"The Christian notions of heaven and hell reflect a development of this notion of a resurrection, but it is a notion that has been transformed—transformed because of the failed apocalyptic expectations of Jesus and his earliest followers." p.258

Christian beliefs shifted sometime during the writing of the NT, according to Ehrman. It changed from expectations of an earthly kingdom to spiritual ideas of heaven and hell.

"...the majority of critical scholars in the English-speaking (and German-speaking) world have understood Jesus for more than a century, since the publication of Albert Schweitzer's classic study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*..."

Scholars had to wait until the 20th century to understand the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus.

"And so we should enjoy life to the fullest, as much as we can, as long as we can. That's what the author of Ecclesiastes thinks, and I agree." p. 276

Erdman says eat, drink, and be merry, that's the teaching of Ecclesiastes. He stops his examination in the ninth chapter of that book and never reaches its final conclusion.

Ecc 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecc 12:14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

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## Denny says

I have long been a fan of Bart Ehrman and have read (and for the most part greatly enjoyed) almost every book he has published, so along with this brief review I offer a sincere apology to the author for its relative unkindness.

The title is a misnomer: it states that the Bible fails to answer the question of why we suffer. But Ehrman devotes significant portions of the book to doing exactly that by explaining the different ways the Bible does answer the question of why we suffer: 1) Suffering is inflicted by God as punishment for sin; 2) it comes from human beings as a consequence of sin; 3) it comes from God in order to be redemptive. I would argue that our most important question is not why we suffer, but how do we alleviate suffering and more importantly, even if impossible to do, is how do we go about putting an end to it? Although Ehrman begins to address these issues toward the end of the book, what he has to say about it amounts to little more than generalized platitudes rather than concrete recommendations.

From the preface on, Ehrman offers frequent autobiographical anecdotes to explain how & why this particular issue is so important to him and how his thinking about the issue of why we suffer has changed over time. In many of his other books, he recounts in lesser detail some of the same personal stories he shares here but rarely in anything approaching as much detail and insight. *God's Problem* is one of Ehrman's most personal books to date, and that is the book's greatest strength. As a result, the tone of the book is less scholarly than his others, although it does still include plenty of endnotes and bibliographical references to other relevant works. There are several instances in the book in which Ehrman presents as settled fact information that is still hotly contested and debated by some scholars, presumably because he assumes readers will be familiar with the standard assertion he makes in his other works that "the majority of modern critical scholars agree" those issues are settled.

Despite my 2-star rating, *God's Problem* really isn't a bad book. If you're a fan of Ehrman's, it's a good place to read about which events and emotions in his life led him to think & believe the way he does today. If you have never given much thought to why humans suffer, it's a great source for studying about how various Biblical authors and editors thought about and tried to present the issue to their respective ancient audiences. As much as I like Ehrman's body of work, this one just wasn't for me.

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## Cathie says

I heard Bart Ehrman speak on the radio. He teaches in Chapel Hill. He was speaking about how there is

nothing redemptive in the suffering of parents who lost a child in an auto accident. He said this on the radio just as I was driving by the house where a friend of my son lived--he was an only child killed in a car accident a few years ago. I had to buy the book. I was also struck by his openness and understanding about faith--he is not writing from a position of antagonism.

As I read the book, I kept wishing I could talk to the author. He seems to really care so much about this subject--it makes me wonder why, if he has already rejected the idea of God and Christianity. Why would it be so important to write a book about it? I think the fact that he cares means that he has not really rejected faith--he is still open to it.

Meanwhile, in the book, he discusses every single troublesome passage in scripture--all of the ones that make us cringe--psalm about baby bashing, the binding of Issac (the rabbis have worked on that for eons), the angry God stories, etc. I kept thinking, what about the other scripture passages, about the God of love, who is slow to anger? Why just pick out the hard ones? Why not look at the whole picture?

He found no intellectual answers for suffering. I would say the reason is that there are no answers. But somehow, we keep going. There are faithful people who have terrible suffering. The intellectual answers fly in the face of human experience. Theology devoid of experience is vapid. He needs to write another book to explain Goodness.

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