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A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE PRE-EXILIC PROPHETS

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I. THE ANCIENT THEORY THAT ALL SUFFERING IS PUNISHMENT

a. **Statement of the Theory.**—The earliest theory held by ancient Israel in regard to the meaning of suffering was that it was invariably the punishment of sin. Adam and Eve were banished from Eden because they disobeyed the divine command.¹ Cain was cursed for killing his brother.² Men were destroyed by the flood because of their wickedness.³ Sodom was overthrown on account of its iniquity.⁴ Whenever disaster befell the nation or individuals, it was never thought that this was accidental, or that it was inflicted arbitrarily by Yahweh, but always that it was sent in punishment for sin; and inquiry was made through priest or prophet to ascertain the cause of the divine displeasure. Thus the defeat at Ai was found to be due to the fact that Achan had violated the ban.⁵ The failure of Saul to obtain a favorable oracle was because Jonathan had broken the tabu on food.⁶ The pestilence that visited Jerusalem was in consequence of David's numbering of the people.⁷ The famine in the days of David was a punishment for Saul's killing the Gibeonites.⁸

To those who kept his commandments Yahweh promised

¹ Gen. 3 16-22.

² Gen. 4 11-15.

³ Gen. 6 5-8.

⁴ Gen. 18 20 f.; 19 24, etc.

⁵ Jos. 7 11 f.

⁶ 1 Sam. 14 20 ff.

⁷ 2 Sam. 24 15.

⁸ 2 Sam. 21 1.

that their days should be long upon the land which He, their God, gave them; that their bread and their water should be blessed, that sickness should be kept away from them, that none should cast their young or be barren, that all their enemies should be defeated before them, and that their borders should be widely extended.⁹ Those who broke Yahweh's commandments were punished with sudden death, with loss of children and property, with sickness, misfortune, and invasion by enemies.¹⁰ The uniform assumption of the old Hebrew religion was, that the good always prosper, and that the bad always suffer. "Be good, and you will be happy; be bad and you will be unhappy;" were regarded as maxims of unailing validity. The natural corollary of this doctrine was, that prosperity is the measure of goodness. If a man succeeded in all his undertakings, he must be well pleasing to God. If, on the other hand, he encountered adversity, he must be a great sinner.

b. Difficulties in the Way of the Penal Theory of Suffering. — 1. *Difficulties that Arose from the Sufferings of the Good.* — Under the simple conditions of early Hebrew society it probably held true in the majority of cases, that righteousness was rewarded with prosperity, and wickedness was punished with adversity; still, even in antiquity, there must have been numerous exceptions that challenged the correctness of this ancient theory of retribution. Abraham and Isaac sinned against Pharaoh and Abimelech; yet Pharaoh and Abimelech suffered, while the patriarchs flourished.¹¹ Jacob defrauded his brother Esau, yet Jacob won the birthright, and succeeded in all his undertakings.¹² Modern criticism holds that the story of Job's righteousness and his sufferings in the prose prologue and the epilogue of the Book of Job is an older folk-tale that has been taken up by the author of the book as a basis for his poem. Ezekiel, who lived before the author of Job, must have known this tale, for he mentions

⁹ Ex. 20 12; 23 26-31.

¹⁰ Gen. 38 7 ff.; 1 Sam. 6 19 ff.; 25 39; 2 Sam. 6 8 ff.; Jud. 9 56 f.

¹¹ Gen. 12 17; 20 2.

¹² Gen. 27.

Job along with Noah and Daniel as a worthy of ancient times.¹³ James 5 11 may allude to this rather than to the canonical Job, and this legend is found in other Oriental literature.¹⁴ If this be true, then the problem of the suffering of the righteous as exemplified in the case of Job was already familiar to Israel in pre-prophetic times.

2. *Difficulties that Arose from the New Social Order.* —

In the period of the monarchy the simple agricultural life of early Israel gave place to a complicated commercial and industrial civilization. Wealth was vastly increased, but it was most unequally distributed. A small group of unscrupulous capitalists, who regarded neither God nor man, amassed great riches by injustice, robbery, and exploitation of the peasantry. They lived in luxury and licence, while the poor suffered ever increasing hardships, although frequently they were more righteous than their oppressors. The prophets of the eighth century B. C. faced the undeniable facts, that in their days the wicked flourished and the righteous languished. These facts were hard to reconcile with the ancestral dogma that suffering is always the punishment of sin.

3. *Difficulties that Arose from the Political Situation.* —

From 745 B. C. to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. Israel was wasted by the terrible Assyrian and Babylonian invasions. In these the righteous and the wicked suffered alike. The good king Hezekiah endured the horrors of the Assyrian wars and the siege of Jerusalem in 701. In 734 Tiglath-Pileser IV carried into captivity the people of Gilead, Galilee, and Naphtali. In 722, after the fall of Samaria, Sargon made a second deportation. In 596 Nebuchadrezzar carried away King Jehoiachin and a large body of Judeans. A second captivity of Judah was made in 586, and a third in 581.¹⁵ In these deportations only the upper classes were taken: royal family, officials, warriors, priests, prophets, and skilled artisans. These were not sinners above others; on the contrary, they

¹³ Ezek. 14 14, 20.

¹⁴ See *Internat. Crit. Com.*, Job, pp. xxv-xxvi.

¹⁵ 2 Ki. 18—19; 15 29; 17 6; 24 14-16; 25 11; Jer. 52 29-30.

included many of the nation's noblest characters. Such national catastrophes could not fail to raise doubts in regard to the correctness of the penal theory of suffering.

4. *Difficulties that Arose from the Sufferings of the Prophets.* — Even the early prophets who preceded Amos had sometimes to endure persecution. Tradition related that Israel repeatedly rebelled against Moses, and that he was constrained to cry out: "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me; and if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favor in thy sight, and let me not see my wretchedness."¹⁶ Samuel complained that Israel had rejected him.¹⁷ Ahab and Jezebel slew the prophets of Yahweh,¹⁸ and attempted to capture Elijah.¹⁹ Ahab hated Micaiah because he prophesied evil to him.²⁰

The writing prophets of the eighth and of the seventh centuries B. C. were conspicuous for their sufferings. They were hated by the nation, persecuted by the authorities, and opposed by the false prophets. Several of them met martyr-deaths.

Amos agonized over the message of doom that he was sent to preach, and over the unbelief of the nation.²¹ He complained that the Israelites had always commanded the prophets not to prophesy,²² that they hated one who reproved in the gate, and abhorred one who spoke uprightly;²³ and that one who was prudent would keep silence in such a time.²⁴ He was denounced as a traitor to King Jeroboam II by Amaziah, the high priest; and was forcibly ejected from Bethel.²⁵

Hosea bore the misery and shame of the infidelity of a wife whom he deeply loved,²⁶ and his denunciations seem to indicate that he too suffered from the hostility of the priests, the prophets, and the nation.²⁷

Isaiah grieved at the sinfulness of Judah, and at its

¹⁶ Ex. 32 7-10; Num. 11 1-11, 14-16; 16.

¹⁷ 1 Sam. 8 4-9.

¹⁸ 1 Ki. 18 4, 13; 19 10, 14.

¹⁹ 1 Ki. 18 10, 17; 19 2, 10, 14; 21 30.

²⁰ 1 Ki. 22 6.

²¹ Am. 5 1-2; 7 2, 5.

²² Am. 2 12.

²³ Am. 5 10.

²⁴ Am. 5 13.

²⁵ Am. 7 10-17.

²⁶ Hos. 1-8.

²⁷ Hos. 4 4-10; 7 7-9.

impending ruin.²⁸ He suffered also because of the hardness of heart that made the nation incapable of heeding his warning.²⁹ "It is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the teaching of Yahweh: which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not."³⁰ He declared that Judah was not satisfied with wearing out the patience of the prophets, but was determined to wear out God's patience also.³¹ An ancient tradition says that Isaiah was slain by King Manasseh, and this is alluded to in Heb. 11 37. "They were sawn asunder."

Micah says of the people of his day: "Prophecy not, they cry, Thy revilings never cease. No disaster can overtake the house of Jacob. Is Yahweh's temper quick, and does he act thus? Are not his words kind to Israel? The prophet for such a people as this is some empty fellow and liar, who prophesies of wine and strong drink."³² Micah was opposed by false prophets, who cried, "Peace," when they were well fed.³³

King Manasseh instituted a fierce persecution of the reforming prophets and their adherents. The Books of Kings and of Jeremiah record that he "shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other."³⁴ A lament of the prophetic party from this time of persecution is perhaps found in Mic. 7 1-10.

Jeremiah was the typical sufferer among the Prophets. The sin of his people distressed him so deeply that it seemed at times as if he could endure it no longer. "Oh that I had in the wilderness a wayfarer's lodge! Then would I leave my people, and go from them! For they be all adulterers, a gang of traitors. And they bend their tongue like a bow for falsehood; and they are grown strong in the land, but not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil."³⁵

His message of the inevitable doom of Judah was a constant torture to Jeremiah.³⁶ "O my soul, my soul! I writhe! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is moaning! I cannot

²⁸ Isa. 6 5, 9-11.

²⁹ Isa. 30 9-12.

³³ Mic. 3 6-7, 11.

³⁵ Jer. 9 2-6; 23 9-11.

³⁰ Isa. 6 9 f.; 28 7-10; 29 9-12, 16; 33 2.

³¹ Isa. 7 12.

³² Mic. 2 6-7, 11.

³⁴ 2 Ki. 21 16; Jer. 2 34; 15 4.

³⁶ Jer. 1 10 b; 4 10-12.

hold my peace, for I hear the blare of trumpets and the battle-cry. Crash upon crash is announced, for the whole country is ruined, our tents are laid low in a second, our curtains torn down in a second!" "My sorrow is past healing, my heart is sick within me."³⁷ "Look at my poor people, moaning far and wide . . . Is Yahweh not in Sion? Has her King left her? Summer is over, the harvest is ended—with nothing to keep us alive. My poor people, they are broken, and I am broken-hearted; I go a-mourning, seized with dismay Oh that my head were waters, mine eyes a fount of tears, that I might weep all day and night for the slain of my poor people!"³⁸

Jeremiah also suffered keenly through the unwillingness of the nation to receive his message. "Stand at the cross-roads, said Yahweh, and look for the old path, ask for the good road and take it, so shall ye be safe and prosper. But they said, We will not take it. I posted sentinels for them, I bade them listen to the trumpet-blast; they said, We will not listen."³⁹

Throughout his entire ministry Jeremiah was exposed to the fierce opposition of the professional prophets, who derided his message, and who prophesied, "Peace, peace, when there was no peace."⁴⁰

The nation and its rulers were not satisfied with merely rejecting Jeremiah's teaching; they also resorted to active persecution. At the time of his call, Jeremiah was told: "Behold, I have made thee this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee."⁴¹

Jeremiah's own kinsmen of the priestly town of Anathoth were among his bitterest enemies. "I was like a trustful lamb, led out to be slaughtered; I knew not their plot, to cut me

³⁷ Jer. 4 19-22. ³⁸ Jer. 8 18—9 1; cf. 13 17; 14 17-18; 17 16.

³⁹ Jer. 6 16-17; cf. 6 10; 17 15; 18 18; 25 3-7; 36 20-25.

⁴⁰ Jer. 5 11-14, 20, 21; 6 12, 14; 14 12-16, 18; 23 9-40; 27 9-18; 28 1-17.

⁴¹ Jer. 1 17-19.

down in my full bloom, to cut me off out of the land of the living, that my very name might be forgotten."⁴² When Jeremiah announced the destruction of the Temple, the priests and the prophets declared him worthy of death, but the civil authorities and the people rescued him by appealing to the precedent of Hezekiah's toleration of Micah, when he had brought a similar message.⁴³ When Jeremiah sent Baruch to read in the Temple the roll in which he had gathered all his utterances during the previous twenty years, "then said the officials unto Baruch, Go, hide thee, thou and Jeremiah." King Jehoiakim then burnt the roll, and sent officers to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch, "but Yahweh hid them."⁴⁴ After Jeremiah had proclaimed in the Temple the impending destruction of Jerusalem, he was arrested by the chief officer of the Temple, and put into the stocks for the night.⁴⁵ When he attempted to leave the city at the time of the raising of Nebuchadrezzar's siege, he was apprehended on the charge of deserting to the Babylonians, and was cast into prison for a long time.⁴⁶ His persistent declaration that safety lay only in deserting to the Babylonians, led to his being cast into a miry dungeon, where he would certainly have perished, but for the friendly intervention of an Ethiopian eunuch.⁴⁷ He was carried away to Egypt by certain fugitives before the wrath of Nebuchadrezzar.⁴⁸ In Egypt he experienced the same persecution at the hands of his fellow-exiles that he had endured in Judea, and tradition records that he was stoned to death by his compatriots in Egypt.⁴⁹

So constant and so fierce was his persecution, that Jeremiah was constrained to cry out: "Alas, my mother! thou hast borne me to contend and to quarrel with all the land! I never lent, I never borrowed money, and yet all curse me."⁵⁰

"Now all day long I am a laughing-stock; men all deride me. Whenever I speak they mock, and they ill-treat me; for

⁴² Jer. 11 18-21; 12 5-8.

⁴³ Jer. 26 7-19.

⁴⁴ Jer. 36.

⁴⁵ Jer. 20 1-3.

⁴⁶ Jer. 37 11-21.

⁴⁷ Jer. 38 4-13.

⁴⁸ Jer. 43 1-7.

⁴⁹ Jerome, Tertullian, Epiphanius.

⁵⁰ Jer. 15 10.

uttering Yahweh's word, day after day I am taunted and insulted At every turn I am in terror, for I hear many whispering, Denounce him! Let us denounce him! My friends are on the watch for a false step; Perhaps, they whisper, he will make a slip; and then we have him, then for our revenge."⁵¹ On one occasion at least his depression was so deep that he lamented that he had ever been born.⁵²

In view of all these hardships, it is not surprising that Jeremiah sbrank from his prophetic ministry, and would have laid it down, had it not been for an inner divine compulsion which forced him to continue, in spite of all opposition. "O Yahweh, thou didst beguile me, and I let myself be beguiled; thou wast too strong for me, thou hast prevailed." "If I say, I will not mention it, I will not speak in his name any more; then I feel within me as it were a fire that burns my very being. I am tired of this, so tired I cannot bear it any longer."⁵³

In addition to all his other troubles, Jeremiah led a singularly lonely life. By special divine command he remained unmarried, and he was also forbidden to share in the life of his fellow-citizens. "Thus saith Yahweh, Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament, neither bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people And thou shalt not go into the house of feasting, to sit with them, to eat and to drink." "Therefore, I sat not in the assembly of them that make merry, nor rejoiced: I sat alone because of thy hand, for thou hast filled me with indignation."⁵⁴ He seems to have had no intimate friends nor disciples, except his faithful secretary Baruch, who shared in all his hardships,⁵⁵ and to whom Jeremiah could promise only that he should escape with his life.⁵⁶

Another prophet, Uriah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, who preached the same message of doom, was brought back from Egypt by King Jehoiakim, and put to death.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Jer. 20 7, 8, 10.

⁵² Jer. 20 14-18.

⁵³ Jer. 20 7, 9; cf. 1 6; 6 11; 9 2.

⁵⁴ Jer. 16 1-9; cf. 17 17-18.

⁵⁵ Jer. 32 12-16; 36 4-8; 43 8-6.

⁵⁶ Jer. 45 1-6.

⁵⁷ Jer. 26 20-23.

Ezekiel was one of the exiles carried away with King Jehoiachin in 596.⁵⁸ He suffered from a paralysis that rendered him speechless, and deprived him of the use of his limbs. So helpless was he, that he was obliged to resort to symbolic actions in order to convey his message.⁵⁹ His wife died suddenly while he was still an invalid.⁶⁰ Like his predecessors, he endured the hatred and opposition of his fellow-countrymen, and of a large and influential group of false prophets.⁶¹

From the point of view of the ancient religion of Israel, the Prophets were great sinners, because they suffered so terribly; but their consciences assured them that they were guiltless. Amos knew that he "spoke uprightly."⁶² Isaiah knew that his lips had been touched with fire from the heavenly altar, and that Yahweh had said to him: "Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin forgiven."⁶³ Micah knew that he was full of power by the Spirit of Yahweh, and of justice, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin.⁶⁴ Jeremiah in particular was keenly conscious of his innocence. "Amen to their curses, O Yahweh, if I be to blame; if I never besought thee in the time of their trouble and straits, for the good of my foes."⁶⁵ "Shall evil be recompensed for good? For they have digged a pit for my life."⁶⁶

The Prophets were confident that Yahweh approved their conduct. At the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry he was assured: "Be not afraid because of them, for I am with thee to deliver thee,"⁶⁷ and this consolation was repeated at various times in his later career: "I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver thee, saith Yahweh"⁶⁸—an assurance which

⁵⁸ Ezek. 1 1-3; 3 15, etc.

⁵⁹ Ezek. 3 14-16, 25-27; 4 1-15; 12 2-7, 18; 33 21 f.

⁶⁰ Ezek. 24 15-18. ⁶¹ Ezek. 13 1-16; 14 4-11; 22 25, 28.

⁶² Am. 5 10. ⁶³ Isa. 6 7. ⁶⁴ Mic. 3 a.

⁶⁵ Jer. 15 10 f., emended text with G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*.

⁶⁶ Jer. 18 19-20; cf. 11 19; 15 16; 17 18. ⁶⁷ Jer. 1 8, 17-19.

⁶⁸ Jer. 15 20-21.

called forth from Jeremiah the joyous exclamation: "O Yahweh my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction."⁶⁹

The Prophets are so sure of their righteousness that they appeal to Yahweh to vindicate them. Thus Micah at the time of Manasseh's persecution prays: "But as for me, I will look unto Yahweh; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me. Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, Yahweh will be a light unto me."⁷⁰ Jeremiah also prays: "O Yahweh, thou knowest: remember me, and visit me, and avenge me of my persecutors; take me not away in thy longsuffering." "O Yahweh Şebaoth, that judgest righteously, that triest the reins and the heart, let me see thy vengeance on them, for unto thee have I revealed my cause."⁷¹

The Prophets are so certain that they are right, that they do not hesitate to invoke fearful curses upon their enemies. These are so frequent and so familiar, that they do not call for further elaboration.⁷²

And yet, in spite of their righteousness, and in spite of their consciousness of God's approval, the Prophets continued to suffer. When Jeremiah begged the Lord to deliver him, the only answer was that he must endure still greater hardships: "If thou hast run with men on foot, and they have tired thee out, then how canst thou keep up with horses? If thou takest cover in a land of peace, then what wilt thou do in the jungle of Jordan?"⁷³

This persistence of suffering in spite of righteousness could not fail to raise in the minds of the Prophets difficult questions in regard to the justice of God's government of the world. At the time when the men of Anathoth were plotting against his life, Jeremiah inquired: "Righteous art thou O Yahweh, when I plead with thee; yet would I reason the cause with thee: wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they at ease that deal very treacherously? Thou hast

⁶⁹ Jer. 16 19; cf. Ezek. 2 6; 3 8 f.

⁷⁰ Mic. 7 7-9.

⁷¹ Jer. 20 11-13; cf. Jer. 11 20-23; 12 1-3; 15 12, 15-18; 17 14-16; 18 19-23.

⁷² Am. 7 16 f.; Isa. 22 15-19; Jer. 6 11; 11 21-23; 20 3-5; 22 18 f.; 28 15-17; 29 21, 23; 38 23 f.

⁷³ Jer. 12 5.

planted them, yea, they have taken root; they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit. Thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins."⁷⁴

In the eventful year 605 B. C., when Nebuchadrezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho at Carchemish, and made Babylon the mistress of the world, Habakkuk challenged Yahweh to explain to him the meaning of the affliction of the righteous. "O Yahweh, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save. For the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore justice goeth forth perverted."⁷⁵ The Lord answered him, that the Babylonians were coming to punish the oppressors in Judah;⁷⁶ but this did not satisfy the prophet. He did not see the justice of giving the Babylonians victory, when they were wickedder than the sinners in Judah whom they overthrew. "Thou that art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and that canst not look on perverseness, wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy peace when the wicked swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he?"⁷⁷ This was the first time in the history of Israel that a prophet dared to question the justice of the divine rule, and to demand of Yahweh an explanation of his doings.

II. THE THEORY OF DELAYED RETRIBUTION

To meet the difficulties in the way of the theory that all suffering is punishment, another supplementary theory was devised by the early Hebrews, namely, that the divine retribution may be delayed, but that sooner or later it will surely come. The righteous sufferer will be restored to prosperity before he dies, and the wicked will not live out his days, nor come to his grave in peace. "Fret not thyself because of evil doers, neither be thou envious of them that work unrighteousness, for they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Jer. 12 1-2.

⁷⁵ Hab. 1 1-4.

⁷⁶ Hab. 1 5-11.

⁷⁷ Hab. 1 13-17.

⁷⁸ Ps. 37 1.

Many years elapsed before Joseph's brethren were punished for selling him into slavery; but after Benjamin was arrested, they were forced to confess, "God hath found out our iniquity."⁷⁹ Abimelech's murder of his brothers went long unavenged; he made himself king, and seemed to prosper; but eventually he was killed by a millstone cast by a woman. "Thus," says the historian, "God requited the wickedness of Abimelech which he did unto his father in slaying his seventy brethren."⁸⁰ The folk-tale in the epilogue of the Book of Job narrates how Job was ultimately vindicated by being restored to health, and receiving twice as many sheep, camels, oxen, and she-asses as he had owned at first, and an equal number of sons and daughters.⁸¹

The theory of delayed retribution was, however, not always applicable, because unfortunately people often died before they received the reward of their virtue. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to Yahweh, yet he missed his reward because he was slain by his brother.⁸² Jephthah's daughter was guilty of no sin, and showed a beautiful spirit of devotion to her father, yet she had to die in her maidenhood in fulfilment of her father's vow.⁸³ In all cases where the innocent, like the sons of Gideon, or Naboth, met violent deaths at the hands of tyrants, it was impossible for them ever to be vindicated. The good king Josiah, who carried through the Deuteronomic reformation, was slain in battle at the age of thirty-eight, without receiving any reward for his righteousness.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the wicked Manasseh, who did his best to turn Judah back to heathenism, and who shed much innocent blood in Jerusalem, reigned in prosperity for fifty-five years—the longest reign of all the kings of Judah—and came to his grave in peace in a good old age.⁸⁵ The contrast between the fates of Manasseh and Josiah led the common people to think that Manasseh was right and Josiah was wrong, and to react against Josiah's reformation.⁸⁶ This apparent break-

⁷⁹ Gen. 44 16.⁸⁰ Jud. 9 56f.⁸¹ Job. 42 10-17.⁸² Gen. 4 4, 8.⁸³ Jud. 11 39.⁸⁴ 2 Ki. 23 29.⁸⁵ 2 Ki. 21 1ff.⁸⁶ 2 Ki. 23 30-32; Jer. 11 9f.

down of Yahweh's justice caused the prophets of the period no little distress.⁶⁷

If there had been any belief in retribution beyond the grave, the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked might have been projected into the world to come, and might have been regarded as extreme instances of delayed retribution; but no such conception of immortality existed in pre-exilic Israel that belief in retribution in a future life was possible. Spirits of the dead went down to Sheol, where they led a shadowy, colorless existence that could hardly be called life. The tendency of the prophetic teaching was to strip the dead of all attributes of knowledge, memory, and feeling, and to conceive of Sheol as the eternal sleep. Sheol was a foreign land, presided over by its own gods; and over its borders Yahweh never passed to exert his authority. Since Sheol stood outside of the rule of Yahweh, and since the dead were incapable of remembering their lives on earth, or of experiencing pleasure or pain; rewards or punishments in the world to come were, of course, impossible. The only distinction in the fate of the dead depended upon their burial. Lack of burial prevented rest in Sheol, and lack of burial in the family tomb excluded one from the society of one's relatives; but there is no trace in the whole Old Testament of a division of the dead on the basis of character. The sinner is threatened with Sheol as a punishment, but never with a particular section of Sheol. The righteous Samuel says to the wicked Saul, who has been rejected by Yahweh, "Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me."⁶⁸

III. THE THEORY OF COLLECTIVE RETRIBUTION

In view of the difficulties in the way of the theory of delayed retribution, still another supplementary theory became necessary to bolster up the traditional doctrine that all suffering is punishment, namely, that the rewards or the punishments

⁶⁷ 2 Chr. 35 25.

⁶⁸ See L. B. Paton, *Spiritism and the Cult of the Dead in Antiquity*, Chaps. XI—XII.

of individuals might be allotted to the groups to which they belonged. The early Hebrews brought with them into Canaan as an inheritance from primitive Semitic times a strong sense of the solidarity of the family and of the clan. Tribes were spoken of in the singular as Israel, Moab, Ammon; and the identity of the individual was lost in the group. The logical corollary of this conception was the assumption of collective responsibility for the sins of individuals. Saul sought to kill David's relatives on his account,⁸⁹ and annihilated the clan of Ahimelech the priest because he had befriended David.⁹⁰ David proposed to cut off the entire family of Nahal because of the insolence of the head of the house.⁹¹ The seven sons of Saul were hanged because of his attack on the Gibeonites.⁹² The sons of Naboth were slain with him.⁹³

It seemed eminently natural, accordingly, that Yahweh should deal with the group rather than the individual; and should bring the punishment of the sinner, or the reward of the righteous, upon his family, his clan, or his nation, rather than upon himself. Yahweh "visited the penalty of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hated him."⁹⁴ The Canaanites were enslaved because of the guilt of their remote ancestor.⁹⁵ Pharaoh's house was plagued because he had taken Sarah.⁹⁶ The wombs of the house of Abimelech were closed for the same offense.⁹⁷ The firstborn of Egypt were smitten for the sin of Pharaoh.⁹⁸ Amalek was destroyed in the time of Saul because its forefathers attacked Israel at the time of the exodus.⁹⁹ David's child died, and the sword never departed from his house, because of his sin.¹⁰⁰ Solomon was told, "I will surely rend the kingdom from thee. . . Nevertheless in thy days I will not do it, for David, thy father's sake; but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son."¹⁰¹

The social and the religious development in Israel in the

⁸⁹ 1 Sam. 22 1, 3 f.

⁹⁰ 1 Sam. 22 16 f.

⁹¹ 1 Sam. 25 22.

⁹² 2 Sam. 21 6 ff.

⁹³ 2 Ki. 9 26.

⁹⁴ Ex. 20 5.

⁹⁵ Gen. 9 24 f.

⁹⁶ Gen. 12 17.

⁹⁷ Gen. 20 18.

⁹⁸ Ex. 12 29.

⁹⁹ Ex. 17 8-16; 1 Sam. 15 2 f.

¹⁰⁰ 2 Sam. 12 10, 11.

¹⁰¹ 1 Ki. 11 11 f.

times of the Prophets tended to undermine the time-honored belief that the rewards or the punishments of fathers were allotted to their children. In the period of the later monarchy the old tribal organization began to break up, and during the Babylonian exile it disappeared almost entirely. This decay of the ancient social groups created a new sense of the worth of the individual.

The religious experience of the Prophets also fostered individualism. Jeremiah, in particular, was rejected by the nation and by the civil and religious authorities; yet he found communion with God outside of the Visible Church of his day. He was the first thoroughgoing individualist in the history of Israel. A new consciousness of the dignity of the individual found expression in the words of the Lord through Ezekiel: "Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine;"¹⁰² and in the prediction of Jeremiah that in the Messianic age Yahweh would write his teaching in the heart of each Israelite, so that all should know Him from the least unto the greatest.¹⁰³

This prophetic thought left its mark in the legislation of Deuteronomy and of the Holiness Code, which recognize new rights of wives, children, and slaves over against the head of the house, and which prohibit the punishment of children for the crimes of fathers, or of fathers for the crimes of children.¹⁰⁴

This new conception of the value of the individual made belief in the ancient theory of collective retribution impossible. Punishment of the nation for the sins of its rulers, or of children for the sins of their parents, no longer seemed consistent with Yahweh's righteousness. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel found current among the people the proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are blunted;" that is to say, "We are suffering unjustly the punishment of our ancestors' sins."¹⁰⁵

To meet this objection Ezekiel formulated the new doctrine

¹⁰² Ezek. 18 4.

¹⁰⁴ Deut. 24 16.

¹⁰³ Jer. 31 31-34.

¹⁰⁵ Jer. 31 29; Ezek. 18 2

of a complete rewarding or punishing of each individual in the present life, that necessitated no entail of guilt upon coming generations. Instead of the dogma that the penalty of the parents is visited upon the children, he affirmed "The soul that sinneth it shall die;"¹⁰⁶ and he entered into an elaborate argument to prove that every man received before death the appropriate reward of his deeds.¹⁰⁷

Thus it appears that, as early as the period of the exile, every element of the traditional theory of suffering was challenged by certain thinkers. It was denied that suffering was always punishment, denied that a just recompense came in the present life, and denied that the sins of the fathers were visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. Orthodoxy continued frantically to reaffirm the truth of the traditional theory, but an ever-increasing number of heretics questioned its validity.

IV. SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING BY THE PROPHETS

Out of the struggle of the Prophets to explain their own sufferings there slowly emerged the conviction, that they were not being punished for their own sins, nor for the sins of their fathers, nor for the sins of their people; but that they were "servants of Yahweh," who were sharing with him in a sacrificial ministry for the redemption of Israel. They were the first who glimpsed the profound truth of the suffering of God, and through that discovery learned to view their own sufferings in a new light.

a. God Suffers Because He Loves. — Yahweh's love for Israel was known already to Amos, when he represented Yahweh as saying, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth."¹⁰⁸ Love was the central element in Hosea's idea of God: "I drew them with man-like bonds, with ties of love."¹⁰⁹ Jeremiah expressed it, in the most

¹⁰⁶ Ezek. 18 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ezek. 18 5-32.

¹⁰⁸ Am. 3 2.

¹⁰⁹ Hos. 11 4.

beautiful words of the Old Testament, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee."¹¹⁰

Sometimes the Prophets pictured the love of God under the figure of a father's love for his son. "I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born."¹¹¹ "Thou art our father, though Abraham knoweth us not."¹¹²

Less often the Prophets compared the love of Yahweh to a mother's love for her babe. "I taught Ephraim to walk, I bare him on my arms."¹¹³ "O house of Jacob . . . my load since ever you were born, whom I have carried from the womb."¹¹⁴ "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, these may forget, yet will not I forget thee."¹¹⁵ "Ye shall be borne upon the arms, and shall be dandled upon the knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you."¹¹⁶

The Prophets' favorite figure for the love of Yahweh was a husband's love for his wife. This originated in the personal experience of Hosea, and was elaborated by all his successors. "I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies."¹¹⁷ "Thy Maker is thy husband . . . For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee."¹¹⁸ "As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee."¹¹⁹

Since Yahweh loved Israel, the Prophets saw clearly that he suffered in the ingratitude and apostasy of his people. "I brought you up out of the land of Egypt . . . and I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites . . . But ye gave the Nazirites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not."¹²⁰ "O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud,

¹¹⁰ Jer. 31 3.

¹¹³ Hos. 11 a.

¹¹⁶ Isa. 66 12 f.

¹¹⁹ Isa. 62 4 f.

¹¹¹ Jer. 31 9.

¹¹⁴ Isa. 46 3.

¹¹⁷ Hos. 2 19.

¹²⁰ Am. 2 9-12.

¹¹² Isa. 63 16.

¹¹⁵ Isa. 49 15.

¹¹⁸ Isa. 54 5-8.

and as the dew that goeth early away."¹²¹ "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? . . . For the vineyard of Yahweh Sebaoth is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant; and he looked for justice, but, behold, oppression; for righteousness, but, behold, a cry."¹²²

Yahweh's father-love was wounded by the lovelessness and disobedience of his children. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. The more I called them, the further they went away. They sacrificed unto the baals, and burned incense to graven images."¹²³ "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider."¹²⁴

Yahweh's husband-love was grieved by the infidelity of Israel, his wife. Hosea had the tragic personal experience of being forsaken by a wife whom he loved dearly, and this became for him a type of Yahweh's suffering in the defection of Israel. "Yahweh said unto me, Keep on loving a wife, beloved of her lover, and an adulteress; even as Yahweh loveth the children of Israel, though they turn unto other gods."¹²⁵

Yahweh suffered also in the misery which Israel brought upon itself by its waywardness. "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself . . . For as often as I speak against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my heart is troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith Yahweh." "I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you."¹²⁶ "I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies . . . Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot. They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness."¹²⁷

¹²¹ Hos. 6 4.

¹²² Isa. 5 1-7.

¹²³ Hos. 11 1-2.

¹²⁴ Isa. 1 2 f.

¹²⁵ Hos. 3 1.

¹²⁶ Jer. 31 18-20; 41 10.

¹²⁷ Jer. 12 7-12.

b. **The Prophets Suffer with God.** — Realizing as they did, that God suffered in the sin and in the punishment of Israel, in order that he might save his people, the Prophets recognized that they were called to share with God in his work of suffering and redemption. Nowhere does this conviction appear more clearly than in Hosea, who realized that his sorrowful experience with his unfaithful wife was sent expressly in order that he might understand Yahweh's experience with apostate Israel.¹²⁹ "I was no prophet, nor member of a prophetic guild," said Amos. "I was only a shepherd and a cultivator of sycamore figs; but Yahweh took me from the flock, and Yahweh said to me, Go, prophecy unto my people Israel."¹³⁰ "The lion hath roared, who will not fear; Yahweh Elohim hath spoken, who can but prophesy?"¹³¹ Hosea knew a definite moment that was the "beginning of Yahweh's speaking to him."¹³² Isaiah heard the voice of Yahweh, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and replied, "Here am I, send me."¹³³ Micah was conscious that he was "full of power by the Spirit of Yahweh . . . to declare to Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin."¹³⁴ Jeremiah in his inaugural vision received from Yahweh the commission: "Before I formed thee in the womb I chose thee; before thou wast born I set thee apart; I have appointed thee a prophet unto the nations . . . To whomsoever I send thee thou shalt go, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak . . . Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth . . . Thou, therefore, gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee."¹³⁴

So confident were the Prophets of a divine commission, that they claimed for themselves the title "servants of Yahweh," or more literally, "slaves of Yahweh," which described them as belonging to Yahweh, acting as his representatives, and doing his work in the world. Thus Amos says: "Surely

¹²⁹ Hos. 1 2-9; 3 1-6.¹²⁹ Am. 7 14 f.¹³⁰ Am. 3 8.¹³¹ Hos. 1 2.¹³² Isa. 6 8.¹³³ Mic. 3 8.¹³⁴ Jer. 1 4-19.

the Lord Yahweh will do nothing, except he reveal his secret unto his servants the prophets."¹³⁶

Since they were the slaves of Yahweh, and since their Master suffered, the Prophets knew that they must expect to suffer also. When Jeremiah begged the Lord to deliver him from his suffering, he was told that this could not be; but that, if he would accept it manfully, then he should be God's own spokesman. "O Yahweh, thou knowest. Remember me, and visit me, and avenge me of my persecutors; in thy longsuffering take me not away. Know that for thy sake I have suffered reproach. I found thy words, and I did eat them; and thy words were unto me a joy and the rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by thy name, O Yahweh, God of hosts . . . I sat alone because of thy hand, for thou hast filled me with indignation. Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? Wilt thou indeed be unto me as a deceitful brook, as waters that fail? This was Yahweh's answer: If thou wilt cease murmuring, I will restore thee to my service; if thou wilt purify thyself from passion, then thou shalt be my spokesman."¹³⁶

c. The Prophets Suffer for Israel. — The Prophets realized that they suffered, not only as servants of God, but also for the sake of their people. As true patriots who loved their nation, they longed to see it escape peril, and to fulfil its destiny. They endured toil and travail, in order to lead it to repentance, and to save it from destruction. "Remember, O Yahweh," says Jeremiah, "how I stood before thee to speak good for them, to turn away thy wrath from them."¹³⁷ Jeremiah's declaration: "I was like a trustful lamb, led out to slaughter,"¹³⁸ bears a singular resemblance to the description of the suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isa. 53 7: "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter": and it shows the same consciousness of the sacrificial aspect of his ministry.

From all these considerations it is clear that the pre-exilic writing prophets broke away from the traditional interpret-

¹³⁵ Am. 8 7.

¹³⁶ Jer. 15 18-19.

¹³⁷ Jer. 18 19-20.

¹³⁸ Jer. 11 19.

ation of suffering as invariably punishment; and in God's case, and in their own cases, recognized the suffering of love for the salvation of others. Their interpretation of suffering was substantially identical with that of Deutero-Isaiah in Isa. 52 13-53 12. This fact has an important bearing upon the problems of the age and the interpretation of the "Suffering Servant" passages in Second Isaiah. Into the discussion of these questions there is no space to enter here.

This is the profoundest interpretation of the mystery of pain that the Old Testament attained. It is superior to all the speculations of the Wisdom School. It far surpasses the best intellectual efforts of the Greek tragic poets and of the Greek philosophers, and of all other pre-Christian literature. It is transcended only by the life and the teaching of Jesus, who "fulfilled" this conception, as he did all that was greatest and best in the Old Testament.