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AN EXAMINATION OF JESUS' THEODICY IN LUKE 13:1-9 AND ITS RELATION TO  
PREMILLENNIAL ESCHATOLOGY  
AS CONTRASTED WITH ISLAMIC THEODICY AND ESCHATOLOGY  
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## INTRODUCTION

Thesis: The purpose of this paper is to examine Jesus' theodicy in Luke 13:1-9 and its relation to premillennial eschatology as contrasted with Islamic theodicy and eschatology. Jesus' theodicy is based upon the premises of universal human depravity, moral culpability, the patience of God within the framework of the final judgment. Persons, therefore, are all equally guilty and whose continued existence, in the absence of genuine repentance, is an evidence of God's longsuffering. Henceforth, persons have no right to question God's character or justice in instances of either moral or natural evil due to one's life being in debt to God's mercy. This paper will also examine the ramifications of the text as to whether the judgment in question is the national destruction of Israel in 70 C.E. resulting from the war with Rome or a double fulfillment related to the eschatological judgment Jesus refers to in Matthew 24. The driving thought of this paper is that even within a preterist interpretation of Luke 13:1-9 (which is not the conclusion reached in this paper), the orthodox Christian view is that the eschatological judgment is the final chapter in God's continued patience. Due to the confines of this paper, an extensive delineation and defense of the premillennial position is not a plausible option. Likewise, the point of the paper is not to contrast the various versions of premillennialism but to connect a "mere premillennialism," akin to C.S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity," together with the respective Christian and Muslim views of how theodicy plays out in the eschaton. This is not a ploy to dodge important eschatological issues but a necessary result of the somewhat broad scope of the research that limits the amount of detail that can be given to the numerous spokes inside of the wheel.

By way of comparison, the premises of Islamic theodicy will be examined in light of Islamic eschatology. To be clear, there is no attempt to collapse all Islamic theodicy and

eschatology under one position so as to show it bereft of the richness of the Christian tradition. Based upon certain presuppositions within Islam, the concept of God's will related to all causal events and the eschatological outcome of the universe precludes the diversity of interpretations as within classical Christian theology.

## I. Aim

My aim is to expand on the points raised by D.A. Carson's in relation to Luke 13:1-9:

1. First, Jesus does not assume that those who suffered under Pilate, or those killed in the collapse of the tower, did not deserve their fate.
2. Second, Jesus does insist that death by such means is not *prima facie* evidence that those who suffer in this way are any more wicked than those who escape such a fate.
3. Third, Jesus treats wars and natural disasters not as agenda items in a discussion of the mysterious ways of God, but as incentives to repentance.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Historical Interpretations

The fullest Jesus' narrative takes place in Luke 13:1-9. The text reads:

*There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.* <sup>2</sup>*And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"* <sup>3</sup>*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.* <sup>4</sup>*Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?"* <sup>5</sup>*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."* <sup>6</sup>*And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.* <sup>7</sup>*And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?'* <sup>8</sup>*And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.* <sup>9</sup>*Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'* "

Clearly this text points towards judgment and carries a subtle amount of eschatological overtones. The question is whether Jesus' point is to connect this narrative to the national judgment of Israel in 70 C.E. or to the future judgment within the *eschaton*. Green correctly

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 60-61.

notes, “The progression of his argument, then, is that judgment will overtake people, whether Galilean or Jerusalemite or of some other origin, unless they repent. The universality of judgment, apart from repentance, is emphasized by the fourfold use of “all” in vv 2, 3, 4, and 5.”<sup>2</sup> Green’s alertness to the universality factor is of high exegetical value. As is common in Jesus’ teachings, parallels to transcendent reality, through parabolic commentary, were drawn from recent events. On another occasion Jesus used a fig tree, a fruitless one at that, as a metaphor for the lack of repentance within the nation of Israel (Matt. 21:18-22; Mk. 11:12-14).<sup>3</sup>

The concept of fruitlessness is not just limited to national Israel. A large part of John the Baptist’s preaching was, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). Paul later uses the concept of fruit to depict the result of repentance and regeneration; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The universality of judgment language precludes a purely preterist interpretation with only the nation of Israel in scope. The visible frustration of the man who planted the tree (Lk. 13:7) is representative of God who established Israel to be a light to the nations (Is. 49:6), to which purpose they had been almost entirely disobedient (Lk. 20:9-18; Mt. 15:8). In any case, the conclusion taken in this paper is that the driving thought of this pericope is a universal call to repentance with the immediate audience being the unfruitful nation of Israel although one may make a case for interpreting the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 C.E. as a partial fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1997), 514.

<sup>3</sup> R.K. Harrison, “Fig; Fig Tree,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1982), 302.

<sup>4</sup> Green notes further, “Does the narrator hope that his audience will hear Isa 5:1-7 I the background of this parable? If so, an identification of Israel with the vineyard is likely, with the further identification of the fig tree as Israel’s barren leadership also conceivable. The parable is effective as a foundation for the call to respond with repentance without reading it in this way. In fact, inasmuch as Jesus’ audience remains “the crowds,” a more general

### III. Jesus Departs from 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mainstream Jewish Theodicy

Almost immediately, Jesus steers away from a strict application of a pure punishment or chastisement theodicy. One may claim that it is indeed possible that either of these are God's reasons for permitting evil but that is not Jesus' point. Jesus neither affirms nor denies traditional theodicies.<sup>5</sup> His aim was not to satisfy the philosophical palate of a modern or post-modern Western academician. Jesus was certainly not an alarmist. Notice that Jesus showed no sign of shock that the tragedies had occurred. Jesus warns his followers not to be shaken when hearing of "*wars and rumors of wars*" (Matt. 24:6).

### IV. Undercutting Defeater of the Mechanistic Punishment Theodicy

Jesus' response leads one to conclude that tragedies are not times for surface solutions (as Carson claims, there is nowhere in the text where Jesus argues for the innocence of these persons).<sup>6</sup> Instead of negating human wickedness, Jesus affirms it. Jesus did deny the notion that these disasters were designed to punish the victims for being ἀμαρτωλοὶ παρὰ 'more wicked' as opposed to the other Galileans who escaped such a fate. What Jesus does deny is a discernable plumb line between unusually wicked sin and a corresponding suffering.

The prevalent view in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism was that calamity and disaster were the direct results of specific, personal sin. In his commentary, Martin cites Rabbi Alexander, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish authority who taught, "No one gets up from his bed of sickness until all his sins have

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call to orienting one's heart and life around God's purpose is the most obvious way to hear this text." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 515. Furthermore, the interpretation of the fig tree analysis will be expanded later in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Except for a mechanistic version of the punishment theodicy that will be discussed later in the paper.

<sup>6</sup> Although not an academic source, David Platt makes a point that is of value to this discussion. In reference to inherent human innocence, Platt writes, "The reality is, the *innocent* guy in Africa will go to heaven because if he is innocent, then he has no need for a Savior to save him from his sin. As a result, he doesn't need the gospel. But there is a significant problem here. The *innocent* guy doesn't exist...in Africa or anywhere else." David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 147.



been forgiven.”<sup>7</sup> Yet Jesus derails such punishment theodicies with his commentary on the blind man elsewhere in John 9:1-3, “*As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”*”

Everyone it seems (except for Jesus) believed that the man’s blindness was the result of either his parents’ wickedness or his own prenatal sin. This popular viewpoint is even expressed by Jesus’ own disciples (Jn. 9:2). Note that Jesus never denied that the man was a sinner but that, at least in this scenario, there was no discernible correlation of the blindness to a specific sin. One could argue that Jesus proposes a modified version of the inscrutability defense. In the Luke 13 narrative, God’s purposes are deemed inscrutable.

#### V. Scope of Jesus’ Inscrutability Defense

Jesus chooses to deal with both moral and natural evil at the same time and manner. That evil and suffering originated as the result of human sin is never denied in the course of the Luke 13 narrative.

##### 1. Moral Evil – Pilate’s murder of the Galileans (Luke 13:1)

In addition to denying a mechanistic theodicy, the second aspect of Jesus’ response is a tacit agreement that tragedies will occur in a fallen world. Pilate’s slaughter of the Galileans in verse one is a clear case of moral evil. Plantinga defines moral evil as evil that results from free human activity.<sup>8</sup> Like many political leaders of his day, Pilate was not a stranger to the use of

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<sup>7</sup> R.A. Martin, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 30.

violence as a repressive strategy. Unwilling to try to understand Judaism, Pilate further alienated himself from the people through deliberate acts of provocation of which Josephus records:

But now Pilate, the procurator of Judea, removed the army from Caesarea to Jerusalem, to take their winter quarters there, in order to abolish the Jewish laws. So he introduced Caesar's effigies, which were upon the ensigns, and brought them into the city; whereas our law forbids us the very making of images; on which account the former procurators were wont to make their entry into the city with such ensigns as had not those ornaments. Pilate was the first who brought those images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, because it was done in the nighttime.<sup>9</sup>

Pilate's response to the Jewish sanction was a standing kill order until he saw that the Jewish resolve was firm even to the point of death. Unfortunately, this terrible act of murdering worshippers in the Temple was not foreign to Pilate's character. If one element of Pilate's character (or lack thereof), stands out, it would be insecurity. T.S. Eliot so eloquently observes, "Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important."<sup>10</sup> Pilate's deep insecurity led him to perpetrate virtually any act if the final outcome was power gained. His part in the illegal trial and execution of Jesus revealed Pilate's willingness to ignore Jesus' innocence and even violate the sacred trust of Roman justice (Lk. 23:18-25; Matt. 27:11-26; John 18:28-19:16). The climax came in a ritual washing of hands, as if such a pretentious act would cleanse from the blood of an innocent man. Here was just another example of Pilate's sacrifice to the green-backed god of political expediency (Matthew 27:24).

In summary, Pilate's murderous actions towards the Galilean worshippers serves as a grisly example of moral evil. So how does the collapse of the Tower of Siloam differ from Pilate's slaughter of the Galileans?

## 2. Quasi-Natural Evil – Tower of Siloam catastrophe (Luke 13:4)

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<sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. W. Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), Ant XVIII, iii, 1.

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 111.

Natural evil is evil that arises outside the realm of human choice and/or negligence such as disease, hurricanes, wild animals, etc. Wood and Marshall comment, “The ‘Tower of Siloam’ which fell and killed 18 persons—a disaster well known in our Lord’s day—was probably sited on the Ophel ridge above the pool (of Siloam) which, according to Josephus, was near the bend of the old wall below Ophlas (Ophel).”<sup>11</sup> The text does not say whether the collapse was caused by faulty construction, a strong wind, or a minor earthquake. Regardless, Jesus never questions God’s overarching sovereignty in the event.

### 3. Jesus’ Commentary

So, what claim is Jesus posing to the problem of natural and moral evil? In both scenarios Jesus denies a mechanistic punishment theodicy (Lk. 13:2, 4). The tension must have been incredible, as the hearers waited to see what explanation would come from this revolutionary rabbi. Jesus’ shocking announcement, “*I tell you, no,*” had to rattle the very pillars of the Jewish hearers’ worldview (Luke 13:3, 5). Jesus follows up with a challenging personal application, “*but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*” (Luke 13:3, 5). C.S. Lewis captures Jesus’ thought with the echo, “Pain is God’s megaphone to get our attention.”<sup>12</sup> Notice that Jesus’ “theodicy” contains no trace of an admission of any lack in God’s omnipotence, omniscience or benevolence. Neither does His answer hint of a Manichaeism, which holds to a dualistic battle in the cosmos by a realized Good/ Evil or Light/Darkness.<sup>13</sup> So what is Jesus’ explanation?

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<sup>11</sup> D.R.W. Wood, and I.H. Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 133.

<sup>13</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, Volume II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 39. Augustine of Hippo held to Manichaeism before converting to Christianity. The progressive irrationalism of Manichaeism led Augustine to disillusionment, through which he began a search for truth that finalized in his conversion to Christianity.

### A. Qualified Inscrutability – Logical Problem of Evil

Jesus sees human suffering as operating within the auspices of the sovereignty of God. In large part, the reasons for human suffering are inscrutable to humans with limited data.

Therefore, what Jesus proposes is more of an undercutting defeater to any sort of mechanized punishment or chastisement theodicy rather than an alternate theodicy of the same order. One example prominent in the Hebrew mind would have been Joseph being sold by his brothers to foreign slave traders (Genesis 37). Joseph's later interpretation of this seemingly unredeemable moral travesty was, "*You meant it for evil but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive*" (Genesis 50:20). Jesus is not so much establishing a new theory but reestablishing a lost synthesis of the sovereignty of God and an ultimate greater good. There is one set of events but two sets of intentions with respect to those events. Greg

Welty comments:

Their intent was great evil and God's intention was great good. The structure of the Hebrew portrays that God intended the actual evil to happen. So Joseph's brothers and God are both intending the same event. However, it is the background motive that makes all the difference. There is a teleological asymmetry here: the purposes of the brothers are at cross purposes with the purposes of God. They do not have the same goal in mind! This might be the beginnings of a model of any and every sin that begins in the universe. Sins are going to be over determined by their intention. Men are blamed in their desire in intending them for evil and God is praised for intending it for good. In Scripture, one's intentions are a relevant factor in assessing moral culpability.<sup>14</sup>

According to Welty, one's intentions assume moral culpability (to be discussed in further detail later) but do not outstretch God's sovereign purposes. Psalm 105:17-24 provides an excellent illustration of this assertion:

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<sup>14</sup> Greg Welty, "Divine Sovereignty" (lecture, PHREL 4383: God & Evil, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, March, 2007).

*he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. <sup>18</sup> His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; <sup>19</sup> until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him. <sup>20</sup> The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free; <sup>21</sup> he made him lord of his house and ruler of all his possessions, <sup>22</sup> to bind his princes at his pleasure and to teach his elders wisdom. <sup>23</sup> Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. <sup>24</sup> And the LORD made his people very fruitful and made them stronger than their foes.*

Notice that while human complicity is certainly a factor, God is the one presented as presiding over the entire affair. Hence, the background for Jesus' thought implies human inability to ascertain all the reasons why suffering occurs. Not only does this pose no obstacle to God's existence, omnipotence, omniscience, or benevolence but it solidifies the difference between the temporal human perspective and the transcendent divine perspective.

#### B. Greater Good Theodicy – Logical Problem of Evil

Per previous discussion, Jesus places the man being born blind as well within the confines of God's sovereignty. The purpose was, "*so that the works of God might be displayed in him*" (John 9:3). Until the time of the blind man's healing, the sovereign plan of God was entirely inscrutable.

So far, it has been demonstrated that Joseph was sold into slavery in order to save many lives, and the blind man suffered so that God's power might be made manifest. According to classic Christian theology, Jesus experienced a tremendous amount of suffering in order to bring about the redemption of many persons (I John 2:1). Within the Christian worldview, the passion of Jesus is the ultimate example of pain and suffering that produced the greater good of redemption for sinners "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12b). Although largely inscrutable until the final analysis (the eschatological culmination by the Lord of history), the greater good brought about by the innocent one suffering violence severely undercuts the

claim that suffering and evil cannot coincide with God's omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence.

## VI. The Fig Tree Metaphor

After using suffering as an incentive for repentance, Jesus provides an illustration with a parable of a fruitless fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9). Fig trees were a common symbol for the Jewish nation.<sup>15</sup> John Nolland comments, "The continued fruitlessness of the fig tree, fruit symbolizing repentance, makes it even riper for an appointment with the axe of the husbandman. The picture is of "judgment graciously held back for a time."<sup>16</sup> Trees not bearing fruit and axes were popular metaphors used by John the Baptist to make a case for the necessity of repentance in light of the forbearance of God, and judgment (Luke 3:8-9). Joseph Fitzmyer explains, "Prima facie, this (cutting down of the fig tree) refers to a form of natural death, which will come unexpectedly; but in the context of judgment, which has been running through this part of the Lucan travel account, a broader sense of perishing must be envisaged."<sup>17</sup>

Synonymous with the undeserved forbearance of the master of the vineyard is God's benevolent withholding of righteous judgment. Jesus does not paint God as a petty, revengeful, despot but rather as a righteous judge whose loving kindness continues to hold back the floodgates of sufficiently warranted judgment. Warren Wiersbe pinpoints the aim of the parable as, "God is seeking fruit. He will accept no substitutes, and the time to repent is now. Thus, the proper response to a tragedy that claims many lives, should be to ask oneself, "Am I just taking

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: The Anchor Bible, Volume 28a* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 1008.

<sup>16</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 9:21-18:34*, Volume 35B, Ralph Martin, ed., (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1993), 720.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1008.

up space, or am I bearing fruit to God's glory?"<sup>18</sup> While judgment is an undeniable theme of the parable, God's mercy is evident from the bonus time given for repentance (Lk. 13:7-9). One should not misunderstand Jesus' affirmation of human sin in the context of tragedy as an indication of callousness towards suffering. Rather, Jesus' words are a sign of willingness to avoid the danger of emotionalism in avoiding difficult topics such as sin.

## VII. Theological Backdrop of a Jewish 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Worldview

At this point, it would be pertinent to highlight several of the themes prominent in Jesus' theological backdrop. Jesus made clear the source and point of his teachings in Matthew 5:17-19:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

According to this text, Jesus' intentions were not to establish a new theological worldview but to live out the one set forward in the Old Testament. The internal presuppositions of Jesus' theodicy are centrally rooted in a God-centered, Old Testament worldview. In order to correct any possible misinterpretations in the thrust of his teachings, Jesus expressly denied any vestige of demeaning or destroying not only the general precedent of the Old Testament but even the "jot and tittle" of the law (Matthew 5:19).<sup>19</sup> There are several vital foundations, unnecessary to elucidate to a primary 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jewish audience, that a Western-based, 21<sup>st</sup> century readership must grasp in order not to misread the implications of Jesus' words.

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<sup>18</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1996), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM]. The "jot" represents iota as the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet where "the minute point or stroke added to some letters of the Hebrew alphabet to distinguish them from others which they resemble; hence, the very least point."

## 1. Historicity of the Fall

First, in the Lucan narrative, it is apparent that Jesus held to the historicity of the Great Deluge as well as the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Lk. 17:26-27). Andrew Wilson notes, “The human fall is . . . logically necessary only for religions in which (1) God is the only Creator, (2) the creation was purposed to be good, and (3) evil is regarded as real and contrary to the purpose of creation.”<sup>20</sup> Noah’s Flood is a hollow narrative without historicity of the fall. Another poignant picture of the resulting damage of the fall is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Lk. 17:28-29). Jesus repeatedly used catastrophic examples such as these to emphasize coming judgment. He concludes, “*It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed*” (Lk. 17:30). It appears that Jesus’ regularly used instances of catastrophic suffering as not only incentives to individual and corporate repentance but also linked them to the final judgment. For Jesus, issues of theodicy, soteriology, and eschatology are deeply intertwined. Moreover, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as Noah’s Flood is an enigma if the fall of man is uncertain. Thus, it is certain that Jesus believed in the fall as an actual event. That evil was not a malicious creation of God but rather an abuse of Adam and Eve’s ability to act as free, moral agents, vindicates God from a kind of cosmic barbarism.<sup>21</sup> God’s graciousness in providing everything necessary for a fulfilling and joyous existence for Adam and Eve and their ensuing ungratefulness serves as Jesus’ theological template for all human sin.

## 2. Universal Human Depravity

Second, Jesus strongly believed in universal human depravity. Throughout the Old Testament, the ambassadors renowned for issuing the often-ignored clarion call for repentance

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Wilson, *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1995), 300.

<sup>21</sup> See, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom & Evil* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1974).



were “The Prophets.” Prophets carried the banner of righteousness even in the deepest mire of Jewish decline. Repentance from sin and a contrite heart for the things of God hinging on combating and eradicating the eroding effects of human depravity, comprised the simple message of these faithful men. Jesus references them and their message, which hinged on combating and eradicating the eroding effects of human depravity, numerous times.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Jesus references the prophets a total of seventeen times in the Lucan narrative.<sup>23</sup>

The message of the Prophets was the religious/cultural glue of the Jewish people so much that many wondered which prophet Jesus resembled most.<sup>24</sup>

It is intriguing that the power and uniqueness of Jesus found precedent only within the tradition of the prophets. Not only that but Jesus also noted the horrific persecution endured by the prophets,<sup>25</sup> the cohesiveness of their message,<sup>26</sup> and the superiority of their testimony versus miraculous signs in convincing one of the truth of God’s Word.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Omnipotence of God: Redemptive Nature of Suffering

Third, Jesus believed that evil was not out of God’s control and that suffering is ultimately redemptive if responded to properly. In Luke 20:41-44, Jesus references Psalm 110:1 and attributes David as a historical figure who authored the Psalm. Jesus uses David’s eating on the Sabbath as a historical event in making the argument that “The Son of man is Lord of the

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 13:34, 18:31.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 6:23, 6:26, 9:8, 9:19, 10:24, 11:47, 11:49, 11:50, 13:28, 13:34, 16:16, 16:29, 16:31, 18:31, 24:25, 24:27, 24:44.

<sup>24</sup> Although not contained in the Lucan narrative, an interesting parallel in two of the other Gospels is the standard of moral and theological excellence held by the prophets. Other than Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, all the other reports compared him to either John the Baptist or Elijah (Mk. 8:27-29; Mt. 16:13-20).

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 23:29-31, 23:37; Lk. 13:34.

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 26:56; Lk. 16:16.

<sup>27</sup> Lk. 16:16, 16:29.

Sabbath.”<sup>28</sup> On numerous occasion in the Lucan narrative Jesus is connected to the title, “Son of David.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, that Jesus considered David’s writings authoritative is a warranted position. David wrote in hindsight on a bout of personal suffering “*It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes . . . I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are righteous, And that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.*”<sup>30</sup> David, as Jesus, saw suffering as essentially restorative rather than purely punitive. While the Old Testament picture of resultant suffering from judgment due to rebellious sin against God is totally consistent with what Jesus taught, the primary and overarching theme is restoration.<sup>31</sup> The benevolence of God in spite of the almost certain future rebellion of his people followed with the road to restoration is beautifully illustrated by the ending of Solomon’s coronation prayer in 1 Kings 8:46-53.<sup>32</sup>

Let it be noted that the foreign aggressors routinely used by God in the Old Testament to humble the rebellious hearts of Israel were not immune from moral culpability. Isaiah 10:5-6 illustrates, “*Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hands is My indignation, 6 I send it against a godless nation.*”<sup>33</sup> Astonishingly, God uses a corrupt political power broker

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<sup>28</sup> Luke 6:1-5.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 1:27, 1:32, 1:69, 2:4, 2:11, 3:31, 18:38-39.

<sup>30</sup> Ps. 119:71, 75

<sup>31</sup> For a narrative pattern of this vicious cycle, consult the book of Judges. The dismal process was: The people rebel, God then brings in a foreign oppressor as His instrument of judgment, the people are humbled. Broken and contrite they cry out to God in repentance and ask for deliverance, and God graciously provides a deliverer who is but a shadow of Jesus Christ the deliverer.

<sup>32</sup> Jesus references Solomon not only as a historical figure but as a symbol of greatness (Lk. 11:31, 12:27).

Several truths stand out from 1 Kings 8:46-53 that provide somewhat of a theological backdrop for suffering and judgment in the Old Testament as well as what Jesus seems to point to. First, one sees that rebellion against the express will of God in Scripture brings the judgment of God. Second, this judgment is with an asterisk that allows for possible mercy as warranted by genuine repentance. Third, future restoration based upon God’s covenant love (*hesed*).

<sup>33</sup> Jesus treatment of Isaiah in Luke 4:17 is evidence that Jesus considered Isaiah to be canonical. Jesus quotes from Isaiah extensively in Matthew’s gospel (Matt. 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, 15:7).

to wreak havoc and suffering upon Israel so that Israel, the “godless nation” who had placed the bushel of iniquity over the light of God’s truth, would return in contrition to God. The *telos* of the national suffering was God’s intentional loving redemption and restoration of a prodigal nation.

#### 4. Unmitigated Sovereignty of God

Fifth, Jesus holds to the total and unmitigated sovereign purposes of God within suffering. Jesus’ struggle in Gethsemane and final willingness to drink the cup of God’s wrath illustrates in the strongest terms an absolute abandon to and faith in the sovereignty and character of God; even to the point of death. One finds this beautifully paralleled in Lamentations 3:37-38 where Jeremiah the prophet writes, “*Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?*” 1 Samuel 2:6-7 expresses the prophet Samuel’s exposition, “*The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The LORD makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts.*” Deuteronomy 32:39 reads, “*See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, And there is no one who can deliver from My hand.*” If one is in a right standing with God one need have no fear, hence Jesus’ stress upon repentance which brings peace with God. Jesus’ fearlessness in the face of savage opposition, even in the face of an ignominious death by crucifixion, was the window that shed light on what it truly meant to walk by faith. In summary, these Old Testament texts appear to support Jesus’ contention in Luke 13:2-3 that God is justified in not alleviating every instance of suffering.

#### 5. Human Culpability in Light of Divine Sovereignty

While the Old Testament metanarrative portrays God as being without rival, it must be duly noted that this was in stark contrast with a later pagan Stoicism.<sup>34</sup> God's sovereignty must not be confused with a kind of Stoic cosmic fatalism that Lawrence Richards identifies as "a kind of universal law that pantheistically pervaded the universe."<sup>35</sup> Human responsibility and culpability is just as evident in the Hebrew Scriptures as is God's sovereignty.

The first passage describing this often misunderstood relationship is 1 Samuel 2:22-25 where Eli the priest appeals to his reprobate sons to forsake their blasphemous lifestyle. The latter part of verse 25 reads, "*But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord desired to put them to death.*" It seems like the moral responsibility of these perverted priests and the sovereign hand of God is one in the same but their refusal to listen was because they "despised the offering of the Lord."<sup>36</sup> Evidence of God condoning something that would violate his holiness is not evident in this text. Note that the repulsive acts were committed by Eli's sons as was their refusal to heed their father's advice. God's sovereignty brought about a seemingly delayed but crushing hammer of justice against Hophni and Phineas through a decisive Philistine victory. Thus, God's sovereignty in this scenario functions parallel to the moral agency of Eli's sons. Thus, moral culpability survives alongside divine sovereignty.

The second example, which depicts Samson's obstinacy in spite of his parents, is even more curious. Upon rejecting the pleas of his parents for him to marry within the covenant community of Israel, "*Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me."*

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<sup>34</sup> E. Ferguson, "Stoicism" *New Dictionary of Theology*, editors, Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, consulting editor, J.I. Packer (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1988), 661. Ferguson writes, "Stoicism was founded by Zeno" (335-263 BC), and "may be characterized as materialistic pantheism."

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>36</sup> 1 Sam. 2:17b.

*However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines.*<sup>37</sup> Nazarite vows and a robust understanding of the Mosaic Law were subjugated to the whims of fleeting pleasures. Samson could not claim ignorance in his rebellion. To Samson's parents the overarching plan of divine sovereignty was inscrutable. Despite God's involvement in this instance of family strife, Samson later suffers the result of following the "lusts of the eyes" with his eyes gouged out by cruel Philistine captors.<sup>38</sup> One can make a strong case that God's use of Samson's unrighteousness to mete out a righteous judgment against the cruelty and inhumanity of the Philistines is warranted.<sup>39</sup>

In summary, the Old Testament paints a picture of divine sovereignty as existing alongside human responsibility that results in a substantive human culpability. Yet in the process, God's sovereignty is virtually inscrutable. These examples serve to illustrate the Old Testament presuppositions present in Jesus' treatment of theodicy and the final judgment in that persons are morally culpable and accountable to God who is sovereign over all events.

## VIII. The Right Question: Why is anyone alive at all?

### 1. Paradigm shift: God no longer on the witness stand

Instead of God being on trial in the sense of having to provide rational grounds for His actions in the world, Jesus applies a groundbreaking paradigm shift: humanity must provide a defense for its continued existence. Man is no longer the prosecutor and God the defendant. Jesus portrays an image of God holding the gavel of justice and humanity is the collective defendant. Jesus' reasoning is rooted in a biblical anthropology stemming from the Hebrew

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<sup>37</sup> Judges 14:3b-4a.

<sup>38</sup> Judg. 16:21.

<sup>39</sup> Samson's death commemorated the greatest blow to Philistine power in generations.

scriptures. If Ezekiel 18:20 holds true that “*the soul that sins must die*,” combined with universal human depravity, the idea Jesus seems to identify in Lk.13:2-3, then the question drastically changes.<sup>40</sup>

Hence the question, “why is anyone alive at all?” The view of Jesus is strikingly symmetrical with that of the apostle Paul who writes in Romans 3:23, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” If death comes through sin, then there is obviously another factor at work in the continued existence of every person who has yet to experience death. Viewed through this lens, it is the continued benevolence and loving kindness of God that underpins Jesus’ call to repentance. In turn, the option of a Stoic cosmic force should be discarded whereas the reality of a transcendent, righteous and merciful Sovereign should be firmly upheld.

#### A. Implications of the Paradigm Shift: Life is mercy, death is justice

If the penalty for sin is death and all have sinned, then why have all not suffered the penalty of violating God’s moral law? From the shadows emerges the theme of God’s  $\pi\sigma\delta$ , most commonly translated “loving-kindness,” as the sole intermediating reality that stands between the axe and the fig tree. It follows that God’s mercy, not His wrath, takes center stage. The logical implication of Jesus’ words is as follows: One should not ask why did certain persons die, but rather, why are the rest of humanity still alive? Therefore, personal repentance should be the response of those who observe evil arising from tragedy.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The reader would do well to note Jesus’ acknowledgement of the historicity of the Hebrew Bible. Without this in proper focus, many of Jesus’ sayings may be misinterpreted as being theologically and philosophically unwarranted. For more information see: [http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/areopagus\\_jesusinspirationscripture/areopagus\\_jesusinspirationscripture.htm](http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/areopagus_jesusinspirationscripture/areopagus_jesusinspirationscripture.htm)

<sup>41</sup> Darrell Bock notes, “Mortality is evidence of the presence of sin in our world (Gen 3). More important than the timing or cause of death is this: only repentance can change death from a tragic end into a bridge to a new kind of life (Lk 3:8; 6:24-26; 10:13; 12:58-59; 15:7). The event shows life’s fragility. Disaster looms for the unresponsive . . . The passage is significant because Jesus constantly avoids letting the question get off-track; he keeps people considering their own sinful state.” Darrell Bock, *Luke: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 238-239.

## B. Implications of the Paradigm Shift: The Necessity of Repentance

Why is repentance necessary? Carnell ponders, “If men of character demand an accounting from those who offend, should we not throw consistency to the wind to say that God, whose character is perfect, fails to make a like demand?”<sup>42</sup> Carnell continues in this vein of thought:

God is propitious toward the human race—that is, he is morally willing to engage in friendly discussion about the problem of evil. But propitiation does not exempt man from the necessity of repenting. God is willing to prove the equity of his dealings, provided we address ourselves to the problem in the only way that the character of God permits. Before God will give an account of himself to man, man must give an account of himself to God; for the *worst* evil, the one that is first in the order of God’s concern, is man’s sin of pride and ingratitude. Man is not held by spontaneous sentiments of thankfulness for all God has done. Ingratitude arouses the judicial sentiment in any person, whether God or man.<sup>43</sup>

Jesus holds forth the loving-kindness of God, demonstrated in His forbearance, as the life-support of humanity. Consequently, tragedy is a call to reflect upon one’s own eternal destiny that should lead to repentance.

## IX. The Challenge: Reflect and Repent

### 1. Repentance Defined

According to Jesus, tragedy and suffering should stir one to repentance. What is the genuine meaning and outworking of repentance? Louw and Nida provide the following description of the Greek word translated “repent” used by Jesus, “Though in English a focal component of repent is the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, the emphasis in μετανοέω and μετάνοια seems to be more specifically the total change, both in

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<sup>42</sup> Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), 272.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

thought and behavior, with respect to how one should both think and act.”<sup>44</sup> Eryl Davies distinguishes, “the call to repentance did not mean merely a change of attitude; rather, it involved a total reorientation that was to affect every sphere of life.”<sup>45</sup> Repentance is no small change but the re-ordering of every facet of the individual’s spiritual, philosophical, and theological universe with the nature of God as revealed in the Bible.

In summary, Jesus neither connects specific sins to specific instances of suffering nor denies human depravity. Jesus uses tragedy as a clarion call of human mortality, which highlights the need for repentance. God is not on trial for His actions in the world. Rather, Jesus describes humanity as collectively guilty. The question is no longer “Why does God let bad things happen to good people?” when confronted with tragedy but “why does God allow survivors?” Jesus’ parable of the fig tree illustrates God’s forbearance in allowing undeserved time for persons to come to repentance.

### IX. Contrast with Islamic Theodicy

In contrast with the theodicy of Jesus, whereas God’s forbearance plays a major factor, Islamic theodicy has a vastly different outlook. In order to fully appreciate this contrast, a brief survey of the central tenets of Islamic theology is provided. However, there are certain similarities between the two faiths. For example, Islam, like Christianity, rejects any form of

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<sup>44</sup> J.P. Louw, and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 1:509.

<sup>45</sup> Eryl W. Davies, *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, J.W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, ed., (New York: Oxford, 2006), 743.



polytheism.<sup>46</sup> The sin of *shirk*, associating anything with God other than His Oneness and sovereignty, is understood as most heinous. Sura 4:116 reads, “God does not forgive one’s associating [others] with Him; He forgives anyone He wishes to for anything beyond that. Anyone who associates [others] with God has strayed far afield.” In reference to this text, Al-Hajj Ta’lim ‘Ali comments, “Association [is] the worst sin.”<sup>47</sup> Not only is understood as strictly Unitarian but that the final judgment rest solely with Him. In a similar manner, Jesus makes statements pertaining to God as the ultimate judge. There is one notable difference: Islam holds that the will of God is not dependent or subservient to anything<sup>48</sup> whereas the majority of Christian theologians hold that God’s will is an extension of His nature and thus, would not will things contradictory to His nature.<sup>49</sup> William of Ockham is one example of Nominalism. He writes, “A thing becomes right solely for the reason that God wants it to be so.”<sup>50</sup> Erickson comments, “Therefore, God must be necessarily good. This means that if God had willed something different than what he did, that would have been good, just as this is good by virtue of his having willed it.”<sup>51</sup> The question then becomes, in light of God’s role in theodicy and the eschatological judgment, the freedom of God. In contrast with the Islamic view, Christian

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<sup>46</sup> Islam’s monotheism is strictly Unitarian. The Trinity is explicitly denied (Surah 4:171), in the Qur’an whereas Christian monotheism is Trinitarian. See, the Nicene Creed: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/brannan/hstercon.iv.html?highlight=council.of.nicea#highlight>

<sup>47</sup> T.B. Irving (Al-Hajj Ta’lim ‘Ali), translator & commentary, *The Qur’an* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Amana Books, 1988), 48.

<sup>48</sup> Saeed Abdullah, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 160.

<sup>49</sup> See, Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen C. Tornay, ed., *Ockham: Studies and Selections* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1938), 180. Quoted in, Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 242. For the purposes of this paper, Erickson’s view will serve as the model Christian for the purposes of this discussion. To generalize upon the entire body of Christian thinkers on this subject would be quite unmanageable given the constraints of this paper.

<sup>51</sup> Erickson, *ibid.*

position in terms of the Scriptural references that declare, “nothing is impossible with God” is best understood in light of those actions being in conformity with God’s nature. For example, Hebrews 6:18 clearly states, “it is impossible for God to lie.” Erickson provides a helpful point of clarification:

Freedom does not mean total indeterminacy . . . Freedom is the absence of external constraints on one’s choice and action. It is not necessarily freedom from internal factors. Freedom does not mean the ability to act in a way different than what one is. It means the ability to act consistent with one’s nature and character. Thus, it really is not quite appropriate to say that God is not free to act cruelly.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Islam rejects any stipulations surrounding God’s actions as denigrating His deity. While Islam certainly upholds the goodness of God, with every *sura* beginning with the phrase, “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful,” the inference is that if God chooses to act differently then He cannot be charged with wrongdoing. The virtues depend solely upon God’s declaration of them as such. If God were to have acted in a different manner or revealed Himself with characteristics diametrically opposed to being “compassionate and merciful” then the moral fabric of the universe would necessarily be required to take similar form.

Corduan highlights the practical determinism that such an emphasis creates. He notes, “All that has happened must have been willed by Allah. This is the core belief on the infallible decree of God. Its intent is to proclaim the sovereignty of God; its effect has been to promote at least the appearance of determinism. Apathy can also result. Since all that happens is decreed by God, there is no reason to try to change anything.”<sup>53</sup> The Qur’an reads, “If there were other gods

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 93.

in either [Heaven or Earth] besides God [Alone], they would both dissolve in chaos. Glory be to God, Lord of the Throne, beyond what they describe! He will not be questioned about what He does while they shall be so questioned.”<sup>54</sup> God’s total and unmitigated sovereignty, *tawhid*, is a central tenet within any Islamic theodicy. On the other hand is the prevailing notion of God’s sovereignty in Christianity but also the command by Jesus himself to literally change the world by making disciples from every distinct ethno-linguistic group.<sup>55</sup>

With the unrelenting emphasis upon “the will of Allah,” there has not been the same level of development within Islamic thought as Christian theology in the area of theodicy. The reason is simply when any event can be relegated to the will of God there is no intellectual necessity to address any variety of theodicies. One example of the clash between the Western (not specifically Christian, per se), and Islamic viewpoints is illustrated in the epic film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, in which one of Lawrence’s men had fallen from his camel during a night march across the desert. As to the man’s fate to die of exposure in the desert, the Muslims responded, “It is God’s will. It is written.” Lawrence refused to operate according to such presumptive determinism with the phrase, “nothing is written,” and at the risk of his own life, went back and rescued the man.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sura 21:22-23.

<sup>55</sup> Matt. 28:18-20.

<sup>56</sup> *Lawrence of Arabia*, directed by David Lean (1962; Hollywood, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1989), VHS. The reader should note that Lawrence’s response of a possible open future does not represent any specific Christian view but rather serves as an illustration of the presumptive determinism of Islamic theodicy in relation to the will of Allah. The bulk of Christian theology has historically held that persons have a moral responsibility and that God’s plan cannot be thwarted. One example (albeit from a more Reformed perspective), is the Westminster Shorter Catechism which reads as follows: 5. What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse, due to us for sin? A. To escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ? A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel. 87. What is repentance unto life? A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy

In a sense, Islamic theodicy is largely circular. Why do instances of pain and suffering occur? They occur because God willed them to occur. Why has God willed them to occur? God has willed these things to happen based on His will. Hence, pain and suffering exist due to the will of God from which the explanation of the “what” (pain and suffering) simply turns around to the “what” of the “who” (the will of God). Because of this, one need not concern oneself with seeking a breakthrough in theodicy.<sup>57</sup> One simply needs to accept that whatever happens is God’s will and submit to it with the belief and that it should not be questioned nor could have been altered. This is not to say that Islamic scholars are incapable of formulating a plethora of elaborate theodicies but that there is no theological or intellectual reason to do so.

One can extend this idea of the occurrence and resolution of pain and suffering within the context of the eschaton as well. Strict and continued obedience to the five pillars of Islam is absolutely necessary to one having a chance of entering Paradise. However, such practice can in no sense correlate to the result of regeneration produced by the Holy Spirit as in 1 John 5:13, “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*” Suzanne Haneef highlights that:

No Muslim, even the best among them, imagines that he is guaranteed Paradise; on the contrary, the more conscientious and God-fearing one is, the more he is aware of his own shortcomings and weaknesses. Therefore the Muslim, knowing that God alone controls life and death, and that death may come to him at any time, tries to send ahead for his future existence such deeds as will merit the pleasure of his Lord, so that he can look forward to it with hope for His mercy and grace.<sup>58</sup>

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of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience. Last accessed August 7, 2012. <http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html>

<sup>57</sup> See, Intisar-Al-Haq, “Fatalism,” *Islamic Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 3. Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, (1969).

<sup>58</sup> Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims* (Chicago: Kazi, 1979), 37. Quoted in, Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 92.

Christians understand the eschatological climax as the day in which “faith will become sight.”<sup>59</sup> In a word, the final confirmation of the witness of the Holy Spirit present in the heart of a believer at the point of conversion,<sup>60</sup> and the same Spirit that preserved them through every conceivable trial provides both a hope and confidence that is entrenched in the merits of a Savior and not in one’s good works.<sup>61</sup> Whereas Muslims, on the other hand, view the eschaton with, at best, a strong sense of uncertainty due to the inscrutable “will of God.” Given such an assumption, a sense of uncertainty could easily slide down the path of outright dread if circumstantial data seems to indicate that God’s anger resides upon a Muslim. Given the will of God that is causally determined by events that occur in space-time, one may have reason to identify God’s favor by whether one’s life is circumstantially favorable. In light of unfavorable circumstances Christians can claim Romans 8:28 whereas the most probable explanation for a Muslim would be some shade of punishment theodicy.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Christian and Muslim responses to the eschatological culmination are drastically different based upon their respective presuppositions on the will of God and the assurance of salvation.

#### X. The Day of Judgment/Doomsday and Resurrection

The specific time of the day of Judgment within Islamic thought is known only by God. Sura 7:187a reads, “They ask thee of the (destined) Hour, when will it come to port. Say: Knowledge thereof is with my Lord only. He alone will manifest it at its proper time. It is heavy

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<sup>59</sup> 1 Cor. 13:13.

<sup>60</sup> Rom. 8:16.

<sup>61</sup> Eph. 2:8-10.

<sup>62</sup> See, Ibrahim Kalin, “Mulla Sadra on Theodicy and the Best of All Possible Worlds,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2007): 183. In his abstract, Kalin’s reads, “The article looks critically at the eight arguments which Şadrā advances to defend his position. At the end of his elaborate discussions, however, Şadrā takes refuge in blessed ignorance.”

in the heavens and the earth. It cometh not to you save unawares.” God is the sole judge over the day of judgment, “Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful! Ruler on the Day for Repayment.”<sup>63</sup> It is also important to note that the rewards that one receives in Paradise, for those who are given mercy, are solely based upon what one earned through strict adherence to Islamic principles.<sup>64</sup>

Central to the Islamic concept of the ultimate judgment is the idea of “The Folding-Up”:

When the sun with its spacious light is folded up; When the stars fall, losing their luster; When the mountains vanish like a mirage; When the she-camels, ten months with young, are left untended; When the wild beasts are herded together in human habitations; When the oceans boil over with a swell; When the souls are sorted out being joined like with like; When the female infant buried alive, is questioned—for what crime she was killed; When the Scrolls are laid open; When the world on high is unveiled; When the blazing fire is kindled to fierce heat; And when the Garden is brought near—Then shall each know what it has put forward. So verily I call to witness the planets that recede. Go straight, or hide; And the night as it dissipates; And the dawn as it breathes away the darkness.<sup>65</sup>

The cataclysmic imagery seems to allude to the book of Joel in Peter’s Pentecost sermon and the idea of the “Day of the Lord” (Acts 2:14-36; Joel 2:1, 15, 23, 32). A historical consideration is helpful at this juncture. Christianity was already established all across the Near East by the time of the birth of Islam. Christian “influence” upon Islam is very apparent to a non-Muslim whereas a Muslim would claim that Islam is essentially the fulfillment of Christianity as Christianity sees itself the fulfillment of Judaism. Islam accepts the prophets and patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible as legitimate within their own time as representatives of God’s truth:

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<sup>63</sup> Sura 1:1-3.

<sup>64</sup> Sura 52:1b.

<sup>65</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1996), Surah 81:1-18, p.1608. Quoted in William F. Larsen, *Islamic Eschatology: Implications for Christian Witness* (Columbia International University, nd), 2. <http://www.ciu.edu/faculty-publications/article/islamic-eschatology-implications-christian-witness> Accessed May 18, 2012.

From Adam, the first prophet, to Muhammad, the Last Messenger, Muslim tradition recognizes and identifies with the whole cycle of prophethood, ranging from the most famous messengers (Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, etc.) to the lesser known, as well as others who remain unknown to us . . . This is the millenary teaching of Islamic tradition: there is a God and a line of prophets whose central figure is Abraham, the archetype of the Muslim, the blood father of this lineage of Ishmael leading up to Muhammad.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, in Islam, Jesus is only one out of many prophets, although Jesus is reported to have performed many miracles.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Christianity holds that Jesus was much more than a prophet; he was the Son of God, the Messiah. The crucial point for the interaction of Christian and Islamic eschatology is not whether Jesus was a speaker of truth but whether he was something more. Christianity holds that Jesus will return as the divine warrior, who upon the fate of history rests, will defeat the Antichrist (Rev. 19:11-21).<sup>68</sup> The eschatological climax of history, as well as the final judgment, is rooted in the work of Jesus Christ. Simply put, Jesus is the main act of the eschaton, not a sideshow. Christ's work will not simply play a part within the judgment but His person is the standard of judgment by which "God judges the secrets of men" (Rom. 2:16b).

On the other hand, the Qur'an teaches that Jesus is merely one of the many righteous persons who will be resurrected on the last day (Surah 19:30-33). Muslims believe they hold

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<sup>66</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Sura 2:87, 3:49, 5:112-114. Winfried Corduan notes, "Most of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur'an (for example, in 3:33, 34; 4:163; 6:83-86) are biblical figures, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Jesus. The Qur'an refers to three prophets—Hud, Shu'aib and Salih (7:66-93)—who are not biblical but whose roots may be in the independent Arabian monotheistic tradition." Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 93.

<sup>68</sup> The imagery of Revelation 19 is so spectacular it is difficult to come to a conclusion that the rider of the white horse represents anything other than deity. Eyes like blazing fire (19:12), wearing many crowns (19:12), name being synonymous with the word of God (19:13), thus elevating him above simply a conduit of God's word, leads the armies of heaven (19:14), strikes down and rules the nations as the unrivaled sovereign (19:15), executes the wrath of God in a direct sense (19:15), seems to single-handedly defeat the beast, the kings of the earth, and their amassed armies, by killing them and delivering them over to the lake of fire (19:19-20). Therefore, based upon Revelation 19 and the interpretation of orthodox Christianity that the rider is the risen and returning Jesus, one finds a gulf of separation between the Islamic and Christian understanding of the culmination of the eschaton and the person of Jesus of Nazareth. See, Ben Witherington III, *Revelation: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 239-263.

Jesus in high esteem whereas giving Jesus even the status of one of the greatest prophets, as understood by Christians, is nothing less than blasphemous. Muslims may be tempted to likewise react to Christian claims that Jesus is not only a prophet of God but the Son of God, charging Christians with the sin of *shirk*.<sup>69</sup> Helpful dialogue can easily become drowned in religious passion. One effective way to conduct dialogue on this religiously sensitive issue is to start the discussion based upon the many references of Jesus within the Qur'an.

Much of the collision of thought comes from the Qur'an appearing to affirm the authority of the biblical prophets while at the same time a vastly different picture arising from the biblical sources which the Qur'an claims as authoritative. Winfried Corduan provides a helpful insight:

If Moses and Jesus were prophets from God, why are there discrepancies between the Bible and the Qur'an with regard to their lives and teachings? The traditional Islamic answer is that all the prophets taught the message that Muhammad taught. But subsequently people tampered with the writings they left behind and distorted the truth of the original message. As one drastic example, Muslims say that Christ did not claim to be God. Passages in which he apparently did so (for example, Jn 10:30) they claim to be later fabrications by the Christian church.<sup>70</sup>

The idea that the driving purpose of Jesus' ministry was to point to Muhammad as the ultimate prophet requires a hermeneutical presupposition that the Christian church significantly altered Jesus' sayings. Shabir Ally, a leading Muslim apologist, clearly captures the mainstream Islamic thought that the apostle Paul was in large part the problem of advocating Christ worship.

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<sup>69</sup> Any denigration of the central figures or tenets of Islam has sparked outrage by Muslims in many parts of the world. In certain cases it has led to the murder of those who portray outright scorn of Islam such as the Dutch film maker, Theo Van Gogh. Jörg Victor, "World Socialist Web Site," *Theo Van Gogh Murdered on the Streets of Amsterdam*, November 10, 2004. Accessed, May 21, 2012. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/gogh-n10.shtml>

<sup>70</sup> Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 90.



When confronted with Colossians 1:16, Ally succinctly responds, “Paul believed that Jesus was an agent whom God used in creating the cosmos.”<sup>71</sup>

One Islamic scholar interprets the reference point of John 14:26 as follows:

This prophecy also is true only of the Prophet of Islam. True, it says “whom the Father will send in my name.” But “in my name” can only mean, “he will bear testimony to my truth.” The Holy Prophet testified to the truth of Jesus as a divine and honoured Teacher and Prophet, and declared them mistaken and misguided who thought him accursed. The prophecy says clearly, “He shall teach you all things.” The words are reminiscent of those used in the prophecy in Deuteronomy. The description applies only to the Holy Prophet; and it was his teaching which brought comfort to the world.<sup>72</sup>

These examples illustrate the oppressively narrow hermeneutical labyrinth that Muslim theologians must apply when interpreting the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John. When taken together with the Second Coming of Jesus as the linchpin of biblical eschatology Muslim theologians *must*, in order to maintain integrity within their own exegesis of biblical passages concerning Jesus, firmly hold that *all* passages referring to Jesus’ deity or status as coming ruler are a product of intentional textual corruption by the Christian church. Herein lies the central

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<sup>71</sup> Shabir Ally, “Questions and Answers,” *Islamic Information Centre*, Accessed May 22, 2012. <http://www.islaminfo.com/qa.php>

<sup>72</sup> Hadrat Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad (Khalifatul-Masih II), *Muhammad in the Bible (Peace and blessings of God be upon him)* (Silver Spring, MD: The Majlis Ansarullah, U.S.A., 2003), 52. In an exegetical twist, Islamic scholars make the case that the παράκλητον of John 14:16 does not refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the ascension of Jesus but is a prophecy of the coming of Muhammad. Muslims hold that Christians have thoroughly understood the meaning of *parakletos*. Tariq Ramadan argues, “We find that there is a disagreement between the Muslims and the Christians about the Greek origin of the word “Parakletos.” Muslims believe that its origin is “Perklotos” and there was a fabrication done by the Christians to hide the word’s indication to the prophet’s name (PBUH) Ahmad (the one who is praised continuously). Such fabrication is an easy task for those whose book is a calamity, full of conflicts, fabrications and contradictions.” Munqidh Bin Mahmoud Assaqqar, *The Promised Prophet of the Bible* (True Guidance and Light Series 5), 117-118. <http://books.google.com/books?id=WpBSFOnoHMMC&pg=PT132&lpg=PT132&dq=the+promised+prophet+of+the+bible+publication&source=bl&ots=PVPUBC0ILs&sig=cvFUmk3ozN7Vd5pS7p3tE2y5WW0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=cUq4T-rjOibw6AGw-aDBCg&ved=0CHIQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false> Accessed May 18, 2012.

difference in Christian and Islamic views of the eschaton and theodicy; the person and nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

Concerning textual evidence, the claim that the New Testament manuscripts have been corrupted must also apply the same criteria to the sources for the Qur'an and the historical Muhammad. Unless presuming the absolute authority of the Qur'an *a priori*, one uncovers the corresponding evidence to be surprisingly historically anemic concerning verifiable facts about the historical Muhammad. Von Irving M. Zeitlin writes:

With regard to Muhammad's Meccan period, practically nothing is known for sure except his marriage and his preaching. The Quran itself provides no coherent biographical narrative, and as (F.E.) Peters aptly observes, "For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary political context, no literary apocrypha for a spiritual context and no Qumran scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian 'sectarian milieu.' The earliest biographer of Muhammad emigration from Mecca and his move to Medina in 622 CE. The original text of Ibn Ishaq's biography was lost, and no extant copy of the original exists. All we have is the recension by Ibn Hisham who died more than 200 years after the Hirja... the truth, then, is that the quest for the historical Muhammad is beset with difficulties and problems, the chief of which is the nature of the sources."<sup>73</sup>

The primary problems arising from "the nature of the sources" is that they are from non-eyewitnesses removed from the actual events by several generations. Unlike the study of the historical Jesus, which has numerous eyewitness testimonies as well as enemy attestation within less than one hundred years, there is no such manuscript evidence for the historical Muhammad.<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

Despite the apparent similarities in language concerning the final judgment, an examination of the actual meaning of the language in the respective religious contexts reaps

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<sup>73</sup> Irving M. Zeitlin, *The Historical Muhammad* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> Peters writes, "The historicity of the Islamic tradition is . . . to some degree problematic: while there are no cogent internal grounds for rejecting it, there are equally no cogent external grounds for accepting it . . . The only way out of the dilemma is thus to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again." Francis E. Peters, *Muhammad and Origins of Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 312.

valuable interpretive fruit. William F. Larsen wisely notes, “though Muslims and Christians have similar terms, often they have significantly different meanings.”<sup>75</sup> In Christian thought, the final judgment is precipitated by the return of Jesus Christ as the divine warrior. For Islam, the final judgment is the reckoning of justice without a reference to redemption except based upon the inscrutable will of God. On this note, Douglas Groothuis comments:

Nearly every chapter of the Qur’an speaks vehemently of the last judgment of Allah, and speaks for more often of hell than of paradise. If a person’s good deeds outbalance the bad deeds (the score is kept by angels), he or she may hope for paradise as a reward. However, since Allah is regarded as utterly sovereign and free, an individual cannot know whether he might receive mercy or severity in the afterlife (Qur’an 36:54; 53:38). However, it is certain that a man cannot be certain of his eternal condition—unless he dies in a genuine jihad. Then his destiny is certain: endless life in the company of multiple, heavenly virgins.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, the key of theodicy and eschatology is best answered by remembering that Jesus was not unaccustomed to suffering. A brief reading of the gospels reveals that Jesus’ actions toward human suffering were anything but indifferent. Jesus showed mercy to a woman accused of adultery, ministered to the crippled, welcomed societal outcasts, ministered to the ill, wept over his friend’s death, was rejected by his own family, was falsely accused, was betrayed by a close friend, and suffered a tortuous death.<sup>77</sup>

St. Rose of Lima writes, “tears belong to God and must be reserved for him alone.”<sup>78</sup>

Miskotte resonates, “There is a silent speech of tears which nobody, not even the angels, can

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<sup>75</sup> Larsen, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 603.

<sup>77</sup> John 8:1-11, Mark 7:32-34, Luke 7:34, Luke 18:39, John 11:35, Matthew 12:46-50, Luke 22:47-48, Mark 14:56, Luke 23:1-49.

<sup>78</sup> Ernest Hello, *Paroles de Dieu*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Paris: Librairie Academique Didier, 1899), 56. Cited in, Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 248.

hear and understand except God.”<sup>79</sup> If Jesus not only had a cognitive “knowledge” of human suffering but also suffered a plethora of evils then the gravity of his words about these realities deepens tremendously. Jesus does not speak from an ivory tower, but from under the iron heel of Roman oppression and fanatical intolerance from a religious establishment that sought his death. Even the agnostic Albert Camus notes the extraordinary implications of the death of Jesus concerning the enigma of evil and suffering:

His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them. The god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity, ostensibly abandoning its traditional privileges, lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the *Lama sabachthani* and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.<sup>80</sup>

Instead of the suffering of Jesus having a weakening effect, it causes God’s attributes to shine even brighter who raised Jesus from the dead. Although these assertions are denied by Islamic scholars, one must allowance for the brilliance of the theodicy that Jesus not only speaks of but experienced in the New Testament metanarrative.

Furthermore, the incarnation establishes God’s camaraderie with humanity when he enters the totality of the human experience. The incarnation is God entering the fray in human flesh, not in a quasi-angelic form immune to human pain. The incarnation means that Jesus experienced the full range of human temptations, frailty, and limitations yet while retaining moral impeccability. It was the proverbial actor coming out of the director’s chair and playing the lead part in the drama.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the claim that God set the parameters of universal operation in no way detracts from the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pain endured by

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<sup>79</sup> Kornelius H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, translated by John W. Doberstein, 248.

<sup>80</sup> *Essais* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 144. In Bruce Ward, “Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus’s Account of the Western Quest for Justice,” *Faith and Philosophy* [April 1991], 213. In, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 487-488.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 150-174.

Jesus. For Christians, the incarnation and passion of Jesus provides an even deeper consolation in the face of evil. Charles Spurgeon put this as:

Our Lord and Master hears with joy the shout of a believer who has vanquished his enemy and, at the same hour, He inclines His ear to the despairing wail of a sinner who has given up all confidence in self and desires to be saved by Him. At one moment He is accepting the crown that the warrior brings Him from the well-fought fight, and at another moment He is healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds.<sup>82</sup>

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observes, “Those who have continued to live on in comfort scold those who suffered.”<sup>83</sup> Jesus is not scolding when saying “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” but rather, pointing to the way of escape from the spiritual Gulag of sin. Therefore, the Christian concept of Jesus theodicy that establishes both the sovereignty of God and the moral culpability of persons, as connected to the final judgment in the eschaton contains vastly different notions than the same conclusions reached in Islamic thought.

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<sup>82</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Finding Peace in Life's Storms* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1997), 107-108.

<sup>83</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 1.

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