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SUFFERING IN THE SUNNI AND CALVINIST WORLDVIEWS:
DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF THE COMPARATIVE
APPROACH IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION
IN SERVICE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
William Michael Clark

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**SUFFERING IN THE SUNNI AND CALVINIST WORLDVIEWS:
DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF THE COMPARATIVE
APPROACH IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION
IN SERVICE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

William Michael Clark

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M. David Sills

Date 10-20-10

To Jenny,
without whom this would not be possible
and to
Scout,
nuestro querido hijo

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PREFACE

This dissertation could not have been completed without the consistent support I have received. Dr. James Chancellor, my supervising professor, not only challenged me to think critically about myself and those of other faiths, but he has also set an example for me to follow. Professors Ted Cabal and David Sills likewise have challenged me to think critically by questioning accepted philosophies and methodologies, while at the same time, they have provided continual encouragement during my studies.

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It would be impossible to put into words how grateful I am for my wife, Jenny, and her support throughout my studies. She has sacrificed much and has taken on additional burdens in order to help me finish my dissertation.

Finally, I am completely aware that God has carried me through this Ph.D. program and dissertation. Whenever I thought I could not do anymore, he would strengthen me, and somehow I would get the work done. This dissertation is definitely a testimony of God's grace. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:36).

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Louisville, Kentucky

December 2010

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Samuel M. Zwemer (1867-1952), the famed “Apostle to Islam,”¹ summarized his arduous missionary career among Muslims in Arabia and Egypt with the following words:

After forty years’ experience- sometimes heartbreaking experience, of sowing on rocks and of watching the birds pick away the seed to the last grain- I am convinced that the nearest way to the Moslem heart is the way of God’s love, the way of the Cross.²

Almost seventy years have passed since Zwemer wrote these words; unfortunately, Christians still find themselves struggling to get near to the Muslim heart. Protestant missionaries have labored over a century and a half among Muslim peoples yet the task of reaching them with the gospel is more daunting today than it was when they first began.

Statement of the Problem

The Muslim world represents the single largest religious bloc yet to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The majority of the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world have little to no access to the gospel.³ The Joshua Project reports that of the one

¹J. Christy Wilson argues that “no one through the centuries of Christian missions to Moslems has deserved better than Dr. Zwemer the designation of Apostle to Islam.” J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam: A Biography of Samuel M. Zwemer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 5.

²Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Cross Above the Crescent: The Validity, Necessity and Urgency of Missions to Moslems* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 246.

³The world-wide Muslim population has grown from under two hundred million in 1900 to over 1.3 billion in 2007. David B. Barret, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:4; Ninian Smart and Frederick Denny, *Atlas of the World’s Religions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

hundred largest unreached people groups, forty-seven are predominantly Muslim.⁴

Moreover, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention reports that of the 504 unreached *and* unengaged people groups with a population of 100,000 or more, 228 of them are predominantly Muslim.⁵ These statistics demonstrate that in spite of all the missionary work that has been done, the task of reaching Muslims with the gospel is far from over.⁶

Barriers in Muslim Evangelism

Muslim peoples have been notoriously resistant to the gospel message. A

⁴Joshua Project, "100 Largest Unreached Peoples," [on-line]; accessed 28 July 2009; available from <http://www.joshuaproject.net/unreached.php?listing=1&sf=population&so=asc>; Internet. Of the remaining fifty-three largest unreached people groups, thirty-eight are predominantly Hindu, eight are predominantly Buddhist, and seven are non-religious or practice folk religion.

⁵Global Research of the International Mission Board, "Unengaged Unreached People Groups ≥100K List," [on-line]; accessed 3 February 2010; available from <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/downloads.asp>; Internet.

⁶The history of Christian missions to Muslims can be divided into four periods. First, from the seventh century to the eleventh century, evangelistic work among Muslims was almost nonexistent. Second, from the twelfth century to the fourteenth century, key figures like Peter the Venerable, Francis of Assisi, and Ramon Lull began calling for intentional missionary work among Muslims. Their call for missions took root, and from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits found themselves throughout Muslim lands. However, the Muslim rulers usually forced them to work only among the Christian population. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century "the Gospel had made no impression worth mentioning on the Islamic lands." Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (London: Pelican Books, 1990), 208. Third, widespread mission work among Muslims did not appear until the modern missionary movement in the nineteenth century when Protestant missionary societies began to send missionaries into Muslim lands. Finally, the fourth period of missionary work among Muslims began after World War I when missionary methods shifted away from older polemic and confrontational methods to a relational and more irenic approach. This shift in methodology occurred during Zwemer's lifetime and was evident in his own approach to ministry. Samuel M. Zwemer, *Islam: Challenge to Faith* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1907), 185-206; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937-45); James T. Addison, *The Christian Approach to the Moslem: A Historical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); James Waltz, "Historical Perspectives on Early Mission to Muslims: Response to Allan Cutler," *Muslim World* 61 (July 1971): 170-86; Lyle Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record; Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the Near East, 1800-1938*, Print-On-Demand ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000); idem, "Mission Lessons from History: A Laboratory of Missiological Insights Gained from Christian-Muslim Relationships," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 11 (April 1994): 75-79; John Mark Terry, "Approaches to the Evangelization of Muslims," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 32 (April 1996): 168-73; Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

plethora of theological, historical, political and cultural barriers keep Muslims from responding to or even considering the gospel.⁷ Of the various theological barriers to the gospel, one of the most substantial barriers is that Muslims already have their own holy book. For a Muslim to hold the Bible as equally authoritative as the Qur'an, much less to place the Bible over the Qur'an, demands a "significant religious, psychological, and cultural leap."⁸ One could even say that it demands a supernatural act of God. A second substantial theological barrier is that the Qur'an explicitly condemns central Christian beliefs. The Qur'an explicitly condemns belief in the Trinity, the sonship and deity of Christ, and the historicity of the crucifixion of Christ, making the gospel message not only offensive, but a direct contradiction to Allah's revelation. A third major theological barrier is that there are enough similarities between Christianity and Islam to make it "obvious" for Muslims that Christianity is simply a corruption of the true religion revealed by God.⁹ From the Christian perspective, one could argue that these numerous theological similarities serve to "inoculate" Muslims against the gospel.¹⁰ In addition to

⁷In addition to the barriers which keep Muslims from considering the gospel, there are also barriers which keep many North American Evangelical Christians from being concerned about the salvation of Muslims. Waleed Nassar lists the following factors that may keep many from wanting to reach Muslims with the gospel: the political affection for the nation of Israel, extreme nationalism and American pride, ignorance of Islam, disdain of Muslim culture and ethnocentrism, and lack of compassion and prayer. Waleed Nassar, "Ten Stumbling Blocks to Reaching Muslims," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed. Keith E. Swartley (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2005), 236-38.

⁸James D. Chancellor and Jeffery Wasserman, "The Religions of the Middle East: Islam and Judaism," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. Ebbie Smith, John Mark Terry, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 391.

⁹Both religions claim to be heirs of Abrahamic monotheism. Muslims profess belief in the *Taurat* (Torah), *Zabur* (Psalms), and the *Injil* (Gospels). Both affirm belief in angels, Satan, Judgment Day, heaven/paradise, and hell. Both affirm that God has spoken through prophets, many of which appear in both the Bible and the Qur'an. The Qur'an includes accounts of biblical figures like Adam, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Jonah, Elijah, Elisha, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus. Both Christianity and Islam affirm that Jesus was the messiah, was born of a virgin, and performed miracles. Moreover, Sunni Muslims and Christians believe that Jesus' Second Coming will bring history to its end.

¹⁰J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission: A Panoramic View of Missions from Pentecost to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 114.

these substantial theological barriers, today's Christians are plagued by the turbulent and long-lasting geopolitical struggle between Muslims and Christians.

The greatest historical barrier in Muslim evangelization has been the legacy of the Crusades, and the negative reputation it has given Christians. Although the godless actions of the crusaders occurred centuries ago, the memory is alive and well in the Muslim world. The Crusades have become a symbol of Christian "expansionism and aggression."¹¹ Herbert Kane argues that the Christian "reputation for cruelty and revenge . . . is a millstone around the neck" of those trying to reach Muslims with the gospel.¹² The reputation Christians earned during the Crusades was confirmed once again during western colonization of Muslim lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western "Christian" nations not only imposed their political, military, and economic control over Muslims lands, but they also gave Christian missionaries access to the Muslim populations. For Muslims, this occurrence demonstrated that western nations not only posed an economic and political threat, but that they also posed a threat to their religion and culture. Naturally, Muslim peoples developed a strong resentment against western nations *and* Christian missionaries.

In addition to the Crusades and western colonialism, a variety of other geopolitical events in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries have served to reinforce Muslim resentment against the west, and thus, Christianity. For example, the creation and support of the nation of Israel by western nations, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the military presence of the United States in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim nations, and the more recent invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 by the United States have made evangelism among Muslim peoples more difficult. In a recent multiyear Gallup research study of the worldwide Muslim population, the attributes

¹¹Chancellor and Wasserman, "The Religions of the Middle East," 392.

¹²Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, 117.

Muslims most associated with the United States were ruthless (sixty-eight percent), aggressive (sixty-six percent), conceited (sixty-five percent), and morally decadent (sixty-four percent).¹³ These characteristics clearly do not make the work easier for Christian missionaries from the west. In addition to the foreign policy of western nations, especially the United States, the sanctions against Muslim nations by the United Nations and restrictions on Muslim economies by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have also served to affect negatively Muslim perceptions of the West.¹⁴

Finally, a multitude of cultural factors also create barriers to evangelism. For instance, in *Encountering the World of Islam*, Keith Swartley lists the following cultural and social barriers: Christian infrequency of fasting, western-style holidays, use of a casket, use of the symbol of the cross, misunderstanding of religious terminology, days and style of worship, western denominations, western worship songs, the use of pictures of Jesus, style of dress, eating pork, church architecture, Christian names, prayer forms, birth ceremonies, having dogs as pets, wedding ceremonies, and circumcision.¹⁵ This list is far from exhaustive yet it does demonstrate the variety of cultural factors that may keep Muslims from the gospel message. In addition, there are strong familial and cultural pressures that may keep Muslims from considering coming to Christ. Muslims who turn to Christ are often rejected by their families, and are socially ostracized. In extreme cases, they may be physically harmed or even killed. These very real consequences may deter many Muslims from even considering the gospel.

Moreover, Muslims in general do not separate religion from culture and thus,

¹³John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup, 2007), 84-85. The Gallup research study took place from 2001 to 2007 and surveyed a sampling representing more than ninety percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.

¹⁴Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context: Past, Present, and Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 153-63.

¹⁵Keith E. Swartley, "Cultural Barriers: Introduction," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, 229.

they equate the “economic exploitation of the poor, breakdown of the family, drug and alcohol abuse, materialism, and rampant immorality” of the west with the Christian faith.¹⁶ From the Muslim perspective one only has to look at the moral decadence of Europe and the United States to see the failings of Christianity. All these theological, historical, political, and cultural barriers to the gospel are further exacerbated in the current Muslim revival in which conservative Islam continues to grow in influence throughout the world.¹⁷

The Necessity of Understanding the Muslim Worldview

In light of the many barriers which Christians face in communicating the gospel to Muslims, Christians should not further complicate the task by settling for a superficial understanding of the Muslim worldview.¹⁸ David J. Hesselgrave correctly points out that the best word available to summarize the missionary task is “communication.”¹⁹ In other words, the work of a missionary boils down to the

¹⁶Chancellor and Wasserman, “The Religions of the Middle East,” 391.

¹⁷John L. Esposito states that the current “ideological worldview of revivalism” in the Muslim world includes the following beliefs: (1) Islam is a complete way of life; (2) the failure of Muslim societies is due to not following Islam and for going after western ideologies; (3) a renewal of society requires a return to Islam, based upon the Qur’an and Muhammad’s original *Ummah*; (4) western-inspired civil codes need to be replaced with Islamic law; (5) modernization is acceptable as long as it is subordinate to Islamic belief, and does not lead to westernization and secularization; (6) the process of re-Islamization will require organizations of committed and trained Muslims who will call others to be more observant and willing to struggle against social injustice. John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 165. For a comprehensive bibliography of works covering the current Muslim revival from the 1970s to the late 1990s, see Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, John Obert Voll, and John L. Esposito, *The Contemporary Islamic Revival: A Critical Survey and Bibliography*, *Bibliographies and Indexes in Religious Studies*, no. 20 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Revival Since 1988: A Critical Survey and Bibliography*, *Bibliographies and Indexes in Religious Studies*, no. 45. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

¹⁸Referencing “the” Muslim worldview does not mean that every Muslim has the same worldview. Islam is multifaceted and takes on various expressions in different contexts. Nevertheless, one can still speak in a general way of the Muslim worldview, since Muslims share a view of the world that shapes their beliefs and practices. The concept of “worldview” is discussed in detail in chap. 3.

¹⁹David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 25.

communication of the gospel. However, the goal is not simply to “tell” the gospel to others, but rather to “communicate” it in a way that is understandable to the respondents. The gospel needs to be contextualized. Hesselgrave provides a helpful definition of contextualization:

Contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, work, word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application; incarnational lifestyle, evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style- indeed with all those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission.²⁰

The type of contextualization that Hesselgrave describes demands an in-depth understanding of the respondent worldview. Naturally, some might be skeptical of contextualization, fearing that it necessarily perverts the gospel. However, this is not the case. In Scripture, we see that the Apostle Paul contextualized the gospel. He presented the gospel differently depending on whether he was speaking to Jews (Acts 13:16-43) or to Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31). This approach fit into his goal to become all things to all people that they may be saved (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Moreover, at the practical level, contextualization is ultimately necessary. Hesselgrave helps clarify the matter by discussing three options missionaries have when communicating the gospel.²¹ First, they can ask respondents to set aside their own worldviews, and temporarily adopt the Christian worldview so that they can understand the message. This approach is not very realistic, especially when there is substantial cultural separation. Second, missionaries can invite respondents to meet them halfway by finding points of contact between their worldviews. However, Hesselgrave warns that many of these similarities “turn out to be mirages upon closer examination.” Moreover,

²⁰Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 143-44.

²¹Ibid., 209-12.

he warns that one should be careful not to separate individual beliefs from entire religious worldviews so not to risk distorting the other religion. Therefore, he concludes that missionaries should temporarily adopt the respondent worldview in order to contextualize the message so that it becomes meaningful for the respondents. He argues that although the task is not easy and never perfect, meaningful communication is possible if missionaries take the initiative and are willing to pay the price.

In order to temporarily adopt the respondent worldview as Hesselgrave advocates, cross-cultural communicators of the gospel must first understand the respondent worldview. For example, Hesselgrave's "three-culture model of missionary communication" and Paul G. Hiebert's "critical contextualization," two highly influential contextualization models, both call for gospel-communicators to exegete the respondent culture.²² Otherwise, the gospel proclamation remains a monologue, not allowing the respondents actually to respond to the intended message.²³ Moreover, if the message is not contextualized, there is the danger that Christianity will remain a foreign religion, requiring respondents to give up their culture or it will lead to syncretism as respondents keep practicing their old beliefs under a thin veneer of Christianity.²⁴

In light of the importance of reaching Muslims with the gospel and the complexity of contextualization, Christians who want to reach Muslims with the gospel

²²Hesselgrave's "three-culture model of missionary communication" calls for gospel-communicators to understand the culture of the Bible, their own culture, and the respondent culture in order to communicate effectively. Hesselgrave states that the task is to "understand/interpret the message intended by the Holy Spirit and human authors of the biblical text and then to explain/communicate that message in a way that is meaningful and persuasive to respondents in the context of their culture," avoiding as much as possible the missionary's own cultural predispositions. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 107-09. Hiebert's "critical contextualization" involves the following four steps: (1) missionary and local believers exegete the culture; (2) missionary leads the church in scriptural exegesis; (3) local believers, as a community, evaluate their culture and determine what should be practiced or not; (4) new contextualized practices are developed by the local church. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 88-91.

²³Lyman E. Reed, *Preparing Missionaries for Intercultural Communication: A Bi-Cultural Approach* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1985), 103.

²⁴Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 80-81.

must invest the time and energy to move beyond a superficial understanding of the Muslim worldview. However, time and energy are not enough to accomplish the task; Christians also need adequate tools to “exegete” the Muslim worldview. As this dissertation will show, the comparative method in the study of religion is one of those tools.²⁵

Thesis

This dissertation will argue that the comparative method is a valuable tool in the study of religion and thus, can be of service to Christian missions. This thesis will be demonstrated through the application of a proposed method of comparison to a specific case study. Comparison is beneficial for a variety of reasons. At the most fundamental level, comparison “can illumine truths” about religious traditions “in ways that would have been impossible through exclusive contemplation” of each tradition on its own.²⁶ When religious traditions are overlapped, similarities and differences become more evident, allowing peculiarities in each to rise to the surface. Consequently, comparativists gain a better understanding of the religious worldview they are studying. If the comparative method provides a more nuanced understanding of religious traditions as this dissertation seeks to show, then the method can also be of great value to Evangelicals as they seek to reach peoples of other faiths with the gospel.

Therefore, this dissertation will seek to show that the comparative method is useful not only in the study of religion, but more specifically that it is useful as a missiological tool. Through comparison, Evangelicals are encouraged to exegete the three cultures of Hesselgrave’s “three-culture model of missionary communication,”

²⁵The term “comparative method” is used in a general way for a family of methods that use comparison as a way to study religions. A brief history and discussion of the comparative method in the academic study of religion will be provided in chap. 2.

²⁶Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 18.

namely, the communicator's culture, the biblical culture, and the respondent culture. First and foremost, comparison enables Christians to study other religious traditions in-depth. In order to carry out an accurate comparison the comparativist must first devote the time and energy to studying the other religious tradition with the goal of gaining an insiders perspective, as much as possible.²⁷ Understanding the general structure of the religious worldview being compared is a prerequisite to any comparative project.

Second, comparison forces Christians to look closer at their own beliefs and practices. By comparing an element of their tradition with that of another tradition, Christian comparativists may end up refining their own faith. For example, comparing the Hindu concept of avatars with the Christian doctrine of the incarnation may help the Christian comparativist clarify her understanding of what it means that Christ is God incarnate since new questions and issues are raised. The same applies to religious practices, like prayer, meditation, worship, and so on. In other words, comparison may end up being a spiritually edifying exercise as it encourages the comparativist to be self-reflective of his own religious beliefs and practices.

Finally, comparison should also prompt the Christian comparativist to study the Scriptures. This will obviously be the case if it is a scriptural comparison, but it also applies in non-scriptural comparisons. For instance, if the comparativist is comparing the role of meditation among Zen Buddhists and Evangelical Christians, she might not have to address directly what the Bible teaches about meditation in the actual comparison; however, she should desire to inquire into what the Bible teaches about meditation. This inquiry may serve to refine further the comparativist's beliefs and practices as she compares them to biblical teaching.

To conclude, comparative studies from an Evangelical perspective should

²⁷Methodological issues relating to the comparative method are discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 3.

encourage Evangelicals to “exegete” not only another religious worldview, but also themselves and the Scriptures. This three-fold exegesis aligns with Hesselgrave’s “three-culture model of missionary communication,” demonstrating that the comparative method can be a useful missiological tool. Gospel communicators who are self-reflective about their own beliefs and practices, who are willing to take the time to study the Scriptures, and who have an in-depth understanding of the respondent religious worldview are best suited to contextualize the gospel effectively. Christians who seek to reach Muslims with the gospel should settle for nothing less.

Some might argue that understanding the Muslim worldview, since it is the religion most similar to Christianity among the major world religions, does not require such rigorous analysis. However, this is not the case. LaRay Barna, in her article “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication” demonstrates that some of the greatest hindrances to intercultural communication are assuming similarities, language differences (how and when words are used), having preconceptions and stereotypes, and not trying to comprehend from within the other’s point of view.²⁸ Based upon Barna’s research, one can conclude that assuming that Islam is similar enough to Christianity and thus, not requiring in-depth study is a faulty position. Assuming similarity, even in light of some shared religious terminology, will only serve to make contextualization more difficult. Moreover, the problem of having preconceptions and stereotypes, and not trying to comprehend from within the other’s point of view, unfortunately, characterizes the approach many Evangelicals have towards Muslims. If Barna’s research is correct, gospel-communicators must be self-critical, and make it their goal to refine continually their understanding of the Muslim worldview since the communication of the gospel is at stake.

²⁸In addition to these four stumbling blocks listed above, Barna also includes nonverbal misinterpretations, and high anxiety as key stumbling blocks to intercultural communication. LaRay M. Barna, “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication,” in *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*, ed. Milton J. Bennett (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural, 1998), 173-89.

Since the fateful events of September 11, 2001, there has been a “great increase of fascination” in America about Islam, especially among Evangelical Christians.²⁹ Consequently, numerous books on Islam have appeared from within the Evangelical Christian community.³⁰ These books fit into three general categories: (1) introductions to Islam; (2) missiological and evangelistic texts; (3) apologetic and polemic works. As would be expected, the majority of these texts discuss Islam in light of the Evangelical Christian worldview, some more explicitly than others. This comparative approach should be expected since both the authors and intended readership belong to the same religious tradition. It is only natural for adherents from one religion to try to understand another religion in light of their own. This dissertation will argue that this comparative approach is beneficial since comparison brings to light characteristics of a religious tradition that may not have been visible if studied in isolation.

²⁹Kidd, *American Christians and Islam*, 164.

³⁰Some of these works are John MacArthur, *Terrorism, Jihad, and the Bible* (Nashville: W Pub. Group, 2001); Ravi Zacharias, *Light in the Shadow of Jihad* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002); Phil Parshall, *Understanding Muslim Teachings and Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); idem, *The Cross and the Crescent* (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel, 2002); idem, *Lifting the Veil* (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel, 2002); Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Muslims* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2002); Paul A. Marshall, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); Christine A. Mallouhi, *Waging Peace on Islam* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); Ergun Caner, *Unveiling Islam* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002); idem, *Voices Behind the Veil* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003); Emir Caner, *More than a Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003); R. C. Sproul and Abdul Saleeb, *The Dark Side of Islam* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003); Colin G. Chapman *Cross and Crescent* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003, 2007); Mateen Elass, *Understanding the Koran* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Shirin Taber, *Muslims Next Door* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Anees Zaka, *The Truth about Islam* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004); William L. Wagner, *How Islam Plans to Change the World* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004); David Goldmann, *Islam and the Bible: Why Two Faiths Collide* (Chicago: Moody, 2004); George Braswell, *Islam and America* (Nashville: B&H, 2005); Keith E. Swartley, ed., *Encountering the World of Islam* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2005); Mike Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammad: A Christian-Muslim Debate on the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Cynthia A. Strong, and Meg Page, *A Worldview Approach to Ministry Among Muslim Women* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006); Bill A. Musk, *The Certainty Trap: Can Christians and Muslims Afford the Luxury of Fundamentalism?* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007); Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understandings and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008); R.G. Ghattas and Carol Ghattas, *A Christian Guide to the Qur'an: Building Bridges in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009). For an analysis of the American Christian response to Islam since September 11, 2001, see Kidd, *American Christians and Islam*, 144-64.

Unfortunately, these recent texts on Islam from an Evangelical perspective lack a robust and developed methodology for comparing Islam and Christianity. Although many of the texts are not explicitly comparative, a comparative undertone exists. This lack of attention to methodology is probably due to the fact that the works, for the most part, are meant for popular readership. Popular books on Islam are needed in the Evangelical Christian community, and play an important role in equipping Evangelicals to reach Muslims with the gospel. Nevertheless, those who plan to devote their lives to Muslim evangelism need to delve deeper into understanding the Muslim worldview. Christians seeking a more nuanced and rich understanding of Islam will need texts that are more methodologically self-conscious. Consequently, the purpose of this dissertation is not only to demonstrate that the comparative method is a valuable tool in the study of religion which can be used in service of Christian missions, but also to provide a methodologically-sound comparative approach to studying religions in general, and Islam specifically.

Outline

Since the comparative method is not without controversy, the second chapter discusses the role of the comparative method in the academic study of religion. The first half of the chapter includes a brief history of the comparative method in the academic study of religion, noting key scholars of religion who used comparison. The second half of the chapter discusses and analyzes the major objections against the comparative method. Chapter 2 serves as the background to the proposed method of comparison and case study.

Chapter 3 proposes a method of comparing two religions as a way to confirm the thesis that the comparative method is a useful tool in the study of religion which can be used in service of Christian missions. The chapter begins with a discussion of methodological issues related to the comparative method, noting how the proposed

methodology avoids past misuses of the comparative method. After discussing methodological issues, additional matters of concern involved in the study of religion are discussed. Finally, the specific case study is presented, namely, an investigation into the topic of suffering in the most important textual resources for Christians in the Reformed tradition³¹ and for Muslims in the Sunni tradition.³²

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the Reformed worldview, and then discusses the issue of the suffering of God's people³³ in the most influential religious textual resources for those in the Reformed tradition, namely, the Bible. More specifically, passages concerning God's purposes behind the suffering of his people, and how they should respond in the Old and New Testaments are presented. Finally, the

³¹Although the term "Calvinist" is more widely recognized, the term "Reformed" will be used instead throughout the dissertation. Many use these two terms interchangeably. For example, in *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics*, R. C. Sproul calls the five points of Calvinism the five points of Reformed theology. R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 115.

In addition, this dissertation will use the designation of "Reformed" in a broad sense, including all Evangelical Christians who emphasize God's sovereignty, and believe that all events are predestined, either by God's decree or permission. Either way, nothing happens apart from God's will. Historically, the Reformed tradition has been associated with Presbyterian churches and their belief in Covenant theology and paedobaptism. Consequently, some Presbyterians object to the fact that many "non-Presbyterians" call themselves "Reformed" even though they hold to the five points of Calvinism. However, even R. C. Sproul uses the term "Reformed" in a broad sense. In *Chosen by God*, Sproul describes Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Baptist theologian Roger Nicole as holding the "'Reformed' view." Idem, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 14-16.

³²Sunnis make up 80 to 85 percent of the worldwide Muslim population. The term "Sunni" originally stood for "Men of the Sunnah and the Jama'ah." That is, those who place special importance on the "established practice" (*sunnah*) as recorded in the *ahadith*; thus, those who hold the position of the Muslim community (*Jama'ah*). However, "Sunni" simply became a designation of not being "Men of the Shi'ah." Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:276-78.

³³The concept of "the people of God" will be used in a general sense, both from the Christian and Muslim perspectives. In the Old Testament, the people of God are those who worship and obey Yahweh, but more broadly may be applied to all Israelites. In the New Testament, the people of God are those who are in the Church, the body of Christ. In the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, the people of God are those who have submitted themselves to God. This may be the prophets and messengers of old that God sent before Muhammad or those who joined the community of the faithful, the *Ummah*, during and since the time of Muhammad. For contemporary Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition, "the people of God" would generally be understood as those in the *Ummah* and regenerate believers, respectively. Thus, in experiencing suffering, a Sunni Muslim or a Christian in the Reformed tradition may ask herself, "why am I suffering?" or "why are *we* (as God's people) suffering?"

major themes that emerge in the analysis are summarized.

Chapter 5 begins with an overview of the Sunni worldview, and then discusses the issue of the suffering of God's people in the most influential religious textual resources for Sunni Muslims, namely, the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, their most authoritative collection of *ahadith*. First, passages concerning God's purposes behind the suffering of his people, and how they should respond in the Qur'an are presented. Second, passages concerning the same issues are presented from *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*. Finally, the major themes that emerge in the analysis of the Muslim texts are summarized.

Chapter 6 compares the themes found in the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts, and highlights some missiological implications that emerged from the study. Both similarities and differences between the texts are discussed, with the goal of shedding light on the Reformed and Sunni worldviews. After gleaning insight from the comparison, some missiological implications are discussed, specifically pertaining to communicating the gospel to a Sunni believer, and suffering in the missionary task.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the main arguments and findings of the dissertation.

Conclusion

An analysis of the current status of Muslim evangelization reveals that Evangelicals, to use Zwemer's phrase, are far from the Muslim heart. The Muslim world represents one of the largest and most unreached religious blocs in the world. It goes without saying that the task of reaching Muslims with the gospel is far from over. Moreover, a plethora of theological, historical, political, and cultural barriers complicate the task. Consequently, gospel communicators should not further exacerbate the problem by settling for a superficial understanding of Islam. Christians who desire to devote their lives to Muslim evangelization must seek an in-depth understanding of the people they

are trying to reach with the gospel. Properly understanding a respondent's worldview is a prerequisite for effective contextualization.

Fortunately, Evangelicals are not devoid of resources to teach them about Islam, especially since 2001. Nevertheless, even though the various works on Islam from an Evangelical perspective are of great service to the church, they do lack a developed methodology of comparison. This lack of methodological self-consciousness calls into question the accuracy and depth of the works that Evangelicals are most likely to use as they learn about Islam. This in turn affects their ability to contextualize the gospel message effectively. This dissertation seeks to speak into this apparent void in Evangelical works on Islam.

This dissertation will seek to demonstrate that the comparative method is a valuable tool in the study of religion, and therefore, it should be used in service of Christian missions. This thesis will be demonstrated through the application of a proposed method of comparison to a specific case study, namely, an investigation into the topic of suffering in the most authoritative textual resources in the Reformed and Sunni traditions. This case study is meant to show that comparative studies from an Evangelical perspective encourage Evangelicals to exegete themselves, the Bible, and the religious worldview being studied, which ultimately makes them better equipped to contextualize the gospel.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

The comparative method, although instrumental in the inception of the academic study of religion, is today in a precarious position among scholars of religion. For some scholars, comparison is inevitable and essential to the study of religion, but for others, comparison is an outmoded method which should be completely avoided. Consequently, any well-developed method of comparison must take into account the history of the comparative method as well as the various objections raised against it.

A Brief History of the Comparative Method in the Academic Study of Religion

The history of the academic study of religion can be roughly divided into three broad stages: (1) the accumulation of *material*; (2) the development of *methods*; (3) the analysis of *motive* in the study of religion.¹ For each of these three broad stages, two representative comparativists will be discussed in order to provide a picture of how the comparative method was utilized in each historical stage.

¹Arvind Sharma, "Towards a Post-Colonial Comparative Religion? Comparing Hinduism and Islam as Orientalist Constructions," in *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* ed. Brian C. Wilson, Thomas Athanasios Idinopulos, and James Constantine Hanges, Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions, vol. 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 221-23. Sharma's proposed three-stage history of the academic study of religion is meant to provide a general outline, noting the changes in the field of religious studies. Beginning in the 1860s, scholars of religion devoted most of their time to the accumulation and analysis of religious data. Then, throughout the twentieth century the emphasis shifted to the development of various methodologies to explain the data (i.e., anthropological, sociological, psychological, phenomenological, and historical approaches just to name a few). Finally, since the 1980s, influenced by postmodern skepticism and in reaction to Orientalism, the issue of motive is now of prime importance. To understand better the development and history of the academic study of religion, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986); Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Carl Olson, ed., *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003).

The first stage of the academic study of religion is characterized by the accumulation of material on religions from around the world, made possible as the West came in contact with other cultures through colonialism. Based upon evolutionary presuppositions, early scholars of religion attempted to use the data collected to find the essence and origin of religion, and trace its assumed evolution through human history. In order to accomplish this task they applied “the comparative (or scientific) method to the data provided by the religions of the world, past and present,” and placed each religion “within a scheme of progress, development, or evolution, and the assessment of their value.”² This type of investigation relied so heavily on the comparison of religions that by the 1890s it became popular to call the field of study “comparative religion,” a shortened form for “the comparative study of religion.”³ From the 1870s to the 1890s, comparative religion was made up of two schools, namely, the philological school of Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) and the anthropological school, exemplified by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and James George Frazer (1854-1941).⁴ Therefore, briefly looking at the work of Müller, Tylor, and Frazer will shed light on the use of the comparative method in this first stage of the academic study of religion.

²Eric J. Sharpe, “Comparative Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 3:578.

³Ibid. Sharpe defines comparative religion as “the historical, critical, and comparative study of religions of the world.” Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 1. Initially, the academic study of religion was called Comparative Religion and referred to the science of religion; however, in time, this label was replaced by terms like the history of religions, world religions, religious studies, and studies in religion. Consequently, the term “comparative religion” is used mostly at the popular level and seldom at the scholarly level. Idem, “Comparative Religion,” 580. Nevertheless, some still use the term “comparative religion” in the broadest sense to mean the study of religion. Others argue that to minimize confusion, the term “comparative religion” should be reserved for methodologies that explicitly use comparison and should not be applied to the field of religious studies in general. Frank Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” in *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Frank Whaling, vol. 1, *The Humanities* (Berlin: Mouton, 1983), 165-66; Hillary Rodrigues and John H. Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 134.

⁴Sharpe, “Comparative Religion,” 578.

Accumulation of Material: Müller, Tylor and Frazer

Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), a German philologist who spent most of his academic career at Oxford, is widely regarded as the founding father of *Religionswissenschaft* in the English-speaking world.⁵ Müller is probably best known as the editor of the fifty-volume series *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910), which provides English translations of key texts in Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Although a philologist, he wrote extensively on the origin and development of religion, giving special attention to religions of Indic origin.⁶

On February 19, 1870, Müller gave a groundbreaking lecture at the Royal Institute in London in which he argued that the development of a science of religion based on an “impartial and truly scientific comparison” of the most important religions of mankind was only a matter of time.⁷ In the lecture, he asked, “why, then, should we hesitate to apply the comparative method, which has produced such great results in other spheres of knowledge, to a study of religion?”⁸ As a man of his day, Müller trusted “the scientific method” and the inevitability of human progress; thus, he approached his

⁵Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 80; S. A. Nigosian, *World Religions: A Historical Approach*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 6. As Müller called for a scientific study of religion in London, Emile Louis Burnouf (1821-1907) was doing the same in France. William A. Clebsch, “Apples, Oranges, and Manna: Comparative Religion Revisited,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 6.

⁶Some of Müller's major works include *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature So Far As It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (1859); *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1864, 1866); *Chips from a German Workshop*, 5 vols. (1867-75); *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873); *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (1878); *India, What Can It Teach Us?* (1883); *The German Classics from the Fourth to the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (1886); *The Science of Thought*, 2 vols. (1887); *Studies in Buddhism* (1888); *Six Systems of Hindu Philosophy* (1899); *Natural Religion* (1889); *Physical Religion* (1891); *Anthropological Religion* (1892); *Theosophy, or Psychological Religion* (1893).

⁷Capps, *Religious Studies*, 68; F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 34-35.

⁸Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 15.

research with “optimism, energy, and confidence.”⁹ As a philologist, he had discovered the value of comparison as he studied the relationship between the various Indo-European languages; therefore, he simply applied his comparative methodology to religion.¹⁰ Müller applied Goethe’s paradox, “He who knows one language, knows none,” to religion, and came up with his now well-known dictum “He who knows one, knows none.”¹¹ According to Müller, this meant that although people may have faith that can “move mountains,” if all they know is their own religion, then they will be unable to define what “religion really is,” or know the “inward nature” of religion or “the faculty of faith.”¹²

Müller’s comparative approach was for the most part textual in nature. Through his training in philology and under the influence of Higher Criticism,¹³ Müller analyzed religious texts from a variety of religious traditions. Through his comparison of religious texts, especially myths, he came to the conclusion that religion started as perception of the infinite, which amounted to nature worship, in combination with a moral sense.¹⁴ He argued that in time, through a “disease of language” the forces of nature were personified and turned into deities as words were mistaken for the things themselves.¹⁵ To conclude, through the influence of his philological background, Müller came to advocate a science of religion which used comparison as a key method of

⁹Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

¹⁰Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 14.

¹¹Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 15-16.

¹²*Ibid.*, 16.

¹³Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 58-59.

¹⁴Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 39.

¹⁵Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 8; Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 54; Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 14.

investigation.

Although Müller's philological approach gave rise to comparative religion, anthropological approaches dominated the field from the 1870s to the 1920s.¹⁶ The earliest scholars of religion lacked a unified theory to explain the varied beliefs and practices, but the theory of evolution provided such a theory. Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of biological evolution and Hebert Spencer's (1820-1903) theory of social Darwinism heavily influenced early anthropological approaches in the study of religion.¹⁷ Anthropologists believed that if humankind evolved from lower to higher states of being, the same must be the case for religion. As part of their evolutionary view of religion, early anthropologists also held to the "theory of survivals," in which some beliefs, practices, and religious institutions were left behind in the process of evolution.¹⁸ This belief encouraged anthropologists to study "primitive" societies of their day in order to understand better how religion originated. Anthropologists E. B. Tylor and James Frazer best exemplify this school of thought.

English anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1832-1917) was the first professor of anthropology at the University of Oxford (1896-1909), and is regarded as one of the founders of anthropology.¹⁹ Although he never attended a university, through his travels and independent studies, he was able to establish himself as a leading anthropologist. In 1856, while vacationing in the United States, he accompanied an archeologist to Mexico,

¹⁶Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 94.

¹⁷Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 49-50; Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 32-33. Spencer was the first to apply the theory of evolution to the study of religion. In *First Principles* (1862) Spencer argued that all things develop uniformly from simple to more complex, including religion. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 32-33. It should be noted though, that Herbert Spencer and E. B. Tylor "carried on an extended and sometimes bitter public conversation" over who first came up with the theory of evolution. Capps, *Religious Studies*, 74.

¹⁸Sharpe, "Comparative Religion," 579.

¹⁹Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods, and Theories of Research*, Religion and Reason, vol. 3 (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 209.

where he acquired his interest in studying human culture.²⁰ From that time forward, Tylor devoted his time to studying the beliefs and practices of “primitive” peoples past and present. His two-volume *Primitive Culture* (1871), which amounts to a comparative ethnology, best exemplifies his thought.²¹

In the first volume of *Primitive Culture*, Tylor primarily discusses the origins of culture. In the second volume he discusses the religion of “primitive” culture, and concludes that for humanity to progress, it needs to be aware of and eradicate current superstitions that linger from less developed times. He concludes the two-volume work with the following words:

It is a harsher, and at times even painful, office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstitions, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrances, the science of culture is essentially a reformer’s science.²²

In addition to his evolutionary view of culture, Tylor also presents his view about the origin of religion. First, he contends that people developed the belief in spirits as a way to explain what happened to people when they slept and when they died.²³ Second, through the process of social evolution, this original animism evolved upward into polytheism, and then finally into monotheism.²⁴ In order to prove his thesis, Tylor traces the supposed evolution of religion by identifying similarities between particular religious beliefs and practices throughout human history and geographic expanse. He

²⁰Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 209.

²¹Some additional works by Tylor include *Anahuac: Or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (1861); *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865); *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (1881).

²²Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holton, 1889), 2:453.

²³Ibid., chaps. 10 through 12.

²⁴Ibid., chaps. 14 through 17.

discusses issues like funeral human sacrifice, souls of objects, ghosts of dead, Hades, demoniacal possession, vampires, tree-worship, thunder-god, supreme deity, prayer, sacrifice, fasting, and a variety of other beliefs and practices. Tylor's methodology of selecting a religious phenomena and then pointing to similar manifestations throughout human history is largely mirrored in Frazer's work.²⁵ Their methodologies were so similar that they could be considered earlier and later versions of "the same general point of view."²⁶

James G. Frazer (1854-1941), a Scottish social anthropologist who spent most of his career at Cambridge, is considered to be one of the founders of anthropology and a pioneer of comparative religion.²⁷ Frazer was a classic "armchair anthropologist,"²⁸ gathering most of his data from field informants. Nevertheless, his contributions cannot be questioned. Frazer is best known for his belief that magic was the first stage of religion, and for his contribution to the concept of sympathetic magic. Eric Sharpe also points to the importance of Frazer's contribution to the topics of divine kingship, the dying and rising god, and the goddess of vegetation.²⁹ Although he calls into question Frazer's evolutionary presuppositions, Walter H. Capps still argues that Frazer's "repository of ethnological and anthropological information remains useful."³⁰

Frazer's best-known and most influential work is *The Golden Bough*, which

²⁵Frazer actually credits Tylor with giving him his first interest in the early history of society. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Roots of Religion and Folklore* (New York: Avenel, 1981), xii.

²⁶Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 16.

²⁷Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 244.

²⁸Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 54.

²⁹Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 90.

³⁰Capps, *Religious Studies*, 71.

was first published in two volumes in 1890.³¹ In subsequent years, the work was expanded to twelve volumes. In the work, Frazer takes the reader on a journey to explain the legend of Nemi Grove. In trying to “solve” the legend, Frazer is able to discuss a variety of topics including primitive man and the supernatural, incarnate gods, tree-worship, royal and priestly taboos, nature of the soul, and the killing of gods, just to name a few. Like Tylor had done previously, Frazer adopts a comparative approach and seeks to make his case by identifying similarities in belief and practice among peoples spanning space and time. At the end of the journey, he not only explains the origin of the legend of Nemi Grove, but attempts to demonstrate that religion began as magic, through which “savages” believed they could control the natural world.

To conclude, the earliest phase of the academic study of religion was characterized by the accumulation and analysis of religious data, exemplified by the work of Müller, Tylor and Frazer. Through his background as a philologist, Müller came to advocate a scientific study of religion based upon the comparative method. By comparing religious texts, he came to the conclusion that religion emerged through a “disease of language,” in which nature was personified. Tylor and Frazer approached religions as anthropologists. Based upon evolutionary presuppositions, they believed they could identify the essence and origin of religion. Tylor concluded that religion began as animism, while Frazer concluded that people turned to religion when magic no longer gave them the results they wanted. As men of their day, Müller, Tylor and Frazer took advantage of the abundant amount of religious data available, and through comparison sought to identify the essence and origin of religion. However, after WWI the evolutionary explanation of religion and the desire to discover the origin of religion

³¹Additional works by Frazer include *Totemism* (1887); *The Golden Bough*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (1900); *Psyche's Task* (1909); *Totemism and Exogamy*, 4 vols. (1910); *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (1911-1915); *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead*, 3 vols. (1913-1924); *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (1918); *The Worship of Nature* (1926); *The Myths of the Origin of Fire* (1930); *The Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion* (1933); *Creation and Evolution in Primitive Cosmogonies* (1935); *Aftermath* (1936); *Totemica* (1937); *Anthologia Anthropologica*, 4 vols. (1938-1939).

fell apart.³²

Development of Methods: Weber and Eliade

The development of methods characterized the second phase in the academic study of religion. During this period, the field splintered into a variety of methodological schools, including the history of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, phenomenology of religion, just to name a few. However, even in this diversification of approaches to religion, comparison still played an important role in the various methods. The work of towering figures like Max Weber (1864-1920) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) reflect not only their respective methodological schools, but also the fact that comparison remained integral to the academic study of religion.

Max Weber is one of the pioneers of the sociology of religion,³³ and is regarded by some as the second “giant” in the academic study of religion after Müller.³⁴ Weber practiced law, and spent time as professor of commercial and German law, political economics, and political science in various German universities.³⁵ Weber is best known in the English-speaking world for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and for *The Sociology of Religion*.³⁶ Weber’s primary position on religion was that religion appeared in response to social and economic factors and then, as religions became systematized they reciprocated by exerting influence back upon the host

³²Sharpe, “Comparative Religion,” 579.

³³Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 352.

³⁴Clebsch, “Apples, Oranges, and Manna,” 10.

³⁵Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 352.

³⁶Waardenburg identifies the following of Weber’s works which have been translated into English and have the most bearing on religion: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930); *Essays in Sociology* (1946); *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1949); *On the Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (1951); *Ancient Judaism* (1952); *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (1958); *The Sociology of Religion* (1963); *On Charisma and Institution Building* (1968). Ibid.

society. Walter A. Capps states that Weber's single contention was that "the human conception of deity influences and shapes concrete actions and social relationships."³⁷

Although Weber is known for his emphasis on the interplay between religion and society, especially concerning economic factors, his use of comparison should not go unnoticed. For example, in his introduction to Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*,³⁸ Talcott Parsons contends that this text is "the most crucial contribution of our century to the comparative and evolutionary understanding of the relations between religion and society, and even of society and culture generally."³⁹ As Parsons' quote might suggest, Weber's *Sociology of Religion* provides insight into his use of comparison. In this work, Weber does not present an overarching thesis; rather, he discusses the origin and development of religions, the religiosity of various social classes, and the interplay of religious traditions with their host cultures.

In order to explain the complex interplay between religion and society, Weber investigated not only the religions and sects of Europe and the United States, but he also turned to religions from Asia and the Middle East. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber explored the connection between Protestantism and capitalism; he eventually carried out comparative studies in India and China where capitalism did not exist seemingly to garner more evidence for his original thesis.⁴⁰ Weber's *Sociology of Religion* brings together his findings from studies into the various religions of the world.

By studying the interplay between a religious tradition and its host culture, and then, by comparing the findings between traditions, Weber was able to develop religious

³⁷Capps, *Religious Studies*, 166.

³⁸*The Sociology of Religion* is actually only a section of Weber's unfinished magnum opus, *Economics and Society*. Ephraim Fischhoff, translator's preface to Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, (Boston: Beacon, 1993), xix-xx.

³⁹Talcott Parsons, introduction to Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, lxxvii.

⁴⁰Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 177.

typologies to explain ways in which religion and society interact. Throughout *Sociology of Religion*, Weber presents a variety of typologies. For example, he contrasts the “ethical prophet” like Zoroaster and Muhammad with the “exemplary prophet” like the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and the Vedic writers.⁴¹ He also presents his fourfold ways to pursue salvation within the major world religions: inner-worldly mysticism, other-worldly mysticism, inner-worldly asceticism, and other-worldly asceticism.⁴² This specific typology led him to postulate his best known thesis that the inner-worldly perspective of Protestantism led to the formation of capitalism. Through typologies such as these, Weber was able to begin the process of explaining how religious beliefs have shaped society. To conclude, although Weber is primarily known as a pioneer in the sociology of religion, his methodology places him among some of the most influential comparativists in the academic study of religion.

Before moving on to discuss Mircea Eliade it is first important to note some of the major changes that the academic study of religion went through in the aftermath of World War II. It would be difficult to understand the development of the comparative method in academic study of religion from Eliade to later comparativists without discussing significant changes in the field. In *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Frank Whaling provides a helpful discussion of the major changes within the field.

Whaling identifies eight major differences between, what he identifies as, the classical period and the contemporary period in the study of religion, with 1945 being the

⁴¹Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 55-57.

⁴²Ibid., 166-83. Weber used the term other-worldly and inner-worldly for religious groups which sought to get away from the world or sought to stay connected to it, respectively. He used the term “mysticism” for groups which emphasized resignation to the world, while he used the term “asceticism” for groups which sought mastery of the world around them.

marker.⁴³ First, there was an increased diversification of approaches in the study of religion as the number of scholars grew, and they moved beyond just looking at texts, classical religions, and “primitive religions” as previous scholars had done. Second, scholars of religion began applying theories or methods of investigation from the human sciences to specific religious data. Third, improved communication increased the speed at which people and information could be accessed, making it more conducive to study current religion. Fourth, scholars became more aware and/or concerned with the implications of religious research based upon a western perspective. Fifth, involvement of secular “religions” like Communism and Nazism, and an overall increase in inter-religious dialogue increased. Sixth, phenomenology of religion became more widely used among scholars of religion. Seventh, the necessity to clarify terms, especially “religion,” became more important. Finally, scholars shifted away from looking primarily to “primal religions” and turned to a variety of concerns, including contemporary religion, non-western religions, western religion by both west and east scholars, and on education of world religions in schools in the west.⁴⁴ Noting these eight major developments in the academic study of religion after 1945 provides an important backdrop for discussing Eliade and later comparativists.

⁴³Frank Whaling, ed., *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 13-24. Wilfred Cantwell Smith also identified a new age in the academic study beginning after World War II. Smith argues that the old age was characterized by “studying foreign religions and people out there,” but in the new age “adherents of those faiths are in the conversation and are doing the research.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither- and Why?” in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 32.

⁴⁴Whaling also provides a helpful list of ten major factors that affected the study of religion and how it was lived out in the aftermath of World War II: (1) disappearance of many European empires; (2) spread of Marxism; (3) new nation states formed; (4) application of economic development and modernization in most countries; (5) intensified debate concerning the relationship of science and religion; (6) acceleration of industrialization; (7) acceleration of the “domination of nature by human beings”; (8) increasing movement of people and information around the world; (9) rise of new cultural/cultural blocks: West, Marxist, Muslim, Hindu, Judaism/Israel, Buddhist lands, Far East Confucian, Black Africa/Latin America/Pacific peoples; (10) since 1970, a rising sense of living in a global world. Whaling, *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, 3-10.

It goes without saying that Mircea Eliade (1907-86) was “one of the most influential comparativists and interpreters of religion of the twentieth century.”⁴⁵ Eliade, a Romanian historian of religion, spent the majority of his illustrious career at the University of Chicago. Three of his most influential works are *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1955), *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), and *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959).⁴⁶ These three works cover some of Eliade’s recurring themes, namely, man’s desire to escape from history, the importance of archetypes, and the universality of the sacred. Although a comparativist, Eliade preferred calling the discipline of religious studies “the history of religions.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, Eliade was not technically a historian of religion himself. Late in his career he did write the three-volume *A History of Religious Ideas*, but this text was unique among his other works.

Eliade’s primary thesis concerning religion was that there is a sacred reality out there, and that people throughout history have been responding to it in similar ways. Standing on the shoulders of Rudolph Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Joachim Wach,⁴⁸ Eliade argued that this sacred essence was beyond outsider investigation.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the way in which humanity has responded to the sacred has been similar. Consequently, Eliade spent most of the time identifying thematic and morphological

⁴⁵Strenski, *Thinking about Religion*, 309. Capps states that “so large, so suggestive, and so strategically comprehensive has Eliade’s work been that many onlookers even attribute the definite and rapid growth of religious studies programs on college and university campuses in North America to its influences.” Capps, *Religious Studies*, 140.

⁴⁶Additional works translated into English include: *Immortality and Freedom* (1958); *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (1960); *Images and Symbols* (1961); *The Forge and the Crucible* (1962); *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964); *The Two and the One* (1965); *The Quest* (1969); *Zalmoxis* (1972); *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (1973); *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (1976); *A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols. (1978-85). Before World War II, Eliade wrote most of his works in Romanian, but after the war he wrote mainly in French. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 213-14.

⁴⁷Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 81.

⁴⁸Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 214.

⁴⁹Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 81.

similarities between religious phenomena in an attempt to “ascertain their fundamental structure and their archetypal significance.”⁵⁰ This comparative approach places him among other phenomenologists of religion.⁵¹

Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion* best exemplifies his phenomenological approach to comparison. As a phenomenologist, he argues that trying to understand the essence of religion “by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.”⁵² Consequently, Eliade selects “one particular modality of the sacred”⁵³ to discuss in each chapter, and traces it through space and time, placing special emphasis on primal religion. In the text, he discusses the sacred and its various modalities: (1) the structure and morphology of the sacred; (2) sky and sky gods; (3) the sun and sun-worship; (4) the moon and its mystique; (5) the waters and water symbolism; (6) sacred stones: epiphanies, signs and forms; (7) the earth, woman and fertility; (8) vegetation: rites and symbols of regeneration; (9) agriculture and fertility cults; (10) sacred places: temple, palace, “centre of the world”; (11) sacred time

⁵⁰Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 216.

⁵¹Phenomenology of religion is difficult to define since the term has been used in a variety of ways. Joseph D. Bettis argues that phenomenology of religion can mean three things. First, it can refer to the philosophical tradition started by German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and includes many others like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricoeur. Second, it can refer to scholars of religion which have used phenomenological methods, like Mircea Eliade, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Joachim Wach. Third, it can refer in a broad sense to the application of general phenomenological methods to “the whole spectrum of religious ideas, activities, institutions, customs, and symbols.” Joseph Dabney Bettis, ed., *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1. Phenomenology of religion in the field of religious studies is known for five characteristics: (1) suspending judgment by bracketing one’s beliefs (*epoche*); (2) trying to view the world through another’s perspective (*Einfuhlung*); (3) taking the perspective of the believer seriously; (4) studying religion as a unique phenomena and not simply through methods in other fields like sociology, theology, etc; (5) using typological comparisons. Whaling, *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, 32-33.

⁵²Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, Bison Books ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), xvii

⁵³*Ibid.*, xix.

and the myth of the eternal return; (12) the morphology and function of myth; (13) the structure of symbols. Through the study of these symbols and myths used by “primitive man,” Eliade sought to show the recurring patterns of religious thought throughout human history and thus, contribute to the thesis that man is *homo religiosus*. Eliade concludes *Patterns in Comparative Religion* with the following words:

But though history may be capable either of assisting or of paralyzing new religious experiences, it can never manage to abolish the need for religious experience. Indeed we may go further and say that the dialectic of hierophanies allows of the spontaneous and complete *rediscovery* of all religious values, whatever they may be and at whatever historical stage may be the society or individual who rediscovers them. The history of religion can thus, in the last analysis, be expressed in terms of the drama of the losing and refinding of those values, a loss and rediscovery which are never, nor can ever be, final.⁵⁴

To conclude, the second historical phase in the academic study of religion was characterized by the development of methods. Max Weber represents the sociological method, while Eliade represents the phenomenological approach. Weber used comparison as a way to discover how religion affects society. Eliade used comparison to make evident the recurring patterns of the sacred within the human experience. The next historical stage in the academic study of religion continued gathering religious data and developing methods; however, because of postmodernism, the issue of motive has now become of prime importance. Comparativists must not only have a well-developed method, but they must be even more self-aware and self-critical in their comparative projects.

The Analysis of Motive: Smart and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project

Ninian Smart (1927-2001) and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP) reflect this new emphasis among scholars of religion to be more self-reflective not only of their methods, but also of their motives. Smart, a Scottish scholar of religion,

⁵⁴Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 465.

taught philosophy at the University College of Wales (1952-1955), history and philosophy of religion at King's College London (1956-1961), theology at Birmingham (1961-1966), developed a religious studies program at Lancaster, and during the end of his career, divided his time between Lancaster and the University of California, Santa Barbara.⁵⁵ In addition to his extensive teaching career, Smart was also prolific writer.⁵⁶

Smart is probably best known for his "dimensional model," in which he analyzes religions according to six dimensions, namely, the experiential, the mythic, the doctrinal, the ethical, the ritual, and the social. In *Religious Experience of Mankind* he writes:

It is a six-dimensional organism, typically containing doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals, and social institutions, and animated by religious experiences of various kinds This general account of religion which we have given depends on comparing religions as we find them in the world. Comparisons, though, need to be handled carefully. . . . We are confronted by *religions*. And each religion has its own style, its own inner dynamic, its own special meanings, its uniqueness. Each religion is an organism and has to be understood in terms of the interrelation of its different parts. Thus, though there are resemblances between religions or between parts of religions, these must not be seen too crudely.⁵⁷

This quote not only reveals his six dimensions of religion, but it also shows his phenomenological approach to religion. As a phenomenologist, Smart sought to bracket

⁵⁵Whaling, "Comparative Approaches," 267.

⁵⁶Some of Smart's book-length works include *Reasons and Faiths: An Investigation of Religious Discourse, Christian, and Non-Christian* (1958); *A Dialogue of Religions* (1960); *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (1964, 2nd ed. 1992); *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (1964, 2nd ed. 1969); *The Teacher and Christian Belief* (1966); *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968); *The Yogi and the Devotee: The Interplay between the Upanishads and Catholic Theology* (1968); *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (1969, 2nd ed. 1976, 3rd ed. 1984, 4th ed. 1991 title changed to *The Religious Experience*, and 5th ed. 1996); *The Philosophy of Religion* (1970, 2nd ed. 1979); *The Concept of Worship* (1972); *The Phenomenon of Religion* (1973, 2nd ed. 1978); *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions* (1973); *Mao* (1974); *Background to the Long Search* (1977); *The Phenomenon of Christianity* (1979); *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* (1981); *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1983, 2nd ed. 1995, 3rd ed. 2000); *Religion and the Western Mind* (1987); *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (1989, 2nd ed. 1998); *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies* (1993); *Religions of Asia* (1993); *Religions of the West* (1994); *Religion and Nationalism: The Urgency of Transnational Spirituality and Toleration* (1994); *Choosing a Faith* (1994); *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1996); *Lights of the World: Buddha and Christ* (1997); *World Philosophies* (1999). This list does not include his edited works, or his published articles.

⁵⁷Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 16-17.

out his own beliefs (*epoche*), withhold judgment, and see the world from the insider's perspective (*Einfuhlung*) as he studied religions. However, unlike Eliade and other phenomenologists, Smart had a “nuanced phenomenological approach”⁵⁸ and thus, avoided trying to find the essence of religion. Moreover, Smart did not use comparison as a “testing ground for more extensive methodological or cultural issues.”⁵⁹ Walter H. Capps calls Smart's *Religious Experience of Mankind* “the most straightforward of comprehensive and systematic attempts to compare and contrast the major religious traditions of the world according to criteria proposed by phenomenology of religion.”⁶⁰

In order to better understand Smart's concern for method and motive, it would be helpful to turn to *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*.⁶¹ In this text, Smart begins by discussing methodological issues, noting the history of the comparative method, and giving an explanation of what the modern study of religion should involve. He contends that modern scholars of religion should (1) discuss many religions and secular worldviews; (2) considers belief systems outside of the traditional religions; (3) study traditions historically and systematically, and try to enter the viewpoint of the insider; (4) make thematic comparisons that help illuminate individual religious traditions; (5) use many methods from a variety of disciplines; (6) seek to show the power of religious ideas and practices to affect other areas of life; (7) help not only educate people, but also help those who are on a “personal quest for spiritual truth.”⁶²

After discussing methodological issues, Smart presents a worldview inventory including the following seven worldviews: (1) the Modern West; (2) the Islamic

⁵⁸Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 82.

⁵⁹Capps, *Religious Studies*, 308.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 307.

⁶¹Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000).

⁶²*Ibid.*, 19.

Crescent; (3) South and Southeast Asia; (4) East Asia; (5) the Latin South; (6) Greater Africa; (7) the Pacific.⁶³ Smart appears to understand a worldview as “the history and nature of symbols and beliefs that have helped form the structure of human consciousness and society.”⁶⁴ After providing a brief historical and religious background by discussing each of the seven worldviews, Smart turns to the heart of the book, his six dimensions of religion. In the rest of the book, he devotes a chapter to each of the six dimensions, and analyses a variety of religious traditions in light of the dimension under study.⁶⁵ As he discusses the various religions and ideologies, he points out similarities and differences. He concludes the text with a chapter on the religious and ideological trends of the twentieth century. To conclude, Smart embarked on his comparative project fully aware of both his methodology and motivation, and made those explicitly clear from the beginning. In addition to Ninian Smart’s work, Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman’s Comparative Religious Ideas Project also reflects this new awareness on methodology and motivation.

One of the most methodologically self-aware comparative studies in recent years has been the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP), a Boston-based research effort from 1995-1999. Hugh Nicholson describes the project as “the most sophisticated and rigorous theory of comparison in the study of religion to date.”⁶⁶ Comparativists Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman led the project, and brought together six

⁶³In the first edition of this text, Smart included the following six worldviews: (1) the Modern West; (2) the Marxist Bloc; (3) the Islamic Crescent; (4) Old Asia; (5) the Latin world; (6) Black Africa and the Pacific. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983).

⁶⁴Smart, *Worldviews*, 3rd ed., 2.

⁶⁵In *Dimensions of the Sacred*, Smart includes “the material dimension” as a seventh dimension. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁶⁶Hugh Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 632.

tradition specialists, four comparativists, and a number of graduate students.⁶⁷ The goal of the project was to test a methodology for comparing religious ideas and to “explore a small-community-based pedagogical approach to the formation of potential future experts in comparative religion.”⁶⁸ The project produced three volumes in 2001, namely, *The Human Condition*, *Ultimate Realities* and *Religious Truth*.

Neville and Wildman developed CRIP on the belief that any comparison must be rooted in a methodological self-awareness. Neville states that “comparisons are not to be trusted without a justified second-order reflection on the nature of comparison.”⁶⁹ Similarly, they argue that since scholars of religion are “up to our necks” in comparison, they would do well to be “self-conscious about it as so to do it fairly and completely as possible—and to avoid being swallowed up in the confusion that results from lack of awareness about scholarly procedures.”⁷⁰ Consequently, their project included the development and testing of a specific theory of comparison.

⁶⁷The tradition specialists included Frank Clooney (Hinduism), David Eckel (Buddhism), Paula Fredriksen (Christianity), S. Nomanul Haq (Islam), Livia Kohn (Chinese religion), and Anthony Saldarini (Judaism). The four comparativists included Peter Berger (sociologist), John Berthrong (historian of religions), Robert Neville (philosopher, theologian, and theorist about comparison), and Wesley Wildman (historical and constructive theologian and philosopher). Robert Cummings Neville, preface to *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert Cummings Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xvi-xvii.

⁶⁸Wesley J. Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” in *Comparing Religions*, 77. Those involved in CRIP met several times a year for three years, devoting each year to one of the three general categories: the human condition (1995-1996), ultimate realities (1996-1997), and religious truth (1997-1998). Each year, they met eight times for a day-long meeting. In the first meeting they discussed the chosen theme of comparison for the year. At the next three meetings, the six specialists presented papers on the theme. At the next three meetings, the comparativists presented their comparative papers based on the data received from the specialists. For a description of what took place during their meetings, see Appendix A in each of the three volumes produced by CRIP: Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁶⁹Robert Cummings Neville, preface in *The Human Condition*, xv.

⁷⁰Wesley J. Wildman and Robert Cummings Neville, “On the Nature of Religion: Lesson We Have Learned,” in *Religious Truth*, 205.

In developing their method, Neville and Wildman sought to take into account what they see as four truisms in comparison.⁷¹ First, comparison requires that the traditions being compared be understood in their own terms. Second, comparison requires not only an accurate representation of the traditions, but also how they are the same and different. Third, comparisons that seek to assert true statements about how specific traditions relate must be “grounded in processes that test them according to relevant criteria.” Finally, in the face of “critical qualifications,” conclusions reached through comparison should be adapted and improved when needed.

Based upon these four truisms, Neville and Wildman developed a collaborative approach between specialists and comparativists using the vague categories of ultimate realities, human condition, and religious truth. By using vague and thus, flexible categories, the specialists were not bound to rigid categories that may not have been applicable to their tradition of specialty.⁷² Moreover, through a collaborative approach, the team of scholars was able to immediately make improvements on the comparisons and avoid having to rely on the insights of just one comparativist.⁷³ After three years of collaborative comparative work, Wildman concludes that “comparative efforts are best done collaboratively.”⁷⁴

To conclude, Ninian Smart and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project reflect a more recent emphasis among scholars of religion to be more self-reflective about not only their methodology, but also their motivation. Clearly aware of the weaknesses of previous comparative projects and in light of the current postmodern skepticism, Smart

⁷¹Robert Cummings Neville, and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in *Ultimate Realities*, 190.

⁷²Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 78.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁴Wesley J. Wildman, “On the Process of the Project during the Third Year,” in *Religious Truth*, 234-35.

and the directors of CRIP make explicitly clear their intentions and methodology as they compare religions. Now that two comparativists from each of the three historical periods in the academic study of religion have been covered, we can now turn to the current status of the comparative method in the academic study of religion.

Current Status of the Comparative Method in the Academic Study of Religion

Since the 1960s, methodological debates have been front and center in the academic study of religion leading to the current methodological uncertainty in the field.⁷⁵ This methodological uncertainty has placed the comparative method in a precarious position. On the one hand, comparativist Kimberley Patton states that the comparative method “has been under fire so heavy that there are very few of us [comparativists] left standing.”⁷⁶ Patton and Benjamin C. Ray lament that “with a few exceptions, comparative studies have virtually disappeared in graduate programs in favor of increasingly narrow ‘areas studies’ research into specific religious texts and communities.”⁷⁷ On the other hand, comparativists affirm that comparison is “extremely common in the study of religion”⁷⁸ and that “comparison is so common in the modern study of religion that ‘comparative religion’ is often used to designate the field itself.”⁷⁹ The paradoxical position of the comparative method in the academic study of religion

⁷⁵Sharpe, “Comparative Religion,” 580.

⁷⁶Kimberley C. Patton, “Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 153.

⁷⁷Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, 3.

⁷⁸Wildman, “On the Nature of Religion,” 204.

⁷⁹Luther H. Martin, “Comparison,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 45. Frank Whaling includes an extensive discussion of the major comparativists from 1945 to 1983, including Wilfred Cantwell Smith, R. C. Zaehner, Raimundo Panikkar, Frederick J. Streng, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Claude Levi-Strauss, Joachim Wach, S. G. F. Brandon, John Bowker, Geoffrey Parrinder, and Ninian Smart, to name a few. Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 163-295.

may explain why comparativist William E. Paden states that the comparative method is still in its formative stages trying to define itself.⁸⁰

For some scholars of religion comparison is not only essential to the discipline, but it is inevitable. Mark Taylor characterizes comparison as “the most fundamental method of the academic study of religion.”⁸¹ Frank Whaling not only argues that comparison is fundamental to religious studies, but that it is actually “part of the cement” that holds the entire discipline together:

Comparative approaches have emerged out of a number of different disciplines that constitute religious studies. But the fundamental nature of comparative religion as such is the fact of comparison. Different disciplines feed into it, but it is dominated by none. Comparative religions assumes a complementarity of disciplines that together illustrate the essentially comparative nature of religious studies. To this extent, comparative religion may be seen as a part of the cement holding together the separate bricks of the religious studies building.⁸²

On a similar note, Walter H. Capps argues that comparison tends to pervade religious studies to the point that it helps “define the field’s direction and compelling intellectual interests.”⁸³ Moreover, he argues that comparison is inevitable because it is impossible to do scholarly research without taking into consideration the cross-cultural nature of the discipline.⁸⁴ In a similar fashion, Diana Eck argues that comparison is nearly impossible to avoid today since “there is no place on earth where religion is simple

⁸⁰William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1994), ix.

⁸¹Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 306.

⁸²Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 280.

⁸³Capps, *Religious Studies*, 340.

⁸⁴*Ibid.* Mark Taylor makes a similar point, noting that the contemporary study of religion is not only multidisciplinary, but also multicultural. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 13. This in turn calls for comparison since comparison is “necessarily cross-cultural.” Ninian Smart, “The Scientific Study of Religion in Its Plurality,” in *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, 183.

and singular.”⁸⁵ In “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” Wesley J. Wildman argues that comparison is inevitable; the question is not whether to compare, but whether it is done well or not.⁸⁶

Although comparativists are optimistic about the role of comparison in the academic study of religion, they are also aware that the comparative method is under heavy attack. In his forward to *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, Jonathan Z. Smith states that there is a “widespread contemporary academic ethos and ethic of extreme localism along with a concomitant distrust of comparison.”⁸⁷ In his essay, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” Robert Segal states that today the “comparative method is conventionally dismissed as an archaic, even quaint, approach to religion and to culture as a whole.”⁸⁸ As will be seen later, many of these criticisms are rooted in postmodern thought. Patton, one of the editors of *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* argues that because of postmodernism and especially deconstructionism, comparative religion “now often finds itself on the sidelines, dismissed by scholars both within and outside the discipline.”⁸⁹ In the discussion so far, it would seem as though there were two camps in the academy, those in favor of comparison and those against it. However, the matter is a little more complex.

Comparativist Robert Segal, in his essay “The Postmodernist Challenge to the

⁸⁵Diana L. Eck, “Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 132.

⁸⁶Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas.”

⁸⁷Jonathan Z. Smith, foreword to *Religious Truth*, xi.

⁸⁸Robert Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” in *The Comity and Grace of Method: Essays in Honor of Edmund Perry*, ed. George D. Bond, Herman Tull, and Thomas Ryba (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 29.

⁸⁹Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 153.

Comparative Method,” provides a helpful classification of the various scholarly positions on the comparative method.⁹⁰ Segal argues that there are four main positions: (1) Postmodern; (2) Controlled Comparison; (3) New Comparativism; (4) Old Comparativism. Scholars who hold the postmodern position reject comparison altogether. Those who advocate what Segal calls “controlled comparisons” allow only comparisons between religious traditions that are geographical and chronologically linked, presupposing “the distinctiveness—the uniqueness, the incomparability—of the area or element within which the cases being compared lie.”⁹¹ The third position belongs to the new comparativists which allow for universal comparisons as long as differences are also identified. Segal includes in this category William E. Paden, who actually uses the term “new comparativism,” Ninian Smart who Segal describes as “the most engaging practitioner of the new comparativism,” and Jonathan Z. Smith who Segal describes as “the most celebrated” of the new comparativists.⁹² The fourth and final position has the fewest defenders. This is the “old comparativism” exemplified by James Frazer and defended by Segal himself. Segal argues that this position is based on empirical research and observation and thus, is incorrectly rejected by most scholars. Segal’s classifications reveal the variety of scholarly opinions on the comparative method. Now that the current status of the comparative method in the academic study of religion has been covered, we can now turn to the more substantial objections to the method.

Objections to the Comparative Method

The comparative method has played a key role in the academic study of religion, yet at the same time, it has been heavily criticized on a number of fronts. Some

⁹⁰Robert A. Segal, “The Postmodernist Challenge to the Comparative Method,” in *Comparing Religions*, 249-56.

⁹¹Ibid., 253.

⁹²Ibid., 254-55.

of the earliest comparativists have been criticized for erroneously assuming an evolution of religion. In addition, critics have accused comparativists of ignoring the context of examples used, ignoring differences between religious traditions, lacking a specific methodology, and of being religiously motivated in their comparisons. More recently, postmodern and postcolonial critics have gone so far as to argue that comparison is not even possible or that it is ultimately immoral and oppressive.

Evolution of Religion Is Assumed

In the earliest forms of comparative religion evolution was the “single guiding principle of method.”⁹³ Early comparativists assumed the evolutionary development of religion; therefore, they erroneously believed that they could ascertain the origin of religion.⁹⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, a noted critic of old comparativism, states in his influential essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” that many early comparativists incorrectly applied the theory of evolution, leading them to “draw data without regard to time or place and, then, locate them in a series from the simplest to the more complex, adding the assumption that the former was chronologically as well as logically prior.”⁹⁵ Assuming that religion evolved in a sequential fashion led many early comparativists to faulty conclusions. For example, with a Eurocentric bias, many scholars of religion came to argue that European societies and Western monotheistic religion represented the peak of human evolution.⁹⁶

Starting in the twentieth century and especially after World War I, belief in the

⁹³Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 26.

⁹⁴For a further discussion of how Darwinism affected the academic study of religion, see Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 47-71.

⁹⁵Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 24.

⁹⁶Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 50.

“simplistic unilinear” evolution of religion, and the desire to ascertain the origin of religion fell apart.⁹⁷ Eric Sharpe attributes this rejection of the evolutionary view of religion to various factors, including a reaction to the “over-optimistic synthesis,” a reaction to Comte’s positivistic thesis, the call for first hand knowledge of peoples rather than just books, and a destroyed optimism after World War I.⁹⁸ Moreover, many of the early positions on religion were proven to be wrong. For example, Tylor’s theory of survivals and his belief that religion evolved from animism to polytheism and then to monotheism was shown to be incorrect. Evidence shows that in places it appears that monotheism existed before polytheism and vice-versa.⁹⁹ Actually, Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt have shown that it is more common for “simpler cultures of people” to be monotheists than polytheists.¹⁰⁰ In addition, Frazer’s thesis that magic preceded religion was also shown to be wrong since evidence shows that that magic and religion may co-exist.¹⁰¹

In light of the evidence, the evolutionary theories of early comparativists, like Tylor and Frazer, have been rejected.¹⁰² Wilfred Cantwell Smith goes so far as to argue that *all* the early attempts to find the essence and origin of religion have failed.¹⁰³ Moreover, the desire to form a single theory to explain all religions now seems like

⁹⁷Sharpe, “Comparative Religion,” 579; idem, *Comparative Religion*, 175.

⁹⁸Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 143, 174.

⁹⁹Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 47.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁰²N. Ross Reat, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983): 460.

¹⁰³Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “On the Comparative Study of Religion,” in *Ways of Understanding Religion*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 191.

“naïve overconfidence.”¹⁰⁴ The evolutionary form of the comparative method has been so discredited that vast majority of comparativists no longer hold the evolutionary view of religion, nor do they seek to find the origin of religion. Therefore, this critique against the comparative method has for the most part become outdated.

Context Is Ignored

A second major objection to the comparative method is that comparativists are often “anti-historical and uncritically selective”¹⁰⁵ in the examples they use. In other words, they ignore the context of the examples they utilize to support their thesis. Daniel L. Pals pejoratively describes Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* and Frazer’s *Golden Bough* as “very large books, their pages crowded and bursting with examples, instances, parallels, and variations,” which are meant to support “the broad generalizations that are central to the theories they advance”; however, the examples are presented “without the slightest regard for their original social context.”¹⁰⁶ Pals’s criticism of these works is not unfounded. For instance, Frazer on one page alone, in discussing the universality of “rain making,” briefly refers to practices of diverse tribes found in North America, Australia, West Africa, and Samoa with no discussion of the geographic or temporal separation of these groups.¹⁰⁷ This methodology dominates his work. He selects a religious phenomenon and then discusses similar phenomena found in groups from around the world and through the ages. Strenski describes Frazer’s methodology as lacking a “certain selectivity of cases to be compared,” which makes the comparisons seem

¹⁰⁴Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 9.

¹⁰⁵Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 81.

¹⁰⁶Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 44-46.

¹⁰⁷Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 14.

“extravagant and disorderly.”¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith accuses this form of comparison, which appears to be simply the recollection of similarity, to be closer to magic than science since it has more to do with memory than method.¹⁰⁹

Similar criticisms are leveled against Mircea Eliade. Pals argues that since Eliade chooses examples from throughout time and space in his typologies, then he is subject to the same criticisms as Frazer received a century before.¹¹⁰ Similarly, in “What’s Beyond the Post? Comparative Analysis as Critical Method,” Barbara A. Holdrege states that the phenomenological work of van de Leeuw and Eliade have been criticized for giving insufficient attention to the diachronic dimension of religious traditions, and for giving insufficient attention to specific contexts.¹¹¹

Critics contend that by ignoring the specific contexts of the examples used, old comparativism “overrides complexity and brings together incomparables.”¹¹² In other words, old comparativists generalize too broadly and prematurely, leading them to false conclusions. Consequently, critics contend that “comparison is merely the premature effort to get things into the comparers’ understanding, which, lacking a valid understanding of the others, results in reducing them to the intellectual agenda and categories of the comparers.”¹¹³ In his article “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions,” Ross N. Reat reminds the reader that theories are meant to assist in understanding religions as they exist in the minds of believers; the actual belief and

¹⁰⁸Ivan Strenski, “The Only Kind of Comparison Worth Doing: History, Epistemology, and the ‘Strong Program’ of Comparative Study,” in *Comparing Religions*, 285.

¹⁰⁹Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 21-22.

¹¹⁰Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 190.

¹¹¹Barbara A. Holdrege, “What’s Beyond the Post? Comparative Analysis as Critical Method,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 78-79.

¹¹²William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 186.

¹¹³Neville, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” 188.

practices should not be subservient to the theory.¹¹⁴ Those who generalize prematurely and too broadly run the risk of twisting the data to fit their theory.

Robert A. Segal, one of the few remaining defenders of old comparativism, rejects the criticisms that old comparativists ignored context, and that they generalized prematurely and too broadly.¹¹⁵ First, he argues that comparisons should be judged on whether they are useful or not, not whether they are right or wrong. Consequently, he contends that one cannot generalize too broadly if the comparison is shown to be useful. Second, he argues that all comparisons are provisional and thus, one cannot generalize prematurely. Finally, he contends that old comparativists do not ignore context since in order to identify similarities they by default need to understand the context enough to see the similarity.

Segal's comments about generalizing prematurely or too broadly do have some merit; however, he fails to demonstrate that old comparativists take into account the context enough to avoid faulty conclusions. As Ninian Smart argues, not seeing apparent similarities in light of their specific contexts will lead to superficial resemblances.¹¹⁶ Moreover, comparativists who ignore context may be practicing a kind of "colonialism writ-small" when they take their subject matter out of their society and artificially place them in "conceptual worlds of their own devising."¹¹⁷ In order to avoid faulty conclusions and "colonialism writ-small," comparative studies should be preceded by studies on the individual religious traditions being compared.

¹¹⁴Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions," 475.

¹¹⁵Segal, "In Defense of the Comparative Method," 29-40.

¹¹⁶Ninian Smart, "Cross-Religious Comparisons: Introduction," in *Ways of Understanding Religion*, 206-07.

¹¹⁷Peter Ochs, "Revised: Comparative Religious Traditions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006): 483.

Differences Are Ignored

A third critique of the comparative method is that many comparativists only point out similarities, and that “the issue of difference has been all but forgotten.”¹¹⁸ Critics argue that this methodology leads to an incomplete vision of both religion in general and of religious traditions specifically. The tendency to only point out similarities can be attributed to a variety of motivations, often related to the thesis that humanity is *homo religiosus* or some form of pluralistic thesis. In other words, comparativists who focus on similarities are usually seeking to make a point about religion in general, and are not necessarily concerned with gaining new insight into specific religious traditions. For example, James Frazer identified similarities in support of his thesis that religion evolved from magic, while Mircea Eliade identified similarities to support his thesis about the universality of the sacred in human experience. Critics could charge such comparativists of self-servingly selecting similarities just to prove their thesis, while at the same time ignoring differences which could detract from their thesis.

In support of only focusing on similarities, a method most often associated with old comparativism, Robert Segal argues that differences cannot be ignored. He states that in identifying similarities comparativists are inevitably identifying differences as well since that is what is left.¹¹⁹ Moreover, according to Segal, proponents of old comparativism do not deny differences; they just deny the importance of them. Segal’s observation that comparativists inevitably deal with differences (at least in their minds) as they identify similarities is true; however, this is not the critique leveled against old comparativists. The critique is not that some comparativists are unaware of differences, but rather that they do not see them as important and thus, do not discuss them.

Ignoring differences between religious traditions can lead to a host of problems. First and foremost, by ignoring differences, the uniqueness of each tradition is

¹¹⁸Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 21.

¹¹⁹Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” 30-31.

lost. Thomas Idinopulos may be going too far when he argues that sameness tells us *nothing* and that *only* through differences can we know something.¹²⁰ However, the point remains that differences by definition show us what is peculiar and unique about the religious tradition being studied. If the goal is to better understand specific religious traditions, then differences cannot be ignored. Second, by only focusing on similarities, one runs the risk of allowing one's thesis to distort the data, leading one to faulty conclusions. Jonathan Z. Smith warns that it is easy for comparativists to misuse comparison by simply using it as a way to play with one's theories. He states that "comparison provides the means by which we 're-vision' phenomena as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems,"¹²¹ and that comparison can become a "playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary."¹²² To conclude, comparativists should use comparison to gain actual insight into religious traditions and not just as a theoretical toy; therefore, comparativists should take into account both similarities and differences between religious traditions.

A Developed Methodology Is Lacking

A fourth substantial objection to the comparative method is that many comparativists lack a developed method of comparison. For example, in Luther H. Martin's article on comparison in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, he lists the lack of a systematic methodology as one of the major problems with the comparative method.¹²³

¹²⁰Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, "The Mothering Principle in the Comparison of Religions," in *Comparing Religions*, 53-54.

¹²¹Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: University of London, 1990), 52.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 53.

¹²³Martin, "Comparison," 45.

Ursula King, in her article “Historical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of Religion: Some Major Developments and Issues Under Debate since 1950,” makes a similar observation.¹²⁴ In her article, she notes that some scholars of religion argue that the term “phenomenology of religion” does not clearly reflect the approach and should rather be called “systematic *Religionswissenschaft*” or “the comparative study of religion.” However, in opposition to this name change, she states that using the label “the comparative study of religion” would not work since it would be too similar to the “earlier, less methodologically aware understanding of ‘comparative religion.’” Although King’s direct topic of concern is not the comparative method, her statement does reflect a common view among scholars of religion that earlier scholars of comparative religion were “less methodologically aware.”

Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” best exemplifies this critique.¹²⁵ In the essay, Smith argues that comparison seems to be more about memory rather than investigation; it is more “impressionistic than methodical.” Thus, comparison is more like magic (contagion) than science. In support of his thesis he identifies four modes or styles of comparison. The first style is ethnographic based on what he calls “travelers’ impressions.” He states that these ethnographic comparisons are not systematic, and are just a way to make something not seem so strange. The second style of comparison is encyclopedic which “consists of contextless lists held together by mere surface associations.” The third mode of comparison he identifies is morphological, which involves the organization of individual items into a hierarchical series of increased complexity. This mode of comparison, according to Smith, identifies archetypes and morphologies ignoring the “categories of space (habitat) and time.” Finally, the fourth

¹²⁴Ursula King, “Historical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of Religion: Some Major Developments and Issues Under Debate Since 1950,” in *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, 54.

¹²⁵Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 19-35.

type of comparative text Smith identifies includes evolutionary works, which place religions on an evolutionary scale. By analyzing examples of each of the four modes of comparison, Smith concludes that there has been “no presentation of rules for the production of comparisons; what few rules have been proposed pertain to their *post facto* evaluation.” Moreover, he argues that in comparative works “the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ and, above all, the ‘so what’ of comparisons” have been lacking. In other words, many comparativists have approached comparisons not only without a specific methodology, but also without a specified purpose or application.

Although Smith is recognized as one of the chief opponents of some forms of comparison, he does not reject comparison altogether. The fact that he wrote the foreword to *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* demonstrates that he is not altogether against comparison. In the foreword he writes that “comparison is fundamental to intellection,” and that the “task is to do it right.”¹²⁶ To compare rightly, according to Smith, requires a “conceptualizing confidence that is grounded in an articulate theory of comparison.”¹²⁷ Thus, Smith does not reject comparison *per se*, but rather comparison devoid of any specific methodology. In his work, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, he argues that comparativists who lack a clear purpose “may derive arresting anecdotal juxtapositions or self-serving differentiations, but the disciplined constructive work of the academy will not have been advanced, nor will the study of religion have come of age.”¹²⁸ In other words, comparative projects lacking a specific methodology and an accompanying purpose will not actually contribute to the academic study of religion.

¹²⁶Smith, foreword to *Religious Truth*, xi.

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 53.

Smith's criticism that comparativists carry out their work without a developed methodology may have been truer in the early 1980s when he wrote "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," but since that time, many comparativists have become much more methodologically self-conscious.¹²⁹ This methodological awareness is evident in the work of Ninian Smart, and the collaborative efforts in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project discussed previously.¹³⁰ In addition to these two examples, one can also look at William E. Paden's "new comparativism" and to Dale Cannon's comparative framework.

William Paden's "new comparativism" reflects a methodologically self-conscious approach to comparison. In "Elements of a New Comparativism," Paden identifies the five elements of the new comparativism that he advocates.¹³¹ First, comparisons must reveal "the bilateral nature of comparative perspective," meaning that both similarities and differences must be discussed. Second, Paden points to what he calls "the heuristic nature of comparative categories," noting that similarities and differences change through time since new data and new questions arise. Consequently, comparative categories need to be flexible leaving the door open for "further differentiation, subtypologization, and problematization through historical analysis." Third, he argues that comparison should not be restricted to just religious themes like deity, sacrifice, creation myths and so on. Fourth, he contends that comparisons should be restricted to specific aspects of religion, rather than comparisons of entire religious traditions. Finally, Paden points out that there is a distinction between comparativist and insider domains of meaning. Although insiders provide valuable information about their

¹²⁹Two more recent and invaluable texts dealing with the methodological issues of comparison are Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells*; Brian C. Wilson, Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions, vol. 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

¹³⁰The methodologies of Ninian Smart and of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project are discussed under the subheading "The Analysis of Motive: Smart and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project" in the first half of the current chapter.

¹³¹Paden, "Elements of a New Comparativism," 184-89.

religious tradition and experience, scholars of religion are able to “recognize and understand relationships” that insiders do not. The validity of Paden’s “new comparativism” could be questioned, but the fact that it is methodologically self-aware cannot. The same stands for Dale Cannon’s comparative method.

In *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion*, Dale Cannon provides a method with which to study and compare different religious traditions with empathy and objectivity, yet without abandoning judgment.¹³² As with Paden, Cannon clearly presents not only his methodology, but also his motivation behind engaging in comparison. In the preface, he explains that the purpose behind the book is to encourage understanding, communication, and dialogue between people of different religious worldviews:

More than simply promoting understanding for its own sake, the book aims to foster mutual understanding, communication, and dialogue between persons having different religious orientations and different ways of being religious. As well, it aims to foster understanding, communication, and dialogue between persons of religious orientation and persons of little or no religious orientation in any conventional sense.¹³³

In the first chapter of the text, Cannon introduces his six ways of being religious, which are generic ways religious people seek to encounter “ultimate reality.” The six ways he identifies are sacred rite, reasoned inquiry, mystical quest, shamanic mediation, devotion, and right action. In chapter 2, he explains key concepts that guide his methodology like objectivity, empathy, phenomenology of religion, empathetically objective, ultimate reality, at-onement, problem of meaning, symbols, ways of being religious, and religious common sense. In the following chapter, Cannon discusses in detail the six ways of being religious, noting that there are healthy and degenerate expressions of each of the six ways. In chapter 4, he provides specific examples of the

¹³²Dale Cannon, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996).

¹³³*Ibid.*, xii.

various ways of being religious, noting that in a single religious tradition there may be multiple acceptable ways of being religious. In chapter 5, he discusses how to be empathetically objective when analyzing a tradition in light of the fact that there are variations in quality of practice of the six ways. In chapter 6, he discusses the advantages of using the framework, and how not to use the framework.¹³⁴ Finally, after six chapters of discussing methodology, Cannon begins to apply his framework.

Cannon concludes the text by applying his framework to specific religious traditions in a variety of ways. In chapter 7, he applies the framework to the whole of Buddhism. Through specific examples, he shows how Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vajrayana Buddhism may favor their own way of being religious, yet they all in a way allow for all six ways. In chapter 8, he applies the framework to the whole of Christianity, including discussions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. He concludes the chapter by showing how Buddhism and Christianity could be compared based upon the six ways of being religious. He concludes that Buddhism emphasizes mystical quest and reasoned inquiry, while Christianity emphasizes sacred rite and devotion as the ways to connect to ultimate reality. In the next six chapters Cannon compares one Buddhist example and one Christian example for each of the six ways of being religious, making evident the diversity within each tradition. To conclude, even though Cannon's approach to religion in *Six Ways of Being*

¹³⁴Cannon lists six advantages of using the framework: (1) helps avoid false or reductive generalizations; (2) helps one understand better the examples of any one way of being religious; (3) sorts out different sorts of religious differences; (4) suggests fruitful comparative studies in depth; (5) helps one recognize and appreciate genuine differences between religions, and avoid false misleading contrasts; (6) Opens up several promising lines of inquiry, including the study of nontraditional ways of being religious, philosophy of religion and religious philosophy, religious ethics and the ethics of religion, psychology of religion and religious formation, interfaith dialogue, and intrafaith dialogue. In addition to the advantages, he also warns of not misusing the framework. Do not take the categories to be more real than the concrete phenomena they are used to describe. Do not presume that with the framework you will be able to understand the phenomenon better than an insider. Do not ignore what does not fit into the categories. Do not theologize with the framework since not all of the "ways" are acceptable in a tradition based upon their official canon. Cannon, *Six Ways of Being Religious*, 147-59.

Religious could be criticized, he could never be accused of lacking methodological self-awareness.

In conclusion, comparative projects must have developed methodologies. Critics correctly rebuke comparativists who fail to specify their purpose and methodology. However, Ninian Smart, the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, William E. Paden, and Dale Cannon demonstrate that comparativists are much more methodologically self-aware than they once were. Their methods could be criticized, but they could not be accused of lacking a developed methodology.

Comparison Is Religiously Motivated

A fifth critique leveled against comparativists is that they are religiously motivated, and thus, they are not objective in their comparisons. For example, in *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* William E. Paden argues that in the West the comparative method has been mostly used in three ways: (1) to undermine Christianity's claim to uniqueness; (2) to defend Christianity's claim to uniqueness; (3) to prove that all religions are basically the same.¹³⁵ If Paden is correct, then comparativists in the West could be accused of using comparison not as a tool of investigation, but rather as a tool to support their own theological positions. Comparativists have been accused of being religiously motivated because they held one religion to be superior to others, or for being religious pluralists, or for simply believing in the existence of the supernatural.

The superiority of one religious tradition, especially Christianity. Some of the earliest comparativists carried out their work with the belief that Christianity was superior to other religions. Ninian Smart, although a proponent of the comparative method, admits that one of the negative connotations of "the comparative study of

¹³⁵Paden, *Religious Worlds*, ix.

religions” is that it is a conscious or subconscious means of expressing the superiority of Christianity over other religions.¹³⁶ In *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*, Carl Olson argues that Müller saw the comparative method as “a means of testing one’s faith and religion against others, and he was convinced that Christianity would win and demonstrate to everyone the unconscious progress that all faiths were making toward it.”¹³⁷ Rudolph Otto has been criticized on similar grounds for believing that Christianity was superior to all other religions because it best balanced the *tremendum* and *fascinans*.¹³⁸ Hillary Rodrigues and John H. Harding argue that Otto used the comparative method with “sympathetic and relatively open disposition,” but that he compromised “any sense of even-handed comparison” because he ultimately claimed that Christianity was a “uniquely superior religion.”¹³⁹ However, their critique does have its problems.

If a comparativist believes that a religious tradition (presumably his own) is superior to the one being compared, then he must certainly be more cautious when making comparisons since he might subconsciously present the other faith in a negative light. However, this need not be the case. If the comparativist is fully aware of the danger of distorting the data, then he might be able to minimize the problem. He might go to the other extreme and be overly critical of his own tradition in order to avoid being accused of favoring his own faith. Moreover, Rodrigues and Harding’s critique could be leveled against *anyone* using the comparative method. Everyone engaged in a comparative project comes to the data with a prevailing religious view. A comparativist may be an adherent of a religious tradition, or she may be a religious pluralist or even an

¹³⁶Smart, *Worldviews*, 20.

¹³⁷Olson, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*, 52.

¹³⁸Capps, *Religious Studies*, 23-24.

¹³⁹Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 79.

atheist. In any case, she would hold that her beliefs are in a sense “uniquely superior” to other beliefs; presumably, that is why she holds to the beliefs in the first place. Would her religious, pluralist or atheistic worldview exclude her from treating another religious tradition with fairness?

Rodrigues and Harding appear to be confusing believing that one religious tradition is superior, and setting out to prove that it is superior. A comparativist can believe that his tradition is superior to others and at the same time not make it his aim to prove it so. To the contrary, the comparativist may want to present the other religious tradition as fairly as possible since his goal is to present true statements about the tradition. The comparativists should be judged on the quality of his work itself and not on the beliefs he may have concerning the superiority of one religion over another. Frank Whaling makes an insightful comment concerning this topic. He argues that a comparativist’s personal faith commitment may actually serve to help him understand the religious commitments of those he is studying since he can empathize with them as a person of faith himself.¹⁴⁰

Rodrigues and Harding’s critique does carry more weight if it is directed toward comparativists who take an apologetic approach, especially those who compare their religious tradition with another religious tradition for the sole purpose of proving their faith to be superior. Apologists who engage in comparison are more likely to misunderstand the religious tradition they are trying to disprove. This may be because they are not interested in understanding the other faith in the first place or because they are only searching for data they may use against it. However, it would be unfair to assume that all apologists who engage in comparison do not care about accurately presenting the other faith. Apologists who desire to gain understanding of another faith and present it fairly must beware of judging the other faith by their own theological

¹⁴⁰Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 183.

values.¹⁴¹ To conclude, scholars of religion have criticized some comparativists for believing that their religious tradition is superior. Although there are pitfalls in comparison with this perspective, it does not follow that the comparativist would be incapable of a fair comparison, especially if she is not setting out to prove her faith superior.

Religious pluralism. In contrast to comparativists that believe in the superiority of their own religious tradition, other comparativists are religious pluralists. In other words, they hold all major world religions to be for the most part equally valid. In *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Walter H. Capps states that “the majority of the comprehensive comparativists approach the relationship between religions as being essentially friendly or benign.”¹⁴² That is, they do not see religions as being in competition, but rather complementary. Thus, critics have accused comparativists with a pluralist perspective of being religiously motivated; they are not making comparisons to learn about religions, but rather to prove their pluralist theology. Russell T. McCutcheon agrees with this critique and argues that much comparison seems more like theology of religious pluralism rather than the academic study of religion.¹⁴³ Similarly, in *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials*, Michael Pye points out that many scholars of religion critique comparativists who believe in a “deeper unity of all religions” since this position itself is a dogmatic/theological position.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, their comparative work at times seems just to be a substitute for

¹⁴¹Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” 183.

¹⁴²Capps, *Religious Studies*, 328.

¹⁴³Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105.

¹⁴⁴Michael Pye, *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 20.

theology.¹⁴⁵

In “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” Wesley J. Wildman points out one of the dangers of approaching comparison from a pluralistic perspective. In the article, he critiques a family of comparative approaches based on a “theological-mystical-metaphysical theory” for developing artificial categories of comparison based upon their own theological perspectives.¹⁴⁶ He states that this “theological-mystical-metaphysical theory” is evident in perennial philosophy.¹⁴⁷ For example, he points out how perennial philosophers posit a hierarchical ontology of the Great Chain of Being including the Godhead, God, intermediate beings, human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. He criticizes these categories for being “too neat” and “too unresponsive to criticism.”¹⁴⁸ In other words, their pluralistic theology keeps them from accurately understanding religions.

N. Ross Reat presents another common tendency pluralists may have when comparing religions. He argues that some comparativists ignore insider informants, and treat them as annoyances that threaten their schemes that demonstrate that all religions are just “variants upon deep-level themes of structures.”¹⁴⁹ This problem of ignoring the insider’s perspective is evident in the pluralist theory of John Hick.¹⁵⁰ Although Hick is

¹⁴⁵Pye, *Comparative Religion*, 20.

¹⁴⁶Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 96.

¹⁴⁷Wildman also identifies this type of “theological-mystical-metaphysical theory” in archetype and Jungian approaches of Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, and John Hick. Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 96.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Reat, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions,” 460.

¹⁵⁰For a closer look at Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, see John Hick, “Religious Pluralism,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. and Charles Taliaferro Quinn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 607-13; idem, “Religious Pluralism” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987); idem, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976); idem, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 1973); idem, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982); idem, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

not primarily a comparativist, his pluralist theory involves the comparison of religions. Thus, his theory reflects the tendency pluralists have of not taking an insider's perspective seriously since it most likely stands in opposition to their pluralistic theology.

For Hick, "All our concepts of God are 'images' of the infinite divine reality."¹⁵¹ Thus, Christ is the Christian image of God, Yahweh is the Jewish image of God, Krishna is a Hindu image of God, and so forth. He argues that these images are finite and culturally formed conceptions of "the divine reality that exceeds all human thought."¹⁵² Hick admits that the conflicting truth-claims between religious traditions present the most difficulty for the pluralist hypothesis.¹⁵³ In order to get around the problem of conflicting truth-claims, Hick is forced to reinterpret and mythologize the central truth claims of religious traditions. For instance, Hick contends that "Jesus is the concrete image of God through whom our worship is focused, and the idea of the Incarnation is an effective mythic expression of the appropriate attitude to him."¹⁵⁴ In other words, the doctrine of the incarnation is simply a useful myth that helps Christians to focus on God in an appropriate manner. Ronald Nash rightly points out that Hick's reduction of religious beliefs to myth is foreign to how insiders would understand their beliefs.¹⁵⁵ Hick is forced to assign a completely new meaning to the doctrines of the various world religions in order to make sense of their conflicting claims. Moreover, Winfried Corduan contends that to affirm that another religion's truth-claims are true, as Hick does, yet at the same time affirm that the claim actually has a higher meaning

¹⁵¹John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 1973), 178.

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 12:333.

¹⁵⁴Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 179.

¹⁵⁵Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 65.

behind it, does violence or trivializes the religion.¹⁵⁶ Because of his pluralist perspective, Hick must reinterpret the religious beliefs of the major world religions in such a way that they become foreign to the actual adherents of the religions.

To conclude, comparativists with a pluralistic theology have been accused of using comparison merely as a guise to promote their own pluralist theology, of applying artificial categories on religious traditions, and of ignoring the insider's perspective. Nevertheless, just as with comparativists who believe that one tradition is superior to another, pluralists are not condemned to misrepresenting religious traditions. If their desire is to prove their pluralist thesis then yes, they are more likely to misconstrue the data in their favor. However, if their intent is to attain accurate knowledge about religious traditions through comparison, then they are not bound to turn their comparative projects into personal theological treatises.

Assuming the existence of the supernatural. Another common critique against comparativists is that they incorrectly assume the existence of the supernatural and thus, are religiously motivated in their comparative work. For example, in *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Timothy Fitzgerald contends that comparativists like Max Müller, Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Ninian Smart all came from a similar theological position:

There is one Ultimate Reality, God or The Transcendent, who is ontologically outside of the world but who gives meaning and purpose to human relationships, to history, and to suffering. This one unconditioned reality makes itself known to human individuals in special kinds of experiences, refracted through their different languages, symbols, and cultural institutions, implanting in them an awareness of moral codes and an underlying purpose in human life.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads between Christianity & World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 145.

¹⁵⁷Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

Among comparativists, phenomenologists are especially castigated for assuming the reality of the supernatural. Critics argue that integral to phenomenological approaches is finding the essence of religion, which itself is based on the assumption that a unified human essence of religion actually exists.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, some critics argue that phenomenologists amount to defenders of religion.¹⁵⁹ Other critics go even further and accuse phenomenologists of not only defending religion in general, but specifically their own tradition. For example, Daniel L. Pals points out that many have accused Eliade of being “a Christian theologian- or even a missionary- in disguise.”¹⁶⁰ In line with this accusation, Ivan Strenski argues that Eliade’s comparisons between Christianity and “pagan” images was “meant to ground Christian spirituality in some trans-historic, or ‘ab-original,’ ‘archaic’ religiosity of great value,” therefore making it more credible.¹⁶¹ Space does not permit discussion of Eliade’s motivation, but the point remains that many have critiqued comparativists for being religiously motivated in their comparisons since they appear to assume the reality of the supernatural.

Russell T. McCutcheon’s *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* best exemplifies this critique. McCutcheon advocates an “increased naturalistic theorizing” of religion, meaning that religion should be analyzed just like every other facet of human life, and should not be treated as a unique area of study.¹⁶² He laments what he sees as a “widespread and virtually normative scholarly assumption that religion is *sui generis*, autonomous, strictly

¹⁵⁸Pye, *Comparative Religion*, 20; Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 3.

¹⁵⁹Whaling, *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, 20.

¹⁶⁰Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 189.

¹⁶¹Strenski, “The Only Kind of Comparison Worth Doing,” 277.

¹⁶²McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 25.

personal, essential, unique, prior to, and ultimately distinct from, all other facets of human life and interaction.”¹⁶³ He contends that based upon this underlying assumption, many scholars of religion use comparative religion to promote the thesis that there is a universal human religiosity.¹⁶⁴ As an example, he points to Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God: the 4000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, in which she clearly states that humans are *homo religiosus*.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, he argues that the same perspective is evident in the work of Eliade and Otto with their emphasis on the sacred and the holy, respectively.¹⁶⁶ McCutcheon ultimately rejects the *homo religiosus* thesis since he does not believe it takes into account atheists and agnostics.¹⁶⁷ In addition to the charge that many comparativists are religiously motivated, a plethora of additional critiques have surfaced due to postmodernism.

Comparison Is Not Possible: A Postmodern Critique

Postmodernism has brought with it a new series of objections against the comparative method. A universally agreed upon definition of postmodernism does not exist; however, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* Bernd Magnus provides a helpful definition of philosophical postmodernism:

Complex cluster concept that includes the following elements: an anti- (or post) epistemological standpoint; anti-essentialism; anti-realism; anti-foundationalism; opposition to transcendental arguments and transcendental standpoints; rejection of

¹⁶³McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 26. On the same topic, Fitzgerald argues that there is no “coherent non-theological basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline.” In other words, those who believe that religion should be studied as a unique phenomenon are necessarily theologically motivated. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 3.

¹⁶⁴McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 105.

¹⁶⁵Ibid. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993), xix.

¹⁶⁶McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 105.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

the picture of knowledge as accurate representation; rejection of truth as correspondence to reality; rejection of the very idea of canonical descriptions; rejection of final vocabularies, i.e. rejection of principles, distinctions, and descriptions that are thought to be unconditionally binding for all times, persons, and places; and a suspicion of grand narratives, metanarratives of the sort perhaps best illustrated by dialectic materialism.¹⁶⁸

The postmodern critique of the comparative method has been so keenly felt among comparativists that it has forced them to come together in defense of the comparative method. For example, in 2000, the University of California Press published *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, a collection of essays written by comparativists in defense of the comparative method in light of postmodernism.¹⁶⁹ The contributors to the text are aware of the mistakes of the past, but they still hold that if the comparative method is “contextualized and refashioned” it can still provide insight into religion, yet with the knowledge that comparison is the “scholar’s invention.”¹⁷⁰

In the introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, Kimberley C. Patton points to the work of Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) as being instrumental in the formation of postmodern thought and therefore, to the postmodern critique of the comparative method.¹⁷¹ Derrida argued that words are not connected to the real world, but are only a part of language games we play. In his essay “Différance,” he writes that “every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of difference.”¹⁷² If it is true that words only point to other words, then religion, which is

¹⁶⁸Bernd Magnus, “postmodern,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 725-26.

¹⁶⁹Kimberley and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*.

¹⁷⁰Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 157.

¹⁷¹Patton, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, 2.

¹⁷²Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Cahoone, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, vol. 2 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 230.

rooted in words, becomes a “discursive formation” rather than an “extra-linguistic phenomenon” to be studied.¹⁷³ Consequently, comparing religions becomes not only difficult, but impossible. If words are only a part of our language games, then any activity involving words, including comparison, are also disconnected from the real world. Consequently, comparing religions just becomes a language game that scholars choose to play, and thus, does not provide any real insight into religion itself.

Moreover, postmodern thinkers also contend that “everything is unique”; thus, making the comparative method meaningless.¹⁷⁴ Wildman calls this critique the “incommensurability objection” in which “we cannot assure ourselves that real commonality exists because intricate cultural embedding makes the ideas involved incommensurable.”¹⁷⁵ Since postmodernism is a critique of the “totalizing, rationalistic gaze” of Enlightenment humanism,¹⁷⁶ postmodern scholars naturally emphasize diversity and uniqueness of phenomena. Even comparativists, Patton and Ray, agree that postmodernism has taught us that we need to be careful with taking a “God’s-eye point of view – making totalizing claims and ‘finding’ universal sacred realities.”¹⁷⁷ In reaction to the postulation of metanarratives by modernists, postmodernists reject the idea of a unifying principle and call for an “infinite proliferation of images.”¹⁷⁸ Therefore, postmodernists contend that difference is what matters; each religious group is unique and cannot be compared to other groups. As Wendy Doniger states, “for postmodernism,

¹⁷³Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology,” 631-32.

¹⁷⁴Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Instructions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 105.

¹⁷⁵Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 88.

¹⁷⁶Patton and Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, 1.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷⁸Wendy Doniger, “Post-Modern and –Colonial –Structural Comparisons,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 69.

sameness is the devil, difference the angel.”¹⁷⁹

Moreover, due to postmodernism’s radical epistemological skepticism and anti-realism, postmodernism also attacks the two “undisputed (and central) players” of the old comparativism, namely, subject and object.¹⁸⁰ The radical skepticism of postmodernism which even calls into question the reality and distinction of subject and object clearly undermines the comparative method. Comparison becomes a meaningless activity if it is “impossible even to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened.”¹⁸¹ Moreover, postmodernism also rejects Enlightenment realism with the belief that there is “one objective description of reality independent of us observers,” and has replaced it with an antirealist position in which “all ideas are constructed and therefore historically, culturally, and linguistically contingent.”¹⁸² If postmodernism’s radical skepticism and antirealism are true, then using comparison to gain true knowledge about religious traditions is illusory.

Another postmodern critique is that individuals are unable to distance themselves from their biases and thus, are unable to make accurate comparisons. Herman W. Tull contends that comparison is “inherently a value laden enterprise; the process of sorting and classifying that are essential to it inevitably reflect the interpreter’s perspective, prejudices, and preferences.”¹⁸³ Since scholars of religion cannot be fully objective in their comparative projects, some postmodern critics argue that comparisons are not even possible and therefore, should be avoided. Moreover, bias rests not only in

¹⁷⁹Doniger, “Post-Modern and –Colonial –Structural Comparisons,” 69.

¹⁸⁰Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 154.

¹⁸¹Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences*, 105.

¹⁸²Edward Slingerland, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 5.

¹⁸³Herman W. Tull, “Comparative Method and the Question of Method: A Rapprochement of the Work of F. Max Müller,” in *The Comity and Grace of Method*, 43.

the individual comparativist, but also in the essential categories that she uses. Critics argue that even these categories are arbitrary and based upon personal bias. One could say that comparisons reveal more about the comparativist rather than the actual religious traditions being compared.

Comparativists have responded in a variety of ways to these postmodern critiques of the comparative method. Although postmodernists are correct in asserting that differences are critical in understanding a specific religious group, the conclusion that religious traditions are so different that they cannot be compared is unfounded. Wildman responds to this “incommensurability objection” in three ways.¹⁸⁴ First, he argues that the “biological structure of human life” provides a basis to speak of common features in human culture. Second, the fact that people may have multiple religious identifies, like being a Confucian Christian, shows that religious traditions are not incommensurable. Finally, he contends that what may be difficult to translate at one place or time may not be the case everywhere and all the time since language and cultures are always changing. What may be incommensurable today may not be so tomorrow.

Comparativists also respond to the postmodern critique by affirming the inevitability of comparison in the academic study of religion. Comparativists affirm that any study which uses language inevitably involves categories and comparison. For example, Wildman points out that even calling a particular religious activity a “ritual” or using words like “God” or “purity” involves classification which itself is built upon a comparative judgment of similarity.¹⁸⁵ Therefore, even though scholars of religion with a postmodern bent may attack the comparative method, they nonetheless use comparison all throughout their work.

In response to the bias critique, comparativists concede that all people,

¹⁸⁴Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 88.

¹⁸⁵Wildman, “On the Nature of Religion,” 204; Wesley J. Wildman, “Appendix A: On the Process of the Project During the Second Year,” in *Ultimate Realities*, 268.

including scholars of religion have biases. The question is whether biases make comparisons impossible. Tull admits that all comparison inevitably reflects “the interpreter’s perspective, prejudices, and preferences”; however, in defense of the comparative method, he points out that *all* scholarship “begins with expectation, presumption, or bias.”¹⁸⁶ In response to the bias critique, Wildman states that being fair or objective is relative, and that it can always be improved. He continues by pointing out that even in the natural sciences, where objectivity is expected, improvement of interpretations is valued, showing that objectivity is relative even in the natural sciences.¹⁸⁷ Ninian Smart provides a helpful response to the bias critique in his article on the “Comparative-Historical Method.”¹⁸⁸ First, he argues that objectivity is better described as “descriptive success.” The goal is not objectivity *per se*, but rather to successfully describe the religious belief or practice. Second, he concedes that complete objectivity is not possible, but it is possible to refrain from value judgments. Finally, he points out that the charge of bias has actually helped the field by encouraging scholars of religion to examine their assumptions and thus to “generate a new level of self-awareness.”

Comparativists have not only sought to respond to postmodern objections to the comparative method, but they have also mounted an attack against what they see as problems with postmodernism. In “Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion,” Kimberley C. Patton includes a scathing attack against some elements of postmodern thought. First, she critiques postmodernism for overemphasizing context. Yes, context is important in understanding religions, but there are also other elements that affect religions. For Patton, the postmodern approach is too simplistic and leaves each

¹⁸⁶Tull, “Comparative Method and the Question of Method,” 43-45.

¹⁸⁷Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 89.

¹⁸⁸Ninian Smart, “Comparative-Historical Method,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 3:572.

religion as a “windowless monad.”¹⁸⁹ Second, Patton criticizes postmodern scholars for spending too much time talking about scholarly prejudices. Patton states that postmodernists want scholars to end up just talking about themselves and their biases, making them “victims of a kind of narcissistic epigraphy that poses as methodological sophistication.”¹⁹⁰ Finally, Patton concludes that since postmodernism eschews metanarratives and ignores similarities, it is not suited to the study of religion since religions themselves seek to present a “totalizing worldview.”¹⁹¹

In his forward to *The Human Condition*, Peter L. Berger presents a similar critique to some elements of postmodern thought. He states that those who have given up the notion of objective truth have concluded that all that remains are personal narratives. This makes religions seem like some kind of “Leibnizian ‘monad,’ impenetrable to the outsider, sovereignly impermeable by generalizing concepts.”¹⁹² According to Berger, this postmodern epistemology encourages the insider to say that “nobody can speak for my people except me,” and for the specialist to say that “nobody understands my specialty except me—and I don’t have to listen to anyone outside of my specialty.”¹⁹³ Berger contends that this kind of extreme relativism does not lead to tolerance, but rather leads to a “peculiar fanaticism,” which can be either ideological and political, or more methodological, evident in those who deny tenure to those who disagree with them.¹⁹⁴ If

¹⁸⁹Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 163.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 166. Similarly, David Gordon White laments that the “talking about ourselves talking about other people” has turned into a “self-indulgent pursuit” in the academy. Scholars of religion should be about interpreting religion, not just “watching ourselves talking about talking about what we do.” David Gordon White, “The Scholar as Mythographer: Comparative Indo-European Myth and Postmodern Concerns,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 49-50.

¹⁹¹Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 168.

¹⁹²Peter L. Berger, foreword in *The Human Condition*, xiii.

¹⁹³Ibid., xiv.

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

ideas cannot be compared and evaluated then no “science” is possible, and all people can do is “talk at and past each other—until, frustrated by the exercise, we start bashing each other’s heads in.”¹⁹⁵

To conclude, today’s comparativists are well aware of the postmodern objections to the comparative method. They concede that scholars have biases and that complete objectivity is impossible. They agree that differences are important in the study of religion. However, they reject the radical skepticism of postmodern which makes comparison meaningless and thus, impossible. David Gordon White sums up the comparativist position when he states that comparative studies can “steer a middle course—between the universalism of our modernist forbears and the nihilism of certain of our postmodernist contemporaries—through the opening afforded by the cognitive activity of reading and interpretation.”¹⁹⁶

Comparison Is Oppressive: A Postcolonial Critique

Under the influence of postmodern thought, especially the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Jean-François Lyotard (1926-1998), many scholars of religion object to the comparative method because they believe that comparison is ultimately oppressive. In “Truth and Power,” Foucault presents the hypothesis that truth and power cannot be separated:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside of power, or lacking in power. . . . Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded values in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. . . . “Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.

¹⁹⁵Berger, foreword in *The Human Condition*, xiv.

¹⁹⁶White, “The Scholar as Mythographer,” 53.

A regime of truth.¹⁹⁷

Lyotard disdained metanarratives, and argued that they lead to terror. In his article “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” he writes,

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and sensible, for the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire of a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality.¹⁹⁸

The writings of Foucault and Lyotard have been influential in postcolonial and anti-orientalist thought, both of which have been highly critical of comparison. Ninian Smart recognizes that some critics see comparison as “odious, and redolent of whiffs of western imperialism and Christian superiority.”¹⁹⁹ Similarly, Wendy Doniger states that in today’s multinationalism it is seen as demeaning and a “reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude” to say that two phenomena in different cultures are “the same.”²⁰⁰ Moreover, Wesley J. Wildman points out how some scholars contend that the purpose of comparison is immoral since it is “an exercise of cultural power.”²⁰¹ Comparison is either a cultural force or at the least a “dangerous form of transformative praxis” since comparison changes those making the comparison and those being compared.²⁰² In addition, Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman state that many critics believe that comparison is a matter of the will and an exercise of power rather than

¹⁹⁷Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Cahoon, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, vol. 2 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 252-53.

¹⁹⁸Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 46.

¹⁹⁹Ninian Smart, “The Scientific Study of Religion in Its Plurality,” 183.

²⁰⁰Doniger, “Post-Modern and -Colonial - Structural Comparisons,” 64.

²⁰¹Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 89.

²⁰²Ibid.

cognition; therefore, comparison is considered a “blatantly political move to conform other cultures or religions to the agenda and categories of the comparers’ own, eventually to get all the religions compared to think of themselves in the comparers’ terms.”²⁰³

Based upon this understanding, comparison is not only impossible from a postmodern perspective, but is actually oppressive and immoral. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Russell T. McCutcheon’s *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* are poignant examples of the argument that much of western scholarship is oppressive.

Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, best reflects this postcolonial and anti-orientalist critique of western scholars of religion, many of which used the comparative method. Said analyzes texts from western literature that discuss “the Orient,” arguing that the West has sought to dominate and control “the Orient.” Said defines Orientalism as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident,’ and as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”²⁰⁴ Moreover, he argues that Orientalism dehumanizes the “Oriental” and places the West on top as teacher, leader and dominator. Orientalists do not allow the Orient to speak for itself nor do they believe that the Orient can change. According to Said, the “logical conclusion to Orientalist thought” is to know the Orient, then invade and possess it, and then re-create it in away that justifies the West’s right to judge and rule of the “Oriental.”²⁰⁵

Influenced by Said and Foucault, Russell T. McCutcheon argues in *Manufacturing Religion* that there is an “imperial dynamic” in much of religious studies

²⁰³Neville, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” 187.

²⁰⁴Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th ann. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 2-3.

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 91-92.

since “knowledge and power are never far from one another.”²⁰⁶ In support of his position, McCutcheon refers the reader to Huston Smith’s *The World’s Religions*.²⁰⁷ McCutcheon criticizes Smith’s “rhetoric of traditionalism.” He argues that Smith’s use of the term “tradition” creates a “stereotyped native who is distinct from, and less than, the modern rational and individualistic Western human being.” To make his point, McCutcheon turns to Smith’s discussion of Confucianism in which Smith describes the “tradition-bound life of tribal societies.”²⁰⁸ Smith discusses how early Chinese society had been tradition bound, exemplified by the account of the woman who burned to death in a palace because she “refused to violate convention” and leave the house without a chaperon. Smith proceeds to discuss China’s “social evolution,” from “social convention” and group consciousness to “reason” and self-consciousness. Smith appears to be stating that individualism and self-consciousness are principles of more developed human societies. McCutcheon criticizes Smith for portraying Chinese culture as evolving to the “liberal ideal of individual freedom, rationality, and self-consciousness” leading to a portrayal of “them in opposition to an us.” McCutcheon argues that by using the term “traditional” Smith is preparing the road for “domestication and subsequently for their domination, all of which is conceived/camouflages as their natural evolution to becomes like us.” He concludes that making a distinction between the “modern” and the “tradition-bound tribe” is a tool to “ensure that one group remains the possessors.”²⁰⁹

Edward Said and Russell T. McCutcheon do make some valid points.

²⁰⁶ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 158, 181.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 177-81.

²⁰⁸ For Smith’s discussion of Confucianism and tradition under investigation here, see Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 161-63.

²⁰⁹ Similarly, David Chidester states that one of the characteristic of early comparative religion was to focus on noting the distance and difference between the civilized and the barbarian, savage and primitive, exemplified in Müller and Tylor. David Chidester, “Colonialism,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 430.

Throughout history, people have used knowledge to oppress others. Even scholarly research can be used to promote oppressive and immoral ideas. Many western scholars have misunderstood and misrepresented “the Orient,” often for self-serving reasons. Nevertheless, Said and McCutcheon’s critiques fail to show that comparison is inevitably oppressive or immoral. Intellectuals, like everyone else, are affected by their worldview; however, this does not mean that they are “slaves to their political, racial, class, and gender preferences”²¹⁰ to such a degree that when they compare they are inevitably doing something oppressive. Comparison can be oppressive, but it is not necessarily so.

Comparativists have provided a formidable response to the objection that comparison is oppressive. In her essay, “Juggling Torches,” Kimberley Patton argues that postmodernism is in essence a reaction and not an argument.²¹¹ She states that it is a reaction to “the fascism and genocidal thinking of its generation” and characterizes it as a “traumatized polemic.” She rejects postmodernism’s premise that “comparison kills before it even begins,” and that all metanarratives are potential weapons of destruction. Moreover, she criticizes the Foucaultian assumption that religion is really about power since it determines what is included and who is excluded, how and for what reasons. She argues that the Foucaultian position is self-contradictory and arrogant because on the one hand it claims to be concerned with context, but on the other hand it disenfranchises religious insiders by ignoring their interpretation of the religion and imposing a “political explanation.”

In his essay, “Methodology, Comparisons, and Truth,” Huston Smith provides a response to Lyotard’s premise that all metanarratives, which involve comparison, lead to oppressive totalism.²¹² He states that Lyotard’s “uncompromising dichotomy” that he

²¹⁰Sharma, “Towards a Post-Colonial Comparative Religion?,” 229.

²¹¹Patton, “Juggling Torches,” 153-71.

²¹²Huston Smith, “Methodology, Comparisons, and Truth,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 172-81.

sets up between wholes and parts is unconvincing. Smith contends that Lyotard is attacking a caricature by depicting those who disagree with him as believing that they can “jump out of their skin,” or have a “God’s eye view.” He concedes that having a “God’s eye view” is impossible; nevertheless, “Reality’s outlines” are still identifiable. Smith also points out that metanarratives do not necessarily lead to terror and violence since respect for the rights of others can be part of the metanarrative. Smith concludes his critique of Lyotard with the following poignant line: “Lyotard drags in Hegel for his whipping boy; but is the line from Hegel-the-lumper to Naziism any straighter than the line that runs from Nietzsche-the-splitter to that *dénouement*?” In other words, a worldview’s emphasis on either the One or the Many does not make it necessarily more violent; what matters is the moral fabric of the worldview.

In addition to critiquing Foucault and Lyotard, comparativists have also had to respond to postcolonialism and anti-orientalism. Wendy Doniger responds to these perspectives in her article “Post-modern and -colonial - structural Comparisons.”²¹³ In the article, she laments that the academy “suffers from a post colonial backlash” brought about by Said’s *Orientalism*. Although she sees problems with the postcolonial critique, she is not unaware of how it has helped the academy. For example, she commends the postcolonial critique for pointing out how early comparativists assumed evolutionist ideas, reminding scholars of religion that they need to overcome these assumptions. She also points out that it has given scholars “heightened awareness of what we are doing, why, and the dangers involved.” However, according to Doniger, to say that Westerners cannot study other religions is taking the issue too far. For instance, she asks, if Westerners cannot use Indian texts then what are they supposed to do with them? Ignore them? Scorn them? Which is better? Rather than being oppressive, Doniger contends that comparisons actually serve as “ghetto-blasters” since it exposes people and ideologies to

²¹³Doniger, “Post-Modern and -Colonial - Structural Comparisons,” 63-74.

diverse people and ideologies, and therefore, prevents cultures and peoples from being insular and isolated.

Arvind Sharma, in his essay, “Towards a Post-Colonial Comparative Religion? Comparing Hinduism and Islam as Orientalist Constructions,” also provides a response to postcolonial thought.²¹⁴ First, he points out the irony that postcolonial thought, which is critical of Western scholarship, is itself a Western fabrication. Second, he makes note that although Said and others desire to defend peoples from western imposition, their own secular humanism stands in opposition to the values of those they are trying to defend. Finally, he critiques them for asserting that no knowledge is “apolitical” and “disinterested” yet at the same time not thinking that this may apply to their own position. A quick look at Doniger and Sharma reveals some of the responses comparativists have given to their postcolonial critics.

To conclude, the works of Foucault, Lyotard, and Said have provided a formidable problem for comparativists. If studying and comparing religions is oppressive and imperialistic, who would want to embark in such a project? Comparativists have responded by recognizing the validity of some of the objections, but remaining opposed to the thesis that comparison is necessarily oppressive. Hugh Nicholson reflects the current comparativist position when he argues that the act of acknowledging the “perspectival character” in comparing religious tradition “seems to be the antidote to the kind of imperialism exemplified by the older comparative method.”²¹⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the comparative method has been a key player in the academic study of religion, it has received its fair share of criticism. The comparative

²¹⁴Sharma, “Towards a Post-Colonial Comparative Religion?,” 221-34.

²¹⁵Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology,” 636.

method was instrumental in the origin of the academic study of religion, evident in Max Müller, E. B. Tylor and James Frazer. Moreover, as the field matured, and the focus shifted from the accumulation of religious data to the development of methodology, the comparative method remained important to the field, albeit in a modified form. The comparative projects of Max Webber and Mircea Eliade are important examples of how comparison was used during the time period when specific methodologies of inquiry in the study of religion were being developed. Finally, towards the end of twentieth century, influenced by postmodern skepticism and in reaction to Orientalism, motive became an issue of prime importance. Ninian Smart's comparative approach and the Comparative Religious Ideas Project exemplify this new breed of self-critical and self-aware comparativists. Comparativists are aware now more than ever that the issues of method and motive cannot be ignored in any comparative project. Comparativists must be aware not only of the benefits of comparison, but also the many pitfalls that await the comparativist. Wendy Doniger, a proponent of the comparative method, eloquently states that "there are sharks in the waters of comparison, but now that we know they're there, we can swim – a bit more cautious, perhaps."²¹⁶

A variety of objections have been raised against the comparative method. The earliest comparativists were rightly accused of erroneously assuming an evolution of religion. Moreover, some comparativists have been rightly accused of ignoring the context of examples used, ignoring differences between religious traditions, and for not having a developed methodology of comparison. Critics have also accused comparativists of being religiously motivated in their comparisons thus, calling into question whether they are using comparison to gain insight into religion or just to prove their theological position. Although it is true that some comparativists may use comparison just to advocate their theological position, it does not follow that all

²¹⁶Doniger, "Post-Modern and -Colonial - Structural Comparisons," 67.

comparativists are bound to this error. Comparativists must be judged on the fruit of their labor, not simply on the worldview with which they approach the religious traditions. Finally, postmodernism has brought about two substantial objections to the comparative method. Some postmodernist critics argue that comparison is not even possible, while others argue that comparison is ultimately oppressive and immoral. Any well-developed methodology of comparison must take into account the varied objections raised against comparison. Now that the history of the comparative method as well as the various objections raised against it have been covered, we can now turn to the dissertation's proposed methodology of comparison with its accompanying case study.

CHAPTER 3

A PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR COMPARING RELIGIONS

This dissertation will seek to demonstrate that the comparative method is a valuable tool in the study of religions and thus, can be of service to Christian missions. More specifically, comparison can help Evangelicals contextualize the gospel since it encourages them to exegete the three cultures of David J. Hesselgrave’s “three-culture model of missionary communication”: the communicator’s culture, the biblical culture, and the respondent culture. Gospel communicators who are self-reflective about their own religious beliefs and practices, who are willing to take the time to study the Scriptures, and who have an in-depth understanding of the respondent religious worldview are best suited to contextualize the gospel effectively.¹ This dissertation will seek to demonstrate the missiological value of the comparative method through a proposed method of comparison and case study, namely, a comparison of the Sunni and Reformed understandings of suffering. However, before delving into the proposed method of comparison and the case study, it is imperative to demonstrate that the proposed method of comparison takes into account the most substantial objections to the comparative method.

¹Similarly, Anthony J. Blasi argues that “people who have more nuanced understandings of their own commitments operate on an everyday basis with a more refined mode of thinking about commitments generally, much in the same way that people who are theologically learned about their own tradition tend to appreciate more adequately other traditions.” Anthony J. Blasi, “Comparison as a Theoretical Exercise,” in *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* ed. Brian C. Wilson, Thomas Athanasius Idinopulos, and James Constantine Hanges, Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions, vol. 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 11. Therefore, Christians who are self-reflective about their commitments, and devote time to studying their own faith and the Scriptures will be able to empathize with those of other faiths, which is critical for contextualization.

Responding to Objections

Any proposed method of comparison must take into account the various objections that have been raised against the comparative method. One possible objection not discussed in the previous chapter that cannot be ignored is that some Evangelicals might contend that the field of comparative religions inevitably forces Christians to compromise biblical doctrine. Evangelical Christians are wise to be cautious since comparative religion has been heavily influenced by liberal Christian theology. The founding fathers of comparative religion like Friedrich Max Müller and James G. Frazer were theological liberals, and other important comparativists, like Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), Gerardus van de Leeuw (1890-1950), Joachim Wach (1898-1955), and Joseph M. Kitagawa (1915-1992), reveal a “liberal non-sectarian theology.”² The relationship between comparative religion and liberal theology has been so strong that Eric Sharpe argues that “as a matter of fact, comparative religion has done at least as much to shape liberal Christianity as the reverse.”³ Similarly, in his article “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” Hugh Nicholson argues that the entire comparative religion enterprise is a theological liberal project:

Many previous attempts to demarcate the science of religion from recognized forms of theological discourse, from the comparative theology of the nineteenth century to the phenomenology of religion to comparative religion of the twentieth, now appear as successive moments with the large liberal theological project of liberating the discourse on religion from dogmatism and exclusion, in short, from the political.⁴

The link between comparative religion and liberal theology is unquestionable; however, just because the founders of comparative religion were theologically liberal, it does not follow that Evangelical comparativists must compromise biblical doctrine.

²Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 252; Hugh Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 616; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36.

³Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 295.

⁴Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology,” 616.

Evangelicals who use the comparative method do not have to give up their biblical convictions, nor do they have to become “comparatively religious” as some have humorously commented.⁵

Critics may respond by arguing that Evangelicals who engage in comparative religions may be able to remain orthodox for a while, but that in time, they will inevitably compromise their theological convictions. For example, in “Evangelicals and the Comparative Study of Religion” Larry Poston argues that Evangelical Christians must adapt their theology, especially their exclusivistic soteriology, if they desire to be involved in the academic study of religion.⁶ He argues that Evangelical Christians are in a “quandary” since they want to remain theologically conservative, and at the same time want “credibility and respectability within the academic community at large.” In support of his argument, he presents four theological positions that he argues Evangelical Christians have developed to lessen tension within the academy, especially concerning the traditional belief of eternal conscious punishment in hell. First, he points out that some Evangelicals end up holding the position that “God extends salvation to any who sincerely respond to whatever spiritual knowledge they have.” Second, he states that some Evangelicals contend that there might be the possibility of hearing the gospel after death. Third, he mentions that others have adopted the belief in annihilationism in place of the traditional belief in eternal punishment. Finally, he states that some have continued to defend the exclusivist position by “emphasizing the reformed doctrines of election and predestination.” He explains that from this perspective, God is not obligated

⁵Ivan Strenski states that Ninian Smart often would joke, half seriously, that the “comparative study of religion tends to make one comparatively religious.” Ivan Strenski, “The Only Kind of Comparison Worth Doing: History, Epistemology, and the ‘Strong Program’ of Comparative Study,” in *Comparing Religions*, 276.

⁶Larry Poston, “Evangelicals and the Comparative Study of Religion,” in *The Comity and Grace of Method: Essays in Honor of Edmund F. Perry*, ed. Thomas Ryba, George D. Bond, and Herman Tull (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 184-97.

to offer salvation to all since all have rebelled with the general revelation they have received. Thus, people are condemned for rebelling against God by doing what they know is wrong in their conscience; no one is judged for their ignorance of the gospel. He concludes that the Reformed position is unconvincing:

While some non-evangelicals may appreciate the consistency of this position, the majority will reject it on the basis of its definition of justice according to a literalist interpretation of Pauline theology. Paul may have believed that these precepts are essentially just, but they do not fit the modern parameters for that term.⁷

Space does not permit discussion of Poston's reflection on the four trends he identifies; however, his overall argument does deserve attention. It appears that Poston confuses the ability to do quality scholarly work with the ability to gain the approval of the academy. If the ultimate goal of an Evangelical scholar of religion is to gain the "credibility and respectability within the academic community at large" then yes, she is likely to compromise her theology. However, if the goal of an Evangelical scholar of religion is to understand another religious tradition, then it should not matter if the academic community approves of her soteriology. Scholars of religion should be judged on their ability to attain accurate knowledge about religions, not whether their religious worldview corresponds with that of the majority of scholars of religion.⁸

⁷Poston, "Evangelicals and the Comparative Study of Religion," 190-91.

⁸In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga demonstrates that just because people reject Christian exclusivism, it does not mean that Christians are unwarranted in holding their belief. He points out that many accuse exclusivists of arrogance and self-serving arbitrariness. In response, he argues that this charge is a "philosophical tar baby" since critics could be accused of the same arrogance since they hold their position as right and those who disagree as wrong. Moreover, he shows that exclusivists have three options: (1) continue to hold their belief; (2) reject their belief and hold the opposite; (3) become agnostic about the issue, neither accepting nor rejecting exclusivism. Option two is not an option unless exclusivists come across strong enough defeaters to convince them to give up their belief. Option three may appear less arrogant, but it is essentially the same since "I am implicitly saying that my attitude is the superior one; I think my course of action here is the right one and yours somehow wrong, inadequate, or unfounded, in the circumstances at best second-rate." This leaves exclusivists with option one. Therefore, exclusivists are warranted in holding their position. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 437-57.

To conclude, Evangelical Christians can engage in comparative religion without giving up their orthodoxy. Although many in the field, past and present, have been theologically liberal Christians, pluralists, or secularists, it does not follow that Evangelicals should reject the comparative method altogether. As this dissertation seeks to demonstrate, the comparative approach in the study of religion can and should be used by Evangelicals in service of Christian missions. In addition to dealing with this possible Evangelical objection to the comparative method it is imperative to demonstrate that this dissertation's proposed method of comparison has interacted with the history of the comparative method and the various objections raised against comparison.

History has shown that scholars of religion have used comparison in a variety of ways and for various purposes. Some comparative methodologies are worthy of imitation while others should be avoided altogether. If anything, a look at the three historical stages of the academic study of religion has shown that a comparativist must have accurate data about the religions being compared, have a developed methodology, and be self-reflective about his motivation in comparing religions. Part of having a developed methodology involves avoiding some of the problems found in previous comparative methodologies. Consequently, before discussing the details of the proposed method of comparison it is important to note how it responds to the various objections critics have raised against the comparative method.

The previous chapter discussed seven of the more substantial criticisms of the comparative method. The earliest comparativists were rightly accused of erroneously assuming an evolution of religion. Moreover, some comparativists have been rightly accused of ignoring the context of examples used, ignoring differences between religious traditions, and for not having a developed methodology of comparison. Critics have also accused comparativists of being religiously motivated in their comparisons thus, calling into question whether they are using comparison to gain insight into religions or just to prove their theological position. Finally, under the influence of postmodern thought,

some critics have argued that comparison is not even possible, while others argue that comparison is ultimately oppressive. Some of these objections deserve more attention than others.

First of all, the evolutionary theory of religion has been disproven and does not accord with scriptural teaching. Therefore, the theory has no part in this dissertation's proposed method of comparison or case study. Second, since a large portion of the dissertation is devoted to a proposed method of comparison critics cannot accuse the comparison of lacking a methodology. The reader may at the end disagree with elements of the methodology, but not its existence.

Third, the postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the comparative method can also be set aside. Postmodernism correctly criticizes the overly optimistic view of human reason by pointing out that humans are epistemologically limited. This critique of human reason accords with the biblical teaching that humans are finite and that their cognitive faculties have been affected by the Fall. However, postmodernism's radical epistemological skepticism, moral relativism, rejection of metanarratives and objective truth conflict too much with scriptural teaching to make it a viable option for Evangelical Christians.⁹ This Evangelical rejection of postmodernism's epistemological skepticism is actually in line with the majority of scholars of religion. In his article, "Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion," Edward Slingerland states that the majority of scholars of religion hold to a method he calls "embodied realism," which is a middle ground position between the two extremes of "Enlightenment realism

⁹For some Evangelical Christian discussions of postmodernism, see Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 130-53; Kenneth Richard Samples, *A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 219-31; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 422-37.

and postmodern anti-realism.”¹⁰ In other words, Evangelical apprehension towards postmodern thought is not unique to them, but can be found within the field of religious studies itself.

In a similar way, the postcolonial critique correctly points out that much of Western scholarship has misrepresented the “Orient,” and that knowledge can be used to oppress others. However, to say that comparison is inevitably oppressive is an overstatement. Comparison can be oppressive, but it does not have to be. The postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the comparative method do have some merit, but the views that comparison is not possible or that it is ultimately oppressive are unconvincing.

Another important objection to the comparative method to consider is that comparativists are religiously motivated and thus, are more concerned with proving their theological position rather than gaining insight into another religious tradition. This objection is especially applicable to this dissertation since it is written from an Evangelical Christian perspective with the goal of demonstrating that the comparative method in the study of religion can be a valuable missiological tool. Therefore, this dissertation is clearly religiously motivated. However, does this mean that this dissertation’s comparative project is doomed to misrepresent the Sunni worldview? Comparativists have been accused of misrepresenting other religions in order to prove the superiority of their tradition, to prove their pluralist theology, or to prove the *homo religiosus* thesis. None of these three accusations apply to this dissertation’s proposed method of comparison or case study. Obviously, the pluralist hypothesis will not be argued for in this dissertation. Even though this dissertation’s comparativist believes that salvation is found in Christ alone, and agrees with the *homo religiosus* thesis, the goal of

¹⁰Edward Slingerland, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 1, 5.

the dissertation is not to prove these theological positions. Rather, one of the goals in the comparison is to gain greater insight into the Sunni worldview in order to equip Christians to better communicate the gospel to Sunni Muslims. Misrepresenting the Sunni worldview would only work against the stated purpose of the comparison. By the end of the dissertation, the reader can judge if religious motivations negatively affected the comparative project.

Finally, critics have rightly accused some comparativists of ignoring the context of religions compared, and of ignoring differences between religious traditions. This methodology may be useful to comparativists who want to argue for the evolution of religion or the universality of the sacred or some pluralistic thesis, but it does not suit the purposes of this dissertation. Since one of the goals of the dissertation is to gain a deeper understanding of the Sunni worldview it is imperative that it is understood in its own terms, and that both similarities and differences be identified. Ignoring the context or differences between the Sunni and Reformed worldviews would give an incomplete picture of each tradition. Therefore, this dissertation's proposed methodology for comparing religions will place special emphasis on understanding both traditions in their own terms, and in noting both similarities and differences. Now that the major objections to the comparative method have been covered, we can now turn to the proposed method of comparison.

The Methodology

Comparative projects must rest upon a well-developed methodology for comparing religions since “comparisons are not to be trusted without a justified second-order reflection on the nature of comparison.”¹¹ Unfortunately, the majority of Evangelical works that compare Christianity with other religions fail to make explicit

¹¹Robert C. Neville, preface to *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xv.

their method of comparison. This dissertation's proposed methodology for comparing religions seeks to speak into this void. Consequently, this dissertation's method for comparing religions is written primarily for Evangelicals, although it could be useful to those outside of the Evangelical community. More specifically, this comparative method is meant to assist evangelicals in contextualizing the gospel as it encourages them to exegete themselves, the Scriptures, and the respondent worldview. In light of this purpose, the proposed method of comparison is intended for those who want to gain greater insight into another religious worldview.

In order to gain greater insight into another religious worldview, this dissertation's proposed method of comparison calls for a thematic comparison of a determined topic as found in the most authoritative religious texts of two different religious traditions. The comparison begins with the comparativist making public his perspective, purpose, and motivation behind making the comparison. Next, the comparativist must explain her reasoning behind the religious traditions, sacred texts, and topic of comparison selected. Before analyzing the selected sacred texts, the comparativist must also include a brief overview of the religious worldview of the two traditions under study in order to set a context for the comparison. After analyzing the sacred texts from each tradition in their own terms, the comparativist presents *both* similarities and differences between the texts, highlighting insights gained through the comparison. An important component to the methodology is trying to gain an insider perspective, both in the overview of the worldview and in the analysis of the religious texts. The goal is to present both as if one were an insider. This approach is especially valuable since the goal is to better understand the religious worldview of insiders. Finally, the comparativist concludes by presenting some missiological implications that emerged from the comparison. Through this methodology of comparison, the hope is that all three "cultures" are exegeted, namely, the comparativist's culture, the biblical culture, and the respondent culture are exegeted.

Perspective, Purpose, and Motivation

Comparativists should begin their comparative projects making explicit their religious perspective, purpose, and motivation behind the comparison. In the past, it was assumed that scholars of religion could study other religions with complete objectivity and free from any biases. However, due to the influence of postmodernism, most scholars of religion no longer hold this position.¹² Even in 1959, Wilfred Cantwell Smith could state that it was no longer an expectation for scholars of religion to have no faith of their own and to be purely scientific.¹³ Today's scholars of religion, especially comparativists, realize that their own faiths or lack thereof do play a role in their work. For example, Diana Eck argues that the study of religion is not just the study of other faiths, but is actually a "continued reflection on the personal, religious, or intellectual presuppositions that shape the intention and direction" of the scholar's study.¹⁴ Consequently, Eck states that expecting completely objective scholarship is "intellectually naïve."¹⁵

Because of this reality, comparativists need to be self-aware and present their religious perspective from the very start of their comparative project. Jonathan Z. Smith argues that since "religion" is in the mind of the scholar of religion, he needs to be "relentlessly self-conscious."¹⁶ In "Questions of Judgment in Comparative Religious

¹²Hillary Rodrigues and John S. Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 138.

¹³Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 45.

¹⁴Diana L. Eck, "Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 140.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

Studies,” George Weckman points out that since all comparisons involve the comparativist’s own beliefs and values, he must be reflective and self-aware, aiming for “relative objectivity.”¹⁷ Similarly, David Cave describes comparison in the study of religion as a “participatory exercise” since it inevitably involves one’s own beliefs.¹⁸ Students of religion cannot fully detach themselves from their own religious beliefs as they engage in comparison.

In “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” Wesley J. Wildman provides a helpful analysis of the comparativist’s epistemic limitations.¹⁹ He states that the comparativist has “only partially conscious interest,” an incomplete knowledge of the world, and a capacity to interpret data to “bring comfort and assurance that the ‘other’ is comprehensible and controllable rather than terrifying.” Therefore, he argues that comparativists must be aware of the “over-active human imagination” in order to minimize the effects of their biases and presuppositions. Being aware of one’s biases in order to avoid “superficial and inappropriate judgments” is especially critical for evangelical Christians since they believe that “over and above all religions there is a knowable, divinely ordained revelation on the basis of which one may assess all religion.”²⁰ However, self-awareness is not enough; comparativists must also make their beliefs known. N. Ross Reat goes so far as to argue that comparativists

¹⁷George Weckman, “Questions of Judgment in Comparative Religious Studies,” in *Comparing Religions*, 17-26.

¹⁸David Cave, “The Role of the Authoritative in the Comparative Process,” in *Comparing Religions*, 35.

¹⁹Wesley J. Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” in *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* ed. Thomas Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 88.

²⁰Charles R. Taber, *To Understand the World, to Save the World: The Interface between Missiology and the Social Sciences* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 90.

cannot “function adequately in religious studies” unless they make their beliefs public.²¹ To conclude, comparativists who truly desire to gain greater understanding of another religious tradition must be self-reflective, make their own beliefs public, and assess how their beliefs may affect their comparisons.

In addition to reflecting on and making known their religious perspective, comparativists should also reflect on and make known their purpose and motivation behind their comparative project. One of the worst mistakes a comparativist can make is to be unaware or assume his purpose and motivation in making his comparisons as if they were obvious to all. Without a well thought out, and clearly stated purpose and motivation, the comparativist may flounder in his comparative efforts. Even worse, he may unintentionally have a subconscious motivation or purpose which may hinder his ability to gain greater insight into the religious worldview under study. For example, the evangelical comparativist may want to gain greater insight into the Thai Buddhist worldview in order to communicate the gospel more effectively, but this may be diverted by a subconscious inclination to prove Christianity superior to Theravada Buddhism. This apologetic approach will most likely interfere with gaining an accurate understanding of the Thai Buddhist worldview. Evangelical comparativists, if their desire is to gain greater insight into another religious worldview, should stay away from the tendency to want to disprove other faiths. Herman Tull correctly points out that the history of religious studies has shown that studying other faith is an “undertaking fraught with methodological pitfalls” because many who have used the comparative method “seem to have done so with certain expectations of what they will achieve, and these expectations have inevitably tempered the results.”²² By thinking through their religious

²¹N. Ross Reat, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983): 470.

²²Herman Tull, “Comparative Method and the Question of Method: A Rapprochement of the Work of F. Max Müller,” in *The Comity and Grace of Method*, 42.

perspective, purpose, and motivation in comparing Christianity with other faiths, evangelical comparativists begin the process of exegeting their own personal “culture” and set the groundwork for correctly exegeting another’s religious worldview.

Traditions, Topics, and Texts

This dissertation’s proposed method of comparison calls for a thematic comparison of one specified topic within the most authoritative sacred texts of two religious traditions. One of the weaknesses of some of the earliest comparativists was that they were too ambitious. They compared too many religious traditions at the same time or if they limited the number of religions, they compared far too many aspects of the traditions. In *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials*, Michael Pye correctly points out that “it is difficult if not impossible to line up several religions which are similar in all important respects, or even to compare all relevant religions in certain respects.”²³ The broad comparative approach of earlier comparativists can too easily lead to superficiality and overgeneralizations. In order to avoid these pitfalls, and in order to devote enough time and energy to the religious traditions being investigated, it is best to delimit the comparison to two religious traditions within larger religious bodies. Even trying to compare two larger religious bodies like Christianity and Hinduism is almost impossible since there is such diversity within each of these world religions. Almost any comparison made would have to be qualified in some way. Moreover, practically speaking, missionaries are not trying to reach Buddhists or Muslims or Hindus, rather they are trying to reach Theravada Buddhists or Sunni Muslims or Vaishnavites. Therefore, limiting comparisons to specific traditions is of greater practical *and* missiological value.

²³Michael Pye, *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 22. Pye divides religious data into four quadrants, including religious concepts, religious states of mind, religious action, and religious groups. He advocates comparing a narrower topic within one of the four quadrants.

In addition to delimiting the comparison to two religious traditions, it is also important to delimit the topic within the traditions that will be compared. For instance, instead of comparing every aspect of the Evangelical Christian worldview with every aspect of the Theravada Buddhist worldview, the comparativist should select a specific topic like prayer, art, sacred texts, marriage, and so on. This type of thematic approach is a modified version of what Eric Sharpe calls, “selective phenomenology,”²⁴ in which a religious phenomenon is traced through various religions without regard to the issue of essence as in the traditional phenomenological approach. This type of thematic comparison is evident in the work of comparativists like S. G. F. Brandon (1907-1971), Geoffrey Parrinder (1910-2005), and John W. Bowker (1935-).²⁵ This dissertation’s proposed method of comparison takes a similar approach, but instead of tracing a topic through various religious traditions it is restricted to two traditions. Limiting the comparison to two traditions allows for more in-depth analysis, and better reflects the reality that missionaries are usually attempting to reach adherents of one religious tradition at a time.

As with their perspective, purpose, and motivation, comparativists must also be self-critical concerning their selected topic of comparison. Since the topic chosen is not self-evident, the comparativist must explain why he chose the topic, and also discuss

²⁴Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 246.

²⁵S. G. F. Brandon was among the first to write “comparative monographs” in which he picked a theme and compared it among various religions. He wrote about time and history in *Time and Mankind* (1951), *Man and His Destiny on the Great Religions* (1962), and *History, Time and Deity* (1965). According to Whaling, Parrinder is “by far the most prolific contributor to this type of religious comparison.” His comparative works include *Witchcraft: European and African* (1958, 1963), *Worship in the World’s Religions* (1961, 1974), *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World’s Religions* (1970, 1996), *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (1976), *Sex in the World’s Religions* (1980; *Sexual Morality in the World’s Religions*, 1996). Bowker’s *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (1970) also exemplifies this comparative methodology. For the most part, these authors avoided value judgments and were not out to prove any theological, typological or structural thesis. Their goal was to compare objectively, but also sympathetically. Frank Whaling, “Comparative Approaches,” in *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Frank Whaling, vol. 1, *The Humanities, Religion and Reason* 27 (Berlin: Mouton, 1983), 239, 257-61.

any possible objections to it. There are a few points that need to be considered when selecting a topic of comparison. First, it should be noted that not all topics are of equal value since some topics may be more central to the religious worldview than others. Topics closer to the heart of the religious worldview being investigated will inevitably provide greater insight into the worldview. Second, the topic chosen should not be too vague or too specific, tying it to a specific tradition.²⁶ If a topic is too dependent on a specific tradition, then it will most likely be artificially imposed on the other tradition in the comparison. For example, based upon these principles, the Comparative Religious Ideas Project selected the flexible topics of the human condition, ultimate reality, and religious truth, and traced them through various major world religions. These topics are specific enough to allow an actual comparison, but they are vague enough to allow each tradition to speak for itself. To conclude, comparativists should reflect on and make known the issues related to the topic chosen.²⁷

In addition to limiting the comparison to two traditions and to one topic, it is also crucial to further delimit the comparison by selecting the religious data that will be used in the comparison. The amount of religious data that can be collected is so vast that it seems impossible to make generalizations;²⁸ limiting the amount of religious data used can help minimize the overwhelming task. If a comparativist chose to compare the evangelical Christian and Theravada Buddhist understandings of the afterlife, he could look at a variety of sources for information. He could interview lay adherents of these

²⁶Wesley J. Wildman, "Appendix A: On the Process of the Project during the Second Year," in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 269.

²⁷Blasi correctly points out that "there is no reason to expect any 'main stream' to select the same phenomena for comparison or, if agreeing upon a set of instances, to conduct the comparisons in the same way." Blasi, "Comparison as a Theoretical Exercise," 16.

²⁸Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On the Nature of Religion: Lessons We Have Learned," in *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 204.

faiths to see what they believe, or he could read their sacred texts to see what they teach concerning the topic, or he could trace the development of the belief through their history, or he could investigate the topic in the works of dominant leaders in each tradition. The amount of sources available to study the selected topic is almost limitless. Therefore, it is important for the comparativist to delimit the range of sources he will use. In this dissertation's case study, the range of sources is limited to the most authoritative religious texts in the religious traditions being compared. Consequently, the comparison will not reveal what adherents of religious tradition A and adherents of religious tradition B *actually* believe concerning X, rather the comparison will reveal the similarities and differences between the textual resources that adherents in religious traditions A and B have in developing their belief concerning X.

Although limiting the comparison to the most important sacred texts has its advantages, some might object. First of all, a comparative methodology which calls for the comparison of sacred texts by default excludes non-literate religious traditions. Thus, this methodology is only useful for traditions which have their own sacred texts. Moreover, restricting the comparison to text-based traditions leaves out disciplines that deal primarily with non-literate traditions like, anthropology, ritual studies, art-and-religion, studies of popular religion, folk culture, etc.²⁹ Second, if a substantial disconnect exists between the teachings of a sacred text, and the actual beliefs and practices of the adherents then the comparison will be of little practical value. Ideally, a textual comparative project should be confirmed with ethnographies too see how the texts are actually lived out.³⁰ Since ethnographies are context specific, missionaries should take it upon themselves to confirm any textual comparison with their own personal experience on the field. In addition, some may object that focusing on ideas and beliefs

²⁹Neville, preface to *The Human Condition*, xxiv.

³⁰Rodrigues and Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 64.

rather than practices provides a limited view of the tradition. Wesley Wildman provides an insightful response to this objection when he writes that comparing ideas is not limiting since comparing practices would inevitably include a comparison of the ideas the practices are built upon.³¹ Another problem with comparing religious texts is that for the most part religious texts invite and may even demand particular responses, implicating the reader in a way that goes beyond the scholarly role.³² This call for a response makes it more difficult for the comparativist to remain “relatively objective” since he inevitably must accept or reject the text’s teaching. In spite of these limitations, textual comparisons can help shed light on the religious worldview of insiders.

Textual comparisons are of the greatest value when comparing text-centered traditions, which tend to be traditions within the major world religions. When comparing religious traditions it is beneficial to compare what is most authoritative for believers, in many cases this includes sacred texts. In her essay, “Scripture and Its Reception: A Buddhist Case,” Miriam Levering lists four characteristics of sacred scriptures.³³ First, believers do not believe the texts are ultimately of human origin. Second, believers take them as normative and authoritative for the community. Third, believers treat the texts as sacred, powerful, etc. Finally, believers understand them “to play special roles in religious life” that other texts do not play. Consequently, comparing sacred texts can help provide significant insight into the religious worldview of insiders since the texts are one of the most important factors in shaping their worldview. However, it should be noted that the comparativist should “approach the authoritative text as the believer

³¹Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas,” 85.

³²Neville and Wildman, “On the Nature of Religion,” 205.

³³Miriam Levering, “Scripture and Its Reception: A Buddhist Case,” in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 58-59.

approaches it,” and try to interpret it “with the voice of insiders.”³⁴ If the goal is to understand the insiders’ worldview, then their interpretation of the text is more important. After gaining an accurate understanding of the texts’ teachings concerning the topic being compared, the next step is to identify similarities and differences.

Comparativists need to identify both similarities and differences in order to provide a complete picture of the relationship between the traditions in light of the topic being compared. As Neville and Wildman point out, comparison is more than just “assembling accurate representations of the things to be compared”; rather, comparison is like a “third term” that explains how the traditions relate, identifying *both* similarities and differences.³⁵ As shown previously, earlier comparativists and more recent postmodern scholars of religion have failed to complete the task of comparison when they either ignored differences or when they ignore similarities. These approaches may serve their theological, philosophical, or theoretical positions, but ignoring similarities or differences is not useful to those who want to gain as much insight as possible into another worldview. Therefore, this dissertation’s proposed method of comparison involves the identification of both similarities and differences.

To conclude, the proposed methodology for comparing religions involves comparing two religious traditions by selecting a topic of comparison, and then identifying similarities and differences between what their most authoritative religious texts teach concerning the topic of comparison. As with the comparativist’s religious perspective, purpose, and motivation, he must also make known why he chose the two traditions, the topic of comparison, and the sacred texts that he will use. Moreover, before delving into the textual comparison, the comparativist must first set the context by

³⁴Cave, “The Role of the Authoritative in the Comparative Process,” 28.

³⁵Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in *Ultimate Realities*, 190.

discussing general characteristics of the worldview of each religious tradition. This strategy overcomes the objection that comparativists ignore context in their comparisons.

Overview of Each Worldview

The concept of *weltanschauung*, or worldview, is a useful concept for comparativists as they seek to make comparisons in light of the general characteristics of each religious tradition being compared. At the most basic level, a worldview is a way of viewing the world. Although at this rudimentary level the concept is easy to grasp, there is no scholarly consensus on the definition or method of analyzing worldviews.³⁶ Before presenting this dissertation's proposed definition and method of analyzing worldviews, it is important to survey the manner in which others have used the concept, both from outside and within the evangelical Christian community. A brief look at Ninian Smart, William E. Paden, James W. Sire, and Paul G. Hiebert's use of the concept of worldview demonstrates that their definition and use of the concept are largely dependent on their academic training, their intended purpose in using the concept, and even their own worldview.³⁷

First of all, scholars of religion, like Ninian Smart and William E. Paden, have

³⁶In *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, David K. Naugle provides one of the most extensive and helpful discussions of the concept, especially for Evangelical Christians. Naugle begins by discussing some of the original worldview thinkers in Protestant Evangelicalism like James Orr, Gordon H. Clark, Carl F. H. Henry, Abraham Kuypers, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Francis A. Schaeffer. Next, he describes how the concept of worldview has been used in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. In chapter 3, he provides a philological history of *weltanschauung*, tracing it from its first use by Kant to its later use in various European languages and then in English. Next, he discusses its use in the nineteenth century by philosophers like Hegel, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, and Nietzsche. In the following two chapters, he discusses the use of the term in the twentieth century by philosophers like Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Donald Davidson. In chapters 7 and 8, he includes a disciplinary history of "worldview" in the natural and social sciences. In the last three chapters, he provides theological reflections, philosophical reflections, and his concluding reflections on the term. Especially interesting to Evangelicals, Naugle includes in Appendix A a synopsis of additional Evangelical works on worldview, and in Appendix B he includes a bibliography of books on the Christian worldview not addressed in the volume. David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁷Naugle convincingly demonstrates that definitions of "worldview" are often worldview dependent. *Ibid.*, 253-58.

used the concept of “worldview” in their study of religion. In *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, Ninian Smart contends that “worldview analysis,” which he describes as an attempt to “describe and understand” the worldview of other people, is “the heart of the modern study of religion.”³⁸ In this text, Smart does not clearly define a “worldview,” but he appears to understand it as “symbols and beliefs that have helped form the structure of human consciousness and society.”³⁹ In *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs* he adds that when he uses the term “worldview” he means “incarnated worldviews, where the values and beliefs are embedded in practice. That is, they are expressed in actions, laws, symbols, and organizations.”⁴⁰ Based upon this understanding, Smart applies the concept narrowly to religions and secular ideologies, but also more broadly to seven main worldviews: the modern West, the Islamic crescent, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Latin South, Greater Africa, and the Pacific.⁴¹ In order to analyze worldviews he proposes two methods. First, worldviews can be analyzed by looking at seven dimensions, namely, the experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, social, and material dimensions.⁴² Second, he also contends that worldviews have a three-part structure and can be analyzed by looking at their understanding of the cosmos, self, and society.⁴³ Unfortunately, Smart does not

³⁸Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 2.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 2-3.

⁴¹Smart, *Worldviews*, 3rd ed., 4; idem, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 8. In the first edition of *Worldviews*, Smart included the following six worldviews: (1) the Modern West; (2) the Marxist Bloc; (3) the Islamic Crescent; (4) Old Asia; (5) the Latin world; (6) Black Africa and the Pacific. idem, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983).

⁴²Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*. In *Worldviews*, Smart only includes six dimensions, leaving out the material dimension.

⁴³Smart, *Worldviews*, 3rd ed., 48.

provide a concise definition of “worldview,” but as a scholar of religion, he does provide helpful categories for analyzing religious worldviews. Fellow scholar of religion William E. Paden also uses the concept of worldview.

Paden does not use the term “worldview;” nonetheless, he does utilize the concept as he analyzes various religions. For example, in *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, William E. Paden’s central theme is that “religious systems” are best understood as “worlds” rather than “beliefs.”⁴⁴ That is, religions live in a world or a “reality” that they create through their symbols. Based upon this premise, he argues that the “the guiding principle” in comparative studies should be that “each religious community acts within the premises of its own universe, its own logic, its own answers to its questions.”⁴⁵ In order to analyze these religious “worlds,” he suggests looking at their mythic language and prototypes, ritual times, the engaging of gods, and the distinction between pure and profane behavior. In spite of his apparent rejection of a knowable objective world and any form of metanarrative, Paden’s description of religious systems as “worlds” reminds comparativists of the value of seeking to understand a religious tradition from within and on its own terms. In addition to these two uses of the concept of worldview in religious studies, the concept has also been widely used in the evangelical Christian community.

In the last several decades there has been “an explosion of interest in worldview in certain circles of the evangelical church.”⁴⁶ The concept has been used for a variety of purposes, most notably for apologetic and missiological purposes. James W. Sire and Paul G. Hiebert exemplify these two different approaches. Sire is best known

⁴⁴William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), vii.

⁴⁵Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶Naugle, *Worldview*, xv.

for *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*.⁴⁷ In this text, Sire provides a definition of a worldview:

A commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.⁴⁸

In addition to this definition, Sire states that a worldview can be expressed as the essential answers to the following “seven basic questions”:⁴⁹

1. What is prime reality- the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

⁴⁷For additional works in which Sire discusses the concept of worldview and how it affects apologetics, see James W. Sire, *A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 75-76; idem, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); idem, *Why Good Arguments Often Fail: Making a More Persuasive Case for Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 93-116, 170-73, 192-93.

⁴⁸James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 17.

⁴⁹Sire’s seven questions are heavily influenced by western philosophy and Christian theism. In the questions, he deals with issues of metaphysics (questions one and two), epistemology (question five), ethics (question six), anthropology (question three), eschatology (question four), and the meaning of history (question seven). Similarly, in *Life’s Ultimate Questions*, Ronald Nash presents a definition of “worldview” even *more* indebted to western philosophy and Christian theology. He states that a worldview “contains a person’s answers to the major questions in life, almost all of which contain significant philosophical content. It is a conceptual framework, pattern, or arrangement of a person’s beliefs.” Moreover, he states that worldviews “function as interpretive conceptual schemes to explain why we see the world as we do, why we think and act as we do.” Based upon these definitions, he states that worldviews contain at least five clusters of beliefs: God, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and anthropology. Nash’s five clusters of beliefs include the three traditional areas of study within western philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics), and also two additional Christian theological categories (God and anthropology). Ronald Nash, *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 13-19.

He contends that the answers to these seven questions reveal the presuppositions in a worldview. Sire then proceeds to describe eight worldviews based upon the seven questions, including Christian Theism, Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheistic Monism, The New Age, and Postmodernism. After describing these worldviews, he discusses guidelines for choosing a worldview. He argues that a worldview should be internally coherent, be able to comprehend the data of reality, should explain what it claims to explain, and it should be subjectively satisfactory. Based upon these four qualifications of an acceptable worldview, Sire concludes that Christian Theism is the superior worldview, thus fulfilling his apologetic intent.⁵⁰ In addition to apologetic purposes, evangelical Christians have also used the concept for missiological purposes.

Paul G. Hiebert exemplifies the missiological use of the concept of worldview. As an anthropologist, Hiebert naturally defines a “worldview” anthropologically. In *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, he provides a definition of a worldview:

The foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives. It encompasses people’s images or maps of the reality of all things that they use for living their lives. It is the cosmos thought to be true, desirable, and moral by a community of people.⁵¹

According to Hiebert, worldviews serve six main functions.⁵² First, they provide cognitive foundations on which to build systems of explanation, providing

⁵⁰Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 248-49; idem, *A Little Primer on Humble Apologetics*, 75-76; idem, *Why Good Arguments Often Fail*, 171.

⁵¹Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 25-26. For additional works in which Hiebert discusses the concept of worldview, see idem, *Incarnational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); idem, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985); idem, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); idem, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tienou Tite, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁵²Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 28-30.

rational justification for belief in these systems. Second, they provide emotional security when facing evil and suffering in the world. Third, they validate the deepest cultural norms. Fourth, worldviews integrate the culture. Fifth, they monitor cultural change. Finally, they provide psychological reassurance that the world is as we see it. In addition to describing the functions of worldview, Hiebert also advocates a variety of anthropological methods for analyzing worldviews including, ethnosemantic analysis, sentence completion, analysis of other signs, analysis of rituals, analysis of folklore and myths, wisdom literature, narrative analysis, aesthetic culture, evaluative ideals, key informants, thick descriptions, cases, deep philosophical analysis, and cross-cultural comparisons. Like Sire, Hiebert also provides a sampling of worldviews to analyze. In *Transforming Worldviews* he describes six different worldviews: worldviews of small-scale oral society, the peasant worldview, the modern worldview, the worldview of late modernity or postmodernity, the post-postmodern or glocal worldview, and the biblical worldview. As the title of *Transforming Worldviews* suggests, Hiebert argues that Christians should study other worldviews in order to effectively share the gospel and to transform the worldview of those who respond to the message.⁵³

Briefly looking at the different ways that Smart, Paden, Sire, and Hiebert define and analyze worldviews demonstrates that there is no authoritative way to approach the concept of “worldview.” Each of their approaches is shaped by their academic training, their intended purpose in analyzing worldviews, and their own worldviews. Consequently, this dissertation must define and analyze worldviews based upon the intended purpose of comparing religious traditions. If the purpose of presenting the religious worldview of the traditions being compared is to set a background for the textual comparison, then the definition and method of worldview analysis must be flexible enough to accommodate various religious traditions. For example, Sire’s

⁵³Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 69.

approach is useful for analyzing philosophical worldviews for Christian apologetic purposes, but is not necessarily the best approach when trying to understand another religious tradition from within. Peter Ochs warns that people have a tendency to “impose categories” onto others without allowing the categories to be shaped by experiences and dialogues with others.⁵⁴ In order to avoid imposing artificial categories on another religious tradition, this dissertation will define and analyze worldviews in a way that is not dependent on a specific religious tradition.

For the purpose of this dissertation, David Naugle’s definition of worldview will be used:

A semiotic system of narrative signs that creates the definitive symbolic universe which is responsible in the main for the shape of a variety of life-determining, human practices. It creates the channels in which the waters of reason flow. It establishes the horizons of an interpreter’s point of view by which texts of all types are understood. It is the mental medium by which the world is known. The human heart is its home, and it provides a home for the human heart. At the end of the day it is hard to conceive of a more important human or cultural reality, theoretically or practically, than the semiotic system of narrative signs that makes up a worldview.⁵⁵

The usefulness of Naugle’s definition, although built from a biblical worldview, is that it is not restricted to a Christian worldview. His definition of a worldview as a “semiotic system of narrative signs” is applicable to a variety of worldviews. Moreover, his definition identifies the importance that narratives play in a worldview. He argues that human beings are “semiotic creatures and inherent storytellers” that “provide narrative answers to the fundamental questions about the realm of the divine, the nature of the cosmos, the identity of human beings, the solution to the problems of suffering and pain, and so on.”⁵⁶ If Naugle is correct, then one way to analyze worldviews is by studying their metanarratives. That is, what unifying story

⁵⁴Peter Ochs, “Revised: Comparative Religious Traditions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006): 486.

⁵⁵Naugle, *Worldview*, 329-30.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 302.

explains their “world”? Analyzing worldviews through metanarratives is not unique to Naugle though.

Although Smart, Paden, Sire, and Hiebert come from different perspectives, they all recognize that narrative is a key element of a worldview. Smart includes myth and narrative as one of the seven dimensions or ways to analyze a worldview. Similarly, Paden includes myth as one of the four ways to analyze religious “worlds.” Sire begins his definition of worldview by stating that it is “a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions.” Finally, Hiebert includes analysis of folklore and myths as one of the ways to analyze a worldview. Therefore, Naugle is not alone in seeing the value of narrative in worldview formation.

This dissertation proposes presenting the worldview of the traditions being compared by answering four key questions. First, “how did we get here?” Second, “what is wrong with the world?” Third, “what is the solution?” Finally, “where are we going?” Using these four questions has several benefits. First of all, the questions are not dependent on a specific tradition and therefore, can be applied to various religious traditions. Second, because the questions are flexible, it enables each religious tradition to speak for itself by not imposing foreign categories. Finally, by using these four questions, the comparativist is able to place the topic of comparison within the tradition’s metanarrative. Part of the strategy of using these four general questions is to allow each tradition to speak for itself in order to gain an insider’s perspective.

To conclude, the proposed method of comparing religions includes setting the context for the textual comparison by presenting an overview of each worldview. Scholars have defined and analyzed worldviews in a variety of ways depending on their academic training, their purpose behind analyzing worldviews, and their own worldview. This dissertation advocates using Naugle’s definition because it is not tied to a specific religious tradition or worldview. Moreover, the proposed methodology involves

describing each religious worldview as a metanarrative by answering four key questions.

Insider Perspective

In order to gain a deeper understanding of another's religious worldview, comparativists must seek to gain an insider's perspective. Michael Pye states that one cannot understand a religious tradition fully without understanding what it means to participants.⁵⁷ Pye may be overly optimistic by stating that one can really understand another tradition fully; nevertheless, comparativists should still seek an insider perspective as much as possible. This approach is especially useful to Christians who are communicating the gospel cross-culturally. If a Christian wants to contextualize the gospel so that his respondents understand his intended message, he must try to see the world as the respondents do. Consequently, one of the final characteristics of this dissertation's proposed method of comparison is that the comparativist should seek to understand the worldview and approach the sacred texts of the religious tradition under study as if he were an insider.

Phenomenology of religion furnishes concepts like *epoche* and *einfuhlung* that can help comparativists seek to gain an insider perspective of the religious traditions under comparison. First of all, phenomenologists of religion practice *epoche*, or bracketing, which entails a temporary suspension of presuppositions and value judgments about the truthfulness of beliefs and value of practices in a religious tradition.⁵⁸ In other words, phenomenologists seek to describe religious traditions as accurately as possible without making any value or theological judgment. This approach may be especially difficult for evangelical Christians since they approach other religions with the belief that they are not salvific, and thus, may be quick to evaluate and point out shortcomings they

⁵⁷Pye, *Comparative Religion*, 13.

⁵⁸Ibid., 16; Frank Whaling, ed., *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 32.

see in the non-Christian religion. Although there are times when evangelical Christians should evaluate other religious traditions, they should restrain from making value judgments on a religious tradition as they seek to understand it from within. Seeking an accurate understanding of another religious tradition, and making value judgments about it are two separate tasks and should not be mingled.

In addition to *epoche*, phenomenologists also seek *einfuhlung*, or “structured empathy,” in which they try to get inside the mind of a believer or see the world through the eyes of believers in order to understand the religion within the religion’s own structures of thought.⁵⁹ Pye describes *einfuhlung* as “the attempt to elucidate as fully as possible what the concepts, actions, social associations, and states of mind mean for the persons involved in them.”⁶⁰ In other words, comparativists should seek to understand the religion in its own terms. Comparativists should not artificially apply concepts and values from one tradition to another tradition. This approach will inevitably lead to a misconstrued understanding of the tradition. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said critiques Christians for interpreting Islam through Christian eyes, which led them to see Islam as a bad copy of Christianity, led them to see Muhammad as an imposter and a heretic, and also led them to incorrectly call Islam “Mohammedanism.”⁶¹

Space does not permit an analysis of Said’s claims; nevertheless, the danger of evangelicals misunderstanding other religions because of their inability to see that

⁵⁹Smart, *Worldviews*, 16; Pye, *Comparative Religion*, 16. Similarly, LaRay M. Barna points out that in intercultural communication the goal is not sympathy, but rather empathy. Sympathizing or putting oneself in another’s position does not help as long as one continues to view the world in the same way. Rather, the goal is to empathize and thus, see the world as they see it. LaRay M. Barna, “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication,” in *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Selected Readings*, ed. Milton J. Bennett (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural, 1998), 173-89. For similar arguments, see Milton J. Bennett, “Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy,” in *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*, 191- 214; William B. Gudykunst, *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication*, 2nd ed., Interpersonal Commtxts 3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 184-85.

⁶⁰Pye, *Comparative Religion*, 16.

⁶¹Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th ann. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 58-60.

religion from within is a real danger. Misunderstanding or misrepresentation will only serve to hurt Christians as they seek to understand other traditions with the purpose of contextualizing the gospel. Therefore, correctly representing other faiths is not just a matter of “respect for truth,”⁶² but is also of crucial missiological importance.

Diana Eck argues that those studying other religions should cultivate a “dialogical perspective,” in which they develop the ability to listen, learn, and interact with those of other faiths in order to be able to articulate the other’s point of view.⁶³ This type of approach is not only useful for scholars of religion, but also for those engaging in cross-cultural ministry. Some might interpret this “virtual conversion”⁶⁴ as an act of disloyalty;⁶⁵ however, the opposite is the case. Trying to understand another faith from within should not be interpreted as compromising one’s own beliefs. Rather, cross-cultural workers need to “convert” temporarily so that they can learn how to accurately communicate the gospel. According to Hesselgrave, adopting the respondent’s worldview is the only viable option missionaries have when trying to contextualize the gospel.⁶⁶ Moreover, the ability to listen, learn, and express another’s perspective are key markers for intercultural effectiveness. In her dissertation “Intercultural Effectiveness: Development of an Intercultural Competency Scale,” Muriel I. Elmer identifies twelve predictors of intercultural effectiveness. Relevant to the topic at hand, she identifies that those who are effective cross-culturally are interested in people of other cultures, show respect by treating others in a way that they feel valued, are inclined to engage with others regardless of differences, and are able to imaginatively enter into another cultural

⁶²Ian Markham, *A World Religions Reader*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 11.

⁶³Eck, “Dialogue and Method,” 147.

⁶⁴Reat, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions,” 475.

⁶⁵Markham, *A World Religions Reader*, 11.

⁶⁶David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 209-212.

viewpoint.⁶⁷ These characteristics are critical in *both* cross-cultural ministry and in comparative projects. Therefore, one could make the case the missionaries tend to be suited to engage in comparative studies. Or, one could argue that comparative projects can help develop effective missionaries as it forces them to learn how to see the world from another's perspective.

To conclude, this dissertation's proposed method of comparing religions has nine characteristics:

1. **Perspective:** comparativists must first make explicit their religious perspective, and should explain how their religious beliefs may assist or hinder their ability to compare religious traditions. Are they approaching the comparison as an evangelical Christian, a pluralist, a Zen Buddhist, an atheist, etc.?
2. **Purpose:** comparativists must clearly state their purpose behind their comparison. What do they hope to accomplish by comparing religious traditions? Do they want to show the superiority of one tradition over another? Do they hope to prove their pluralist position? Do they want to show the historical connection between religious traditions?
3. **Motivation:** comparativists must make their motivation in comparing religions known. There will more than likely be a variety of motivations involved.
4. **Traditions:** comparativists must select two religious traditions to compare, and should provide a rationale for their selection.
5. **Topic:** comparativists must select one topic to compare, and provide a rationale. The topics can be beliefs, rituals or any other topic that is found within the two traditions being compared.
6. **Texts:** comparativists must select the most authoritative religious texts from each religious tradition that will be used to investigate the topic selected.
7. **Similarities and differences:** after investigating each set of religious texts, the comparativist must identify both similarities and differences.
8. **Worldview:** before analyzing the sacred texts selected, comparativists need to provide an overview of each tradition's worldview. The worldview analysis should be based upon the following four questions: How did we get here? What is wrong with the world? What is the solution? Where are we going?

⁶⁷Muriel I. Elmer, "Intercultural Effectiveness: Development of an Intercultural Competency Scale" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1986).

9. Insider perspective: in explaining each worldview and in analyzing the sacred texts, comparativists should seek an insider's perspective.

Now that the principles of the proposed method comparison have been discussed, we can turn and apply these principles to the case study.

The Case Study

Although theory and methodology play an important role in the academic study of religion, they are not the ultimate goal. Rather, the goal is to understand religious worldviews; theories and methodologies are only tools that assist in accomplishing this goal. Consequently, this dissertation's proposed methodology of comparing religions is of little practical value unless it is applied to a specific case.

Perspective, Purpose, and Motivation

This dissertation's comparative project is written from an evangelical perspective, and more specifically, from a Reformed perspective. The purpose of comparing the most authoritative textual resources that Sunnis and Christians in the Reformed tradition have in developing their beliefs concerning suffering is fourfold. First, the comparison is meant to give evangelical Christians a better understanding of the Sunni worldview. Second, the comparison is meant to encourage evangelical Christians to analyze their understanding of suffering in light of the Scriptures. Third, the comparison is meant to help evangelical Christians think through the missiological implications that come from studying what the Bible, Qur'an, and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* teach concerning suffering. Built upon these first three purposes, the fourth and final purpose of the comparison is to demonstrate that the comparative method is a valuable missiological tool since it prepares Christians to contextualize the gospel message through "exegeting" themselves, the Scriptures, and the respondent's worldview.

The motivation behind comparing the Sunni and Reformed worldviews is ultimately that God be glorified through the proclamation of the gospel and the salvation

of sinners from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The hope is that this dissertation's proposed method of comparing religions and the specific case study can assist Christians as they seek to reach the lost with the gospel, especially Sunni Muslims. To conclude, this dissertation is written from a Reformed perspective, and is intended to equip Christians to reach Sunni Muslims with the gospel, to the glory of God.

Traditions, Topics, and Texts

This case study will compare the most authoritative textual resources that Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition have in developing an understanding of suffering. The Sunni and Reformed traditions will be compared for a variety of reasons. First of all, this dissertation is written from a Reformed perspective and is meant to equip Christians to reach Sunnis with the gospel. Thus, comparing the Sunni and Reformed traditions is only logical. Second, much fruit can come from comparisons between religious traditions that have theological and historical connections. In "The Mothering Principle in the Comparison of Religions," Thomas Idinopulos may have overstated his case when he argues that comparison is *most* valuable when comparing religious groups which are historically connected; nevertheless, he is correct in pointing out that comparing religious traditions with no historical connection are more problematic.⁶⁸ Similarly, Wesley J. Wildman argues that comparing religious traditions which have vast cultural distance and have no "significant contact" are much more difficult to carry out.⁶⁹ The Sunni and Reformed traditions have enough in common to make them ripe for comparison. The more numerous and significant the similarities, the more carefully one has to look for differences and thus, more nuanced the insights will be.

⁶⁸Thomas Idinopulos, "The Mothering Principle in the Comparison of Religions," in *Comparing Religions*, 51-58.

⁶⁹Wesley J. Wildman, "Appendix A: On the Process of the Project During the First Year," in *The Human Condition*, 278-79.

Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition share several significant theological convictions. Both believe in a historically-rooted grand metanarrative, giving “cosmic seriousness to the historical dimension of human life.”⁷⁰ Adherents of both traditions understand history to be linear, beginning with God’s creation of the cosmos and ending with his judgment of humanity.⁷¹ As monotheists, both believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator God. Moreover, they both affirm God’s absolute sovereignty and power over the world’s affairs. Although the Reformed belief in predestination is not identical to the Sunni belief in *qadar*, both Sunnis and Christians in the Reformed tradition affirm that all events in the world happen according to God’s will.⁷² As representative of the Reformed position, the Westminster Confession of Faith provides an explanation of God’s sovereignty:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith provides a similar explanation:

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears his wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing his decree.

Both of these historic Reformed confessions of faith affirm that God decreed from all eternity whatever comes to pass; however, at the same time, they both affirm

⁷⁰Marshall Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life,” *Diogenes* 32 (1960): 52.

⁷¹Hodgson argues that with this shared belief in a linear history “there is sufficient similarity among them to give certain contrasts validity.” *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷²*Qadar* refers first and foremost to God’s omnipotence, but in the Qur’an, the term often is related to God’s decisions and decrees. Consequently, the term is associated with predestination in Muslim theology. Massimo Campanini, “Qada’/Qadar,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2006), 515-17.

humanity's creaturely will and moral responsibility. Thus, in a mysterious way, God's sovereignty and humanity's responsibility co-exist.⁷³

Sunni Muslims often add predestination as the sixth pillar of Islam.⁷⁴ Sunni scholar, 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, in the opening line of *Divine Will and Predestination in*

⁷³Some scholars in the Reformed tradition explain this co-existence through the concept of "compatibalism." In support of compatibalism, Bruce A. Ware provides an example from Isaiah 10:5-9 where God uses Assyria to punish Israel. However, after using Assyria to punish Israel, God then punishes Assyria for destroying Israel. Ware writes, "Although Assyria carries out God's will, Assyria acted freely (i.e., he did what he most wanted to do) and from his heart when he acted with pride and wickedness toward Israel. Therefore, God's prior determination to raise up and use Assyria is fully compatible with Assyria's own freedom of will to do what he wanted, from the depths of his heart, to do. . . . Exhaustive, meticulous divine sovereignty is here fully compatible with human freedom consisting of people doing what they most strongly desire to do." Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 83-84. For an extensive discussion of compatibalism, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 9-38; 125-98. Carson provides a lengthy list of texts from the OT and from John's Gospel that he argues affirm God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Carson also discusses this subject in chaps. 11 and 12 in idem, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

⁷⁴The majority of Sunnis hold that the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature teach predestination. For example, in the Qur'an, 3:145 reads, "Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave, the term being fixed as by writing," and 9:51 reads, "Say: Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has decreed for us: He is our protector." All English quranic quotations in this dissertation come from Yusuf Ali's translation unless otherwise noted. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, new ed. with rev. translation and commentary (Brentwood, MD: Amana, 1991). 'Umar S. al-Ashqar provides an extensive list of quranic verses that Sunnis use in support of their belief in predestination: *qadar* in general (8:42; 15:21; 25:2; 33:38; 54:49); Allah's "all-encompassing knowledge" (6:28; 6:117; 8:23; 34:3; 53:32; 59:22; 65:12; 67:14); Allah has written everything in "The Preserved Tablet" (22:70; 36:12; 43:4; 52:1-3; 85:21-22); Allah's will is all-encompassing and his power is irresistible (2:253; 5:48; 6:35; 6:39; 6:111-12; 10:99; 25:45; 36:82; 81:29); Allah is the Creator of all things (4:1; 6:1; 15:86; 21:33; 39:62); People's deeds are created and decreed by Allah (7:178; 16:125; 35:11; 37:96; 54:52). 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans., Nasiruddin al-Khattab. 3rd rev. English ed., Islamic Creed Series, vol. 8 (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 21-26; 38-50.

The *hadith* literature emphasizes predestination even more than the Qur'an. Muhammad is reported to have said that Adam's rebellion against God was fated forty years before he was created, and that while in the womb, God determines a child's gender, social status, age, and their moral character (presumably including their eternal destiny), and that each person has their place assigned either in the Fire or in Paradise (*Ahadith* no. 3409, 4736, 4738, 6594, 6595, 6605, 6614, and 7515). Unless otherwise noted, the numbering of *ahadith* in this dissertation are from Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997). The number of the *hadith* will be included in a parenthesis following the text or in a footnote.

Daniel Brown actually argues that the *hadith* literature reflects a "strikingly deterministic mood" which is "devoid of traditions defending free will." Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 137-38. Similarly, W. Montgomery Watt argues that while the Qur'an is "through and through theistic" and emphasizes the majesty and omnipotence of God, the *ahadith* at times tend to be atheistic in that they present human life as being controlled by vague, mysterious, and impersonal forces. W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac, 1948), 20.

Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah, presents the standard Sunni position when he writes that, "Belief in *qadar* (predestination), is one of the basic principles of faith, without which a person's belief is incomplete."⁷⁵ Sunnis affirm that God's is omnipotent, his decrees irreversible; therefore, all good and all evil come from God's decree and foreordination.⁷⁶ However, like in the Reformed tradition, Sunni Muslims also affirm humanity's responsibility. Orthodox Sunni *kalam*, or theology, is most heavily influenced by Ash'arite theology, named after Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (873-935).⁷⁷ As a mediating position between the hard determinism of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855), and the free will position of the qadarites and Mu'tazilites, al-Ashari developed the theory of acquisition (*kasb*) in which God "creates the actions," but people become morally responsible for those actions as they "acquire" them.⁷⁸ In this way, al-Ashari and the majority of Sunnis for that matter, affirm both God's omnipotence and humanity's moral responsibility.

⁷⁵ Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, 21.

⁷⁶ Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology: From the Eighth Century C.E. to the Present," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 281.

⁷⁷ Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 144; Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 280-81; John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72. Al-Ashari also argued that the Qur'an was uncreated, that God's anthropomorphic attributes should be accepted without specifying how, that eschatological matters should not be seen as mere metaphors, and that evil and good are determined by divine fiat. W. Montgomery Watt, trans., *Islamic Creeds: A Selection*, Islamic Surveys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 41-47; idem, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 66.

⁷⁸ Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 144-47; Esposito, *Islam*, 73; Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 281; Abdul Hafeez, "Allah's Omnipotence and Freedom of Will for Man," *Hamdard Islamicus* 25 (2002): 31-40; Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 35; Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 1, *The Formative Period* (London: Routledge, 1990), 70. It should be noted though, that contrary to the Reformed position, al-Ashari's theory of *kasb* denies the existence of secondary causes. Every action is thus created by God, either good or evil. This did not pose an ethical problem for the Asharite position since he held that good and evil are determined by divine fiat. Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopædia of Islam*, rev. ed. (London: Stacey International, 2001), 62; Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 24; Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science* 8 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 55-56.

An additional similarity between Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition is that they both seek to ground their beliefs and practices in their authoritative religious texts. Faithfulness to their religious texts is a priority in both traditions. In the Reformed tradition, the authoritative religious text is the Bible. For example, the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith states that “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.” Moreover, it states,

The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.

The most authoritative sacred texts for Sunni Muslims are the Qur’an and the hadith *corpus*. The Qur’an is “the very word of God,” “the ultimate authority in all religious matters,” and “the primary source of meaning for a Muslim.”⁷⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr states the matter clearly when he writes that “The Quran is the origin and source of all that is Islamic.”⁸⁰ However, quranic influence is not restricted to the religious sector. The Qur’an is the “primary source of guidance” in all areas of life for Muslims, including legal, moral, political, economic, and social.⁸¹ Although not officially an object of worship, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Qur’an in Islam. For example, when comparing Islam and Christianity, many Muslims, do not equate the Qur’an with

⁷⁹Mustansir Mir, “The Qur’an in Muslim Thought and Practice,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3:394-96; Feisal Abdul Rauf, *Islam: A Search for Meaning* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1995), 3.

⁸⁰Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Quran as the Foundation of Islamic Spirituality,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 3.

⁸¹Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

the Bible, rather, they equate the Qur'an with Jesus Christ.⁸² Next to the Qur'an, the vast majority of Muslims revere the *hadith* as “the second revelatory source of law and guidance in Islam” since it is “the only vehicle” through which they can access the prophetic *Sunna*, Muhammad's sayings and habits.⁸³ According to Muslims, Muhammad was the ideal human who reflected perfect submission and obedience to God; he is the “living Qur'an.”⁸⁴ Abdul-Malik Mujahid expresses this position when he states that “the ideal and perfect example of good manners and character which the Qur'an demands from mankind, was present in the person of Muhammad in its highest degree.”⁸⁵

⁸²It has become axiomatic in Islamic studies to equate Jesus Christ with the Qur'an and the Bible (or NT) with the *hadith* literature. However, from an Evangelical position, equating Jesus with the Qur'an, and the Bible with the *hadith* is not that helpful. Actually, it only seems to downplay Christ's deity and the Bible's trustworthiness. Yes, both the Qur'an and Jesus are understood to be the uncreated Word of God in their respective traditions; however, the Qur'an is not God in the flesh nor is it to be worshipped. Equating Jesus with the Qur'an tends to strip Jesus of his deity. Additionally, although it is true that the NT records the life of Jesus and the *hadith* corpus records the life of Muhammad's, Muslims do not believe the text of the *hadith* to be completely trustworthy. The essence of the *hadith* is true, but the text itself may not be. This understanding fits with a liberal Protestant understanding of the Bible, but it does not fit the Evangelical understanding of Scripture. Consequently, the axiom is not true for Evangelicals.

Interestingly, Muzammil H. Siddiqi also rejects the analogy from a Muslim perspective. He argues that the analogy is false because the Qur'an is not an object of worship nor do Muslims pray to the Qur'an. He also states that he consulted with three “Westernized” Muslims about this analogy and he reports that they responded by saying that the analogy is “superficial,” “impertinent, and “blasphemous.” Muzammil H. Siddiqi, “God: A Muslim View,” in *Three Faiths—One God: A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Encounter*, ed. John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 76.

⁸³Aisha Musa, *Hadith as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1, 5. The traditional position has been that the *Sunna*, the Muhammad's example as recorded in the *hadith* literature, and the Qur'an “spring from a single source,” with the *Sunna* clarifying the Qur'an. The difference is that the Qur'an is completely trustworthy both in its text and meaning. In contrast, the wording of the *hadith* is “merely conjectural,” and only the sense of the account is reliable. Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7, 43. Moreover, the traditional Muslim understanding has been that the *Sunna* either corroborates, clarifies, or qualifies the general rules found in the Qur'an. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Law and Society: The Interplay of Revelation and Reason in the Shariah,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, 121.

⁸⁴Esposito, *Islam*, 11.

⁸⁵Consequently, Mujahid states that “the heart of every Muslim is filled with love for the last Prophet Muhammad” since Muhammad is “the greatest benefactor of humanity.” Therefore, “Highest love for the Prophet is made a test of our Faith.” Abdul-Malik Mujahid, publishers note of *The Sealed Nectar (Ar-Raheequl-Makhtum): Biography of the Noble Prophet* by Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, rev. ed. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2002), 5.

Consequently, the *hadith* literature has been “accorded the status of divine revelation,”⁸⁶ and has played a key role in shaping Muslim piety by providing an “overall framework for reflection and practice.”⁸⁷

Since Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition are text-centered, comparing their religious texts takes on even greater importance. This case study will involve the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*. Not much needs to be said about the Qur’an and the Bible. However, since the *hadith* literature is so expansive it is imperative to delimit what collections will be used. In Sunni Islam there are six collections of *hadith* that hold a prominent position.⁸⁸ These six collections were put together in the ninth and tenth centuries, and are taken as “normative sources” because few of the *hadith* in them are considered “spurious.”⁸⁹ Of these six collections, the two most authoritative and widely-used collections are *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* and *Sahih Muslim*. Brown states that *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* and *Sahih Muslim* “gained an authoritative status only slightly below that of the Qur’an in the Muslim community.”⁹⁰ Hodgson states that these two collections “came to be revered as especially holy because it was felt the reports they contained were sifted by the most careful tests of genuineness; the other four

⁸⁶Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 5.

⁸⁷R. Marston Speight, “Hadith,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 2:85. Esposito states that Muslims look to Muhammad to learn “how to treat friends as well as enemies, what to eat and drink, how to make love and war.” Esposito, *Islam*, 11.

⁸⁸The six collections are named after their creators: al-Bukhāri (d. 870), Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875), Abu Da’ud al-Sijistani (d. 888), Ibn Majah al-Qazwini (d. 887), Abu Isa al-Tirmidhi (d. 892), and Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Nasa’i (d. 915). Speight, “Hadith,” 84-85.

⁸⁹Vincent J. Cornell, “Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Practice in Islam,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, 74.

⁹⁰Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 86. Khan states that “it has been unanimously agreed that Imam Bukhāri’s work is the most authentic of all the other works in Hadith literature put together,” and that it is “the most authentic book” after the Qur’an. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, introduction to *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 1:19. Burton argues that apart from the Qur’an, no “more lavish praise has been heaped on any writing in Arabic” than on these two works. Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith*, 123.

allowed ‘weaker’ reports.’⁹¹ However, between these two works, al-Bukhāri’s collection has always been considered the most authoritative. Consequently, this dissertation will restrict itself to his collection of *ahadith*. Now that the two traditions and textual resources have been presented, we can turn to the topic of comparison.

One of the goals of the dissertation is to identify similarities and differences between what the Qur’an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible teach concerning suffering. More specifically, what do these texts teach concerning God’s purposes behind the suffering of his people and how are they to respond? Based upon their religious texts, what are some ways those in the Sunni and Reformed traditions could interpret suffering they experience in life? What can Christians in the Reformed tradition learn from the Bible to aid them in interpreting the suffering they are experiencing? What can Sunnis learn from the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* that can help them interpret the suffering they experience? While analyzing the Sunni and Reformed religious texts, *possible*

⁹¹ Marshal G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1: 254. Brown points out that al-Bukhāri and Muslim were the first to *only* collect sound *ahadith*. Brown, *Hadith*, 31.

Al-Bukhāri traveled throughout North Africa and the Middle East for sixteen years gathering reports about the acts and sayings of Muhammad from more than one thousand *sheikhs*. It is reported that he sorted through three hundred thousand to over six hundred thousand *ahadith*, of which he accepted less than three thousand of them as authentic. His entire project was seen as an act of piety. He is reported to have never added a *hadith* to his collection until after ablution and performing ritual prayer. Al-Bukhāri organized the reports into ninety-seven chapters. His collection ended up with over seven thousand *ahadith* since some *ahadith* appear in multiple chapters. The chapters cover some theological matters, but as would be expected, al-Bukhāri places greater emphasis on legal and ritual matters. Preceding each chapter, he includes a short paragraph providing his interpretation of the *ahadith* included.

Muslim is reported to have collected three hundred thousand *ahadith*, but only accepting four thousand of them as authentic. Like al-Bukhāri, Muslim traveled widely and visited the most important learning centers in the Muslim world. He organized his collection into fifty-four chapters, leaving out commentary as al-Bukhāri had included. His collection is not as organized or systematic as al-Bukhāri’s, but he does place more attention to the chain of transmission. Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 31; Muhammad Muhsin Khan, introduction to *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 1:18-19; Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, introduction to *Sahih Muslim*, by Ibn Hallaj al-Qushayri Muslim, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (New Delhi: Idara Isha’at-E-Diniyat, 2007), 1: xviii; Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), 30-32; Muhammad Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features, and Criticism* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1961), 88-101; John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 123-26.

responses that they have at their disposal will be presented as they seek to answer the two following questions: 1) What is God's purpose behind my current suffering? and 2) How does God want me to respond to the suffering I am currently experiencing? The goal of the comparison is not to present how they *actually* interpret and respond to suffering in their life. This would involve a different type of research project altogether. Rather, the goal is to compare the textual resources they have at their disposal as they seek to interpret and responding to their suffering.

Before discussing the benefits of using the topic of suffering, it is important to respond to some potential objections to the topic. Some might object that suffering is not equally distributed or experienced around the world and therefore, cannot be compared across religious traditions. In response, the daily news makes it clear that suffering is not equally distributed in the world. It would be naïve to assume that all people have experienced suffering in the same way. Nevertheless, suffering is part of the human condition. Even those who live in relatively safe and affluent parts of the world are not immune from suffering. Jack Bemporad provides a helpful definition of suffering; he defines it as “the experience of organisms in situations that involve physical and mental pain, usually attended by a sense of loss, frustration, and vulnerability to adverse effect.”⁹² Since suffering is ubiquitous, it can be a fruitful field of study in an attempt to better understand various religious worldviews.

A second objection to dealing with the topic of suffering is that suffering is a more prominent theme in Christianity than in Islam, thus favoring Christianity. In his article “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as a Framework for Religious Life” Hodgson argues that Christianity has delved deeper into the issue of human suffering

⁹²Jack Bemporad, “Suffering,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 99.

while Islam has delved deeper into the issue of human responsibility and judgment.⁹³ He states that Muslims see Islam as “the religion of sober moderation” and thus, have “shied away from the poignant, from the passionate and the paradoxical in life.” This perspective would include the topic of suffering. If Hodgson is correct, it would seem that comparing the topic of suffering would favor Christianity as comparing human responsibility and judgment would favor Islam. However, this would only be a problem if the traditions are compared for the purpose of evaluating their value. As stated previously, this is not the purpose of this dissertation. Moreover, even though Islam has not focused as much on the issue of suffering as Christianity has, looking into what the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* teach concerning suffering can still help shed light on the Sunni worldview.

A religious tradition’s interpretation and response to suffering reveals much about its worldview. Ninian Smart argues that “we cannot see what faiths and philosophies mean until we see them within the world of suffering, of poverty, of upheaval.”⁹⁴ Similarly, John Bowker contends that “what a religion has to say about suffering reveals, in many ways more than anything else, what it believes the nature and purpose of existence to be.”⁹⁵ Sociologists of religion point out that one of the important functions of religion is to provide an explanation for suffering and death, placing them in a context of meaning. These explanations, or theodicies, “tell the individual or group that the experience is not meaningless but is rather part of a larger system of order.”⁹⁶ Since

⁹³Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life,” 53-57.

⁹⁴Smart, *Worldviews*, 178.

⁹⁵John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 2.

⁹⁶Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2002), 33. For an extensive discussion of theodicies from a sociological perspective, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 53-80.

suffering is ubiquitous and religions for the most part seek to provide an explanation for it, it is reasonable to believe that looking into a religion's view of suffering would help provide deeper insight into its worldview.

Insider Perspective

In order to gain an insider perspective, this case study will give priority to insider resources, and thus, hopefully provide a description of each worldview and an analysis of the sacred texts that would be acceptable to insiders in each tradition. It should be noted though, that insider texts will not be used exclusively since it would be naïve to assume that only insiders can provide accurate information about their religious tradition. Gaining and presenting an insider perspective of the Reformed and Sunni worldviews will involve slightly different challenges since the dissertation is written from a Reformed perspective.

Since the dissertation is written from a Reformed perspective, the primary challenge in presenting the Reformed worldview is assuming that all of the researcher's beliefs are representative of the worldview. In order to avoid this problem, Reformed texts and confessions of faith will be used to help make sure that the presentation of the worldview and the interpretation of the biblical text actually reflect the worldview, and not just the researcher's own personal beliefs. In addition to using texts written by those within the Reformed tradition, other texts, especially those written by other evangelical Christians, will also be used. Since Christians in the Reformed tradition are part of the broader evangelical Christian community, many conservative evangelical Christian beliefs also reflect those held in the Reformed tradition. To conclude, using insider resources will help keep personal beliefs in check, leading to an overview of the Reformed worldview, and an analysis of the biblical text that is representative of the tradition. Analyzing the Sunni worldview will require a slightly different type of approach.

Seeking to gain and present an insider perspective of the Sunni worldview will require a more extensive research into Sunni resources. In presenting an overview of the Sunni worldview, a variety of scholarly and popular works will be used, especially those written by Sunni Muslims. Texts like ‘Umar S. al-Ashqar’s eight-volume work in the Islamic Creed Series, Fazlur Rahman’s *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, and Suzanne Haneef’s *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, will help provide an insider’s perspective. In analyzing the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, a variety of Sunni sources that comment on these texts will be used. First of all, al-Bukhāri’s chapter on Muhammad and his companions’ commentary on the Qur’an will be helpful.⁹⁷ Moreover, prominent Sunni *tafsir* will be used, like that of al-Tabari (d. 923) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373).⁹⁸ Al-Tabari’s *tafsir* is “the first major work in the development of traditional Qur’anic sciences,” and all those who came after him “relied heavily on his work and acknowledge their debt to him.”⁹⁹ Moreover, Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips points out that al-Tabari’s *tafsir* is the oldest entire Qur’an that exists today in its entirety, and that it is the most popular *tafsir* among scholars.¹⁰⁰ Ibn Kathir’s commentary on the Qur’an is considered by some scholars as “the most authoritative” of the earliest *tafsir* on

⁹⁷Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 6:21-420.

⁹⁸Imad al-Din Isma‘il b. Kathir was born in Bosra, but spent his intellectual career in Damascus, where he studied under his famous Hanbali teacher, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Ibn Kathir is best known for his *tafsir*, *The Interpretation of the Mighty Qur’an (Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘azim)*, his world history, *The Beginning and the End (al-Bidaya wa-l-nihaya)*, and his *Biography of the Prophet (al-Sira al-nabawiyya)*. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 196. Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari was a historian, commentator and jurist. He was born in the Caspian region, studied in Iran, but spent most of his life in Baghdad. Andrew Rippin, “Al-Tabari, Abu Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarir,” in *Encyclopedia of Islamic Civilization and Religion*, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Routledge, 2008), 632.

⁹⁹Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 1:3-4.

¹⁰⁰Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur’anic Interpretation* (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 26, 59-60, 64.

the Qur'an,¹⁰¹ and some scholars consider it to be "one of the soundest of tafsir bil-ma'thur."¹⁰² In addition to being highly regarded, Ibn Kathir's commentary is also widely used. In *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe includes *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* among the most popular and accessible commentaries in the Arabic-speaking world.¹⁰³ Moreover, McAuliffe also states that it has "achieved the most contemporary currency," and Wagner points out that it is especially influential among "conservative Muslims."¹⁰⁴

In addition to the commentaries by Ibn Kathir and al-Tabari, Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan's nine-volume *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* will also be utilized.¹⁰⁵ In these volumes, al-Hilali and Khan include commentary on the Qur'an from *Tafsir At-Tabari*, *Tafsir Al-Qurtubi*, and

¹⁰¹Walter H. Wagner, *Opening the Qur'an: Introducing Islam's Holy Book* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 186.

¹⁰²Rauf, *Islam*, 17. *Tafsir bil-ma'thur* ("tafsir according to transmission") takes into consideration the collective interpretation of the past, especially those of Muhammad, his companions and their students, while *tafsir bil-ra'y* ("tafsir according to opinion") are based mostly on "personal opinions for explanations, interpretations, and deductions." Consequently, *Tafsir bil-ma'thur* are considered superior to *tafsir bil-ra'y*. Ibid., 16; Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer*, 55. Ibn Kathir was highly influenced by his teacher's four hermeneutical steps in interpreting the Qur'an. First, Ibn Taymiyya looked for other verses in the Qur'an that could help in his interpretation of an *aya*. Second, if the Qur'an did not contain any helpful verses, he would look to the *Sunna*. Third, If Muhammad's *Sunna* did not help, he would then look to the teachings and example of Muhammad's companions. Finally, he would look to the companions' "followers." Consequently, Ibn Kathir was especially concerned with looking to the *hadith* and the Companions of Muhammad to interpret the Qur'an. This made him different from his predecessors. He rejected basing interpretations on biblical sources, non-Muslim sources, or on human reason. Some criticize him for ignoring the exegetical work done by previous commentators. McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," 196-98; Norman Calder, "Tafsir from Tabari to Ibn Kathir," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 123-27; Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 61-63; 97.

¹⁰³Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38, 71-76.

¹⁰⁴McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," 196; Wagner, *Opening the Qur'an*, 186.

¹⁰⁵Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language: with Comments from Tafsir At-Tabari, Tafsir Al-Qurtubi and Tafsir Ibn Kathir and Ahadith from Sahih Al-Bukhāri, Sahih Muslim and other Ahadith book*, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000).

Tafsir Ibn Kathir. Moreover, al-Hilali and Khan include and comment on *ahadith* from *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, *Sahih Muslim*, and others collections of *ahadith* as they seek to shed light on the quranic text. Therefore, Al-Hilali and Khan's text is very useful in the study of the traditional orthodox interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, four different English interpretations of the Qur'an will be used, namely, those by 'Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad, M. H. Shakir, and Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan.¹⁰⁷ These four "translations" provide insight into a variety of interpretations of the Arabic text. In addition, Ali, Asad, and al-Hilali and Khan's translations all include their own commentary on the text. Finally, in addition to the *tafsir* and English translations of the Qur'an, a variety of Sunni texts that deal directly with the content of the Qur'an will be utilized.

In analyzing *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, a variety of texts that comment on the *ahadith* will be used. First, Muhammad Muhsin Khan's commentary in his nine-volume *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri* will be helpful in understanding the *ahadith*. Moreover, comments by Abu Zakariya Yahya Bin Sharaf Al-Nawawi (1234-1277) in his two popular collections of *ahadith*, *Nawawi's Forty Hadith* and *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, will also assist in understanding an insider's approach to the *ahadith*. Additionally, a variety of Sunni texts that comment on *ahadith* in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* will provide additional insight into the collection. To conclude, in order to gain an insider perspective, texts written by those in the Reformed and Sunni traditions will be used. The goal is to present an overview of each worldview, and to analyze their sacred texts in a way that would be approved by insiders.

¹⁰⁶Paula Youngman Skreslet and Rebecca Skreslet, *The Literature of Islam: A Guide to the Primary Sources in English Translation*, ATLA Publication Series (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006), 10.

¹⁰⁷Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*; Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration*, complete ed. (Bitton, England: Book Foundation, 2003); M. H. Shakir, *Holy Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1983); Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*.

Conclusion

Comparative projects in the study of religion must be built upon a well-developed methodology of comparison. Learning from previous methods of comparison, this dissertation proposes a method of comparing religions that will assist evangelical Christians in contextualizing the gospel by encouraging them to exegete themselves, the Scriptures, and the respondent worldview. The methodology calls for a textual and thematic comparison of the teachings of the most authoritative sacred texts of two traditions concerning a specific topic chosen. In this process, the comparativist must reflect on and make known his religious perspective, purpose and motivation in comparing the religious traditions. Moreover, the comparativist must explain his rationale behind choosing the two traditions, the topic of comparison, and the texts that will be compared. The approach also involves providing a background for the textual comparison by presenting a brief overview of the worldview of each tradition. Finally, throughout the entire comparative process, the comparativist should seek to gain an insiders perspective as she seeks to understand the other worldview.

To demonstrate the usefulness of the proposed methodology for comparing religious, the methodology will be applied to a specific case study. The Qur'an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible will be compared to see what textual resources Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Reformed tradition have in interpreting and responding to suffering in their lives. The next chapter will begin with an overview of the Reformed worldview, and will conclude with a thematic analysis of the Old and New Testaments.

CHAPTER 4

THE SUFFERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Studying the Old and New Testaments will provide invaluable information on the primary textual resources Christians in the Reformed tradition have in interpreting suffering they may experience in life. However, before analyzing the biblical text, it is imperative to first set the proper context by outlining the Reformed worldview.

The Reformed Worldview

Christians in the Reformed tradition, like other conservative Evangelical Christians, affirm that God is all-powerful and sovereign over his creation.¹ However, those in the Reformed tradition affirm God's control over all things to a greater degree. Reformed theologian Loraine Boettner argues that because God is infinite in wisdom and power, his plan for the world "must extend to every detail of the world's existence," and that "if we could see the world in all its relations, past, present, and future, we would see that it is following a predetermined course with exact precision."² This "exact precision" extends to the salvation of sinners. The Reformed tradition is most often associated with

¹As stated in the introductory chapter, this dissertation uses the term "Reformed" in a broad sense, referring to Evangelical Christians that emphasize God's sovereignty over all affairs. Consequently, times of suffering cannot be attributed just to chance or ultimately to human freedom. It should be noted that there some Christians in the Reformed tradition who do not consider themselves either conservative or Evangelical.

²Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), 20. Boettner provides an extensive list of biblical texts that he argues support the idea that history unfolds according to God's plan: (1) God's plan is eternal; (2) God's plan is unchangeable; (3) God's divine plan includes the future acts of men; (4) God's divine plan includes the fortuitous events or chance happenings; (5) some events are recorded as fixed or inevitably certain; (6) even the sinful acts of men are included in the plan and are overruled for good. *Ibid.*, 26-29.

the five points of Calvinism:³ (1) total depravity; (2) unconditional election; (3) limited atonement;⁴ (4) irresistible grace; (5) perseverance of the saints.⁵ However, these five points deal primarily with Reformed soteriology, and not with the entirety of the worldview. Answering the four questions of the proposed method of comparison will help fill out the outline of the Reformed worldview: (1) how did we get here? (2) what is wrong with the world? (3) what is the solution? (4) where are we going?

How Did We Get Here?

The Scriptures teach that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The triune God of the Bible is the self-existent holy loving Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of the cosmos, for “from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36). The Westminster Confession of Faith provides a standard Reformed description of God:

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

³In 1618, the Calvinist majority in the Dutch Reformed Church called together a general assembly of the church at Dort in order to evaluate “the Remonstrance,” a document developed by “an influential Arminian minority” in the church. The document affirmed five points: conditional election, universal atonement, total depravity/prevenient grace, resistible grace, and conditional perseverance. At the end of the meeting, the synod published the five canons of the Synod of Dort, which responded to the five articles of the Remonstrance point-by-point. These five canons of the Synod of Dort later came to be known as the five points of Calvinism. Robert A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will: God’s Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 26-27.

⁴It should be noted that this dissertation’s broad use of “Reformed” also includes “four-point Calvinists,” those rejecting limited atonement.

⁵Texts on the five points of Calvinism abound. Some helpful resources include Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*; Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 9-13.

Moreover, God is triune. The Westminster Confession of Faith provides an orthodox Christian view of the Trinity:

In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

In the beginning, God spoke the cosmos into existence and declared it “very good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). In addition, he created humanity in his image as the pinnacle of his creation (Gen 1:27). He created Adam and Eve, and placed them in the Garden of Eden, where they could enjoy God’s creation, experience fellowship with their Creator, and rule as his image-bearers (Gen 1:26-27; Heb 2:8; Ps 8:6). Theologians have long debated what it means for God to have created humanity in his image. Scott J. Hafemann provides a helpful interpretation of the biblical text. He argues that being created in “the image of God” is primarily a “functional designation,” noting humanity’s unique ability to “relate directly to God in conscious dependence. . . and to reflect this relationship by exercising a godlike rule over the world.”⁶ Moreover, he contends that in representing God’s rule over his creation, Adam and Eve proclaimed “God’s sovereign character in and through his dominion over the created order,” thus introducing the biblical idea of the “kingdom of God.” Hafemann defines the kingdom of God as “the rule and reign of God over his people as their Lord, by which he expresses his own glory as the one and only Creator and Sustainer and Provider and Ruler of all things.”⁷

⁶Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 25. Similarly, T. Desmond Alexander describes Adam and Eve as God’s viceroys, governing the earth on his behalf. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008), 76.

⁷Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*, 25. George Ladd argues that the Kingdom of God is God’s sovereign rule expressed in three ways in Scripture: (1) some passages refer to God’s Kingdom as his reign; (2) some passages describe God’s Kingdom as “the realm into which we may now enter to experience the blessings of His reign”; (3) other passages refer to a “future realm which will come only with the return of our Lord Jesus Christ into which we shall enter and experience the fullness of His reign.” George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 22.

Therefore, God created humanity not only to represent him, but also to glorify him (Isa 43:7; 1 Cor 10:31), just like the rest of creation, which God also created for his glory (Pss 8:1; 19:1-2; 57:5, 11; 113:4; 145:10, 21; 148:13; 150:6). Consequently, God is worthy to receive all glory, honor, and power because he created all things, and because all things are from him, and through him, and to him (Rev 4:11; Rom 11:36). The first question in the Westminster Larger Catechism highlights this purpose of human existence. It reads, “What is the chief and highest end of man? Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him for ever” (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 10:31).

What Is Wrong with the World?

The universe is in a fallen state, full of pain, suffering, and death. When God placed Adam in the Garden, he told him that he could eat freely, but not from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which, and that if he ate from the tree he would surely die (Gen 2:16-17). However, under the instigation of the serpent, Adam and Eve tried to usurp God’s authority and ate from the tree (Gen 3:1-6).⁸ In response, God cursed the serpent, greatly multiplied pain in childbirth, and cursed the ground, increasing man’s toil in working the field (Gen 3:14-19). Finally, God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden (Gen 3:24) and they were consigned to die and return to dust (Gen 3:19). Adam’s disobedience ruptured his relationship with God, Eve, and creation (Gen 3:8-10, 12, 17-19).⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy argues that the Fall obliterated the kingdom of God because

⁸Alexander states that “Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God is an act of utmost treachery. On the one hand, they knowingly betray the Creator who has entrusted them with his authority to govern the earth. On the other hand, they give allegiance to a cunning creature who challenges God’s authority with the deliberate intention of overturning his careful ordering of creation.” Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 78.

⁹Robert Reymond provides a helpful discussion of seven effects of the fall: (1) Adam and Eve became guilty and morally corrupt; (2) image of God was marred; (3) fellowship between God and humanity was broken; (4) creation was cursed; (5) Adam and Eve were condemned and punished; (6) imputation of Adam’s guilt on the human race; (7) humanity’s “greatest and most immediate need is now divine grace.” Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 446-49.

it denied God's rule and confused the proper relationships between God, people, and the world.¹⁰

Adam's sin not only disrupted the created order, but it also brought in death, both physical and spiritual (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:20-22). Humanity inherited Adam's guilt (Rom 5:18)¹¹ and with it, physical death and his sinful nature. Paul describes human nature in Romans 3: "There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one" (Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Rom 3:10b-12). Therefore, in their fallen state, all people are dead in their sins (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13) and in a position of enmity with God (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18), being by nature objects of God's wrath (Eph 2:3).

Humanity is therefore in a state of "total depravity" and "total inability," which "explains the troubles in our world."¹² Robert Reymond describes "total depravity" as being "morally and spiritually corrupt in disposition and character" and "total inability" as being incapable of changing one's character or acting contrary to one's corruption.¹³ Similarly, Grudem describes fallen humanity as lacking spiritual good before God; that is, people cannot "do any *spiritual* good or be good *in terms of a relationship with God*."¹⁴ Romans 8:7-8 reads, "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do*

¹⁰Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 111, 202.

¹¹Wayne Grudem argues that this inherited guilt is best understood as "inherited sin" rather than the traditional name of "original sin" because it is less likely to be misunderstood. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 494.

¹²Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 20.

¹³Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 450-58.

¹⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 497.

so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”¹⁵

People are sinful both by nature (Eph 2:3) and by action (Rom 3:23); therefore, they deserve God’s righteous judgment (Rom 2:1-5; 6:23). In Romans 1-3, Paul explains the human predicament, namely, that both Jews and Gentiles stand guilty before their Holy Creator (Rom 2:12; 3:9-19, 23). All people know that God exists; creation testifies to his eternal power and divine nature (Rom 1:19-20), and their own consciences testify to God’s existence and to their moral duty (Rom 1:32; 2:14-15). Therefore, they are without excuse (Rom 1:20). Nevertheless, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18), and instead of honoring God and giving him thanks (Rom 1:21), they exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship creation rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). In summary, through Adam’s rebellion against God, humanity is in slavery to sin, and condemned to physical death and God’s eternal punishment. Humankind, in its fallen state, lives at enmity with God, with itself, and has subjected creation to futility and corruption (Rom 8:19-22).

What Is the Solution?

God, in his mercy and love, has provided the solution to the world’s fallen condition. He is in the process of reestablishing the Kingdom of God,¹⁶ and making all things new (Rev 21:5) by redeeming the fallen world through Jesus Christ (Matt 1:21;

¹⁵Palmer provides a helpful discussion of the Reformed understanding of total depravity and total inability. He notes that “total depravity” does not mean “absolute depravity” since people are not as evil as they could be, and that because of common grace, unregenerate sinners can still do “relative good.” Rather, he states that “total depravity” means that in their fallen state, people are “only and always sinning” since they are “never able to do any good that is fundamentally pleasing to God” because their “good” deeds are void of “true faith” and are not done to the glory of God (Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9; Ps 51:5; Rom 3:10-18). Finally, Palmer describes “total inability” as not being able to do what is “truly good” (Matt 7:17-18; 1 Cor 12:3; John 15:4-5; Rom 8:7-8) or even to desire to do what is “truly good” (Matt 7:18; John 3:3; 6:44; 8:43; 15:4-5; Ezek 11:19; Col 2:13; Eph 2:1, 5). Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 9-19.

¹⁶The Bible presents a unique salvation history, *Heilsgeschichte*, with the predominant theme of the coming of the Kingdom of God, “the struggle to reestablish the uncontested rule of God over the earth.” Larry R. Helyer, *The Witness of Jesus, Paul and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 81.

Luke 1:68; Eph 1:7; Col 1:20). In essence, through his Son, God is redeeming what he *generated* from the beginning by *regenerating* what had been *degenerated* through the Fall.¹⁷ In order to reverse the effects of the Fall, God is creating a new heaven and new earth,¹⁸ and a new humanity,¹⁹ which will reflect his image and perfect rule,²⁰ thus consummating the Kingdom of God.

God planned to redeem the fallen world through Christ before the foundation of the world.²¹ However, God only progressively revealed his plan to reestablish his Kingdom and renew all things through the coming of the Messiah. Immediately after the Fall, God hinted to Christ's eventual defeat of Satan. In the *proto-evangelium*, he announced that the woman's seed will bruise the serpent's head, and that the serpent's seed will bruise his heel (Gen 3:15).²² God further advanced his plan of redemption by choosing Abram (Abraham), and promising to bless him and his descendants. God promised him land, to make his name great, to turn his descendants into a great nation,

¹⁷Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 188.

¹⁸Rev 21:1; Isa 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13.

¹⁹John 3:3; Rom 6:4; Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:14-16; Titus 2:14.

²⁰J. G. Millar argues that "the message of the Bible, in essence, is that God is at work to bring into being a people under his rule in his place." God created Adam and Eve for this, but they refused the terms. Therefore, God is creating a new heaven and new earth where God's people dwell with him as they should (Rev 22:3-4). J. G. Millar, "People of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 684.

²¹Matt 25:34; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8. According to the Reformed tradition, God not only planned the way of salvation before the creation of the world, but he also, in his love and grace (Eph 1:3-12), unconditionally elected undeserving sinners he would regenerate and save through Christ. Grudem provides a succinct definition of the Reformed doctrine of election: "Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure." Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 670. In support of the doctrine he points the reader to Acts 13:48; Rom 8:28-30; 9:11-13; 11:7; Eph 1:5-6, 12; 1 Thess 1:4-5; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Tim 5:21; 2 Tim 1:9; 2:10; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:9; Rev 13:7-8. *Ibid.*, 671-73.

²²Through his death and resurrection, Jesus rendered the devil powerless (Heb 2:14). Moreover, God promised that he would crush Satan under the feet of his people (Rom 16:20), and that the devil would be thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where he will be tormented day and night (Rev 20:10).

and to bless all the families and nations of the earth through him and his offspring.²³

Christopher Wright argues that the promise to bless the nations “is the bottom line, textually and theologically, of God’s promise to Abraham.”²⁴ God fulfilled this promise through Jesus Christ, who was slain, and with his blood purchased for God people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev 5:9).²⁵

God’s promise continued to progress as the children of Israel grew in number and formed a mighty nation; however, they found themselves in slavery in Egypt for four hundred years. Through miraculous signs and a mighty arm, God delivered Moses and the children of Israel out of bondage, and led them to the land he had promised Abraham.²⁶ In the wilderness, God established the Mosaic covenant, teaching them how to relate to God and one another, promising to bless them if they obeyed the stipulations of the covenant, and to curse them if they disobeyed (Deut 27-28). God declared that Israel would be his special possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, if they would only keep his covenant (Exod 19:4-6).²⁷ Through their obedience, they were to

²³Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:4-5; 17:4-8, 19; 18:18-19; 22:17-18. God repeated the promise to Abraham’s son, Isaac (Gen 26:3-4), and his grandson, Jacob (Gen 28:14-15; 35:12-13).

²⁴Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 194. Interestingly, when Peter is preaching to the crowds in Jerusalem, he references God’s covenant with Abraham, but only notes the promise that through Abraham’s seed all the nations will be blessed (Acts 3:25; Gen 22:18).

²⁵In Galatians, Paul argues that God preached the gospel to Abraham when he told him that all the nations would be blessed in him (Gen 12:3), foreseeing that the Gentiles (or nations) would become sons of Abraham as they are justified by faith (Gal 3:7-8). Moreover, Paul references Gen 22:18 and argues that God’s promises were given to Abraham and to Christ, Abraham’s “seed” (Gal 3:16).

²⁶Wright argues that the exodus is “the primary model of God’s idea of redemption,” and that “it is used as one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ.” Wright, *The Mission of God*, 265.

²⁷God did not choose Israel because of their great number. Rather, he chose them because he loved them, wanted to keep his promise to their forefathers, and for his glory (Deut 7:6-8; Isa 63:11-14; Jer 13:11). Bruce Waltke states that the OT’s message is that “the holy and merciful God continually irrupts into history to establish his kingdom for the hallowing of his name.” Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 167.

draw the nations to the one true God (Deut 4:6-8).

As the children of Israel entered the land and took possession of it, it appeared that God's promises to Abraham were coming to fruition. However, the children of Israel continually broke the Mosaic covenant, and imitated the pagan nations around them, committing spiritual adultery. During the time of the judges, everyone "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 21:25), which established a perpetual cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance. During the time of the kings, the children of Israel did not fare much better. Nevertheless, God did not reject his people. Rather, he added to his promises by establishing the Davidic covenant, promising King David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever (2 Sam 7:11-29; 1 Chr 17:10-27).²⁸

Throughout the time of the kings, God sent prophets to both Israel and Judah, calling the people back to himself, and to warn them of coming judgment. However, because they continued in their idolatry and wickedness, God eventually sent Israel (722 BC) and Judah (586 BC) into exile. Interspersed in their messages of judgment, the prophets also pointed to a future day of blessing for the people of God, where God would once again ruled over an obedient people. Walter Brueggemann states that "the coming rule of YHWH" is everywhere in the Old Testament and is described as a "time of *shalom*, of well-being, of prosperity, security, and fruitfulness."²⁹ He states that it involves three elements: (1) the "restoration and rehabilitation" of Israel; (2) a new creation (Isa 11:6; 65:17-25; Hos 2:18, 21-22); (3) a time when all nations will be impacted by this rule of Yahweh, since he is the Lord of all nations (Amos 9:7; Mic 4:1-

²⁸Pss 89:2-4, 28-29; 132:10-12; Isa 9:6-7; Jer 33:20-22, 25-26; Dan 2:44; 7:14, 27 reiterate that the kingdom that God will establish through the coming Messiah will have no end. It goes without saying that the NT writers understood Jesus as the fulfillment of this promised Davidic king with an eternal kingdom.

²⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 371.

4; Isa 19:24-25).³⁰ Similarly, Walter Kaiser states that the prophets describe Israel's coming restoration as a religious, national, ecological, and physical new birth (Isa 24-27; Jer 30-33; Ezek 33-48; Dan 2-12; Zech 12-14).³¹

Moreover, this restoration involves the coming of the Messiah,³² and the establishment of a new covenant between God and his people (Ezek 37:26; Jer 31:31-34). In this new covenant, all the people of God will know God, and he will dwell with them. He will be their God and they will be his people. He will forgive their sins and they will have his law on their hearts.³³ The OT canon ends with the people of God waiting for God to come and set everything right.

When the fullness of the time came (Gal 4:4), God the Father sent his Son to inaugurate God's kingdom and the renewal of all things. Schreiner argues that the NT makes it clear that in Jesus Christ "God's promises are fulfilled, the end of the ages has come (1 Cor 10:11), the new creation has dawned, eternal life has arrived, and the new covenant is a reality."³⁴ On the same note, Goldsworthy states that Jesus' incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection fulfill the promises of the OT as it begins the "re-

³⁰Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 371.

³¹Walter Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004), 135.

³²Hos 3:5; Mic 5:2; Isa 9:2-7; 11:1-10; 55:3-4; Jer 23:5-6; 30:9; 33:15, 17; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Dan 9:25-26. Thomas R. Schreiner notes that besides Dan 9:25-26, few OT texts explicitly promise the coming of an "anointed one." Nevertheless, he argues that it is not incorrect to state that the OT taught the coming of the Messiah. He writes, "no violence is done to the OT in saying that it promises the coming of a Messiah, for when we merge the promises of the Davidic covenant with the anointing of the Davidic king, it is legitimate to say that the OT looks forward to the coming of an anointed one in the line of David." Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 198-201. For a discussion of the development of the concept of "Messiah" in the OT, see Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 888-90.

³³Jesus understood his death as bringing in this new covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Paul saw himself and the others who worked with him as ministers of this new covenant (2 Cor 3:6). In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as the mediator of the new covenant, explicitly identified with the new covenant described in Jer 31:31-34 (Heb 8:8-12, 13; 9:15; 12:24).

³⁴Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 41.

creation of the kingdom in which God, his people and the created order exist in perfect harmony, perfectly fulfilling their roles.”³⁵

Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is fully God and fully man, yet without sin (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22). He lived a life of perfect obedience and so fulfilled the law (Rom 8:4; 1 Cor 1:30; Heb 4:50). He preached the kingdom of God, healed the sick, fed the hungry, cast out demons, and raised the dead. Jesus’ “signs, wonders, and healings” were markers of the inbreaking kingdom of God and “manifestations of the new creation.”³⁶ At the end of his ministry, Jesus’ was crucified and buried. However, he was not murdered, rather, he willingly offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for sinners, dying on the cross in their place in order to bring them to God.³⁷ Through Christ’s work on the cross, God demonstrated not only his love for sinful humanity,³⁸ but also his own righteousness in not allowing sin to go unpunished (Rom 3:25-26; Acts 14:16; 17:30). After three days in the grave, Jesus resurrected from the dead,³⁹ and appeared to his disciples at various times and in various locations (1 Cor 15:3-8). After a period of forty days (Acts 1:3), he

³⁵Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 206-07. Goldsworthy goes so far as to argue that “Jesus is the new creation.” Ladd points out that even Paul, who does not overly emphasize the concept of the kingdom of God, still portrays Jesus’ mission in terms of his Kingdom or reign. He argues that in 1 Cor 15, Paul presents the kingdom of God as “the redemptive, dynamic rule of God exercised in Christ’s total messianic mission to bring order to a disordered universe, to accomplish God’s total redemptive purpose.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 450.

³⁶Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 64, 66.

³⁷Isa 53:5; Matt 20:28; 26:28; Mark 10:45; 14:24; Luke 22:20; John 11:50-51; Rom 3:24-25; 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Eph 5:2; Heb 10:14; 1 Pet 3:18. Traditionally, those in the Reformed tradition have held to limited or particular atonement, namely, that Christ only died for the elect, those the Father had predestined for salvation before the foundation of the world. In support of this doctrine, Grudem references John 6:37-39; 10:11; 17:9, 20; Acts 20:28; Rom 5:8, 10; 8:32-33; Eph 1:3-4, 7; 2:8; 5:25; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:4; 3:13; Phil 1:29. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 595-96.

³⁸John 3:16; Rom 5:8; Gal 2:20; Eph 1:3-5; 2:4-7; 5:2, 25; Titus 3:4-6; 1 John 3:16; 4:9-10; Rev 1:5-6.

³⁹Christ’s resurrection points to the bodily resurrection of believers and to the “restoration of the whole physical creation.” Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 230.

ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he reigns in power (Luke 22:69; 24:51; Heb 8:1) and intercedes for his people (Rom 8:34).

Before his ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20), and declared that they would be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). Since that time, Christ's followers have proclaimed the gospel, calling people to repent of their sin, and put their faith in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; 17:30; 20:21; Rom 10:9-10). However, in their fallen state, people are unable to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. They are not able to understand the things of God (1 Cor 2:14), and "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). Therefore, the message of the cross is foolishness to them (1 Cor 1:18).

In order to overcome a sinner's spiritual deadness, God must effectually call her,⁴⁰ and regenerate her heart⁴¹ so that she will respond in repentance and faith. Grudem defines God's effectual call as "an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith," and regeneration as "a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us."⁴² As people are drawn into the kingdom through

⁴⁰Rom 8:29-30; John 6:44; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 1:22-25.

⁴¹John 1:13; 3:3-8; Jas 1:17-18; 1 Pet 1:3, 23, 25; Eph 2:5; Col 2:13; Acts 10:44.

⁴²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 693, 699. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes God's effectual call and regeneration: "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it."

repentance and faith in response to the gospel, the “regeneration that exists in Christ starts to become a reality” in believers.⁴³ God gives them spiritual new birth, making them new creations in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). He justifies them, forgiving their sins and declaring them righteous, for Christ paid for their sin and his righteousness has been imputed to them.⁴⁴ God adopts them,⁴⁵ making them children of God in the family of God, the Church.⁴⁶ God begins to sanctify them with the Holy Spirit, freeing them from sin and making them more Christ-like in their character.⁴⁷ Finally, God guarantees their perseverance in the faith and eventual glorification, for those “whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom he justified, He also glorified” (Rom 8:30).⁴⁸ Through Jesus Christ, God lovingly redeems rebellious

⁴³Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 215.

⁴⁴Rom 3:21-22, 26, 28; 4:3, 5, 6-8; 5:1, 17, 19; 8:1, 30, 33-34; 1 Cor 1:30; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9. For an extensive discussion of penal substitution and justification, see Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, eds. *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, eds. *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

⁴⁵John 1:12; Rom 8:14-17, 23, 29; Eph 1:5; Phil 2:15; Gal 3:23-26; 4:4-7; 1 John 3:1a. For a discussion of the spiritual blessings of being adopted by God, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 974-78; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 739-42.

⁴⁶The NT also describes the Church as the temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16-18; Eph 2:21), a new humanity (Rom 5:12-17; Eph 2:15), the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-31; Eph 4:16; Col 1:18; 2:19), the household of God (1 Tim 3:15), God’s field (1 Cor 3:9), the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2), the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim 3:15), the Israel of God (Gal 6:16), the people of God (Heb 4:9; 1 Pet 2:10), the family of God (Matt 12:49-50; 2 Cor 6:18; Eph 3:14; 1 Tim 5:1-2), the flock of God (John 10:1-30; 21:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:4; Heb 13:20), and the vineyard of God (Mark 12:1-12; John 15:1-8). T. J. Tidball, “Church,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 410; Millar, “People of God,” 686.

⁴⁷Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 746.

⁴⁸The Westminster Confession describes the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: “They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.”

sinners. They once were enemies of God deserving his wrath, but now they are his beloved children, heirs of the new creation.

Where Are We Going?

God, in his own timing, will bring his kingdom and the new creation to their consummation, led by the return of Christ.⁴⁹ Until that time, believers are to make Christ known in both word and deed, to the glory of God. If those in Christ die before his return, they are taken to be with him, awaiting their final bodily resurrection (Luke 23:43; John 12:26; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23). At the end, all people will be bodily resurrected, and brought before the judgment seat of Christ.⁵⁰ The redeemed will spend eternity in the new heaven and the new earth. The rest of humanity will be banished from the new creation,⁵¹ and will spend eternity in hell, where each person will be punished according to their sins.⁵²

In the new heaven and new earth, God sets everything in its right relationship, reestablishing the kingdom of God as in the beginning. However, God does not just bring the world to its pre-fall state; rather, he makes it into something even greater.⁵³

⁴⁹Christians in the Reformed tradition, as in the Evangelical tradition at large, have varying views on the Millennium (Rev 20:2-5). Therefore, a specific millennial view will not be presented in this section. For discussions of Amillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, and Postmillennialism, see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1212-231; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1109-136.

⁵⁰2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10, 12; 2:16; Acts 10:42; Eph 6:8; Rev 20:11-15; 2 Tim 4:1; Matt 25:31-33; John 5:26-27.

⁵¹Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 717.

⁵²The NT describes hell as a place away from the presence of the Lord (2 Thess 1:9) prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41). It is a place of eternal punishment (Matt 25:46), torment (Luke 16:28; Rev 14:10-11; 20:11), where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). It is described as outer darkness (Matt 8:12), a bottomless pit (Rev 9:1-2, 11), a place of unquenchable eternal fire (Matt 25:41; Mark 9:43, 48), and a lake of fire and sulphur (Rev 20:10).

⁵³Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), 285.

In the new creation, God will bring together his redeemed people from every tribe, language, people, and nation to dwell in perfect harmony with him and with each other:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Rev 21:3-5)

There will no longer be any night or need for the sun, for the Lord God will be their light and the Lamb its lamp (Rev 21:23; 22:5). There will be no temple for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev 21:22). The people of God will worship and serve God the Father and the Lamb day and night (Rev 4-5; 7:15; 22:3). They will be a kingdom and priests to God, and they shall reign on the earth forever and ever (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 22:5). As priests, the people of God will have direct access to God and will finally, see his face (Rev 22:4), thus fulfilling “the hope and the goal of individual salvation throughout the Scriptures.”⁵⁴

In summary, God is good and created the world good. Humanity’s fall introduced pain, suffering, and death into the world. God redeemed our fallen world, including sinners, through Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Finally, God will one day bring salvation history to its consummation with a new heaven and a new earth, where God’s kingdom is fully established and suffering is no more.

In light of the Reformed worldview, the suffering of God’s people is not accidental, but rather is part of God’s plan. God promises his people that he causes all things to work for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). Nevertheless, suffering is not in itself good. Suffering is an

⁵⁴George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 288.

“intrusion”⁵⁵ into God’s good world. Suffering, pain, and death are “enemies that Christ came to defeat,” even though God may choose to use suffering “for the good of his children and the glory of his name.”⁵⁶ Moreover, as the book of Job demonstrates, the people of God do not know for certain why God has them go through specific periods of suffering since he has not revealed this to them. Suffering is ultimately a mystery, calling for faith.⁵⁷ In *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, John Calvin states that one of the ends of learning about providence is to “teach us to rest in God with quiet and tranquil minds and to despise with confidence and courage the perils that surround us and the hundred deaths that threaten us.”⁵⁸ Similarly, in their introduction to *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware argue that “the doctrines of grace and divine providence are a bulwark for suffering.”⁵⁹ They contend that knowing that “nothing happens to us that does not pass through God’s loving hands,” and that “no action or event- not one!- can ever occur outside of God’s all-encompassing wise plan,” believers can live confidently, and trust God with their lives.⁶⁰

The Suffering of God’s People in the Old Testament

According to the OT, Yahweh is “a sovereign who presides in power and

⁵⁵John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th ann. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 304-05; R. S. Wallace, “Suffering,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J Douglas, 2nd ed. (Wheaton IL: Tyndale, 1982), 1148.

⁵⁶Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 166, 179.

⁵⁷D.A. Carson, “Job: Mystery and Faith,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (2000): 38-55.

⁵⁸John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke & Co, 1961), 166.

⁵⁹Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 18.

⁶⁰Ibid.

authority over heaven and earth, over all creation, and over the historical processes of human affairs.”⁶¹ Therefore, calamity is often attributed to God throughout the OT. For example, Job attributes his suffering to God; God has given and taken away (Job 1:21). Also, he asks his wife, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). Similarly, Lamentations 3:38 reads, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?” In the book of Amos, God rhetorically asks, “If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it? (3:6). Finally, in Isaiah 45:6-7 God says, “I am the LORD, and there is no other, The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity. I am the LORD who does all these.” Moreover, in the book of Job, Satan could not touch Job or even his possessions without God’s permission (Job 1:12; 2:6). Consequently, the OT has much to say about God’s purposes behind the suffering of his people.

What Are God’s Purposes behind the Suffering of His People?

The OT provides six possible reasons why God may have his people suffer.⁶² First, God may be punishing his people for their sins. Second, God may be disciplining or correcting his people so that they might return to him. Third, God may be testing his people. Fourth, he may be refining or purifying his people. Fifth, God may be teaching his people a theological truth. Finally, God may have his people suffer for redemptive purposes.

Punishment for sin. The most prevalent explanation in the OT for the

⁶¹Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 75.

⁶²These purposes are not mutually exclusive. John Feinberg notes that God may want to accomplish a variety of objectives with the suffering of his people. He also notes that God may want the suffering to accomplish something not only in the life of the afflicted, but also in those who know the person or in the spiritual realm. John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*, rev. and exp. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 478.

suffering of God's people is that God is punishing them for their sins. God's "retributive justice,"⁶³ or punishment for sin, is a foundational principle in the OT. The OT presents a world governed by a righteous and just God; therefore, it is natural that the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished.⁶⁴ Therefore, much of the suffering of God's people in the OT, for individuals and the nation, can be described as "retributive suffering."⁶⁵ Retributive justice applied to individuals appears most clearly in Proverbs and Psalms, where God is described as blessing the righteous and destroying the wicked.⁶⁶ In addition to being a foundational principle in the OT, retributive justice also plays a key role in the Mosaic covenant. God promised to bless Israel if they remain faithful, and to curse them if they are unfaithful (Lev 26; Deut 11:26-28; 27-28; 30:15-20):

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known. (Deut 11:26-28)⁶⁷

The OT is filled with examples of God punishing individuals or groups of people because of their sin. God punished Adam and Eve for their disobedience (Gen 3:14-19). During the forty years the children of Israel spent in the wilderness, God would often punish them for their sin. For instance, when the children of Israel worshiped the

⁶³J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 41; Barry D. Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 47 (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 5.

⁶⁴Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 128-29.

⁶⁵Ibid.; H. Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering: Human and Divine* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 34.

⁶⁶Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 5. This belief is also seen in Job's friends, who attribute his suffering to his sin.

⁶⁷However, God promises that if they repent and confess their sins, he will not utterly destroy them (Lev 26:40-45).

golden calf (Exod 32; Deut 9:13-29), God's anger burned against them (Exod 32:10; Deut 9:14) and he sent a plague on the people (Exod 32:35).⁶⁸ In a similar fashion, as the children of Israel camped in Shittim, they joined the people of the land and worshipped their gods, yoking themselves to Baal peor (Num 25:1-9). As punishment, God sent a plague, killing twenty-four thousand of them (Num 25:9). Moreover, because they complained against Moses, God once sent down fire which consumed the outskirts of their camp (Num 11:1-3). Finally, God even disallowed Moses and Aaron from entering the land because they rebelled against God's command at the waters of Meribah.⁶⁹

God's retributive justice is also evident during the conquest, and leading up to the time of the monarchy. For instance, the children of Israel lost in battle against the people of Ai because they transgressed the covenant with God, for Achan had taken some of the devoted things from Jericho which God had told them to destroy (Josh 7:1-26). The book of Judges establishes a pattern repeated throughout the OT. The children of Israel forsake God, by doing evil and worshiping foreign gods (Judg 2:10-14). In response, God punishes them with foreign oppressors.⁷⁰ The children of Israel then cry out (Judg 3:9, 15; 4:3, 6:7; 10:10, 15), and God, in his mercy, sends them judges to deliver them (Judg 2:16), but they soon turn away from God again (Judg 2:17).⁷¹

Saul, David, and Solomon all experienced God's retributive justice. When

⁶⁸God also had the Levites kill those who had participated in the idolatry; they killed about three thousand men (Exod 32:26-28).

⁶⁹Num 20:10-13, 24; 27:14; Deut 1:37; 3:23-28; 4:21-22. For additional examples of retributive suffering during Israel's time in the wilderness, see Num 3:4; 11:33-34; 12:1-16; 14:1-11, 20-37; 16:1-50, 41-49; 21:4-9; 26:10, 61, 65; 32:11; Lev 10:1-3; 26:61; Deut 1:34-36; 24:9; Ps 78:29-31.

⁷⁰They were oppressed by the Mesopotamians for eight years (3:8), by the Moabites for eighteen years (3:12-14), by the Canaanites for twenty years (4:1-3), by the Midianites for seven years (6:1), and the Philistines and Ammonites for eighteen years (10:6-9).

⁷¹In his farewell address to all Israel, Samuel reminds the people that during the time of the judges, God had given Israel into the hands of Sisera, the Philistines, and Moab because they had forgotten God (1 Sam 12), but that he had sent judges to deliver them when they cried out. Nevertheless, he warned that if they did wickedly God would sweep them away.

Saul broke God's commands and performed an unlawful sacrifice, God promised to take away his kingdom (1 Sam 13:8-14). God eventually rejects Saul as king because he spared Agag and some of the animals, and did not devote them to destruction as God had commanded (1 Sam 15:9, 23, 26).⁷² Although David was a man after God's own heart, he was not always faithful. Because King David despised God by having Uriah killed and taking his wife (2 Sam 11; 12:10), God promised that the sword would never depart from his house (2 Sam 12:10). Therefore, God raised up evil from within his house, took away his wives, and gave them to his companions (2 Sam 12:11; 16:21-22). Moreover, God had Bathsheba and David's newborn child die (2 Sam 12:14-23).⁷³ God also punished Solomon for his sin. Solomon's heart turned away from God (1 Kgs 11:4, 9) for he married foreign women and worshiped their gods (1 Kgs 11:1-8). Therefore, God divided his kingdom (1 Kgs 11:11-13; 31-33), and raised up an adversary against him (1 Kgs 11:14).

Since the majority of the kings of Israel and Judah did evil in God's sight, God's retributive justice is a common motif throughout the history of the kings. Jeroboam's promotion of idolatry in the land led to the downfall of his house (1 Kgs 13:33-34; 14:7-17; 15:29-30). Some of the kings of Israel that came after Jeroboam brought calamity on themselves and on their people because they followed in the idolatrous ways of Jeroboam.⁷⁴ Similarly, some kings of Judah were also punished for

⁷²In addition, God later sent a harmful spirit upon him (1 Sam 16:14-16, 23; 18:10; 19:9), and departed from Saul (1 Sam 18:12). 1 Chr 10:13-14 explains that God killed Saul, and gave the kingdom to David because he had disobeyed God's commands, and because he consulted a medium rather than God.

⁷³Later in David's reign, God sent a famine for three years because Saul had broken Israel's promise with the Gibeonites and killed them (2 Sam 21:1). At another time during David's reign, God was angry with Israel, and he incited David to order a census (2 Sam 24:1-5). When David recognized his fault and repented, God gave him three options to choose from: three years of famine, three months of being chased by his enemies or four days of pestilence. David chose the pestilence, which eventually killed seventy thousand men.

⁷⁴Baasha (1 Kgs 16:1-7, 11-13); Zimri (1 Kgs 16:18-19); Ahab (1 Kgs 16:33; 21:20-24; 22:37-38; 2 Kgs 10:1-11); Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:4, 6, 16); Joash/Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:1-5).

their sin and unfaithfulness to God, namely, Jehoram/Joram (2 Chr 21:10-20), Amaziah (2 Chr 25:14-16, 27), and Ahaz (2 Chr 28).⁷⁵

The most poignant examples of God's retributive justice in the OT are the fall of Israel in 722 BC, and the fall of Judah in 586 BC.⁷⁶ The prophet Ahijah prophesied against Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, that God would uproot Israel and scatter them beyond the Euphrates because they provoked God to anger for making asherim (1 Kgs 14:15-16). Similarly, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah condemn Israel for their idolatry and immorality, and warn that God is going to destroy and exile them through the hands of Assyria.⁷⁷ 2 Kings explains that the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and carried Israel into exile because they served idols, and built themselves high places, pillars, and asherim on every hill (17:9-12). Moreover, they did not listen to God's warning through the prophets, and they rejected God's covenant (17:13-15; 18:11-12). Jeremiah and Ezekiel both use God's destruction of Israel for their sin as a warning for Judah, for God cast them out of his sight (Jer 7:15), and he gave them into the hands of their "lovers" (Ezek 23:1-9).

Similarly, the OT presents the Babylonian captivity, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC as God's judgment on Judah for their iniquities. Micah (3:9-12), and Zephaniah (1:4-6) warned that God was going to destroy Judah because of their sin, and Isaiah specified that God was going to destroy Judah through the hands of Babylon (Isa 2:6-22; 3:1-2, 8-9; 5:1-7; 29:3-4, 13-14). Jeremiah exemplifies the OT understanding of the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. The book of Jeremiah teaches that God himself sent Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem, and sent the people into exile because of

⁷⁵Some kings of Judah, namely, Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah did try to bring the people back to God (2 Chr 15:1-7; 29:3-31:21; 34:8-35:19).

⁷⁶For additional examples of God sending foreign nations to punish his people for their sin, see 1 Kgs 14:25; 1 Chr 5:23-26; 2 Chr 12:1-9; 21:16-17; 24:23-24; 28:1-27.

⁷⁷Amos 2:6-8; 3:11; 5:18-27; 6:4-8, 12-14; Hos 1:4; 2:1-13; 4:1-19; 5:1-14; 7:10-13; 8:13-14; 9:7-9, 17; 10:2; 11:5; 12:2, 14; 13:4-11; Isa 8:1-8; 9:8-21; 10:1-11.

their sins. God sent a nation from the north to punish the people of Judah because of their sin (Jer 1:14-19; 5:7-15, 19, 29; 6:6-7, 13-15), and for forsaking the covenant by worshiping other gods (Jer 7:22-26; 11:1-17; 22:8-9). God destroyed Jerusalem (Jer 6:6-12; 21:4-7) and the temple (Jer 7:14-15). He consumed the people with sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer 14:12; 15:2; 29:17-23), and sent them into exile for seventy years (Jer 29:4, 14; 5:19; 25:4-11). God says, “Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people, The fruit of their plans, Because they have not listened to My words, And as for My law, they have rejected it also” (Jer 6:19).⁷⁸ From all the passages presented, it is clear that the OT teaches that God may send times of suffering on his people as punishment for their sins.⁷⁹

Discipline and correction. God may also send times of affliction on his people in order to discipline them,⁸⁰ that is, correct them⁸¹ and motivate them to return to God. Therefore, his punishments serve not only a punitive role, but also a disciplinary one, for God disciplines as a loving father (Deut 8:5; Prov 3:11-12). The OT describes God disciplining both individuals, and the children of Israel collectively. God’s punishment of his people is best understood as discipline since he will never utterly

⁷⁸For further passages in Jeremiah which describe the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity as God’s punishment for the sins of Judah, see Jer 2:3-37; 4:16-18; 8:4-14; 9:12-16; 13:9, 13-14, 22-25; 16:10-13; 17:1-4; 13; 18:15-17; 19:3-9. For additional passages describing the Babylonian captivity as God’s punishment, see 2 Chr 21:10-16; 23:26-27; 24:20; 36:15-21; Ezra 5:12; 9:7, 13; Neh 1:8; 9:26-37; 13:17-18); Lam 1:5, 8-9, 12-15, 22; 2:1-9, 17; 4:13-16, Ezek 4; 5; 7:1-9; 9:9-10; 15; 16; 24; 33:21-29; Dan 9:7-16; Zech 7:9-14.

⁷⁹Space does not permit to discuss all the instances of retributive suffering throughout the rest of the OT. For further examples, see 1 Sam 2:27-34; 3:13-14; 4:11, 17; 6:19; 2 Kgs 5:15-27; 2 Chr 20:35-37; 26:16-21; Pss 78; 90:7-9; 107:10-14; 119:75; Isa 3:14-17; Jer 3:1-3; 42:13-22; 44:11-14, 27-30; Hag 1:7-11; Zech 10:3.

⁸⁰For an extensive treatment of this topic, see Jim Alvin Sanders, *Suffering as Divine Discipline in the Old Testament and Post-Biblical Judaism* (Rochester, NY: Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1955). Both Kaiser and Robinson describe this type of suffering as educational and disciplinary. Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 129; Robinson, *Suffering*, 36.

⁸¹John Goldingay, *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 622.

forsake his people, even though they have repeatedly broken the covenant.⁸² For instance, throughout the book of Jeremiah, God promises to destroy his people, and even after he does so, he promises a time of future restoration and blessing for Israel (Jer 30-33). This shows that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians “does not represent the abandonment of the people, but is intended to have a disciplinary function.”⁸³

Discipline in the OT is most often corporate and connected to God’s covenant with Israel.⁸⁴ For instance, in Deuteronomy 8:5-6, as Moses reminds the children of Israel of their covenant with God and of their troubles in the wilderness (Deut 7:1-8:4), he tells them, “that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.”⁸⁵ Moreover, in Leviticus 26:14-17, God tells the children of Israel how he will punish them for their disobedience, and then says, “If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins” (26:18). He repeats the same idea in Leviticus 26:23-24 and in 26:27-28. These verses imply that the suffering that God will send upon them for their disobedience is intended to make them repent and turn back to God (26:23-24).⁸⁶ This theme is found throughout the OT.

Some OT texts explicitly state that God may send times of suffering on his

⁸²Deut 4:27-31; 9:26-27; 30:1-10; 2 Kgs 13:23; Ps 106:40-46; Isa 65-66; Jer 30-32; 33:25-26; 46:28; Ezek 36-37; Mic 7:20

⁸³Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 60.

⁸⁴D. P. Kingdon, “Discipline,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 448.

⁸⁵Kingdon argues that based on Deut 8:5, God’s discipline of Israel was motivated by love and concern as a father for a child. However, the covenant curses in Deut 27 and 28 should prevent us from “sentimentalizing God’s love” as to exclude the severity of God’s discipline as seen in the destruction of Jerusalem in the Babylonian captivity. Kingdon, “Discipline,” 448.

⁸⁶Moreover, it should be noted that the word יָסַר, which the NASB translates as “punish” in verses 26:18 and 28 can also be translated as discipline, as in the ESV. יָסַר appears ninety-two times in the OT and thirty-three times carries the idea of God teaching a lesson through affliction to the nation of Israel or to individuals. Sanders, *Suffering as Divine Discipline in the Old Testament*, 42.

people so that they will recognize their sin and repent. In Hosea 5:14-15, God says that he will tear Ephraim and Judah to pieces, and that he will depart from them until they repent: “I will go away *and* return to My place Until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me.” Other passages explain that God’s people should have repented when God punished them for their sin. In the book of Amos, God states that he sent Israel a famine, drought, a scorching wind, mildew, a plague, and that he slew their young men with the sword, and overthrew them as Sodom and Gomorrah so that they would return to him (4:6-11). Nevertheless, after each of these punishments, they did not repent (4:6-11). Isa 42:24-25 states that God “gave Jacob up for spoils and Israel to plunderers,” and he poured out the heat of his anger, yet Israel did not “recognize it” and “paid no attention.” In all these examples, God expects his people to repent after he punishes them for their sin.⁸⁷

God may also send times of affliction on individuals, that they may learn and repent. God’s discipline is a common theme in the books of poetry. In the Psalms, David calls out to God, asking him not to rebuke him or chastise him in his anger (Ps 6:1-2; 38:1-4). David also pleads with God to remove his plague and oppressions from him, for the chastening he is receiving for his iniquities is consuming what is dear to him like a moth (Ps 39:10-11). Also, the psalmist recognizes his suffering as God’s severe discipline (Ps 118:18). Moreover, the psalmist thanks God for afflicting him, for in the affliction he was able to learn God’s law (Ps 119:71-75). Psalm 93:12 reads, “Blessed in the man whom You chasten, O LORD, And whom You teach out of Your law.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Proverbs 3:11-12 reads, “My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or

⁸⁷For additional examples of God punishing his people collectively so that they would repent, see Jer 2:30; 5:3; 7:28; Dan 9:13; Hag 2:17.

⁸⁸Commenting on this verse, Charles Talbert states that people should accept and desire God’s discipline since it is motivated by God’s mercy and is intended for their good. Charles H. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 15.

loathe His reproof, For whom the LORD loves He reproves, Even as a father *corrects* the son in whom he delights.” Therefore, God’s people might interpret their suffering as God’s discipline and correction.

A test and a trial. Some passages of the OT explain times of suffering as a test or trial from God. This type of suffering could be characterized as probational or evidential.⁸⁹ The OT uses three key terms for testing: נסה, בחן, and צרק, meaning “to reveal,” “to authenticate,” and “to refine,” respectively.⁹⁰ God tested (נסה) Abraham to see if he would sacrifice Isaac. He tested (נסה) Israel in the wilderness for forty years to see what was in their hearts (Deut 8:2). Because Israel did not drive out the nations as God commanded, he left them in the land in order to test (נסה) Israel to see whether they would walk in his ways (Judg 2:21-22; 3:1; 3:4). Moreover, God tests (בחן) or authenticates human hearts with times of affliction (Prov 17:3), like that of the people of God (Ps 66:10), and Job (Job 23:10).⁹¹ In Jeremiah 9:7 and Zechariah 13:9, God warned that because of his peoples’ sin, he would have to test (בחן) or authenticate them. Finally, God may test (צרק) by refining with fire (Ps 66:10; Isa 1:25; 48:10; Jer 9:7; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2-3). These passages will be discussed in the following paragraph under the heading of refining. Based upon these examples, God may test his people partly as a punitive measure or as a way “to see” or “authenticate” a believer’s faith, like in the case of Abraham and Job.

⁸⁹Robinson, *Suffering*, 39. Smith calls this form of suffering in the OT “probationary.” Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 134.

⁹⁰Gregory Scott Smith, “The Testing of Our Faith: A Pentateuchal Theology of Testing” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 12, 16, 32, 36. On p. 39, Smith includes a helpful chart with the definitions of the three words and all their uses in the OT.

⁹¹Feinberg states that God used Job’s affliction at least in part to show Satan an example of “true or genuine faith.” Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 479. Similarly, Robin Routledge points out that “Job’s faithfulness in the face of suffering has an influence in the heavenly realm: it proves the truth of God’s words and gives the lie to Satan’s accusation.” Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 257.

Refining. Closely related to the idea that suffering is a test from God, is the idea that suffering can serve to refine or purify the person from sin. Alister McGrath notes that in the OT “suffering is seen as being like a refiner’s fire, which removes the impurities of faith.”⁹² Proverbs 17:3 teaches that God’s testing may have a purifying effect for “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” Job presents a similar idea when in the midst of his suffering he says, “But He knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). The psalmist also alludes to this purifying effect of suffering: “For You have tried us, O God; You have refined us as silver is refined. . . . We went through fire and through water, Yet You brought us out into a place of abundance” (Ps 66:10, 12). In Isaiah, God’s punishment of his people is described as a smelting away of dross (Isa 1:25), a removal of alloy (Isa 1:25), and a washing and purging (Isa 4:4). In Isaiah 48:9-11, God explains that he has refined Judah and tested them in the furnace of affliction for his own sake because he will not allow his name to be profaned or for his glory to be given to another. Jeremiah describes God’s punishment as a refinement (Jer 9:7), and Ezekiel describes God’s wrath as cleansing (Ezek 24:13-14; 36:33). After returning from exile, Zechariah warns that there will be a time when God will cleanse Jerusalem from its sin, impurity, and false prophets; two-thirds will be cut off and the last third will be refined by fire (Zech 13:1, 8-9). Finally, in Malachi 3:2-3, God warns that he will come in judgment and purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. To conclude, in most instances, God’s refining through suffering is partly punitive, but it can also be for simple edification, like it was for Job.

Teach a theological truth. God may have his people suffer in part to teach a theological truth. In other words, the suffering can be “revelational,” as God uses the suffering to give his people a deeper knowledge of himself, and of his relationship with

⁹²Alister McGrath, *Suffering & God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 72.

them.⁹³ For example, God places Hosea and Ezekiel in a “paradigmatic role that results in personal loss.”⁹⁴ God commands Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman (Hos 1:2; 3:1-3), whose unfaithfulness was to be a vivid picture for the people of Israel of their unfaithfulness to God. Moreover, God tells Ezekiel that he is about to take away his wife, “the desire of his eyes,” but that he should not mourn or weep (Ezek 24:15-17). Ezekiel will then be a sign (Ezek 24:24, 27) to the people of Jerusalem when they ask him why he is not weeping, for he will tell them that they too will not weep when God profanes his temple, the “desires of their eyes,” and when their sons and daughters are killed by the sword (Ezek 24:21-22). When the people see Ezekiel’s prophecy come true, God says that they will then know “that I am the LORD” (Ezek 24:24, 27).⁹⁵ Finally, although the text does not explicitly state that God had Job suffer so that he could gain a better understanding of God, the text does show that Job experienced God in a new way. In Job’s final confession, he recognizes his deeper understanding of God:

I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. “Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.” I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2-6)

In other words, Job caught “a glimpse of his sovereignty and majesty” like never before.⁹⁶

Redemptive suffering. The account of Joseph (Gen 37; 39-50) and the

⁹³Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 134. Robinson also calls it “revelational suffering.” Robinson, *Suffering*, 42.

⁹⁴Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 121.

⁹⁵Throughout Ezekiel, God warns that he will destroy his people because of their sin, and when this does take place, then they will know “that I am the LORD” (Ezek 6:7, 9-10, 11-14; 7:4, 9, 27; 33:29).

⁹⁶Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 482. Feinberg also states that “sometimes our view of God is too small, and God corrects that by sending afflictions and then providing himself to be the all-powerful One in our behalf.” *Ibid.*, 483.

passage on the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12) provide a unique form of suffering not found in other parts of the OT, that is, suffering for the good of others. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, is separated from his loving father, is wrongly accused of sexual misconduct with Potiphar's wife, is thrown into prison for years, and is forgotten by the cupbearer who promised to help him. After all this suffering, Joseph explains to his brothers that God had sent him ahead to preserve life, especially Israel's family, as he was able to help Pharaoh to plan ahead for the seven-year famine (Gen 45:5-8). Moreover, he explains to them that although they meant evil against him when they sold him into slavery, God actually meant it for good, in order "to preserve many people alive" (Gen 50:20). Kaiser calls Joseph's suffering a "doxological suffering," meaning that God may have his people experience suffering "in order that His own glory and purpose might be worked out."⁹⁷ House identifies Joseph's suffering as "redemptive suffering," because God brings good out of Joseph's suffering.⁹⁸

The example of the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12) is not only redemptive, but explicitly vicarious and substitutionary. God smote him, and was pleased to crush him (Isa 53:4, 10). God caused the iniquity of sinners to fall on him, and was therefore counted among the transgressors (Isa 53:6, 12). He bore their griefs and carried their sorrows (Isa 53:4). He was pierced through for their transgressions, and crushed for their iniquities (Isa 53:5). Their chastening fell on him and his scourging brought them healing (Isa 53:5). He will justify the many by bearing their iniquities, and he will intercede for them (Isa 53:11-12). This principle of substitutionary atonement is present in Old Testament sacrificial system as the sins of the people are laid on an animal, especially on

⁹⁷Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 132.

⁹⁸Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 312. Commenting on God's plan for Joseph, Jerry Bridges states that for a child of God, "there is no such thing as pain without a purpose." The purpose may seem "irrational and inexplicable," yet God's purpose is beneficial. Jerry Bridges, "Does Divine Sovereignty Make a Difference in Everyday Life?" in *Still Sovereign*, 301.

the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).⁹⁹ However, the passage of the Suffering Servant is the only passage in the OT that teaches that a person can serve as a guilt offering.¹⁰⁰ Jesus himself (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:37) and the early Christians (Matt 8:17; 12:17-21; 1 Pet 2:24) saw him fulfilling the role of this Suffering Servant.

To conclude, the OT presents six major reasons God might have his people suffer. He might be punishing them, disciplining them, testing them, refining them, teaching them a theological truth, or he might have a redemptive purpose in mind.

How Are God's People to Respond to Suffering?

The OT provides various principles believers can use as they develop a response to suffering. First, if believers feel that they are being punished or disciplined for their sin, they should repent. Second, believers should call out to God when they are experiencing times of suffering. Third, believers should put their hope and trust in God. Finally, believers should remain faithful to God.

Repent if being punished and disciplined. The most common explanation for the suffering of God's people in the OT is that God is punishing or disciplining them for their sin. In response to God's discipline, his people should confess their sin and repent. This response necessitates that his people accept God's chastisement and punishment.¹⁰¹

Various passages in the OT describe his people accepting his discipline. For example, when Samuel tells Eli that God is about to punish his house because of their sin,

⁹⁹Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 130.

¹⁰⁰House, *Old Testament Theology*, 132. House further argues that the passage links the OT sacrificial system and the NT teaching that Christ's death atones for sin.

¹⁰¹R. C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in the Christian Life* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2009), 142.

Eli responds by saying, “It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him” (1 Sam 3:10-18). Eli trusted in God’s justice and accepted God’s punishment upon his family. After Nathan confronted David with his sin and God told him that he would raise up evil for him from his household, David confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD,” (2 Sam 12:13), and he repented (Ps 51). Moreover, after David’s newborn son died because of his sin, David “arose from the ground, washed, anointed *himself*, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped” (2 Sam 12:20). David admitted his guilt and saw that God was blameless in his judgments (Ps 51:3-4). Finally, in reference to God’s punishment of his people, Micah says, “I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me out to the light, *And* I will see His righteousness” (7:9). Micah recognized that God’s judgment on his people was deserved and therefore, they should bear it and wait for him to restore them.

Several passages in the OT call God’s people to repent or teach that God expects his people to repent when he disciplines them.¹⁰² In the Mosaic covenant, God states that he will give his people respite from his punishments if they repent (Lev 26:40-45). God reiterates the same principle to Solomon (2 Chr 7:14). God’s call for his people to repent is a common theme throughout the message of the prophets. For instance, the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Joel all affirm that God commands his people to repent of their sin, especially in response to his discipline.¹⁰³

Call out to God. Throughout the OT, the people of God call out to him for help during times of affliction. The clearest example of this response to suffering is in

¹⁰²For a more extensive discussion of passages that describe the expectation that God’s people repent in response to his punishment and discipline, see pp. 143-46.

¹⁰³Isa 1:16-17, 27; 30:15; 55:1-2; 6-7; Jer 3:11-15, 22; 4:1-4; 4:14; 7:3-6; 14:7-9; 18:11; 21:12; 26:13; Ezek 18:21-24, 30-32; 33:10-11; Hos 6:1-3; 10:12; Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-17.

the Psalms, which affirm the reality of human anguish. Songs of lament and complaint make up a major portion of the Psalms.¹⁰⁴ Psalm 6:4-6 reads, “Return, O LORD, rescue my soul; Save me because of your lovingkindness. . . . I am weary with my sighing; Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears.” Kaiser identifies seven parts in a psalm of lament: (1) invocation; (2) plea to God for help; (3) more complaints; (4) confession of sin or declaration of innocence; (5) prayer of imprecation or curse on one’s enemies; (6) expression of confidence that God will deliver, (7) hymn or blessing.¹⁰⁵ The Psalms end by stating that God will deliver or at least express “implicit confidence, insofar as the author expects God to hear and respond; true despair is silent.”¹⁰⁶

The OT not only depicts God’s people calling out to him when in distress, but also that God hears them, for he is near to all who call upon him in truth (Ps 145:18). Throughout the Psalms, God is described as one who hears and responds to the prayers of his people.¹⁰⁷ He is also the one who comforts, cares for, and restores his people.¹⁰⁸ He is near to the broken hearted (Ps 34:18), and he keep their tears in his bottle and writes them in his book (Ps 56:8). Therefore, God especially hears the cries of the afflicted, poor, and needy, and he executes justice for them.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴Bruce Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 369. Pss 4-7; 10-13; 22; 25; 28; 42-43; 55-57; 59-60; 69-70; 74; 77; 79; 86; 88; 102; 123;130;137;140-143 are psalms that involve calling out to God when suffering. Dan McCartney, *Why Does it Have to Hurt? The Meaning of Christian Suffering* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1998), 105

¹⁰⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Suffering and the Goodness of God in the Old Testament,” in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, ed. Christopher Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Theology in Community 1* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 59.

¹⁰⁶Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 158. For some Psalms that state that God will respond and deliver, see Pss 3-7; 10; 13-14; 17; 25-28; 35; 59. *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁰⁷Pss 4:3; 6:8; 18:6; 34:4; 55:16-17; 86:7; 106:44-48;107:13-14, 19-20; 118:5; 120:1; 121:1.

¹⁰⁸Pss 34:18; 56:8. Also see Isa 51:12; 57:15; 66:13.

¹⁰⁹Pss 10:17-18; 22:24; 34:6; 34:17; 69:33; 72:12-14; 140:12-13; 146:7, 9.

The OT also contains examples of God answering the prayers of his people as they cry out. For example, God responded to Hagar's cries and provided for her and Ishmael (Gen 16:11-14). He heard Jacob's pleas and protected him from Laban (Gen 32:42). He heard the cries of Israel, and delivered them from slavery under the Egyptians (Exod 2:24; 4:31; Neh 9:9). God relented from destroying the people of Israel when Moses cried out to him for mercy (Num 11:1-3; Deut 10:18-20, 25-29). In the time of the judges, the children of Israel cried out to God and he sent judges to deliver them. He provided a son for Hannah in response to her prayers (1 Sam 1:11-12). Hezekiah and Isaiah called out to God to protect Jerusalem from the Assyrians, and God delivered them (2 Kgs 19:19; 2 Chr 32:2-23; Isa 37:14-20). It is clear from the OT text that one of the natural responses for God's people is to call out to God for help when they are suffering; they call out because they trust that he will hear and respond.

Put hope and trust in God. Throughout the OT, the people of God put their hope and trust in God, for he is their source of protection and safety. He is their shield, refuge, rock, fortress, and stronghold:¹¹⁰

I love You, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, And I am saved from my enemies. (Ps 18:1-3)

Moreover, God is the savior, deliverer and redeemer of his people.¹¹¹ God declares, "For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior," (Isa 43:3a), and "I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no savior besides Me" (Isa 43:11). He is also their strength.¹¹² After crossing the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel sang

¹¹⁰For some examples, see Gen 15:1; Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31; 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:2-3, 32, 47; 23:3; Ps 18:2.

¹¹¹For some examples, see Exod 6:6; 2 Sam 22:2; Job 19:25; Pss 17:7; 18:2; 19:14; Isa 43:3; Jer 15:21; Lam 3:58; Mic 4:10; Zech 49:8.

¹¹²Exod 15:2; Neh 8:10; Pss 28:7-8; 46:1; 59:17; 73:26; 81:1; Isa 12:2; Jer 16:19; Hab 3:19.

“The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation” (Exod 15:2).¹¹³ Therefore, God’s people should not fear (Pss 3:6; 46:1-3; 118:6), but rather put their hope and trust in God.¹¹⁴ For instance, Daniel was taken out of the lion’s den and suffered no injury “because he had trusted in his God” (Dan 6:23).

Part of trusting in God is waiting for his deliverance. In times of trouble, David writes, “Wait for the LORD; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the LORD” (Ps 27:14).¹¹⁵ Similarly, Lamentations 3:24-26 reads, “‘The LORD is my portion,’ . . . Therefore I have hope in Him. The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. *It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the LORD.*” Isaiah reminds the people of God that his justice will come, and that he will give strength to those who wait for him:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God”? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, And to *him who* lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, And vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up *with* wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary.” (Isa 40:27-31)¹¹⁶

In addition to waiting for his deliverance, God’s people do not take it upon themselves to repay their enemies; rather, they trust God to repay as he sees fit. In the Song of Moses, God declares that vengeance and recompense are his (Deut 32:35).

¹¹³Similarly, Isa 12:2 reads, “For the LORD GOD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation,” and Ps 118:14 reads, “The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation.”

¹¹⁴God is the hope of Israel or God’s people should hope in God: Pss 31:24; 146:5; Jer 14:8, 22; 17:13; Lam 3:22-24. The people of God should trust in him: 2 Kgs 18:5, 22, 30; 1 Chr 5:20; 2 Chr 13:18; Ps 4:5; Prov 3:5; Isa 12:2; Jer 17:7; Dan 6:23.

¹¹⁵For other passages in the Psalms that emphasize the value of waiting for the LORD, see Pss 25:5, 21; 27:14; 33:20; 37:7, 9, 34; 40:1; 52:9; 62:1, 5; 69:3, 6; 106:13; 130:5-6; 147:11.

¹¹⁶For additional passages in Isaiah that emphasize the value of waiting for the LORD, see 8:17; 25:9; 26:8; 33:2; 49:23; 64:4.

Moreover, Proverbs 20:22 reads, “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you.” Therefore, instead of seeking revenge, God’s people call out to God for justice. The psalmists call out to God to deliver them and repay their enemies, for Yahweh loves justice and will not forsake his people (Ps 37:28).¹¹⁷ Similarly, Jeremiah calls on God to pay back those who have opposed and persecuted him during his ministry (Jer 17:17-18; 18:19-23; 20:11-12). Nehemiah also calls on God to return the reproach on the heads of those who oppose the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem (Neh 4:4-5). In summary, when God’s people are experiencing times of affliction they should put their hope and trust in God. They should wait for God to deliver them and to repay their enemies as he sees fit.

Remain faithful to God. God expects his people to remain faithful to him and his commands when they are suffering. Job exemplifies this type of steadfastness. God describes him as a “blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8). After Satan takes Job’s property and children, Job responds by tearing his robe, shaving his head and worshiping God: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing (Job 1:22). After Satan attacks Job’s health, Job still did not sin and he said, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? (Job 2:10). Even though Job ends up lamenting his birth and even complaining to God, he never turns away from God nor does he break God’s commands. He remains faithful as much as is possible under his conditions. After God overwhelms him with his sovereignty and power, Job repents of his questioning, and admits his ignorance before God (Job 42:1-6).

David and Habakkuk also remain faithful to God, and respond to suffering by worshiping God. After David’s newborn son dies, David arises from the ground, washes

¹¹⁷For additional Psalms in which God is called on to repay the wicked, see Pss 5:10; 7:6; 9:19-20; 10:14-15; 35:1; 70; 71:13.

and anoints himself, changes his clothes, and goes to temple to worship God (2 Sam 12:13-14, 20). He does not accuse God of wrongdoing, but rather accepts God's discipline and continues to worship God. His suffering drew him back to God, not away from him. In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet asks God how he can use the kingdom of Babylon to punish his people since they are so wicked themselves. God responds that he will judge them as well. The book ends with Habakkuk rejoicing in God:

Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
The Lord GOD is my strength,
And He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*,
And makes me walk on my high places.

Also, the book of Daniel contains examples of God's people remaining faithful, even under persecution. Under the threat of being thrown into a "furnace of blazing fire (Dan 3:6), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained faithful to God, and would not worship Nebuchadnezzar's gods or worship the golden image he set up (Dan 3:8-14). After being detained and given a final chance to recant and worship the image, they respond that they would not worship his gods or image even if it costs them their lives:

O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be *so*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *even* if *He* does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. (Dan 3:16-18)

Daniel exemplified a similar commitment to God, even to death. As a ploy to get rid of Daniel, his opponents convinced King Darius to sign a document, enacting a law that anyone who makes a petition to any god or person, except to the king, will be thrown into the den of lions (Dan 3:7). However, when Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house and got on his knees, and prayed toward Jerusalem

as he had done before. Therefore, he was detained and thrown into the lions' den (Dan 6:16-17). In both of these accounts, God supernaturally delivered his people from death, leading Nebuchadnezzar and Darius to acknowledge God's power (Dan 3:28-30; 6:25-28).¹¹⁸

To conclude, based on the OT, God's people may interpret their suffering in various ways. God may be punishing them for their sin, and disciplining them so that they will turn back to God. Or, God may be testing them. He may also be using the affliction to refine and purify their faith. God may also have his people experience suffering in order to teach them and others a specific theological truth. Finally, God may be using the suffering in a redemptive way, in order to bring about a greater good. If believers interpret their suffering as God's discipline, they should confess their sin and repent. If they are suffering for any other reason, they should call out to God, put their hope and trust in him, and remain faithful to the end.

The Suffering of God's People in the New Testament

Since the suffering and death of Christ are at the heart of God's plan to redeem our fallen world, suffering is not "alien to the purpose of God."¹¹⁹ Consequently, the NT provides a more positive perspective on suffering than the OT. In the NT, the suffering of God's people is ultimately for God's glory and the good of his people, for suffering is how God is bringing in his kingdom and new creation. Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross is the foundational event that establishes this NT theme. Mark Talbot

¹¹⁸Josef Ton notes that Daniel and his three friends not only stayed faithful to God under the threat of death, but that they also used the opportunity in exile to tell their captors about their God. Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 34. Daniel tells the kings about his God (Dan 2:37-38; 4:19-27; 5:17-28; 6:21-22). His three friends tell the king about their God (Dan 3:17-18). The kings acknowledge their God (Dan 2:47; 3:28-29; 4:34-37; 6:25-27).

¹¹⁹Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 98.

eloquently explains this glorious truth:

Our Lord's crucifixion is the supreme instance of how God ordains real evil for his own glory and his children's good: in that case, the most awful act ever done- the crucifixion by wicked yet responsible men of God's only Son, "The Holy and Righteous One" who is the very "Author of life" (Acts 2:23 and 3:14f.)- was and is the most wonderful event that has ever occurred because it was through Christ's utterly unjust and undeserved crucifixion and death that God was reconciling the world to himself.¹²⁰

What Are God's Purposes behind the Suffering of His People?

The NT does not provide a theodicy; nevertheless, it does contain extensive resources for believers as they seek to interpret their personal suffering. The dominant theme that the suffering of God's people is ultimately for God's glory and the good of his people is evident throughout the NT. First, there are passages which explicitly or implicitly teach that God has his people experience suffering for his own fame and renown. Second, passages abound in which suffering is the mechanism through which the gospel spreads. Third, God may have his children suffer for the good of others. Fourth, God may use suffering to sanctify his children, making them more Christ-like in character. Fifth, God may use times of suffering in the life of believers as a way to deepen their faith and reliance on him. Sixth, God may test believers with times of affliction for the purpose of purifying them, and increasing their heavenly rewards. Seventh, God may have believers experience afflictions so that they may have a deeper experiential knowledge of a spiritual truth. Finally, God may introduce trials into the life of his children in order to discipline them, leading them to repent of their sin and turn back to him.

It should be noted that God's glory and the good of his people are not easily separated, for all the good that God does for his people is ultimately for his own glory.

¹²⁰Mark A. Talbot, "All the Good That Is Ours in Christ: Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 66.

The spread of the gospel and the spiritual development of his children are not only for the good of God's people, but they are also honoring and pleasing to God. Grudem implies this idea when he writes: "we should see all the hardship and suffering that comes to us in life as something that God brings to us *to do us good*, strengthening our trust in him and our obedience, and ultimately increasing our ability to glorify him."¹²¹

Before discussing the possible reasons behind the suffering of God's people in the NT, it is imperative to first look at Christ's work on the cross, the central event in salvation history, where God "shows that the worst evil is meant by God for good."¹²² The NT clearly teaches that Christ's sacrifice was for God's glory and the good of his people. Jesus knew that his suffering and death was ultimately for his Father's glory (John 12:27-33; 13:31-33; 17:1-2).¹²³ Contemplating the "cup" he was about to drink, Jesus prays, "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 'Father, glorify Your name' (John 12:27-28a). Moreover, Jesus speaks of his approaching death as his own glorification (John 12:23-24; 13:31-33; 17:1-2). After hearing that some Greeks were seeking to see him, Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:20-24).

Paul also describes Christ's redemptive work as glorifying to God. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that God's plan of redemption is ultimately for the glory of God (Eph 1:5-6, 12, 14). In his letter to the Philippians, he writes that because Christ was

¹²¹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 811-12.

¹²²John Piper, *The Passion of Jesus Christ: Fifty Reasons Why He Came to Die* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 118.

¹²³Jesus also speaks of being "lifted up," carrying the double meaning of crucifixion and glorification (John 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32-33). J. B. Green, "Death of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 162.

obedient to the point of death on a cross, God highly exalted him, giving him “the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow . . . and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:8-11). In other words, Christ’s suffering and death glorified both God the Father and Jesus Christ.¹²⁴ The cross not only brings glory to God, but is also for the good of his people.

Through the cross, God the Father and Jesus Christ demonstrated their love for sinners.¹²⁵ The cross demonstrates their love in various ways. First, through the cross Christ defeated his peoples’ enemy, namely, Satan. He disarmed the demonic powers (Col 2:14-15), rendered the devil powerless (Heb 2:14), and destroyed the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Second, he reconciled sinners to God, giving them access to the Father.¹²⁶ He did this by offering himself as a pleasing offering and sacrifice to God, taking on himself the wrath of God in the place of sinners.¹²⁷ Through Christ’s sacrifice, God has forgiven, redeemed and declared righteous people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.¹²⁸ Christ has freed them from the slavery of sin (1 John 1:7; 1 Pet 2:24; Rev 1:5-6), the demands and curse of the law (Col 2:13; Gal 3:13), the present evil age (Gal 1:4), and the fear of death (Heb 2:14-15). He has given them spiritual life (John 1:12-13; Col 2:13) adoption as sons (Rom 8:23), eternal life (John 3:16), the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14), the guarantee of their resurrection (Rom 6:5; 8:11; 2 Tim 2:11), and the joy of being with Christ in life and death (1 Thess 5:10; Phil 1:21, 23; 2 Cor 5:8). By so doing,

¹²⁴Similarly, in Revelation, we see angels and the people of God worshipping the Father and the Lamb because of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross (Rev 5:9, 12-13; 19:6-8).

¹²⁵Father (Rom 5:7-8; John 3:16; Eph 1:7; 1 John 4:10) and Son (Eph 5:2, 25-26; Gal 2:20).

¹²⁶Rom 5:1, 10; 8:34; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:13, 16, 18; Col 1:20; 1 Pet 3:18.

¹²⁷John 1:36; 6:51; Acts 8:32; Rom 3:25; 4:25; Gal 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:1-2, 25-26; 1 Thess 1:10; Heb 7:27; 9:14, 26; 10:10, 12; 1 Peter 1:19; 1 John 4:10.

¹²⁸Matt 26:28; Eph 1:7; Mark 10:45; Rev 5:9; Rom 5:9; 3:24, 28; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14.

God has created a new humanity (Eph 2:14-15), a people for himself that are zealous for good works (Titus 2:14), who live for Christ (2 Cor 5:15; 1 Pet 2:24) and bear fruit for God (Rom 7:4). Christ's redemptive suffering and death, for God's glory and the good of his people, sets the pattern for understanding God's purposes in the suffering of his people.

God's glory. One of the themes in the NT is that God can use the suffering of his people to reveal more fully his perfections and thus, bring glory to himself. Ware argues that "God sometimes ordains affliction. . . for his glory, power, and grace to be more fully and clearly manifested."¹²⁹ Hafemann states that in the life of Paul, suffering is a "midwife for God's glory."¹³⁰ This theme is found in the Gospels, and especially in the Pauline epistles. Once, when Jesus healed a blind man his disciples asked him if his blindness was due to his own sins or that of his parents (John 9:2). Jesus responds that neither his sins nor his parents' sins caused his blindness:

It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world. (John 9:3-5)

In other words, the man was blind so that the "works of God" might be shown through Christ's healing. It manifested not only God's power, but also Christ's divine origin and his role as "the Light of the world." The man Jesus healed came to believe that Jesus came from God because he was able to heal him (John 9:32-33). Moreover, after Jesus told him that he was the Son of Man, he worshiped Jesus (John 9:35-38). The man's blindness provided an opportunity for Christ to heal, and to make himself known as the Son of Man sent from the Father. Although the man was not technically a believer while he was blind, the passage still shows that God is glorified when he heals. In

¹²⁹Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 169-70.

¹³⁰Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*, 161.

discussing this passage, Feinberg states that God may allow suffering in the life of God's people so that in the future God may demonstrate his power and glory.¹³¹ Similarly, J. H. Gertsner contends that based on this incident, suffering and evil "might be an occasion for the revelation of the glory of God in Christ."¹³²

This principle becomes even clearer when Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus was first informed that Lazarus was ill, he responded by saying, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it" (John 11:4). Then, right before raising Lazarus from the dead he prayed, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me" (John 11:41-42). After Lazarus come forth alive, many of the Jews who came to Mary believed in Christ (John 11:45). In this instance, Jesus explained that his friend's illness and death was for his own glory and that of his Father. The miracle made it clear that Jesus came from God, and that God always hear him; therefore, many began to believe in Christ. A final example in the Gospel of John is found in the closing chapter of the book. In the last few lines of the book, John records Jesus telling Peter that when he is old he will be bound and taken where he does not want to go. John comments that Jesus said this to show Peter "by what kind of death he would glorify God" (John 21:19). Peter's eventual martyrdom was to the glory of God. In addition to these examples in the Gospel of John, Mark and Luke also make a point to note that the people who witnessed Jesus' healings would often respond by praising and glorifying God (Mark 2:10-12; 5:19-20; Luke 13:10-17; 18:42-43). Similarly, in Acts, Peter's healing of a paralytic and of Dorcas, whom he raised from the dead, led to many people believing in Christ (Acts 9:32-34, 36-42). In summary, God may allow his people to get ill in part because he

¹³¹Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 479.

¹³²J. H. Gerstner, "Evil," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 385.

plans to heal them, revealing his power and thus, draw people to faith in Christ. Or, he may have his people glorify him through their death as they remain faithful to the end, revealing to the world the beauty of Christ. In either case, the child of God can say with Paul, “Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil 1:20).

Finally, God often manifests his power through the weakness and suffering of believers, especially as they carry the gospel. Paul writes that his weakness and suffering, as one who carries the gospel, manifests the greatness of God’s power:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:7-12)

In other words, Paul’s weakness as a missionary serves to glorify God.¹³³ As people experience the power of the gospel and see Paul’s weakness, they know that the power is from God.¹³⁴ Therefore, God gets all the credit and the glory. Paul also provides a vivid picture of the gospel in himself; he manifests Christ’s death in his suffering, and he manifests Christ’s resurrection and life in the gospel that he carries.¹³⁵ Moreover, in proclaiming the gospel, Paul becomes a “spirit-giver” (2 Cor 3:1-3),

¹³³Merrill Proudfoot, *Suffering: A Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 24-25.

¹³⁴Paul presents a similar idea in 1 Cor 2:3-5, which reads, “I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”

¹³⁵Udo Schnelle states that the “Apostolic existence entails participation in the event of Jesus’ cross, and that participation cannot be reduced to mere verbal preaching; it is a reality that involves the apostle’s whole existence. The life of the apostle in the *existential illustration of the kerygma*, so that the apostle can follow no other path than his Lord.” Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 244.

“through whom the power and Spirit of God are being manifested and poured out.”¹³⁶ In a similar fashion, Paul explains that he will boast in his weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in him, for Jesus told him that his power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Therefore, he is well content with his weaknesses, with insults, distresses, persecution, and difficulties for Christ’s sake, for when he is weak then he is strong (2 Cor 12:10).¹³⁷ Although Paul’s ministry did involve signs and wonders (2 Cor 12:12), he believed that “strength in weakness” was even “more distinctive of an apostolic ministry.”¹³⁸ Paul understood his being given over to death as not accidental, but “part of the divine plan for the spread of the gospel.”¹³⁹

To spread the gospel. Throughout the NT, the suffering of God’s people often opens the door for greater gospel proclamation. For example, after Jesus warned his disciples that they would be arrested, persecuted, delivered up to the synagogues and prisons, and brought before kings and governors for his name’s sake, he said, “It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute” (Luke 21:12-13).

Paul experienced these opportunities that Christ spoke about. When Paul was

¹³⁶Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit: An Exegetical Study of II Cor. 2:14-3:3 within the Context of the Corinthian Correspondence*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 19 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), 220.

¹³⁷Daniel Akin understands Paul to mean that “whenever the Lord’s servants humble themselves and acknowledge their shortcomings, insufficiencies, and weaknesses, the power of Christ can flow through them and manifest itself.” Daniel L. Akin, “Triumphalism, Suffering, and Spiritual Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 in its Literary, Theological, and Historical Context,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1989): 142.

¹³⁸Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 88.

¹³⁹Scott Hafemann, “The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul,” in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 177.

arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:30-36) he used it as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel to the crowds (Acts 22:1-21), to Felix the governor and others present (Acts 24:10-20), and to King Agrippa and others present (26:2-29).¹⁴⁰ Previously, when Paul and Silas had been beaten with rods in Philippi and imprisoned, they used the opportunity to share Christ with the Philippian jailer and his family, who all came to Christ (Acts 16:22-34).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that his imprisonment has “turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,” for those in the governor’s palace know that he is imprisoned for Christ (Phil 1:12-13). Moreover, his imprisonment has helped other believers trust in the Lord more so they have “far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil 1:14).¹⁴¹ He also rejoices that because of his imprisonment more people are proclaiming Christ (Phil 1:14-18), even if some are doing so because of envy and strife. In other words, Paul is urging the Philippians “to find joy in what matters- the progress of the gospel.”¹⁴²

God may use the suffering of his people to take the gospel to new places. In the book of Acts, when persecution broke out in connection with Stephen’s martyrdom, many from the church in Jerusalem fled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch where they proclaimed the gospel among Jews and Gentiles, and many believed (Acts 11:19-21). Commenting on this event, Piper writes that “The suffering of the church is used by God to reposition the missionary troops in places they might not have otherwise gone.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰When he was with Felix, he appealed to be tried before Caesar’s tribunal (Acts 25:11), possibly because Jesus had previously told him that as he witnesses to Jesus’ cause in Jerusalem so he must also witness in Rome (Acts 23:11).

¹⁴¹Commenting on this verse, Piper writes that “If he must, God will use the suffering of his devoted emissaries to make a sleeping church wake up and take risks for God.” John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 91.

¹⁴²Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 309. I. Howard Marshall states that in this letter, Paul relativizes imprisonment and the threat of death over against “the hope of being with Christ and the progress of the gospel.” I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 346.

¹⁴³Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 96.

Peter Hicks comments that Stephen's martyrdom, and the related persecution helped to scatter the church and led to "growth of the kingdom."¹⁴⁴ In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul reminds them that it was because of a bodily illness (lit. weakness of the flesh) that he preached the gospel to them the first time (Gal 4:13-15). Therefore, God used Paul's "weakness in the flesh" to take the gospel to the Galatians. Hafemann interprets this passage to mean that "Paul's suffering was the divinely ordained means by which the gospel itself was made clear to the Galatians."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, G. H. Twelftree writes that in this example "illness becomes an opportunity to preach the gospel."¹⁴⁶

God may also use the suffering of his people to embody and therefore communicate the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 13:4 Paul writes, "For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God *directed* toward you." In other words, through his weakness and his proclamation of the gospel, he manifests both the weakness of the cross and the power of the resurrection.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Sumney states that Paul understands his weakness as a "reflection of the crucified Christ," and as "an

¹⁴⁴Peter Hicks, *The Message of Evil and Suffering: Light into Darkness*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 182.

¹⁴⁵Hafemann, "The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul," 171.

¹⁴⁶G. H. Twelftree, "Healing, Illness," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 380. Hafemann and Twelftree's interpretation is the dominant view, but not all agree. A. J. Goddard and S. A. Cummins argue that Paul was not ill, but rather, was referring to persecution he was experiencing. Paul had "weakness in the flesh" because of opposition. A. J. Goddard and S. A. Cummins, "Ill or Ill-Treated? Conflict and Persecution as the Context of Paul's Original Ministry in Galatia (Galatians 4.12-10)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 52 (1993): 116. This interpretation would not affect the point that suffering led Paul to another geographic area, giving him the opportunity to take the gospel to the Galatians. Troy Martin argues that the "weakness in the flesh" refers to that of the Galatians (i.e., their sinful nature). In other words, Paul brought the gospel to them because they needed it. Troy W. Martin, "Whose Flesh? What Temptation? (Galatians 4.13-14)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 74 (1999): 65-91. Fortunately, Martin's thesis is not convincing.

¹⁴⁷David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and Its Cognates in the Pauline Literature*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion 3 (New York: P. Lang, 1984), 234-40.

embodiment of the gospel.”¹⁴⁸ Schreiner contends that Paul’s suffering was a corollary of the cross since his sufferings was “the path of salvation for the Corinthians, just as Christ’s sufferings is the way God’s saving power is released.”¹⁴⁹ Therefore, the suffering Paul endured was how God took the gospel to the nations; it was “at the very center of his apostolic evangelism.”¹⁵⁰

Finally, as believers persevere in times of suffering, especially persecution, they have an opportunity to explain the hope that is in them as a witness to nonbelievers:

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, *you are* blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED,¹⁵¹ but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. (1 Pet 3:14-16)

In times of persecution, believers must be ready to defend and explain their continued faith in God in the face of affliction, both with words and in their godly behavior.¹⁵² Consequently, their suffering “may be a catalyst for the conversion of pagans.”¹⁵³ From these various examples, it would be natural for believers to understand their suffering as a God-given opportunity to make Christ known, through gospel proclamation and through their response to their affliction.

For the good of others. Throughout Paul’s epistles, he expresses how he is

¹⁴⁸Jerry L. Sumney, “Paul’s ‘Weakness’: An Integral Part of His Conception of Apostleship,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 52 (1993): 79.

¹⁴⁹Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 95.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵¹Peter appears to be referencing Isa 8:12.

¹⁵²Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 480.

¹⁵³Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 57.

suffering not only for the gospel, but also for the good of the churches. Paul struggled and suffered in building the “maturity and Christ-likeness of others.”¹⁵⁴ In his letter to the Colossians, he writes that he rejoices in his sufferings for their sake (Col 1:24). He tells them that he labors and strives with God’s power to present them all complete in Christ (Col 1:28-29). Moreover, he wants them to know “how great a struggle” he has on their behalf as he seeks to help them mature in their faith (Col 2:1-5).

To the church in Philippi, he writes from prison that he struggles between wanting to depart and be with Christ or to continue laboring for their progress and joy in the faith (Phil 1:23-25). He concludes that he prefers to continue laboring for their good, even if this means that he may be “poured out as a drink offering” (Phil 2:17-18).¹⁵⁵ In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles, since he is imprisoned for taking the gospel to them (Eph 3:1). Moreover, he tells them not to lose heart at the tribulations he is experiencing on their behalf, because his tribulations are their glory. That is, his tribulations, in bringing the gospel to them, were a prelude to their acceptance of the gospel and thus, their eventual glorification.¹⁵⁶

In 2 Tim, Paul encourages Timothy to suffer hardship with him like a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 2:3). He reminds Timothy that he has suffered hardship for the gospel, even imprisonment as a criminal (2 Tim 2:9). Nevertheless, because God’s word is not imprisoned, he endures “all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus *and* with *it* eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:10). In all these examples, Paul suffers for the good others, that they may hear

¹⁵⁴Hicks, *The Message of Evil and Suffering*, 183.

¹⁵⁵Similarly, in 2 Cor 1:6, Paul states that his afflictions are for their good, their comfort, and salvation.

¹⁵⁶Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 250.

the gospel or grow in the faith.

Finally, God may also use times of suffering to prepare his children to minister to others.¹⁵⁷ In the opening lines in 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds the church that God comforts them, in part, so that they can in turn comfort others:

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Cor 1:3-4)

Suffering that believers may experience, in conjunction with God's comfort, equips them to minister to others in ways they would not have been able to do otherwise. Ware concludes from this passage that God sometimes designs suffering as "the instrument of sharing and ministering his grace."¹⁵⁸ In summary, believers may see their suffering as somehow beneficial to others. The suffering may open the door for gospel witness or it may equip believers to minister to others, either to comfort them or to help them mature spiritually.

Sanctification. One of the dominant themes in the NT is that God can use times of suffering to sanctify his people.¹⁵⁹ That is, God can use suffering as a key instrument in making believers more Christ-like, for God is in the process of conforming his children into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).¹⁶⁰ Therefore, God may use

¹⁵⁷Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 484; Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 170.

¹⁵⁸Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 170. Based on this passage, Hicks states that suffering gives believers the ability to help others. Hicks, *The Message of Evil and Suffering*, 183.

¹⁵⁹Hafemann describes suffering as a "schoolmaster." Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*, 149. Smith states that suffering can have a "pedagogical" function. Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 157. Talbert states that suffering can educate and refine believers. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 91.

¹⁶⁰Talbot states that when we see Jesus face to face, we will see how God has done all things for his glory and the good of his children, for "we will see that through our sufferings our loving Father has been conforming us to the likeness of his Son." Talbot, "All the Good That Is Ours in Christ," 77.

suffering to purify his people from sin and build up their character.

Several passages speak of the interplay between suffering and sanctification. For instance, Paul sent a letter to the church in Corinth to rebuke them for their sin, causing them to mourn and be sorrowful. However, he rejoiced in their sorrow because it led them to repentance (2 Cor 7:8-10). God can therefore, use suffering to get the attention of his children, leading them to “repentance and transformation.”¹⁶¹ Similarly, suffering may help believers put away sin (1 Pet 4:1-2).¹⁶² For Christ “suffered in the flesh” by dying, and therefore “ceased from sin,” so believers who are suffering in the flesh through persecution, should also cease from sinning, and live not for “the lusts of men,” but for the “will of God.” In addition, God may use times of affliction to keep his people from becoming proud and self-sufficient. Paul argues that a “thorn in the flesh” was given to him to keep him from exalting himself because of “the surpassing greatness of the revelations” God had given him (2 Cor 12:7). Smith states that because of Paul’s “superlative experience,” he was running the risk of “disqualifying himself for apostolic service by becoming conceited, by entertaining delusion about his own importance.”¹⁶³ If Smith is correct, Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” not only kept Paul humble, but also enabled him to carry out the ministry God had for him.

Moreover, suffering may help believers develop their character. James writes that believers should consider all joy when facing various trials because they serve to test their faith and produce endurance, leading to even greater maturity (Jas 1:2-4). Similarly, Paul writes that believers should exult in their tribulations because it leads to perseverance, proven character, and hope, which does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured out within their heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:3-5). McCartney

¹⁶¹Randy C. Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009), 417.

¹⁶²Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 481.

¹⁶³Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 167.

rightly notes that in these positive effects of suffering, Paul assumes that the sufferer is relating his suffering to his relationship with God, for “unless a sufferer is clinging to Christ, he or she is not going to persevere and will not develop the character of Jesus but will abandon hope.”¹⁶⁴ In addition to sanctifying and developing character, God may also use suffering to deepen a believer’s faith in him.

Deepen faith in God. Times of suffering may strengthen a believer’s faith and reliance on God. For example, when Jesus found out (supernaturally?) that Lazarus was dead, he said to his disciples, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him” (John 11:14). It appears that Jesus was glad that he was not there to heal Lazarus because he knew that when his disciples saw his power over death by raising Lazarus from the dead, their faith would be strengthened. Presumably, this would also be the case for other believers present, including Mary, Martha, and especially Lazarus. Moreover, in the opening lines of his letter, James writes “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2-4). According to James, believers should welcome adversities in life as tests from God which can deepen their character and their dependence on God, freeing them from “shallow and incomplete” faith.¹⁶⁵ Instead of having “shallow and incomplete” faith, believers who trust in God during trials deepen their faith and move toward “the eschatological goal of completion or perfection” as God intends for them.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴McCartney, *Why Does it Have to Hurt?*, 99.

¹⁶⁵Buist M. Fanning, “A Theology of James,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 419.

¹⁶⁶Dan G. McCartney, “Suffering in James,” in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian & Reformed Heritage*, ed. D. Clair Davis and Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 480.

To the church in Corinth, Paul writes that he and those ministering with him in Asia experienced such suffering that they “despaired even of life” and that they had “the sentence of death” within themselves (1 Cor 1:8-9).¹⁶⁷ However, he explains that this happened so that they would not trust in themselves, but rather trust in God who has the power to raise the dead (1 Cor 1:9). In other words, God used their time of intense suffering in Asia to deepen their faith and trust in him. The suffering forced them to put their hope in God (1 Cor 1:10), fully trusting that he can raise them from the dead if they did not survive. Moreover, God did deliver them, which further strengthened their faith in his ability to deliver them in the future (1 Cor 1:10).¹⁶⁸

Jesus himself was made “perfect” as he “learned obedience from the things He suffered” (Heb 5:8-9; 2:10). Jesus did not have to learn obedience because he had been disobedient (Heb 4:15b) nor was he made perfect because he had been imperfect; rather, by experiencing the cross, he trusted and obeyed God to a greater degree than he ever had before.¹⁶⁹ Ware states that “the Father designed that he would face, over the years, ever increasingly difficult demands that he would obey, leading to the ultimate demand of the Father upon his life.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, one could say that the cross took Jesus’ faith in the Father to a deeper level. In addition to strengthening a believer’s faith in God, God may also use times of affliction in the life of a believer to give him experiential knowledge of

¹⁶⁷Yates lists various theories about what Paul was referring to (1) the Demetrius riot (Acts 19:23-41); (2) “fighting with beasts” (1 Cor 15:32); (3) trial in a state court (2 Cor 11:23); (4) flogging in a Jewish court (2 Cor 11:23); (5) illness; (6) trouble in the churches. Yates argues that it was most likely caused by Jewish opposition. Roy Yates, “Paul’s Affliction in Asia: 2 Corinthians 1:8,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 53 (1981): 241-45.

¹⁶⁸In discussing the pedagogical purpose of suffering, Smith references this passage and writes that “When the righteous find themselves in a position of helplessness, cry out to God and then experience God’s deliverance, the pedagogical effect is that they come to know with experiential certainty that God alone has power enough to save and that human efforts are utterly ineffectual.” Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 158.

¹⁶⁹“He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).

¹⁷⁰Ware, *God’s Greater Glory*, 169.

a specific spiritual truth.

A test to purify believers and increase their rewards. The NT contains some passages which suggest that God may test believers with times of affliction for the purpose of purifying them, and increasing their rewards on judgment day. In the NT, the noun *πειρασμός* can be translated as a test/trial or temptation, depending on the context.¹⁷¹ The same event can be *both* a trial and a temptation since when one is tested, one may be tempted to be unfaithful to God.¹⁷² God tests his people for the purpose of building them up, while the devil tempts believers in order to destroy them. In these times of trial or temptation, believers have the opportunity of remaining faithful to God or turning away.

Jesus overcame all temptations and passed all trials he experienced. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2, 13), and he describes his disciples as those who have stood by him in his trials (Luke 22:28). Because Jesus was tempted in what he suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb 2:18). Moreover, because he was tempted in all things as we are (yet without sin), he is able to sympathize with our weakness as our high priest (Heb 4:15).

Several NT passages discuss the benefits of God's testing. James encourages believers to rejoice when they encounter various trials because the testing of their faith will lead to their spiritual maturity (Jas 1:2-4). McCartney notes that the test or trial is not what produces spiritual maturity; rather, it is the faithful endurance.¹⁷³ God intends to mature believers through trials; therefore, believers should not waste the opportunity by sinning and not trusting God.

¹⁷¹Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "πειρασμός." The same applies to the verb *πειράζω*. Ibid., s.v. "πειράζω."

¹⁷²G. H. Twelftree, "Testing," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 814.

¹⁷³McCartney, "Suffering in James," 481.

God may also use times of suffering to refine and purify the faith of his children. Peter taught this truth to believers who were experiencing various trials because of their faith in Christ:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 1:6-7)

Peter encourages them to rejoice in their salvation (1 Pet 1:3-5) even though they are distressed by various trials because of their faith. He reminds them that their trials are temporary, and that they serve to prove *and* purify their faith. Therefore, the suffering they are enduring does bring some benefit to them. Based upon this passage, R. C. Sproul describes suffering as a crucible that tests the faith of believers by fire.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Gordon Kirk argues that for Peter, the general purpose of enduring suffering is the refining of one's faith.¹⁷⁵ Alister McGrath states that suffering can help believers get rid of "God substitutes," and it teaches them to "trust in God and lean upon him alone."¹⁷⁶

In addition, Peter also states that the purifying of their faith "may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ," hinting to the rewards that await believers (1 Pet 1:7). Feinberg contends that God may use suffering to prepare believers for them to receive rewards on the Day of Judgment.¹⁷⁷ Believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and will be recompensed according to their deeds (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). Therefore, God's people should not just interpret affliction as "a sign of God's displeasure," but should realize that God may be using it to prepare believers for the Day of Judgment when their endurance under fire serves as the

¹⁷⁴Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering*, 7.

¹⁷⁵Gordon Kirk, "Endurance in Suffering in 1 Peter," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 53.

¹⁷⁶McGrath, *Suffering & God*, 73.

¹⁷⁷Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 485-86.

basis of their reward.¹⁷⁸ John Piper makes the same argument as Feinberg. He points to 2 Corinthians 4:17 in support of his position. The passage reads, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”

Piper argues that Paul is teaching that when believers endure suffering with patience the reward of their “experience of God’s glory in heaven increases.”¹⁷⁹ Their suffering does not bring them to glory, since their salvation is rooted in Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. Rather, their patient endurance through suffering *increases* their experience of glory. Piper also points to Christ’s teaching in Matthew 5:11-12:

Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus encourages believers to rejoice when they are persecuted because they will be rewarded for their patient endurance. Piper argues that Christ’s statement carries the greatest encouragement if he means that the more they endure suffering, the greater their reward will be.¹⁸⁰ Based upon these texts, believers may interpret times of affliction as trials from God that serve to purify their faith if they endure. Moreover, God may be using the affliction to add to his children’s reward as they remain faithful to him.

Give experiential knowledge of a spiritual truth. God may have his children experience suffering so that they may have first-hand knowledge of a specific spiritual truth. For example, Paul writes “we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:9).¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 486.

¹⁷⁹Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 88-89.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸¹Referencing this passage, John Piper writes that God may use suffering to purify believers from “all remnants of self-reliance and entanglement with the world,” and that the “universal purposes for all Christian suffering” is “more contentment in God and less satisfaction in self and the world.” *Ibid.*, 87.

This suffering taught Paul and his co-laborers in the gospel that they needed to stop trusting in themselves, but rather trust in God. Presumably, Paul already knew this spiritual truth, but this experience made it real for him. In addition, Paul's thorn in the flesh and his subsequent prayers that Christ would remove them, led Christ to teach him that his grace was sufficient for him, and that his power was perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:7-10). Therefore, Paul could boast and be well content about his weaknesses because he now knew the truth that, "when I am weak, then I am strong." By this, Paul meant that only when he recognizes his weakness, is it possible for him to rely on the power of Christ.¹⁸²

God may also use suffering to teach believers about the unity that exists in the Body of Christ.¹⁸³ In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, Paul teaches that all believers are members of one body and therefore, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." In Galatians 6:2, Paul instructs believers to "bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." In these verses, Paul reveals that because a believer is in Christ, his identity is inseparable from his brothers and sisters in Christ. McCartney notes that suffering not only links believers with Christ, but also links suffering believers with other believers (2 Cor 1:6-7; 1 Cor 12:26).¹⁸⁴ Therefore, God may use suffering to help believers better understand and also experience the unity of the Body of Christ as they suffer together and carry each others' burdens.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸²Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 168.

¹⁸³Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 480-81.

¹⁸⁴Dan G. McCartney, "Suffering in the Teaching of the Apostles," in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 99.

¹⁸⁵Phillips notes that even Christians that are not suffering are not exempt from suffering since they are called to "sympathetic suffering," by suffering with others and helping to carry their burden. Mickey Arnold Phillips, "A Theological Analysis of Suffering As a Christian Lifestyle in the New Testament" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 79.

Discipline and correct. The NT teaches that God disciplines those he loves (Heb 12:4-11; Rev 3:19).¹⁸⁶ Hebrews 12:4-11 best expresses God's intent when he disciplines and corrects his children:

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."¹⁸⁷ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

This passage teaches several truths concerning God's discipline. First, God disciplines in order to help believers fight sin. Second, the fact that God disciplines his children should serve as a "word of encouragement."¹⁸⁸ Third, God's discipline can involve affliction, for it can cause one to faint and be sorrowful. Fourth, God disciplines those he loves as a father disciplines his son; therefore, those who receive his discipline can know that they are his children. Fifth, God disciplines his children for their good, so that they can share in his holiness. In discussing God's discipline, McGrath states that God's love is transformation, aiming to help believers glorify God and enjoy him

¹⁸⁶McCartney uses the term "restorative." Smith describes the suffering as "remedial." Erhard Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage describe it as "divine education." McCartney, *Why Does it Have to Hurt?*, 84; Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 59; Erhard Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering*, trans. John E. Steely, Biblical Encounters Series (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 231. Kingdon notes that in the NT the individual element of discipline is more prominent than the corporate as in the OT. Kingdon, "Discipline," 448.

¹⁸⁷The author of Hebrews is quoting Prov 3:11-12 from LXX.

¹⁸⁸D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 64-65.

forever.¹⁸⁹

In addition to this direct teaching in Hebrews concerning God's discipline, the NT also contains some examples of God's discipline. Because Zacharias did not believe the angel Gabriel when he told him that Elizabeth was going to bear a son, Gabriel struck him mute (Luke 1:12-20). Zacharias learned not to doubt God; when his son was born, he named him John as Gabriel had told him to do. God accepted his repentance. He returned his speech, and then filled him with the Holy Spirit so that he prophesied about his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:59-2:79). In 1 Corinthians, Paul warns believers to first examine themselves before taking the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:28). Those who take the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). Paul explains that many of them are ill, and some have even died because they have brought God's judgment on themselves for taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:29-30). However, Paul describes this judgment as God's discipline, with the aim of keeping his people from being condemned along with the world (1 Cor 11:32).¹⁹⁰ The consequences are seen as a warning from God, encouraging them to repent and stop their sin of "shocking proportions."¹⁹¹ From this incident, Twelftree concludes that God may use illness as a way to judge and correct his children in order to keep them from being condemned with the world.¹⁹² Another example of God's discipline is found in Acts when God strikes Ananias and Saphira dead because they lied to God and to the church (Acts 5:1-11). It is unclear from the passage if this incident describes God's discipline of his children or God's punishment of unbelievers.

¹⁸⁹McGrath, *Suffering & God*, 73.

¹⁹⁰Smith argues that believers will not be condemned with the world because their disciplinary suffering atoned for their sins. Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 92-93. Based upon Paul's soteriology, it is doubtful that Smith is correct.

¹⁹¹Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 261.

¹⁹²Twelftree, "Healing, Illness," 378-79.

F. F. Bruce provides a helpful analysis of the situation.¹⁹³ He argues that ultimately, it is not possible to know. They act as unbelievers, but at the same time, are true believers *never* guilty of deceit? Luke concludes his description of the incident by stating that “great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). It seems that fear would come over the whole church only if believers felt that something similar could happen to them. In any case, the incident served as a warning to the church because God can and does discipline his children.

To conclude, the NT provides a variety of ways for God’s people to interpret God’s purposes behind their suffering. Their suffering is ultimately meant for God’s glory and their good. They may be experiencing suffering in order to advance the gospel or for the benefit of others. God may be using their affliction to make them more Christ-like, and deepen their faith. He may also be testing them as a way to purify them, and add to their rewards on judgment day. Moreover, God may be giving his children experiential knowledge of a spiritual truth through their affliction. Finally, God may be disciplining and correcting his children by having them go through times of difficulty, so that they may repent and turn back to God.

How Are God’s People to Respond to Suffering?

Since the NT is grounded in a suffering Christ and his suffering Church, it has much to teach concerning how God’s people should respond to affliction. First, the NT is clear that God’s people should repent of their sin, especially if they are being disciplined by their heavenly Father. Second, in all circumstances, God’s people should pray and call out to God in times of affliction, for he is there to comfort his people. Third, the NT teaches that believers should view their suffering from an eschatological perspective,

¹⁹³F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 115.

knowing that their salvation is secure and that their opponents will be the recipients of God's justice. Fourth, the NT teaches that believers should not be surprised by suffering, for it is Christian to suffer; it is part of their identity in Christ. Fifth, when believers are opposed or even persecuted, the NT presents three possible responses, namely, to avoid areas of possible persecution, to flee from persecution, or to engage with the persecutors. Sixth, when believers engage those that oppose them they should do so in light of the command to love and pray for their enemies. Seventh, various NT texts also call believers to remain joyful during times of affliction, knowing that they are being sanctified, their salvation is secure, and that they will be rewarded for their perseverance. Finally, believers should trust God and therefore, endure to the end.

Repent if being disciplined. God intends his discipline to draw his children to repentance. In rebuking the church at Laodicea, Jesus says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19). Through repentance, believers restore their fellowship with God, for Jesus is knocking at the door and he will sit and eat with the one who lets him in (Rev 3:20). Jesus also called the churches in Ephesus (Rev 2:5), Pergamum (Rev 2:16), Thyatira (Rev 2:20-23), Sardis (Rev 3:2-3), and Laodicea (Rev 3:15-16) to repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, Paul states that his rebuke of the church in Corinth made them sorrowful "according to *the will of God*," leading them to repentance as God had wanted. Moreover, implied in James' commands for believers to confess their sins to one another is the idea that they will repent of their sins (Jas 5:16). Finally, in 1 John 1:9, John teaches that if believers confess their sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive their sins and to cleanse them from all unrighteousness. This statement implies that believers will be confessing their sins, since if they say they have no sin, they are deceiving themselves (1 John 1:8). To conclude, God expects his people to repent when he disciplines them.

Pray and call out to God. Although believers should trust in God's divine purposes for suffering, this does not "require a passive acquiescence to suffering."¹⁹⁴ The NT commands and provides examples of God's people calling out to him in times of suffering. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask God not to lead them into temptation, but rather deliver them from evil (Matt 6:13). Moreover, Jesus told the parable about the persistent widow in search of justice in order to teach that believers should always pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1-8). In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:6-7). James writes that if anyone is suffering he should pray (Jas 5:1), and if anyone is sick, believers should pray for healing (Jas 5:14-16). Peter also writes that believers should cast all their anxieties on God because he cares for them (1 Pet 5:7).

In addition to these teachings on prayer, the NT also contains various examples of God's people calling out to him when they are afflicted. Shortly before Jesus was arrested, he went off by himself and fell to the ground, and asked his Father three times, if it was possible, to remove the cup from him (Matt 26:39, 44; Mark 14:36, 39; Luke 22:41, 44). The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as offering up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the one who was able to save him from death (Heb 5:7). After Peter and John were released from prison for preaching Christ, they returned to the other believers, and prayed to the Lord that he would take note of the threats that were being made against them, and to grant them boldness in speaking his word (Acts 4:29).¹⁹⁵ Finally, when Paul was given his "thorn in the flesh," he prayed

¹⁹⁴Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 175.

¹⁹⁵Darrell Bock notes that they quoted Ps 2:1 in their prayer, showing that they believed that their suffering was "anticipated in Scripture." Darrell Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation of God's Promises," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 55.

three times that the Lord would remove it (2 Cor 12:8). He was persistent in his prayer and believed that God had the power to deliver him, but he was also willing to accept no as God's answer.¹⁹⁶ Believers can be confident that God is present to comfort them, and that he will not forsake them in their affliction.¹⁹⁷

The people of God must also remember that God sees their suffering, and is present to comfort them. Jesus calls to himself the weary and heavy laden, and promises to give them rest for their souls (Matt 11:28-30). As Jesus prepared for his death, he encouraged his disciples by telling them that he would not leave them as orphans, but that he would send them the Holy Spirit, who will dwell with them and in them (John 14:16-18). Moreover, as Jesus neared his time of ascension, he commissioned his disciples and promised to always be with them, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). In the cross of Christ, God identified with humanity;¹⁹⁸ therefore, the cross proves that God loves sinners, and has identified with them in their pain.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, because Jesus can sympathize with human weakness, believers can draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that they can receive mercy and find grace in time of need (Heb 5:15-16). In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells the churches in Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira that their tribulation and perseverance does not go unnoticed (Rev 2:9, 13, 19). Believers are not alone in their afflictions. Christ sees their suffering and is in them, ready to give them help and rest for their souls.

Moreover, the NT also teaches that God does not forsake his children. The author of Hebrews encourages believers to be content with what they have, for God has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." (Heb 13:5; quoting Deut 31:6,

¹⁹⁶Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 177.

¹⁹⁷For additional examples of believers calling out to God during times of affliction, see Acts 12:5; 16:25; Rom 15:31; 2 Thess 3:1-2.

¹⁹⁸F. P. Cotterell, "Suffering," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 804.

¹⁹⁹Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 320.

8; Josh 1:5) The author then concludes that believers should confidently say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?” (Heb 13:6; quoting Ps 118:6). Similarly, speaking of himself and his co-laborers, Paul states that although they are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, they are not despairing for they are not utterly crushed, forsaken or destroyed (2 Cor 4:8-10). The same applies to all believers; they will never be utterly crushed, forsaken, or destroyed, for God is with them. Not only does God not forsake his children, but he also comforts them. Paul describes God as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort who comforts believers in their affliction (2 Cor 1:3-4). Later in the same letter, Paul describes God as the God who comforts the depressed (2 Cor 7:6). To conclude, although believers are to trust God in whatever circumstances they find themselves, this does not mean that they should not pray and call out to God for deliverance. He is present to comfort them, and will not forsake them in their affliction.

View suffering from an eschatological perspective. Various NT passages can comfort the people of God in their suffering by encouraging them to view their circumstances from an eschatological perspective.²⁰⁰ Believers should view their temporary suffering in light of their eternal state in the new heaven and new earth. For instance, as Jesus approached his crucifixion, he encouraged his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled and to believe in God and in him, for he is going to prepare a place for them in his Father’s house, and will return for them so that they might be where he is (John 14:1-3). In addition, he taught his disciples that even though they will have many tribulations in the world, they should take courage for he has “overcome the world” (John 16:33). Although there are various ways to understand that Christ overcame the world, it is clear from his statement that Jesus, and by extension his followers, will be the victors.

²⁰⁰Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 580.

Believers should find comfort in their suffering that Christ has prepared a place for them, and that although they are afflicted in this world, this will not always be the case.

Like Christ did, Paul also encourages believers to view their suffering in light of their future in glory. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). In other words, the present and temporary sufferings of believers are “inconsequential” in light of their “certain future glory.”²⁰¹ Therefore, he writes that in hope, believers wait eagerly with perseverance for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:25). He continues by writing that the Spirit helps believers in their weakness by interceding for them according to the will of God (Rom 8:26-27). Paul ends by discussing God’s plan and love for believers, which makes their future victory certain. God causes all things to work out for the good of believers, and those whom he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, he called, justified and glorified (Rom 8:28-30). Therefore, since God is for believers, nothing can separate them from the love of Christ, not even tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword (Rom 8:31-35). Through Christ, believers are conquerors, and their salvation is secure for “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:37-39).

Paul uses a similar argument in 2 Corinthians. Paul writes that even though the “outer man” is decaying, believers do not lose heart because their “inner man” is renewed day by day, for their “momentary, light affliction” is producing for them “an

²⁰¹Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 434.

eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:16-17).²⁰² Instead of looking at the temporal things which are seen (including their affliction), believers should look to that which is eternal and not seen yet (2 Cor 4:18), including being clothed with their dwelling from heaven (2 Cor 5:1-5). Therefore, because believers walk by faith and not by sight, they are of good courage for they know that to be in the body is to be absent from the Lord, and to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-8).²⁰³ Believers do not lose heart and are of good courage because they know that their temporary suffering is increasing the glory they will experience, and because even death is beneficial for them for they will be at home with the Lord.

Peter also encourages believers in their suffering by pointing them to the eschatological reality. Schnelle argues that the “the central eschatological theme in 1 Peter is *hope in suffering*”²⁰⁴ This hope is grounded in Christ’s resurrection (1:3, 21) and return (1:7, 13; 2:12; 4:13), their imminent salvation (1:5, 9-10, 13; 2:2), and the inheritance awaiting believers (1:4). Therefore, even though believers are “distressed by various trials” (1:6) and share in Christ’s sufferings (4:13), they can rejoice (1:8; 4:13) knowing that Christ’s resurrection has brought them their inheritance, and that they will be saved at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

²⁰²McCartney argues from this verse that “suffering is thus a pointer to future glory.” McCartney, “Suffering in the Teaching of the Apostles,” 98. Commenting on 2 Cor 4:16, James Dunn states that “Only when death has had its full say, only when mortality has corrupted to death, only then will the believer escape the clutches of death.” James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 483.

²⁰³Similarly, Phil 1:21-24 reads, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” D. W. Palmer argues that Paul does not explicitly state why to die is gain. Based upon examples from Greek literature, Palmer argues that for Paul, death is gain because it brings “release from earthly troubles.” D. W. Palmer, “To Die is Gain (Philippians 1: 21),” *Novum Testamentum* 17, no. 3 (1975): 218. Although this may be a part of what Paul meant, his statement in v. 23 that to be with Christ is “very much better” seems to be saying that to die is gain for Paul because it brings him to Christ.

²⁰⁴Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 615.

Finally, some NT passages encourage believers in their affliction by affirming their reward in suffering, and the final judgment of those who have afflicted them. Jesus affirmed that those who have given up their house, wife, brother, parents or children for the sake of the kingdom, Christ, and the gospel will be rewarded both now and in the age to come (Matt 10:28-31; Luke 18:29-30). Moreover, the NT affirms that those who patiently endure to the end will be rewarded. Their experience of God's glory will be increased (2 Cor 4:17-18).²⁰⁵ They will receive the crown of life (Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10), and the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:6-8). They will eat from the tree of life (Rev 2:7), eat some of the hidden manna (Rev 2:17), receive a white stone with a new name (Rev 2:17), have authority over the nations (Rev 2:26), receive the morning star (Rev 2:28), be clothed in white garments (Rev 3:5), never have their name blotted from the book of life (Rev 3:5), be given a pillar in the temple of God (Rev 3:12), sit with Jesus on his throne (Rev 3:21), and be given to drink from the spring of the water of life without cost (Rev 21:6-7).

God will reward those who endure, and will punish those who oppose him and his people. First, central to Christ's teaching on the kingdom of God is that the kingdom involves an "eschatological reversal."²⁰⁶ The exalted will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted (Luke 14:11; 18:14). Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those persecuted for Christ's sake, but woe to the rich, the well-fed, and those who laugh now (Matt 5:3-11; Luke 6:20-26). Second, Paul and John affirm that God will punish those who afflict his children. Paul states that it is just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict believers (2 Thess 1:6-8). Believers should not seek revenge, but leave it up to God to repay (Rom 12:17-21). The book of Revelation provides a vivid image of the reversal that will take place; God's persecuted people will be in glory, and their

²⁰⁵Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 88-89.

²⁰⁶Dan G. McCartney, "Suffering and the Goodness of God in the Gospels," in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 82-83.

persecutors will be punished. John describes those who had been martyred because “of the word of the Lord” calling out to God asking for justice, for him to avenge their blood (Rev 6:9-11). God eventually “avenges the blood of his bond-servants” (Rev 19:2) by destroying Babylon (Rev 17-18) for in it “was found the blood of prophets and of saints of all who had been slain on the earth” (Rev 18:24). Finally, the devil, death, Hades, and anyone who does not have their name in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:10, 14-15), while God’s people will dwell in his presence on the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21-22). To conclude, God’s people can endure their affliction for they know that they are temporary, and that they are nothing compared to the glory that awaits them in Christ’s presence. Moreover, although they may be suffering now at the hands of those who oppose Christ and his gospel, they know that God will bring forth justice.

Do not be surprised by suffering, for it is Christ-like to suffer. The NT teaches that it is normative for God’s people to suffer for Christ and the gospel; suffering is part of their identity in Christ.²⁰⁷ Peter writes, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12).²⁰⁸ Likewise, John writes, “do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). Paul writes to the Philippians

²⁰⁷Eckhard Schnabel contends that the early church understood the antagonism of the pagan society against the church “as eschatological tribulation, as an unavoidable reality of the messianic period, the time between the first and second advents of Jesus the Messiah.” Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 2:1537. Schnabel notes that his explanation on the Christian response to persecution is based on Thomas Söding, “Widerspruch und Leidensnachfolge: Neutestamentliche Gemeinde im Konflikt mit der paganen Gesellschaft,” *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*, 41:137-56.

²⁰⁸Schnelle contends that “Election by God for suffering is the central theological them of 1 Peter.” Because believers have been reborn (1:3-2:3), they are “categorically different from their surrounding world,” making suffering “an unavoidable and necessary consequence of their faith” (2:19-20; 4:17; 4:14, 16-17, 19) in their now hostile environment (2:12, 15-17; 4:2) where they live as exiles (2:11). Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 604-05. Ladd argues that the afflictions that Peter is referring to are not “physical afflictions, natural evils, or accidents, or the sort of tragedy that besets all human beings. It is the sufferings people are called upon to endure because they are Christians” Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 644.

that it has been granted to them for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him (Phil 1:29).²⁰⁹ Robert Plummer identifies three truths from these verses: (1) suffering is ordained by God; (2) suffering is as much part of the Christian life as faith; (3) the struggles of the Church parallel Paul's struggles.²¹⁰

Therefore, as followers of the crucified Christ, Christians should not be surprised if they experience suffering for it is central to their identity.²¹¹ Ladd writes that "The nexus between suffering and participation in the community of the Son of God is not accidental but rooted in the very being of that community" because the Church "came into existence through obedience to the call of the rejected Messiah and by virtue of his sacrificial death."²¹² Similarly, McGrath states that "suffering is not a sign of being outside of the family of God, but a distinguishing mark of membership."²¹³

The NT teaches that there is a unique union and identification of Christ with his Church. Therefore, "Christian suffering is Christological."²¹⁴ For example, when Jesus appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus, he asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4; 22:7-8; 26:14-15). Christ understood Paul's attack on the

²⁰⁹Darrell Bock states from this verse that suffering is a gift from God because they are imitating Christ and making evident their commitment to God if they stand firm against opposition. Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 329. For additional passages in which Paul teaches that Christian should expect suffering, see Acts 14:22; 1 Thess 3:3; 2 Tim 3:12.

²¹⁰Robert Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 134.

²¹¹Mickey Arnold Phillips argues that the NT does not include a theodicy because the authors understood suffering as simply part of being a Christian. That is, they understood "suffering as a Christian lifestyle." Phillips, "A Theological Analysis of Suffering As a Christian Lifestyle in the New Testament," 2.

²¹²Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 203.

²¹³McGrath, *Suffering & God*, 83. In a similar fashion, Schnelle states that "suffering is not only the consequence of the new and different conduct of Christians in society, but that suffering is a constitutive element of Christian existence as such." Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 617.

²¹⁴McCartney, *Why Does it Have to Hurt?*, 59. He references Gal 2:20; 1 Pet 3:18; 4:13.

Church as an attack upon himself.²¹⁵ This truth deeply affected Paul, who came to understand the connection between the sufferings of Christ and those of his Church.²¹⁶

Throughout Paul's letters, he identifies the suffering of Christ with the suffering of his people. Smith points out that these types of passages have usually been interpreted in two ways: (1) as Christ's disciples, Christians follow Christ's example and their suffering "is analogous to or imitative of Christ's suffering"; (2) a spiritual union between believers and Christ exists. Thus, as believers suffer, "so literally does Christ."²¹⁷ With either of these two interpretations, the point stands that suffering is integral to the identity of believers as followers of Christ.

In Romans 8:17, Paul states that since believers are children of God, they are then heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, which involves not only being glorified with him, but also suffering with him. In other words, "believers must suffer in order to experience future glorification."²¹⁸ In 2 Corinthians 1:5 and 4:10, Paul speaks of himself and his co-workers as having "the sufferings of Christ in abundance" and in "carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." The suffering of Paul and the apostles not only accompanies their proclamation of the gospel, but "is a proclamation of the gospel" since their suffering in some sense is a picture of Christ's death.²¹⁹ In Colossians 1:24 Paul

²¹⁵From these passages in Acts, Edmund Sutcliffe states that "we have, then, this great consolation that we do not suffer alone; our sufferings are not overlooked or forgotten, for He has identified Himself with us, and our sufferings are His sufferings." Edmund Sutcliffe, *Providence and Suffering in the Old and New Testaments* (London: Nelson, 1953), 165-66.

²¹⁶Although this idea is usually connected with Paul, Peter also taught a similar concept. In 1 Pet 4:13-16, Peter states that believers share in the sufferings of Christ as they are reviled for the name of Christ or suffer for being Christians.

²¹⁷Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 175.

²¹⁸Schreiner, *Romans*, 428. Smith argues that it is a given fact that a believer will suffer with Christ as a "prelude to his being glorified with him." Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 178.

²¹⁹Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission*, 130. Dunn states that "The tension, suffering, death and life experienced by Paul he experienced as the outworkings of Christ's death and resurrection." Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 484.

states, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” This passage has been interpreted in various ways. Some argue that what Paul is saying is that the Church “fills up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” by suffering and presenting to the world a picture of the cross.²²⁰ Others argue that what Paul has in mind is the rabbinical idea of messianic pangs or woes, which amounts to a quota of suffering the church must experience before the end.²²¹ Plummer rejects the idea that Paul thought of himself as filling up messianic woes since Paul never directly speaks of them. Why assume his readers would know about these; rather, Paul is referring to the fact that since he is taking the gospel to new places for the first time “he bears the brunt of the world’s antagonism towards God and his word.”²²² Thus, Paul is saying that he is filling up the “Christ-based suffering” of the church “because it is the inevitable outworkings of the church’s gospel-based existence.”²²³ In any case, Paul makes a clear connection between Christ’s suffering and that of the church.

²²⁰Piper writes, “God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the sufferings he experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us.” John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 225. In a similar way, W. F. Flemington argues that “The Christian, by his incorporation in Christ called and empowered to re-enact what Christ did, is continually striving to make that reproduction in his own person more complete.” W. F. Flemington, “On the Interpretation of Colossians 1:24,” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 88. In contrast, Hanna Stettler contends that this verse is about Paul’s unique suffering as an apostle, and does not apply to all Christians. Paul, as an apostle, is filling up the afflictions on behalf of the church. Hanna Stettler, “An Interpretation of Colossians 1:24 in the Framework of Paul’s Mission Theology,” in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, 189-90.

²²¹F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 83; C. Anderson Scott, “The Sufferings of Christ,” *The Expositor* 12 (1905): 234-40; Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 182; Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2010), 481-82.

²²²Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission*, 133.

²²³*Ibid.*, 132-33.

The most prominent source of suffering for God's people in the NT is persecution; however, the NT also describes God's people suffering as they make sacrifices for Christ and the gospel. Ladd notes that Christian suffering also includes "laboring for the Kingdom of God (Col. 4:11)," by proclaiming the kingdom and helping others to enter it.²²⁴ Likewise, Gerstenberger and Schrage contend that God has called all Christians for "service, witness, and confession," and that these activities often involve suffering.²²⁵

Jesus expected his followers to deny themselves, and make sacrifices for him and the gospel. Jesus taught that those who want to be his disciples must renounce all (Luke 14:33). Therefore, he promised that those who have left their houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers for the sake of Christ and the gospel will be rewarded (Mark 10:29-30). Paul exemplified the sacrifice Christ called for from his followers. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes how he turned his back on his old life, and whatever he counted as gain in it he now counts as loss compared to knowing Christ (Phil 3:4-8). He recounts that for Christ's sake he suffered the loss of all things, and now counts them rubbish so that he may gain Christ (Phil 3:8).²²⁶ In his farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul tells them that he is going to Jerusalem knowing that afflictions await him; nevertheless, he says, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:22-24).²²⁷ God's people suffer not only as they make sacrifices, but also as they spread their

²²⁴Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 450-51.

²²⁵Gerstenberger and Schrage, *Suffering*, 191.

²²⁶Based upon this verse, Alcorn argues that "suffering brings us into deeper intimacy with God." Alcorn, *If God Is Good*, 410-11.

²²⁷For additional passages describing believers as suffering for the good of the gospel, see Phil 2:25-30; 4:2-3; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:8-12.

“offensive” message.²²⁸

Jesus taught his disciples that following him would inevitably lead to their suffering and even death, for that was his path. Jesus taught them that since the world hated and persecuted him, so will his disciples will be hated by the world, for they are not of the world (John 15:18-20; 17:14).²²⁹ He told them that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword and division on the earth, for his message will divide families; “a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt 10:34-36; Luke 12:51-53). Therefore, when he sent out his disciples, he told them that they were as sheep or lambs in the midst of wolves (Matt 10:16; Luke 10:3). He warned that they will be delivered up to courts and flogged (Matt 10:17; Luke 13:9). Brother will deliver brother to death, the father his child, and children will rise against their parents and have them put to death, and will be hated by all for Jesus’ sake (Matt 10:21-22; Luke 13:12-13).²³⁰ Even worse, those that kill them will think that they are serving God (John 16:2).

Therefore, Jesus warned his disciples that those who are not willing to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him are not worthy of him (Matt 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Ladd notes that the cross is not a burden, but rather “an instrument of death;” therefore, “to take up one’s cross means to be willing to go as Jesus went to a martyr’s death.”²³¹ Robinson states that taking up one’s cross involves “self-

²²⁸Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission*, 123. Goldsworthy argues that because Jesus was rejected, suffered, and died in order to destroy the “old age,” so will the Church suffer as it proclaims the gospel because “it is the instrument of Christ’s invasion.” Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 228.

²²⁹Jesus also told his disciples that since his opponents called him Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those who belong to him (Matt 10:25).

²³⁰Commenting on Jesus’ statement that believers will be hated for his sake, Tennent argues that the Church should not only expect persecution, but regard it as normative. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 472.

²³¹Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 202.

renunciation, acceptance of innocent suffering, and obedient imitation.”²³² D. A. Carson contends that in taking up their cross believers “must die to self-interest, declare themselves dead to the glories and attractions of this world, and be prepared for suffering, even the most ignominious suffering.”²³³ Nevertheless, their suffering does not end in defeat, but rather in victory; for he who loves and finds his life will lose it, but he who hates his life and loses it for Christ and the gospel will find it (Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25).

Finally, the NT is full of examples of God’s people suffering for Christ’s sake. In the book of Acts, Luke shows that “mission, of necessity, encounters *adversity* and *suffering*.”²³⁴ Believers were persecuted, arrested, chased out of towns, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned, and even killed.²³⁵ Nevertheless, God’s word could not be stopped (Acts 1:8; 28:30-31). Paul’s life exemplified a life of suffering for the gospel.²³⁶

In defense of his apostleship, he provides a catalog of his afflictions to the Corinthians:

Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among

²³²H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 49.

²³³Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 75.

²³⁴David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology, vol. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 121-22.

²³⁵Acts 4:3-22; 5:17-21, 40-41; 7:54-60; 8:1, 3; 12:1-5; 13:50; 14:19; 16:19-39; 17:5-9; 18:17; 21:27-28:31.

²³⁶Young Kee Lee provides a helpful, though not exhaustive, breakdown of Paul’s suffering: (1) physical: “physical abuse, dangers and perils, imprisonment, and bodily illness and sickness”; (2) mental/emotional: “rejection and opposition, affliction by false brothers and the unfaithful and disobedient”; (3) spiritual: divine compulsion and pressure, satanic hindrances, unceasing anguish for Israel, and daily concern for the church. Young Kee Lee, “God’s Mission in Suffering and Martyrdom” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999), 126.

false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. (2 Cor 11:23-30)

In this catalog of afflictions there is no evidence that Paul resents or questions God for his suffering.²³⁷ Rather, Paul presents this list of afflictions as “evidence of his zeal for the Lord”; apparently arguing that not one would joyfully accept the hardships he endured if he was not actually called by God.²³⁸ Although not all believers share in Paul’s apostolic role, all believers are called to proclaim the gospel, which inevitably bring with it some form of opposition.

Avoid, flee, or continue to engage if persecuted. The NT reveals three responses by God’s people as they face opposition and persecution, namely, they avoid persecution, they flee from persecution, or they engage the persecutors.²³⁹ Some NT passages show Jesus avoiding persecution. J.D. Payne notes that Jesus withdrew to Galilee after he heard that John the Baptist was killed (Matt 4:12), and that he went to Galilee to avoid being killed, for his time had not yet come (John 7:1, 8).²⁴⁰ Also, towards the end of his ministry when plots to put him to death intensified, “Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the

²³⁷Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 98.

²³⁸John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 6 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 93-94.

²³⁹J. D. Payne identifies three responses to persecution in the NT: flight, avoidance, and engagement. J. D. Payne, “Missions in the Context of Violence: A New Testament Response,” in *Missions in Contexts of Violence*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, Evangelical Missiological Society 15 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 57-65. Plummer points out that even though God ordains suffering for believers in a “general sense” (Phil 1:29), believers should still “legitimately seek and pray to avoid” specific instances of suffering (Acts 22:25-29; 2 Cor 1:8-11; Phil 1:19; 1 Tim 2:1-4; Matt 10:23; 24:9, 15-22). Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission*, 137-38. The NT does not call believers to purposefully seek out opposition or persecution. The desire for martyrdom by the early church is not rooted in biblical teaching.

²⁴⁰Payne, “Missions in the Context of Violence,” 58, 60.

country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples” (John 11:54).

Other NT passages describe God’s people fleeing from opposition and persecution. Jesus twice “fled” from being stoned to death, after being accused of committing blasphemy (John 8:59; 10:31-39). In addition, Jesus told his disciples to shake the dust off their feet and leave the towns that rejected their teaching (Matt 10:14; Luke 9:5; 10:11), and that in the future they would have to flee from town to town because they will be persecuted (Matt 10:16-23).²⁴¹ Many from the church in Jerusalem fled when persecution broke out in connection with Stephen’s martyrdom (Acts 8:1-4). In addition, throughout Acts, Luke records that Paul would often flee from cities when persecution broke out.²⁴²

A final set of passages reveal God’s people engaging with those who oppose and persecute them. Even though Jesus did avoid and flee persecution, when his time had come, he headed directly to Jerusalem, knowing what awaited him. Jesus knew that as the Son of Man, he must suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day.²⁴³ However, his life was not going to be taken from him; rather, he was willingly laying it down for his sheep whom he loved (John 10:11, 15, 17-18; 15:13). At the last supper, he told his disciples that he was giving his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45),²⁴⁴ and that through his blood he was enacting the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:27-28; Mark 14:22-25). Moreover, during his ministry he directly engaged with the religious authorities that opposed him. He challenged them not only with his

²⁴¹Payne, “Missions in the Context of Violence,” 58.

²⁴²Acts 9:23-25, 29-30; 14:5-20; 17:5-10, 14; 18:18; 19:30; 20:1.

²⁴³Matt 16:21-28; 17:12, 22-23; 20:18-19; 26:2; Mark 8:31-9:1; 10:33-34; Luke 9:22-27; 12:50; 17:25; 18:31-33; 24:25-26, 46; John 8:28; 12:27-33.

²⁴⁴Craig Blomberg notes that the language of ransom is like that of a slave market, paying the price for a slave. Moreover, he states that Jesus was probably alluding to Isa 53:10, 12. Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 363.

teachings in general, but he also directly rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their sin (Matt 23; Luke 11:37-54). At his trial, Jesus did not try to defend himself, but he did respond to the high priest's question whether he was the Messiah, the Son of God by saying, "You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."²⁴⁵ Jesus clearly engaged his opponents, leading to his death.

As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sent his disciples out (John 20:21). Jesus sent his disciples out knowing they were as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt 10:16; Luke 10:3), and that they would be hated and persecuted (Matt 10:17-18). In Acts, the most common response to opposition and persecution was engagement.²⁴⁶ At Pentecost, Peter boldly addressed the crowds accusing them of killing the Christ, and called them to repentance (2:14-36). After healing a lame beggar at the temple, Paul turned to the crowds and once again accused them of killing "the prince of life" and called them to repentance (3:11-26). After his arrest, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed salvation in Christ alone to the rulers and elders that detained him (4:5-12). The council charged Peter and John to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, but they responded by saying, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:18-20). After Peter and John were released, the believers prayed and asked the Lord to grant them confidence in proclaiming his word (4:29). Peter and the apostles were arrested again, and again were told to stop teaching in Jesus' name. Peter and the apostles responded that they could not disobey God:

We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and

²⁴⁵Jesus alluded to Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13.

²⁴⁶Payne, "Missions in the Context of Violence," 62.

forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him. (5:29-32)

Space does not permit a discussion of all the passages in Acts in which believers confronted their opponents with the gospel; nevertheless, these examples presented reveal the boldness with which the early church engaged those that opposed them. The book of Acts demonstrates that in the face of persecution and even death believers prefer to obey God, and that opposition only serves to increase their vigor and the extent of the Church.²⁴⁷

Love and pray for enemies. Throughout the NT, believers are commanded to love and pray for those who cause them harm. Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies, and to pray for those who persecute or mistreat them (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:35). Instead of retaliating, they are to do good to those who hate them, and bless those that curse them (Luke 6:27), in so doing, they reflect their Father's love and mercy (Matt 5:45; Luke 6:26). Jesus reflected this love even while on the cross when he said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, echoed Jesus' words. As he was being stoned to death, Stephen fell on his knees and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60).

Peter and Paul also taught that believers should not retaliate, but should love and pray for their enemies. Peter commands believers to imitate Christ, who when reviled did not revile back, and when he was suffering he did not utter threats, for he entrusted himself to God who judges righteously (1 Pet 2:23). He also writes that believers should not return evil for evil or insult for insult; rather, they should give a blessing (1 Pet 3:9). In addition, they should keep their tongue from evil and from speaking deceit (1 Pet

²⁴⁷Brian Rapske, "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution," in *Witness to the Gospel*, 254.

3:10). They should turn away from evil and do good (1 Pet 3:11).²⁴⁸

Paul provides his most extensive discussion on this topic in his letter to the Romans. They are to bless and not curse those who persecute them (Rom 12:14).²⁴⁹ They are to live at peace with everyone, as far as it depends on them (Rom 12:18). They are not to repay evil for evil (Rom 12:17a), but they should “leave room for the wrath of God,” for the Lord says, “vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Deut 32:35 in LXX) (Rom 12:19).²⁵⁰ Paul also quotes Proverbs 25:21, teaching believers that if their enemy is hungry they should feed him, and if he is thirsty they should give him something to drink. Paul summarizes his point by stating that believers should not be overcome by evil, but should overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).

Rejoice amid suffering. Various NT passages teach that God’s people should rejoice even while they are being afflicted. On the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers that those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are blessed (or fortunate) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:10). Also, he said that those who are insulted, persecuted and have all kinds of evil falsely said against them for his sake are blessed (Matt 5:11). They should rejoice and be glad for God has a great reward for them in heaven, for the prophets were persecuted in the same way (Matt 5:12).²⁵¹ In Romans, Paul writes that believers should exult in their tribulations because it leads to

²⁴⁸Randy Hall notes that Peter commands holy conduct, even during opposition and persecution, as a witness to their opponents (1:15; 2:12-15, 20, 24; 3:6, 11, 17; 4:19). Randy Hall, “For to This You Have Been Called: The Cross and Suffering in 1 Peter,” *Restoration Quarterly* 19 (1976): 143.

²⁴⁹In 1 Cor 4:12-13, Paul writes that when he is reviled he blesses, and when he is slandered he tries to make peace.

²⁵⁰In 1 Thess 5:15 Paul writes, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.”

²⁵¹In a similar fashion, Luke records Jesus saying that they are blessed who are hated, ostracized, and have their name scorned as evil for the sake of the Son of Man, are blessed (Luke 6:22). They should be glad and leap for joy for their reward in heaven is great (Luke 6:23).

their perseverance, proven character, and hope (Rom 5:3-5).²⁵² Likewise, James states that believers should consider it all joy when they encounter various trials because the testing of their faith helps them mature spiritually (Jas 1:2-4). The joy is not in the pain of the trial, but rather in seeing “what God intends to accomplish through it.”²⁵³ From these examples, it is clear that God wants his people to find reasons to be joyful even though they may be suffering.²⁵⁴

The NT also contains various examples of believers rejoicing even as they are suffering. After being arrested, flogged, and charged not to proclaim Christ, the apostles “went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name” (Acts 5:40-41). Luke also records that Paul and Barnabas faced persecution and were driven out from Antioch in Pisidia, but they were still “continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:50-52). After listing an array of afflictions that commend him as an apostle (2 Cor 6:3-10), Paul describes himself as “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10). Moreover, he writes to the believers in Corinth that he is filled with comfort and overflowing with joy in all his affliction because of his confidence and pride in them (2 Cor 7:4). In his letter to the Philippians, he writes that he rejoices even in his imprisonment because it has led to the

²⁵²While in prison, Paul writes to the believers in Philippi that they should “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4). Similarly, Paul writes to the believers in Thessalonica that they should rejoice always, and that it is God’s will for them to give thanks in everything (1 Thess 5:16, 18).

²⁵³Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 173. Moreover, Ware states that “far from viewing trials as the purposeless by-products of living in a world in which forces of nature are run amuck, or in which wicked free creatures have their way in attempting to ruin our lives, rather we are instructed to see the powerful, wise, and good hand of God in all the trials of life, and so we have hope.” *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁵⁴Peter also encourages believers to have joy during their suffering. Believers can rejoice in their suffering because their salvation is secure (1 Pet 1:3-6). Also, their trials serve to prove and purify their faith, preparing them for Christ’s return (1 Pet 1:7). Moreover, they are blessed if they suffer for righteousness sake (1 Pet 3:14); when they are reviled for Christ’s sake, it proves that they are believers (1 Pet 4:14). Therefore, believers should continue to rejoice as they share in Christ’s sufferings, looking forward to the joy of his return (1 Pet 4:13). Ladd argues that in 1 Peter, “Peter desires his readers to face the evils that are befalling them not with stoic pessimism or mere passive fatalism, but with an affirmation that they play a positive role in God’s will for the Christian life.” Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 645.

advance of the gospel (Phil 1:12-18). In addition, he rejoices in the faith of the Philippians, even though he is being poured out as a drink offering (Phil 2:17-18). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that he rejoices in his sufferings for their sake (Col 1:24). Finally, Paul recognizes that the believers in Thessalonica received the gospel in much tribulation and joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:6).²⁵⁵ In other words, their persecution did not lessen the joy they had from the Holy Spirit through the gospel.²⁵⁶

To summarize, the NT provides various reasons why believers can remain joyful during times of suffering. If they suffer for Christ, they should rejoice that they were considered worthy to suffer for him, and because of the great reward that awaits them in heaven. Also, their suffering for Christ shows that they belong to him. Believers can also rejoice because their trials can help them mature spiritually. Believers can also rejoice in their sufferings if they know that they are for the good of others, and that they have helped spread of the gospel. Finally, they can rejoice during their trials because they know that their salvation is secure.

Trust God and endure to the end. Finally, above all else, believers should trust God and remain faithful to the end, for without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). Believers should put their faith in God (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; 2 Cor 5:7), and entrust their lives to him. As Jesus faced the cross, he prayed to the Father three times, asking if there might be some other way; nevertheless, he submitted himself to God's will, "yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matt 26:39, Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Peter writes that when Jesus was reviled and suffered, he entrusted himself to God who judges

²⁵⁵Jervis contends that in this verse Paul is saying that suffering is "part of the warp and woof of the gospel, that acceptance of the gospel is at the same time acceptance of suffering." L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15-16.

²⁵⁶Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, 36. In like fashion, Jervis states that their suffering "takes place not in the bleakness of suffering alone" but it takes place in "the arena of joy." Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel*, 27.

righteously (1 Pet 2:23). Therefore, believers “who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet 4:19).

Paul prayed three times that his thorn in the flesh be removed, but he “ended up embracing God’s purpose behind it” (2 Cor 12:7-10).²⁵⁷ Peter encourages believers in affliction by stating that although they may suffer “for a little while,” the God of all grace, who called them to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish them (1 Pet 5:10). As believers trust God with their lives, they are able to endure periods of suffering.

The NT also teaches that true believers endure, and remain faithful to the end. Jesus’ parable of the soils makes it plain that suffering can serve to “separate genuine faith from its counterfeits.”²⁵⁸ In the parable, those with “shallow roots” endure for a while, but they fall away when they encounter tribulation or persecution because of Christ’s word (Matt 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17; Luke 8:13). Moreover, Jesus taught his followers that they would experience persecution, and that those who endure to the end will be saved (Matt 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13).

Paul often wrote about the need for believers to endure. He endured in the midst of persecution and suffering (1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 1:6; 6:4; 2 Tim 3:11). In Romans, Paul rejoices in tribulation for it produces perseverance (5:3).²⁵⁹ He instructs believers to rejoice in hope and persevere in tribulation, and states that the Scriptures were written to instruct and encourage believers so that they may persevere and have hope (Rom 12:12; 15:4). Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians because of their “steadfastness of hope,” and he spoke proudly of them to other churches because of their perseverance and faith in

²⁵⁷Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 177.

²⁵⁸Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*, 150.

²⁵⁹Also see Jas 1:3-4.

the midst of persecution and affliction (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:4).²⁶⁰ In 2 Timothy, Paul commands Timothy to imitate him, and endure hardship as he carries out his ministry.²⁶¹

The author of Hebrews points his readers to those who came before them, showing that their suffering is “a sign that they are on the pilgrim path that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and above, Jesus, walked before them”²⁶² They suffered, yet they kept their faith in God trusting that he would keep his promise:

And others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. (Heb 11:35b-40)

Moreover, the author of Hebrews encourages believers, as they run the race set before them, to fix their eyes upon Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross (Heb 12:2). In addition, he writes that they should consider Jesus, “who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself” so that they will not “grow weary and

²⁶⁰D. R. Denton argues that the NT idea of hope and perseverance, exemplified in 1 Thess 1:3 “expresses the common OT idea of waiting,” which involves “hopeful expectancy and patience” like in Hab 2:3; Dan 12:12; and Pss 40:1; 69:3. D. R. Denton, “Hope and Perseverance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 314, 319.

²⁶¹Paul writes, “For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself. (2 Tim 2:12). Later in the letter, Paul tells Timothy to be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and to fulfill his ministry just as he (Paul) has been poured out as a drink offering, fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (2 Tim 4:5-7). Chiao Ek Ho states that Paul “draws attention to himself as a paradigm for Timothy and the Ephesian believers so that they might emulate him in his suffering for the gospel.” Chiao Ek Ho, “Mission in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul's Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 261.

²⁶²Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 671. Similarly, James encourages believers to look to the prophets who are counted as blessed because they endured in the midst suffering, especially Job who ended up experiencing God’s compassion and mercy (Jas 5:10-11).

lose heart” (Heb 12:3). Therefore, as Jesus did, believers should look ahead to the glory that awaits them to help them endure their suffering. Also, they should be strengthened by the fact that Jesus remained faithful and endured hostility by sinners to his death, but they “have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” in their “striving against sin” (Heb 12:4).²⁶³ Stott concludes from this passage that “the cross of Christ is a *stimulus to patient endurance*.”²⁶⁴

The theme of perseverance in the midst of suffering dominates the book of Revelation. Jesus is the “faithful witness” (Rev 1:5) and those who enter the second death are the cowardly and unbelieving/untrustworthy or “faithless” (Rev 21:8).²⁶⁵ John begins the description of his vision by writing, “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:9). Jesus tells each of the seven churches that those who conquer, and keep his word to the end will be rewarded (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).²⁶⁶ He commends the church in Ephesus for their patient endurance (Rev 2:2-3). He tells the church in Smyrna that he will give the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death (Rev 2:10). Throughout the book, believers are called to endure and keep their faith (Rev 13:10; 14:12). Moreover, Revelation 12:11 states that believers overcame Satan “because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when

²⁶³Peter encourages and instructs believers under opposition and persecution to look at Christ’s example of suffering before glory, in order to remind them of “God’s providence and ultimate victory” (1 Peter 2:21-23). Buist M. Fanning, “A Theology of Peter and Jude,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 451. Jesus did not only die for sinners, but he also left an example for them to follow (1 Pet 2:21).

²⁶⁴Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 306-07.

²⁶⁵Joshua Owen argues that in the book of Revelation, Jesus is presented as the “proto-martyr,” although only his death is redemptive. Joshua David Owen, “Martyrdom as an Impetus for Divine Retribution in the Book of Revelation” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 98-99.

²⁶⁶Thielman states that they must “‘conquer,’ even if that means, like Jesus, by being ‘conquered’ by God’s enemies.” Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 629.

faced with death.” While believers may be “defeated” by Satan through persecution and even death, they actually conquer Satan when they remain faithful; “Satan’s victory over them is at the same time their victory over Satan.”²⁶⁷ Finally, in all these commands to endure, the believer is to rely on God because he is the one that gives perseverance and encouragement (Rom 15:5).

Conclusion

The OT and NT provide extensive information on God’s purposes behind the suffering of his people, and how God’s people should respond. In light of the Reformed worldview and the biblical text, those in the Reformed tradition will most likely interpret times of affliction they may experience as ultimately for God’s glory and the good of his people, even though God’s purposes are hidden to them. God may have his people experience suffering for multiple reasons. First, through times of affliction, God may reveal his power and grace more clearly as he heals believers who are ill or as believers remain faithful for his name’s sake. He may also manifest his power more fully as he works through the weakness of his children as they communicate the gospel. Second, God may use the suffering of his people to give them opportunities that they would not have had otherwise to communicate the gospel. God may also have his people experience some hardship in order to take the gospel to new places and people. Moreover, God may spread the gospel as believers embody it through their suffering, and as they persevere in spite of their suffering. Third, God may have his people experience difficulties for the good of others. Their affliction may equip them to better minister to others as they receive God’s comfort. In addition, God’s people may have to suffer as they take the gospel to others or as they work for the spiritual development of others. Fourth, God may have his people experience times of suffering in order to conform them

²⁶⁷C. Marvin Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 274.

to the image of Christ. He may be testing them for the purpose of sanctifying them by freeing them from sin and developing their character. He may also be deepening their faith and giving them experiential knowledge of spiritual truths. Finally, God may discipline his children with times of affliction for the purpose of bringing them to repentance.

The OT and NT also provide instructions on how God's people should respond to suffering. First, if God is disciplining believers for their sin, they should repent and turn back to him. Second, God's people should call out to God, for he is present to comfort. Third, believers should put their hope and trust in God, and remain faithful to him to the end. Fourth, believers should view their suffering from an eschatological perspective, knowing that their salvation is secure, and that God will ultimately vindicate his people. Fifth, believers should not be surprised if they suffer because it is part of their identity in Christ. Sixth, in response to opposition and persecution, believers can avoid potential persecution, flee from persecution, or engage with the persecutors, as they are led by the Spirit. In all circumstances, believers should love and pray for those who cause them harm. Finally, believers can remain joyful even while they are suffering because they know that God is using the affliction to conform them to the image of Christ, and because God has secured their salvation and will reward them according to their faithfulness.

CHAPTER 5

THE SUFFERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE QUR'AN AND SAHIH AL-BUKHĀRI

As the two most authoritative religious texts in the Sunni tradition, studying the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* will provide invaluable information on the Sunni understanding of suffering. However, before analyzing the concept of suffering in the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, it is imperative to first set the proper context by outlining the Sunni worldview.

The Sunni Worldview

Al-Fatihah, the opening chapter of the Qur'an, "encapsulates the essence of the Qur'an, and of Islam."¹ *Al-Fatihah* reads,

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.

To summarize, Allah is the one true God.² He is most gracious and most merciful. He is the cherisher and sustainer of all the things. Therefore, humanity and all creation owe him praise. Moreover, people need his aid and guidance so that they can

¹Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 21. Michael Sells argues that it is the Islamic equivalent to the Lord's Prayer. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud, 1999), 43.

²Even though "Allah" is the Arabic word for God, the word "Allah" will be used instead of "God" since this better reflects an insider's perspective. Muslims use the word "Allah" not just to mean "God," but they use it as a proper name. For example, Badru D. Kateregga states that "Muslims would affirm that the name Allah is the most profound revealed name for the Almighty. Muslims would witness that we cannot do better than to refer to God by that name of surpassing beauty which He Himself has revealed to the last Prophet, Muhammad (PBUH)." Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 67.

follow the straight path,³ thus avoiding his wrath on the Day of Judgment. Consequently, an adherent of Islam is, first and foremost, a *muslim*, “one who submits” to Allah.⁴ Hammudah Abdalati argues that a “true, faithful Muslim” makes his belief in Allah “effective” when he places his “complete trust and hope in God,” submits to his will, and relies on his aid.⁵ Submitting to Allah involves following his guidance as revealed in the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, Muhammad’s exemplary behavior.

The Qur’an and *ahadith* reveal the foundational rituals and beliefs in the Sunni worldview.⁶ Sunni Muslims express their submission to Allah by following the five pillars of Islam, namely, the confession of faith (*shahadah*), ritual prayer (*salat*), religious tax (*zakat*), fasting (*sawm*), and pilgrimage (*hajj*).⁷ The five pillars can be understood as

³Al-Tabari argues that staying on the straight path includes doing what pleases Allah, submitting to him, believing in the prophets, obeying the Books, keeping oneself from sin, and following the example of Muhammad and of other “devout servants of God.” Abu Jafar Muhammad B. Jarir al-Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur’an*, ed. W. F. Madelung and A. Jones, trans. John Cooper, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73.

⁴Charles Le Gai Eaton, “Man,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 362. A *muslim* (مسلم) is one who practices *islām* (اسلام), meaning submission (to Allah).

⁵Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1994), 11.

⁶In the *hadith* of the angel Gabriel, Abu Hurairah narrated an incident when a man came to Muhammad and asked him “What is faith?” (50; 4777). Muhammad replied that it was to believe in Allah, his angels, meeting with him, his messengers, and in the resurrection. Then the man asked Muhammad, “What is Islam?” Muhammad replied that it was to worship Allah alone and no one else, to perform *salat*, to pay *zakat*, and to observe *sawm*. After the man left, Muhammad turned to those with him and told them that the man was the angel Gabriel who came to teach people their religion. Based upon this *hadith* and on additional teachings found in the Qur’an and the *ahadith*, Sunni Muslims have put together five pillars and five beliefs that best summarize Sunni practice and belief. The *hadith* of the angel Gabriel “has been long regarded by Muslims as one of the most important statements on Islamic faith and practice.” Vincent J. Cornell, “Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Practice in Islam,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

⁷The confession of faith is “There is no god, but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” Allah expects Muslims to face Mecca five times a day and to recite Arabic prayers, accompanied by prescribed bodily postures. Muslims are expected to give 2.5% of their net worth once a year to help the poor, orphans, widows, to free slaves and debtors, and to help the spread of Islam. Adult Muslims are expected to fast by abstaining from food, drink, and sexual activity everyday during the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset. Muslims are expected to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime, unless they are financially or physically incapable. It should be noted that some add *jihad*, struggling in Allah’s cause, as a sixth pillar of Islam.

“embodied submission”⁸ or acts of worship and service.⁹ In addition to the five pillars, there are also five foundational beliefs in the Sunni worldview. Quranic *aya* 4:136 clearly presents these five beliefs:¹⁰

O ye who believe! Believe in Allah and his messenger, and the scripture which he hath sent to his messenger and the scripture which he sent to those before (him). Any who denieth Allah, his angels, his books, his messengers, and the Day of Judgment, hath gone far, far astray.

The first belief is that Allah is one.¹¹ Committing *shirk*, associating anything with Allah, is the worst sin in Islam. The second belief is in Allah’s angels.¹² The third belief is in Allah’s books, namely, the *Tawraat* (Torah), the *Zaboor* (Psalms), the *Injeel* (Gospel), and the Qur’an. The fourth belief is in Allah’s prophets and messengers.¹³ Muhammad is the last prophet, the seal of the prophets. The fifth belief is in the Final Judgment. At the end of time, Allah will resurrect all people and bring them before him

⁸Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam, Religions as Worldviews* (New York: Paragon, 1994), 8.

⁹The word *ʿabada* (عَبَدَ) can mean both to serve and to worship.

¹⁰It should be noted that some add predestination as a sixth belief.

¹¹Seyyed Hossein Nasr states that “Allah is first and before everything One, and it is the Oneness of God that lies at the center of both the Quranic doctrine of God and Islamic spirituality.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “God,” in *Islamic Spirituality*, 312. Similarly, Ilzamudin Ma’mur argues that the concept of *tawhid*, the oneness of Allah, is the “foundation, the centre, and the end of the entire doctrine of Islam.” Ilzamudin Ma’mur, “The Concept of Tawhid in Sunni Islam (With Special Reference to Al-Ash’ari),” *Hamdard Islamicus* 25, no. 2 (2002): 35.

¹²Angels are Allah’s messengers and helpers. They perform a variety of functions, like recording peoples’ deeds and protecting believers. For a detailed account on the doctrine of angels as taught in the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, see ‘Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The World of the Noble Angels: In the Light of the Qur’an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 2nd ed., Islamic Creed Series 2 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005).

¹³Al-Ashqar lists twenty-five prophets in the Qur’an: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Hud, Saleh, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Shu’ayb, Job, Dhulkifl, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Elisha, Jonah, Zachariah, John, Jesus, and Muhammad. Messengers are to convey Allah’s message clearly (2:151; 3:20; 5:67; 16:44; 29:45; 33:39), call people to Allah (16:36; 21:25; 26:108, 110, 126, 131, 144, 150, 164, 179), bring good news and warning (18:56), reform and purify people’s souls (2:257; 22:46; 42:52), correct “deviant ideas and spurious beliefs, establish proof so that people have no excuse on the Day of Resurrection (4:41-42, 165; 16:89; 20:134; 21:11-15), and rule the *ummah* (3:31; 4:80; 5:48, 38:26). ‘Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The Messengers and the Messages: In the Light of the Qur’an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 3rd ed., Islamic Creed Series 4 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 38-40; 69-87.

for judgment; he will cast some into hell, while others he will admit into paradise. *Al-Fatiha*, the five pillars, and the five beliefs establish an outline of the Sunni worldview. Answering the four questions of the proposed method of comparison will help fill out the outline of the Sunni worldview: (1) how did we get here? (2) what is wrong with the world? (3) what is the solution (4) where are we going?

How Did We Get Here?

In the Qur'an, all things originate with Allah. He is the First and the Last (57:3). Allah is the Real, the Truth, Ultimate Reality.¹⁴ The Qur'an teaches that Allah has "the most beautiful names" (59:24), and in the *ahadith*, Muhammad specifies that he has ninety-nine names (2736; 6410).¹⁵ These ninety-nine names describe Allah as the creator, sustainer, and ruler of creation. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present. He is also the merciful and pardoning protector. However, he is also the judge, severe in punishment. The well-known "throne verse" presents a similar picture of Allah (2:255).

Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory).

Of the various attributes mentioned in this *aya*, the foundational attribute is

¹⁴Muzammil H. Siddiqi, "God: A Muslim View," in *Three Faiths--One God: A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Encounter*, ed. John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 63; S. Nomanul Haq, "Ultimate Reality: Islam," in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 77. See 10:32, 13:14; 18:44; 20:114 for verses stating that Allah is *al-Haqq*, the Truth.

¹⁵The ninety-nine names of Allah are understood and therefore, translated in a variety of ways. For a couple of examples, see 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Belief in Allah: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 3rd ed., Islamic Creed Series 1 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 317-21; Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopædia of Islam*, rev. ed. (London: Stacey International, 2001), 118-19.

God's.¹⁶ *Surah* 112 is "the finest expression" of *tawhid*,¹⁷ and regarded by Muslims as "the essence of the whole Qur'an."¹⁸ It reads, "Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him."

In addition to being One, Allah is also the all-powerful creator and sustainer of the cosmos. Faruq Sherif argues that Allah's "greatest and most manifest attribute" is that he is the creator and preserver of heaven and earth.¹⁹ Creation glorifies Allah and it is a "sign" of Allah's existence (2:164: 17:44). As creator and sustainer of the universe, Allah is all-powerful over its affairs. He is lord over life and death (3:145, 156), and nothing can happen apart from his will.²⁰ When describing Allah, Fazlur Rahman states that he is "Creator and Sustainer of the universe and of man, and particularly the giver of

¹⁶Allah's attributes have been understood in various ways in the Islamic tradition. Traditionalists, in the early history of Islam, took Allah's attributes and anthropomorphic language in the Qur'an literally. Rationalists, like the Mu'tazilites, deny the reality of the attributes, emphasizing his distinction from creation. However, the dominant and mediating position, that of al-Ashari, is that Allah's attributes are real, and that the anthropomorphic language in the Qur'an should be accepted, yet *bila kayfa*, "without knowing how." In other words, reason must bow to revelation. The attributes are real, but they are not like those of creation. Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 1, *The Formative Period* (London: Routledge, 1990), 70-71; Haq, "Ultimate Reality," 80-84; Siddiqi, "God," 67. Ma'mur, "The Concept of Tawhid in Sunni Islam," 37. Haq adds that Allah enters history through his revelation, but that his substance or essence remains transcendent. S. Nomanul Haq, "The Human Condition in Islam," in *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 165. Similarly, Siddiqi states that Allah does not reveal his person; rather, in his revelations, he provides knowledge about himself, his creation, and his will for humanity. Siddiqi, "God," 73.

¹⁷Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 35.

¹⁸Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), 11.

¹⁹Faruq Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an* (Reading, UK: Garnet, 1995), 26.

²⁰Allah gives victory in battle (3:13, 122-129). No one can believe in Allah, except by his permission (6:107, 111-12, 125; 10:99-100). Allah has power over life and calamity, all comes from his will (3:160, 3:165, 6:65, 7:188, 10:107). Allah gives life and death, and no one can die except by Allah's will, as it has been determined (3:145, 156). Smith and Haddad state that Muslims can be assured that "behind the flow of events, both in the natural and human orders, is a divine plan, and that all man's life from birth to death is a microcosmic part of that overall macrocosmic scheme." Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 11.

guidance for man and He who judges man, individually and collectively, and metes out to him merciful justice.”²¹ Rahman’s description highlights not only Allah’s power over creation, but also his relationship with humanity.

Humanity is the pinnacle of Allah’s creation. Humans are different from the rest of creation in that Allah “breathed his own spirit” into them (15:29; 32:9; 38:72). The Qur’an also teaches that Allah created humanity to worship and serve him (51:56).²² *Aya* 51:56 plainly states, “I have only created *jinn*s and men that they may serve/worship me.”²³ Consequently, the Qur’an describes worshipers of Allah as servants or slaves of Allah.²⁴ Moreover, *aya* 7:172 describes how humanity, from the very beginning, covenanted with Allah that he was their Lord, and that he alone deserves worship:

When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): “Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?”- They said: “Yea! We do testify!” (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: “Of this we were never mindful.”²⁵

Moreover, Allah placed humanity as his *khalifa*, vice-regent (2:30-37),²⁶ and

²¹Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 1.

²²Jamal Badawi argues that any action can be worship as long as it is done with “pure” intention, and that it is done “within the limits prescribed by Allah.” Jamal Badawi, “The Earth and Humanity: A Muslim View,” in *Three Faiths—One God: A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Encounter*, ed. John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 88.

²³As noted previously, the word *عبد* (*'abada*) can mean to worship or to serve. *Jinn* are spirit beings that Allah created out of “smokeless fire.” Like people, they can embrace or reject Islam, and will be brought before Allah on the Day of Judgment. For more information on the *jinn*, see 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The World of the Jinn & Devils: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 2nd ed., Islamic Creed Series 3 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005).

²⁴Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an*, 49.

²⁵The *ahadith* also reference this original covenant between humanity and Allah (3344; 6557).

²⁶*خلف* (*khalifa*) is most commonly translated successor; however, it can also carry the idea of vice-regent, trustee, and deputy. Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 84-85; Mustansir Mir, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Terms and Concepts* (New York: Garland, 1987), 35-36; Arne Ambros and Stephan Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 89-90.

gave humanity “the Trust” (33:72-73).²⁷ In simple terms, one could say that Allah has placed humanity in charge on earth. Mohamed Abu-Hamdiyyah provides a helpful explanation of what it means for humanity to be Allah’s *khalifa* when he states that “God put mankind in full charge on earth. This empowerment or mandate with full responsibility runs during the sojourn of man on earth.”²⁸ S. Nomunal Haq emphasizes the moral nature of this God-given responsibility. He argues that Allah created humanity in order to bring about through his guidance, “a moral order *here on earth*, that is, a moral order in history.”²⁹ Syed Abul Ala Maudoodi understands that people live out their role as Allah’s vice-regents by carrying out his will:

Man’s being the viceregent of God on this earth logically requires that the purpose of his life should be to carry out the will of God on this earth. To enforce the divine will in the portion of the world’s affairs whose management has been entrusted to him by God, to create and maintain those conditions in which peace, justice, and virtue can flourish; to suppress and eradicate whatever mischief, and disorder is caused by the evil-doers among men and to foster those virtues and moral qualities which are pleasing in the sight of God and with which the Lord of the universe desires to embellish His earth and enoble His creatures.³⁰

²⁷The quranic passage 33:72-73 reads, “We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it; He was indeed unjust and foolish; (With the result) that Allah has to punish the Hypocrites, men and women, and the Unbelievers, men and women, and Allah turns in Mercy to the Believers, men and women: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” Schimmel points out that scholars are not in agreement on what exactly “the trust” means: obedience, faith, responsibility, individuality, etc. Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 33. Rahman states that the “trust” is the mission Allah gave to humanity to create a moral social order on earth. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 18. Abdul Rauf argues that based on 33:72-73, Allah gave the trust to humanity to watch over creation so that he could make his “forgiving and punishing attributes” manifest. Feisal Abdul Rauf, *Islam: A Search for Meaning* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1995), 53-54. Similarly, al-Ashqar argues that Allah created a world in which he could manifest his names and attributes, his wisdom, forgiveness, justice, etc. Ashqar, *The World of the Jinn & Devils*, 220.

²⁸Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur’an*, 84-85.

²⁹Haq, “The Human Condition in Islam,” 162. Commenting on this belief of moral responsibility before God and society, Hodgson argues that Islam “has been uncompromising in keeping the sense of cosmic duty unaltered and central, in accord with the straightforward sobriety which seems to characterize it.” Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life,” *Diogenes* 32 (1960): 57.

³⁰Syed Abul Ala Maudoodi, *The Ethical View-Point of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Markazi Maktaba Jamaat-e-Islami, 1953), 50.

As Allah's vice-regents, humankind's time on earth is a test or a trial. The Qur'an clearly states that Allah also created humanity that he might test them, and see which one was the best (11:7-9; 18:7; 67:2; 76:2). Fadhlalla Haeri states this succinctly when he states that "Life is a trial preparing people for paradise or hell."³¹ Similarly, in *The Purpose of Creation*, A.B. Philips states that "This world of life and death, wealth and poverty, sickness and health, was created to sift out the righteous souls from the evil ones. Human conduct in this world is the measure of faith."³²

Taking a look at Adam's sin, the first incident of humankind's disobedience, will provide a helpful picture of the human condition before Allah. Allah created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden, and commanded them not to eat from the forbidden tree.³³ However, Satan tempted them, and they ate of the tree.³⁴ For their disobedience, Allah banished them from the garden and cast them down to earth. However, they quickly repented and Allah forgave them (2:37; 7:23-26).³⁵

This incident reveals some important elements of the Sunni understanding of human nature. First, Allah created Adam in a state of moral purity, which all humankind shares with him (30:30).³⁶ The *ahadith* teach that every child is born muslim (one who

³¹Fadhlalla Haeri, *Journey of the Universe as Expounded in the Qur'an* (London: KPI, 1985), 10.

³²A. B. Philips, *The Purpose of Creation* (Riyadh: Islamic Propagation Office in Rabwah, 2007), 47.

³³The quranic account is found in 7:19-26.

³⁴The Qur'an recounts that when Allah created Adam out of clay, he commanded his angels to bow down before Adam (15:26-44; 17:61-65; 18:50; 20:116-23; 38:71-88). All the angels obeyed, except *Iblis* (ابليس; usually translated as devil), who because of pride, would not bow to Adam. Allah then cursed *Iblis*, and he became الشيطان (*al-shaytan*), the adversary of mankind. For a detailed account of Satan in the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature see, Peter Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), 18-56; Ashqar, *The World of the Jinn & Devils*, 81-161.

³⁵Adam's repentance involved him acknowledging his sin, renouncing his error, and regretting what he had done. Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, 1:264.

³⁶Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," *Journal of Dharma* 2 (1977): 269.

believes and submits to God), but is later corrupted by their parents who make them either Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian. Therefore, a “true Muslim” believes that Allah created humanity with a nature that is more good than evil.³⁷ Adam’s disobedience was due to Satan’s temptation, and his own “built-in human imperfections,”³⁸ which made it possible for him to disobey. Mustansir Mir argues that sin arises from the “willful misuses by humans of the freedom that has been accorded them.”³⁹ Moreover, Adam and Eve’s sin did not transform or corrupt human nature; rather, their sin only affected them, and Allah quickly forgave them when they repented. In opposition to the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, Abdalati states that Adam and Eve’s “committing a sin or making a mistake,” did not “necessarily deaden the human heart, prevent spiritual reform or stop moral growth.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the human condition in Islam is not about “recovery from a fall” to regain some “original glory,” but is rather about “perpetually fulfilling a set of obligations, ‘to enjoin good and dismiss evil,’ and while fulfilling its obligations humanity reaches ever new glories.”⁴¹ To conclude, every person is born with the innate ability to obey or disobey Allah, and to repent if needed.

In light of this human condition, the Qur’an teaches that Allah gives guidance to whom he wills, guiding on the straight path those who obey him and his prophet, and leading astray those who reject his guidance (2:142, 213, 272; 6:88, 149; 14:4; 16:93; 24:35; 28:56; 30:29; 35:8). To those who turn to him, as the introduction to every *surah* states, Allah is “most gracious, most merciful.” He is “Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful,”

³⁷Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 18.

³⁸Badawi, “Islam: A Brief Look,” in *Three Faiths—One God*, 189.

³⁹Mustansir Mir, “Sin” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4:73.

⁴⁰Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 31.

⁴¹Haq, “The Human Condition in Islam,” 171.

(2:192).⁴² Allah's mercy was most clearly manifested when he sent guidance to humanity through his messengers and his books, especially Muhammad and the Qur'an. Consequently, Abdalati states that the Qur'an is "the greatest gift of God to humanity," and Gai Eaton states that Allah gave Muhammad as an act of "mercy to mankind."⁴³

What Is Wrong with the World?

The main problem with the world is that the majority of people do not submit to Allah. People do not obey Allah, nor do they order society by his Divine Law, *Shari'ah*, as they should. This largely explains why the world is in its current chaotic state. According to the Qur'an, the majority of people are *kuffār*, unbelievers; they have turned away from the signs, and do not believe in Allah nor worship him as they should (12:40, 103, 105-107).⁴⁴ *Kuffār* are ungrateful, haughty, unlawful, unjust, and contentious. They also mock revelation, and follow their own inclinations with no regard for Allah.⁴⁵ The Qur'an describes the majority of people as being ungrateful, in spite of all that Allah has given to them (10:12, 22-23, 31, 60; 12:38).⁴⁶ The essence of unbelief is ingratitude, explaining why the word *kufr* is used for both those who do not believe and

⁴²The *ahadith* report Muhammad saying, "When Allah completed the creation, He wrote in His Book which is with Him on His Throne, 'My Mercy has overcome My Anger'" (3194; 7404; 7453; 7553; 7554).

⁴³Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 191; Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1994), 201.

⁴⁴*Aya* 12:40 reads, "If not Him, ye worship nothing but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers, for which Allah hath sent down no authority: the command is for none but Allah: He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him: that is the right religion, but most men understand not." 12:105-107 reads, "And how many Signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn (their faces) away from them! And most of them believe not in Allah without associating (other as partners) with Him! Do they then feel secure from the coming against them of the covering veil of the wrath of Allah, or of the coming against them of the (final) Hour all of a sudden while they perceive not?"

⁴⁵For a semantic analysis of these terms that describe *kuffār*, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, McGill Islamic Studies 1 (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 119-55.

⁴⁶Also see 14:32-34; 16:51-55, 72, 83; 27:73; 100:6.

those who are ungrateful.⁴⁷ In addition, the Qur'an depicts humanity as being rebellious and as giving partners to Allah, and thus, committing *shirk* (4:48). Haq argues that *shirk* is “the cardinal sin of Islam,” and that “in terms of its frequency, intensity, and rhetorical force, there exists hardly any theme in the Qur'an that matches *shirk*.”⁴⁸

The reason people do not submit to Allah, and do not live by his commands is because they are weak, petty, forgetful, and succumb to Satan's temptations. The Qur'an describes humanity as weak (4:27-28).⁴⁹ 'Umar S. al-Ashqar states that humanity has many weaknesses, which are in fact “diseases” of the soul; Islam calls people to reform themselves and get rid of these diseases.⁵⁰ Moreover, the Qur'an teaches that people are forgetful (59:19), making them prone to allow the “cycles of acquisition and competition” in life to “obscure matters of ultimate concern.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, in their weakness, people are naturally capable of avoiding major sins, and are able to try their best to avoid minor sins.⁵²

In addition to their natural weakness, people also have to contend with Satan's

⁴⁷Jane Dammen McAuliffe and Daniel A. Madigan, “Themes and Topics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 83.

⁴⁸Haq, “The Human Condition in Islam,” 166. Shirk is the only unforgivable sin for those who die insisting on associating anyone or anything along with Allah. Badawi, “The Earth and Humanity,” 93-94.

⁴⁹4:27-28 reads, “Allah doth wish to Turn to you, but the wish of those who follow their lusts is that ye should turn away (from Him), far, far away. Allah doth wish to lighten your (difficulties): For man was created Weak (in flesh).” Allah also created people very impatient (70:19).

⁵⁰Ashqar, *The World of the Jinn & Devils*, 127-28. Al-Asqar includes an extensive list of human weaknesses that Satan exploits: weakness, despair, hopelessness, recklessness, inappropriate joy, self-admiration, pride, wrongdoing, oppression, denial, ingratitude, haste, negligence, foolishness, miserliness, stinginess, covetousness, argumentativeness, doubt, suspicion, ignorance, carelessness, going to extremes of hostility in cases of dispute, arrogance, false claims, panic, fear, withholding charity, rebellion, tyranny, overstepping the limits, love of wealth, and being infatuated with the world.

⁵¹Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 40.

⁵²Badawi, “The Earth and Humanity,” 92. Badawi bases this conclusion on 2:286, 4:31, and 5:7.

temptations. After Allah cast Satan away for refusing to bow down before Adam, Satan vowed to be humanity's enemy (7:16-17).⁵³ Although Satan cannot coerce, he can invite and tempt (7:11-18, 27; 20:120). Satan's ultimate goal is to lead a person to hell and deprive her of paradise (35:6).⁵⁴ Therefore, Allah warns humankind of Satan's temptation (7:27):

O ye Children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment, to expose their shame: for he and his tribe watch you from a position where ye cannot see them: We made the evil ones friends (only) to those without faith.

Believers have a variety of "weapons" in their fight against Satan's temptations: being watchful and cautious, adhering to the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, turning to Allah for his protection, keeping oneself busy with remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), adhering to the practices of the *ummah*, discovering "the traps and snares" of Satan, opposing Satan, repenting and seeking forgiveness from Allah, and not leaving any room for Satan "to instill suspicion in people's hearts."⁵⁵

Negative consequences await not only individuals who reject Allah and his messengers, but also peoples and civilizations. The Qur'an presents human history as an ongoing process of societies being created and destroyed based upon Allah's unalterable moral judgment that governs world history.⁵⁶ In *aya* 10:13, Allah says, "Generations before you We destroyed when they did wrong: their messengers came to them with clear-signs, but they would not believe! Thus do We requite those who sin!"⁵⁷ Before

⁵³See 7:16-17, which reads, "because thou hast thrown me out of the way, lo! I will lie in wait for them on thy straight way: Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left: Nor wilt thou find, in most of them, gratitude (for thy mercies)." The Qur'an presents Satan as man's opponent and enemy, not God's. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 123.

⁵⁴Ashqar, *The World of The Jinn & Devils*, 83.

⁵⁵Ibid., 165-202.

⁵⁶Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 52.

⁵⁷Also see 7:3-6; 17:58-60; 19:98; 28:58; 50:36.

destroying a people or a civilization though, Allah first sends them a messenger to warn them, calling them back to worship Allah, and to turn away from evil (10:47; 16:36; 28:59; 38:3-4). However, every time Allah sent a messenger to a people, they rejected him (23:44). Allah destroyed Pharaoh and the Egyptians for rejecting Moses (7:130-132; 11:96-99; 23:44; 28:40; 40:26-28; 37). He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because they rejected Lot and persisted in their immorality (11:81-83; 15:61-79; 29:28-34). He sent an earthquake to the people of Midian because they rejected Shu'aib, whom he had sent them (11:84-95; 29:36-37). He also destroyed the people of 'Ad and Thamud for rejecting Allah's Signs and his messengers, Hud and Salih (11:50-68; 29:38; 41:15-17).

These accounts in the Qur'an serve as warnings for current and future generations.⁵⁸ As Mahmoud Ayoub states, "History is God's court of justice and the instrument of His discipline."⁵⁹ In the opening line of Sayyid Qutb's highly influential work, *Milestones*, he warns that the modern world is in danger of destruction because it lacks the "vital values" needed for its progress:

Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head- this being just a symptom and not the real disease—but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress.⁶⁰

To conclude, what is wrong with the world is that individuals and societies are not submitting to Allah. Individuals are weak, forgetful, and give in to Satan's temptations. This reality leads them to be ungrateful, rebellious, and to commit *shirk*. They end up rejecting Allah and his messenger. These same problems then extend to the

⁵⁸Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*, 114. The Qur'an presents a cyclical pattern in history in which Allah sends messengers and prophets to civilizations to warn them that if they do not repent and worship Allah they will be destroyed. The people end up rejecting the messenger, Allah then destroys them, but he keeps alive those that did embrace the messenger. Bakker argues that these narratives end up being prophet-centered, or even Muhammad-centered since all the stories are related back to him and his situation. Dirk Bakker, *Man in the Qur'an* (Amsterdam: Drukkerij Holland, 1965), 98.

⁵⁹Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 275.

⁶⁰Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus: Dar Al-Ilm, 1996), 7.

societal level, and people form societies devoid of Allah's guidance. Individuals on the wrong path are heading towards hell, and societies on the wrong path are heading toward their inevitable demise.

What Is the Solution?

The solution to what is wrong with the world is Islam, an all-encompassing way of life in submission to Allah's will. In his mercy, Allah has provided guidance by sending his messengers and his books to help remind people of their responsibilities before him.⁶¹ Allah's mercy toward humankind culminates with the Qur'an and Muhammad; however, the message is not new. In his article "What Islam Stands For," Abul A'la Maududi argues that "The Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that Islam- the complete submission of man before God- is the one and only faith consistently revealed by God to mankind from the very beginning."⁶² Similarly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr contends that Muhammad did not come with a new message, but rather to "reaffirm the truth which always was, to re-establish the Primordial Tradition (*al-dīn al-ḥanīf*), and to expound the doctrine of Divine Unity."⁶³ Consequently, Islam does not provide a new solution to what is wrong with the world, but rather, repeats what Allah's messengers and prophets have proclaimed since creation.

Allah provides guidance to individuals and to societies through Islam, especially through the Qur'an and Muhammad. Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi argues that "Islam

⁶¹Hodgson argues that in Islam, people primarily seek guidance rather than forgiveness. In support of this claim, he points to the fact that in the *fatīha* the emphasis is on seeking Allah's guidance rather than his forgiveness. Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life," 49-74.

⁶²Abul A'la Maududi, "What Islam Stands For," in *The Challenge of Islam*, ed. Altaf Gauhar (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), 3.

⁶³Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1978), 5.

is the most suitable religion for mankind.”⁶⁴ Qutb contends that Islam is “the only system” which has the values and way of life that can lead to the world’s “healthy development” and its “real progress.”⁶⁵ Suzanne Haneef states that Islam is “a complete and perfect system of life.”⁶⁶ Stating it negatively, Hasan Ibn Abdullah al-Shaykh writes that Islam is alone capable of “saving humanity from its certain collapse.”⁶⁷

Islam provides meaning and guidance for believers. Believers know that the purpose of life is to worship and serve Allah by obeying his commands in the Qur’an and *Sunnah*. In addition to explaining the purpose of life, Islam also provides believers with reminders of Allah, thus helping them to stay on the straight path.⁶⁸ The Qur’an teaches believers to remember Allah through reciting the Qur’an and through *salat*: “Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to thee, and establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance of Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt. And Allah knows the (deeds) that ye do” (29:45). The

⁶⁴Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, “Islam: The Most Suitable Religion for Mankind,” in *The Challenge of Islam*, ed. Altaf Gauhar (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), 17-30. Nadvi argues that Islam is the most suitable religion for mankind because it affirms the Oneness of God, the equality and brotherhood of mankind, human dignity, forgiveness of sins, unity of the sacred and the profane, and because it calls humanity to focus on the eternal, the spiritual and judgment day.

⁶⁵Qutb, *Milestones*, 7-8. Likewise, in *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb states that “Christianity is unable, except by intrigue, to compete with the social and economic systems that are ever developing, because it has no essential philosophy of actual, practical life. On the other hand, Islam is a perfectly practicable social system in itself; it has beliefs, laws, and a social and economic system that is under the control of both conscience and law, and which is open to growth through development and application.” Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. John B. Hardie, rev. ed. (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2000), 317. As one of the leading figures in the history of Muslim fundamentalism, Qutb further argues that Islam needs “to play the role of the leader of mankind,” and that this is only possible if the *ummah* is “restored to its original form.” Qutb, *Milestones*, 9.

⁶⁶Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 14th ed. (South Elgin, IL: Library of Islam, 1996), 125.

⁶⁷Hasan Ibn Abdullah al-Shaykh, foreword to *The Life of Muhammad*, by Muhammad Husayn Haykal, trans. Ismail Ragi A. al Faruqi (Indianapolis: North American Trust, 1976), x.

⁶⁸To remember, *ذَكَرَ (dkikr)*, is “one of the core concepts of the Qur’an and of Islamic civilization.” Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an*, 40.

Qur'an and Islamic rituals, especially *salat*, serve as reminders,⁶⁹ helping believers overcome their natural weakness and forgetfulness.

Moreover, the Qur'an and *Sunnah* provide moral guidance for believers. The Qur'an is a guide for humankind (2:185; 7:52; 27:77), which Allah gave Muhammad that he might lead humanity from "the depths of darkness into light" (14:1). Consequently, Rahman states that the aim of the Qur'an is not Allah, but rather humanity and its behavior.⁷⁰ Muhammad Haykal argues that if people follow the "rules and ideals of conduct" in the Qur'an, that would enable them to attain "moral perfection."⁷¹ In addition to the Qur'an, believers also look to the *Sunnah* to see how Allah wants them to live. Muhammad is the ideal man; his life exemplified complete submission and obedience to Allah. Syed Muhammad al-Naquib al-Attas states that Muhammad is the "perfect model" of Islam for all generations and for all time.⁷²

Instead of cataloguing the various morals and values found in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, it will be enough to highlight the morals and values that two Sunni writers describe as essential to the faith. In *Islam in Focus*, Abdalati states that based upon the Qur'an and the *ahadith*, "true believers" trust Allah with unshakable confidence, use what they have for Allah, "enjoin the right and good, and combat the wrong and evil by all lawful means at their disposal," obey Allah and Muhammad, increase in faith when the Qur'an is recited, have humility of heart when Allah's name is mentioned, show

⁶⁹Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 40.

⁷⁰Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 3. Likewise, Jomier contends that the Qur'an is "first and foremost a book of exhortations, practical advice and at times legislation." Jacques Jomier, *The Great Themes of the Qur'an*, trans. Zoe Hersov (London: SCM, 1997), 3.

⁷¹Muhammad Haykal, "Islamic Civilization as Depicted in the Qur'an," in *The Life of Muhammad* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1976), 539.

⁷²Syed Muhammad al-Naquib al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality," in *The Challenge of Islam*, ed. Altaf Gauhar (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), 66. Concerning the believer's relation with Muhammad, Eaton states that "the believer feels close to him in life and hopes to be closer still after death, loving him not only as master and as guide but also as brother-man." Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, 200.

hospitality, speak the truth, and love Allah, Muhammad, and others for Allah's sake alone.⁷³ In *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, Haneef covers an extended list of Islamic values: God-consciousness, faith, sincerity, responsibility, integrity, honesty, discipline, self-control, humility, patience, endurance, courage, thankfulness, keeping of commitments, fair-dealing, dignity, honor, self-respect, purity, modesty, chastity, kindness, helpfulness, cooperation, charitableness, generosity, hospitality, consideration, good manners, brotherliness, warmth, lovingness, striving, hard work, and love of knowledge.⁷⁴ As believers submit to Allah by obeying the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, believers uphold the primordial covenant and embody their roles as Allah's vice-regents.⁷⁵

Finally, Islam is not only the solution for individuals, but also for societies. Rahman argues that there is no doubt that the "central aim" of the Qur'an is to set up a "viable social order on earth that will be just and ethically based."⁷⁶ Haneef argues that Islam has its own "social, political, legal and economic concepts and systems," and if societies implement them, they "would be as nearly ideal in moral and human terms as it is possible for a society to be."⁷⁷ These social, political, legal and economic concepts and systems are rooted in Allah's Divine Law, *Shari'ah*. Nasr provides a helpful description of *Shari'ah*, showing its central role in Islam:

In the Islamic perspective God has revealed the *Shari'ah* to man so that through it he can reform himself and his society. . . . The presence of *Shari'ah* in the world is due to the compassion of God for his creatures so that he has sent an all encompassing Law for them to follow and thereby to gain felicity in both this world and the next. The *Shari'ah* is thus the ideal for human society and the individual. It provides meaning for all human activities and integrates human life. It is the norm

⁷³Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 23-24.

⁷⁴Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 73-97.

⁷⁵Cornell, "Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge," 96.

⁷⁶Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 37.

⁷⁷Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 111, 123.

for the perfect social and human life. . . . To live according to *Shari'ah* is to live according to the Divine Will, according to a norm which God has willed for man.⁷⁸

By obeying *Shari'ah*, humanity fulfills its charge to create a moral order based upon Allah's commands.⁷⁹ Since only the *ummah* seeks to obey *Shari'ah* and thus, live out Allah's purpose for humanity, it plays a unique and crucial role in the world. Speaking of the *ummah*, Allah states, "Even so we constituted you as a median community that you be witnesses to humankind and that the Messenger be a witness over you" (2:143).⁸⁰ Moreover, Allah states that the Muslim community is "best of peoples," for they command what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in Allah (3:110). Qutb argues that the *ummah* should therefore lead humanity:

Islam came to create a people with a unique and distinctive character, a community that was to lead humanity, achieve purposes of God on earth, and rescue humanity from the suffering it had endured at the hands of misguided leaders, methodologies, and concepts.⁸¹

To summarize, the solution to what is wrong with the world is Islam. Islam provides meaning to the human life, and through the Qur'an and Islamic rituals, it provides reminders of Allah needed to stay on the straight path. Moreover, *Shari'ah* embodies the ideal for individuals and for society. If individuals obey *Shari'ah* and build their societies upon it, they will purify themselves and the world. In Islam, there is no such thing as salvation, rather, there is only *success* or *failure* in bringing about the type of world order embodied in the *Shari'ah*.⁸²

⁷⁸Seyyed Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 117-18.

⁷⁹S. Nomanul Haq, "The Taxonomy of Truth in the Islamic Religious Doctrine and Tradition," in *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 138.

⁸⁰Rahman's translation of 2:143. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 62.

⁸¹Sayyid Qutb, *Basic Principles of the Islamic Worldview*, trans. Rami David (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2006), 2. Similarly, Hodgson states that the *ummah* is "ideally a single homogeneous brotherhood with a common witness and with a common mission to purify the world, incumbent equally on every believer and at every moment." Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life," 65.

⁸²Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 63.

Where Are We Going?

According to the Qur'an and the *ahadith*, people will spend eternity in either paradise or hell. In his foreword to *Paradise and Hell: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, al-Ashqar writes, "Praise be to Allah, Who has created Paradise and Hell, and has created inhabitants for each of them, and has made Paradise the abode of His beloved and Hell the abode of His enemies."⁸³ Aya 47:15 provides a vivid contrast between paradise and hell:

(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits; and Grace from their Lord. (Can those in such Bliss) be compared to such as shall dwell for ever in the Fire, and be given, to drink, boiling water, so that it cuts up their bowels (to pieces)?⁸⁴

However, before reaching paradise or hell, individuals must first die, spend time in the grave, be bodily resurrected, and finally face Allah's judgment. The Qur'an teaches that death is inevitable (3:185; 28:88; 39:30; 55:26-27) and that Allah has appointed one's time of death (3:145; 4:78; 7:34; 56:60; 62:8). After dying, people spend time in *Al-Barzakh*, the "interval" between death and the Day of Resurrection. Their bodies remain in the grave while their souls are taken to either paradise or hell to be blessed or tormented, awaiting their bodily resurrection and judgment.⁸⁵

The Day of Resurrection has a variety of names in the Qur'an including, the Hour, the Last Day, the Day of Judgment, the Day of Recompense, and the Day of

⁸³Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 5th ed., Islamic Creed Series 7 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 17.

⁸⁴The "great mass of the faithful" take the descriptions of paradise and hell "at face value." In addition, traditionally, it has been understood that there are seven levels in both paradise and hell, which amount to degrees of blessing and punishment. Jane I. Smith, "Afterlife," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 1:42.

⁸⁵Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The Minor Resurrection (What Happens after Death): In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 2nd ed., Islamic Creed Series 5 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 65-103; 117-43.

Coming Out.⁸⁶ The Day of Judgment will be a day of dread (22:1-2; 83:4-6), especially for disbelievers (40:18; 74:9-10; 76:27). Allah will destroy the earth (28:88; 55:26). Heaven will be rolled up (21:104; 39:67). The earth will be crushed and the mountains will be blown away.⁸⁷ The seas will overflow (81:6; 82:3). The sky will shatter and split (52:9; 55:37; 69:16; 82:1; 84:1-2), and the stars will fall from the sky (82:1-2).

When the trumpet blows (27:87; 36:49-51; 39:68; 79:6-7), all individuals will be resurrected (36:51-53) and returned to Allah (3:83; 11:123; 23:115; 24:64; 28:88; 29:57) to be recompensed (51:1-6). After the souls and bodies of all people are reunited, they will be gathered in one place (2:148; 11:103; 56:49-50), and brought before Allah for judgment (18:48; 39:69). Individuals will hold in their right or left hand, depending if they are righteous or not, a book with a record of their deeds (18:49; 69:19-31; 84:7-8). Their deeds will be placed before them (3:30; 5:105; 18:9; 82:5) and they will be weighed on a balance (21:47; 23:102-103). Those whose deeds are light will be the losers, but those whose deeds are heavy will prosper (7:8-9; 23:103-105; 101:6-11). Allah will judge fairly, and no one will experience injustice.⁸⁸ However, Allah's judgment is holistic in nature, and not a "strict *quid pro quo*."⁸⁹ For example, in his

⁸⁶Day of Resurrection (4:87; 17:97; 22:5; 30:56; 42:45); the Hour (15:85; 16:1; 20:15; 22:1; 34:3; 40:59; 54:1); the Last Day (2:177; 2:232; 4:162; 9:18); the Day of Judgment (3:161; 37:21; 77:38; 78:17); the Day of Recompense (37:20; 82:14-19); the Day of Coming Out (30:25; 50:42; 70:43).

Although no one knows the time of the Day of Resurrection (7:187; 31:34; 33:63; 79:42-44), there are signs that will precede it: appearance of smoke (44:10-15), the great tribulation in human history brought about by *ad-Dajjal* (the Anti-Christ), the descent of Jesus who will kill *ad-Dajjal* (43:61), the emergence of Gog and Magog, removal of the Qur'an and the death of good people, mankind's return to ignorance and idol-worship, destruction of the Kaaba, rise of the sun from the west, emergence of the beast (27:82), and the fire that will gather the people. 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The Day of Resurrection: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 2nd ed., Islamic Creed Series 6 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 249-327.

⁸⁷See 18:47; 20:105-107; 69:13-15; 70:9; 73:14; 77:10; 78:20; 81:3; 89:21; 101:5.

⁸⁸See 2:281; 4:77, 124; 16:111; 17:71; 18:49; 21:47; 45:22; 46:19; 99:7-8. *Aya* 21:47 reads, "We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least, and if there be (no more than) the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it (to account): and enough are We to take account."

⁸⁹Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 109.

mercy, Allah will multiply the weight of the good deeds of believers (2:261; 6:160; 64:17). Moreover, the *ahadith* record that Muhammad will intercede on behalf of believers on the Day of Judgment (3340; 3361; 4712; 4718). Although the Qur'an appears to teach that there is no intercession (2:48, 254; 6:51, 70; 39:23, 44), other verses state that there is no intercession without Allah's permission (2:255; 10:3; 20:109; 34:23; 53:26), thus making it permissible.⁹⁰

After the judgment, Allah will gather the *kuffār* into جهنم (*jahannam*), hell,⁹¹ where they will be punished in proportion to their sin.⁹² They will feel sorry for denying Allah and will want to get out,⁹³ but there will be no way to escape (18:53). They will even ask the angels to intercede on their behalf to lessen the pain (40:49-50; 43:77), but the severity of the torment will not decrease with time (2:86; 17:97; 78:30). The Qur'an describes hell as a place of disgrace (3:192; 9:63), and of great loss (39:15). Allah prepared it for disbelievers (3:131; 78:21-22), and it is the dwelling place (3:151; 10:8; 57:15) for those who reject Allah and Muhammad (9:63; 35:36; 48:13; 55:35-44; 56:39-

⁹⁰Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 31. Commenting on *aya* 2:48, Al-Tabari contends that there will be no intercession for those who die in disbelief. He states that based upon the *ahadith*, it is clear that through Muhammad's intercession, Allah "may grant a reprieve to His believing servants." Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, 1:295. For an extended discussion of intercession on Judgment Day, see Ashqar, *The Day of Resurrection*, 235-58.

⁹¹See 19:68-72; 25:34; 39:71; 41:19; 52:13. The Qur'an teaches that the majority of people will be in hell (12:103; 34:20; 38:85). In the Qur'an, hell is described as "the fire," "burning," "raging flame," "scorching fire," "abyss," and "crushing pressure." Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopædia of Islam*, 175.

⁹²There are degrees of punishment in hell or levels in hell depending on a person's deeds. See 3:162-163; 4:145; 6:132.

⁹³See 6:27; 10:54; 23:106-108; 35:37; 40:11; 67:6-11; 84:10-12. 67:6-11 reads, "For those who reject their Lord (and Cherisher) is the Penalty of Hell: and evil is (such), Destination. When they are cast therein, they will hear the (terrible) drawing in of its breath even as it blazes forth, Almost bursting with fury: Every time a Group is cast therein, its Keepers will ask, 'Did no Warner come to you?' They will say: 'Yes indeed; a Warner did come to us, but we rejected him and said, 'Allah never sent down any (Message): ye are nothing but an egregious delusion!' They will further say: 'Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we should not (now) be among the Companions of the Blazing Fire!' They will then confess their sins: but far will be (Forgiveness) from the Companions of the Blazing Fire!"

56; 88:1-7), his signs (7:36), and faith (2:39, 161-162). Moreover, the Qur'an describes hell as specifically for those who did not believe (*kufir*) and added gods to Allah (*shirk*).⁹⁴ Hell is also for hypocrites (4:145; 9:68), the arrogant (7:36; 39:60; 46:20), and for those who did not perform *salat* or give *zakat* (74:43-47), and rejected the resurrection (74:43-47). The Qur'an provides vivid imagery of the fiery torments of hell.⁹⁵

The traditional Sunni position is that hell is eternal, and that no one gets out except sinners from the *ummah*, "believers in the Oneness of Allah," after they have been punished for their sins.⁹⁶ Sinful believers may spend time in hell if they committed major sins that outweigh their good deeds: by belonging to sects that go against the *Sunnah*, refusing to migrate to Muslim countries for Allah's sake (4:97-98), judging unjustly, lying about Muhammad, being proud, killing for no reason, practicing usury, consuming peoples' wealth and property unjustly, making images of living things, supporting those who do wrong, being a temptress, being an oppressor, torturing a living being, being insincere in seeking knowledge, drinking from vessels of gold and silver, cutting down trees that give shade to people, and committing suicide.⁹⁷ Therefore, hell is eternal for disbelievers and temporary for sinful believers.

⁹⁴See 13:5; 20:99-101; 25:11; 26:94-98; 40:10-12, 50, 70-76; 67:9.

⁹⁵The Qur'an describes hell as a place of fire (37:64, 38:59, 44:47, 47:15; 81:12-13; 101:8-11), heat (77:30-33), hot wind (56:41-44) and black smoke (56:43), where the losers are the fuel (2:24; 66:6). There is no shade (77:30-33), and they will have to drink boiling hot water (22:19-20; 55:44; 88:5). They will eat fire and coals (4:10), and unsatisfying vegetation that will boil their insides (37:62-68; 44:43-46; 56:51-56; 88:6-7). In addition, their skin will be roasted (4:56), and their faces will be scorched and blackened (3:106; 10:27; 14:50; 17:97; 21:39; 23:104; 27:90; 33:66; 39:24). Finally, they will be tied in chains, fetters, and yokes, (22:21-22; 34:33; 40:70-72; 69:31-32; 73:12-13; 76:4) and they will be dragged on their faces (54:47-48).

⁹⁶Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell*, 57. Hell is eternal according to the Qur'an, but later commentators have argued for annihilationism or universalism after punishment in hell. Smith, "Afterlife," 41-42.

⁹⁷Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell*, 86-100.

Allah rewards righteous believers with الجنة (*al-Jannah*),⁹⁸ paradise, which he has prepared for them (3:133). Being admitted to Paradise is “the supreme achievement” (4:13) for people can “scarcely imagine the real Bliss” that is reserved for the righteous.⁹⁹ Allah does not “save” believers; instead, righteous believers achieve success (*falāh*) rather than loss (*khusrān*).¹⁰⁰ The Qur’an clearly teaches that those who side with Allah and Muhammad will be victorious (5:56), while those who side with Satan will be losers (58:19). Allah rewards¹⁰¹ those who believe and do deeds of righteousness.¹⁰² Quranic *aya* 29:58 reads, “But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness - to them shall We give a Home in Heaven, lofty mansions beneath which flow rivers. . . an excellent reward for those who do (good)!” Although Paradise is a reward, al-Ashqar argues that “a person cannot earn it by virtue of his deeds alone, but by the Grace and Mercy of Allah. . . . good deeds will be a reason, not the price, for admission to Paradise.”¹⁰³ Forgiveness is needed. In his mercy, Allah has promised forgiveness, and a great reward for those who believe and do deeds of righteousness (5:9). Muhammad Al-Ghazali states that if believers reform their intentions and purify themselves from “malice, avarice, and all vicious wishes,” then Allah will forgive the rest of their sins since his mercy and

⁹⁸*Al-Jannah* literally means “the garden.” The word “suggests that which is veiled, covered or surrounded; hence an ‘enclosed garden’ luxuriant with foliage of tall, shadowing trees and sheltered from storm or tempest.” Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopædia of Islam*, 237.

⁹⁹Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, new ed. with rev. translation and commentary (Brentwood, MD: Amana, 1991), 1049. *Aya* 32:17 reads, “Now no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden (in reserve) for them - as a reward for their (good) deeds.”

¹⁰⁰Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 108.

¹⁰¹The Qur’an describes paradise as a reward (3:136, 195; 5:85; 7:43; 18:30-31; 20:76; 25:75; 29:58; 34:37; 39:74; 46:14; 78:36; 98:8). Moreover, there are levels and degrees of reward in Paradise (2:253; 4:95-96; 9:19-22; 17:18-21, 55; 20:75; 25:75; 39:9; 57:10).

¹⁰²See 2:25, 277; 4:57; 7:42; 10:9-10; 20:75-76; 29:58-59.

¹⁰³Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell*, 265-66.

compassion overtake his wrath (7:156).¹⁰⁴ Therefore, “But any that (in this life) had repented, believed, and worked righteousness, will have hopes to be among those who achieve salvation” (28:67)

Allah will transform the heavens and the earth (14:48), making earth a Garden for the inheritors,¹⁰⁵ where there will be all that a soul could desire and eyes could delight in (43:71). The Qur’an describes Paradise as a garden,¹⁰⁶ where there is no suffering or fear of suffering (7:43), no grieving or fear (7:49), no fatigue (15:47-48), and no hunger or thirst (20:118-19). Moreover, inhabitants in Paradise will be free from sin (19:62; 52:23; 56:25-26; 78:35; 88:11). There will be rivers (2:25; 18:31), springs (15:45; 77:41; 55:50, 66), large trees, gardens, and fruit in abundance (2:25; 38:51; 55:52, 68; 56:20, 32-33; 76:14; 77:41-42; 78:31-32). The winners will dwell in mansions (9:72), lofty places (25:75; 34:37; 39:20), and pavilions (55:72). They will wear silk clothing (18:31; 22:23; 76:12, 21), pearls, and jewelry of gold and silver (22:23; 35:33; 76:21). They will lounge on couches or thrones (18:31; 52:20; 55:54, 76; 56:13-16; 88:13-16), use goblets and dishes of gold (43:71; 76:15-16), drink non-intoxicating wine (37:46-47; 47:15; 56:17-19), and be served by eternally-young male servants (56:17-18; 76:19). In addition, men will live with their wives (13:23; 36:56; 43:70), and will marry the beautiful الحور (*al-houri*) (44:54; 55:72; 56:22), which Allah created for them (56:35).¹⁰⁷ Finally, the

¹⁰⁴Muhammad Al-Ghazali, “The Problem of Evil: An Islamic Approach,” in *Evil and the Response of World Religion*, ed. William Cenkner (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1997), 73.

¹⁰⁵Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 111.

¹⁰⁶See 2:25; 3:15, 198; 4:57; 7:44; 20:75-76; 29:58; 35:33-35; 36:55-56.

¹⁰⁷*Houris* are “the female companions, perpetual virgins, of the saved in Paradise.” Glassé, *The Encyclopædia of Islam*, 184. Al-Ashqar describes *houris* as beautiful women whose white part of the eye is intensely white and the black part intensely black. Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell*, 296. The Qur’an describes the Houris as full-breasted (78:33) virgins (37:48; 38:52; 55:56; 56:35-37) of equal age (38:52; 56:37; 78:33) with big, beautiful, and lustrous eyes (37:48; 44:54; 52:20; 56:22-23). Some argue that the *houris* are the wives of believers, but there is “no Qur’anic justification for such an equation.” Smith, “Afterlife,” 42. Some interpret the “sexual relations with divine maidens” metaphorically, and argue that the spiritual rewards are just described in sensual terms. William J. Hamblin and Daniel C. Peterson, “Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 1:440; Haleem, *Understanding the Qur’an*, 93-106.

greatest pleasure in paradise will be to “gaze upon the face of Allah.”¹⁰⁸ Aya 68:34 reads, “Verily, for the Righteous, are Gardens of Delight, in the Presence of their Lord.”

To conclude, Allah is the all-powerful and merciful creator and sustainer of the cosmos, deserving of all praise. He created humankind that people may worship and serve him. As Allah’s *khalifa*, humanity is also responsible for establishing a moral order based upon Allah’s commands. In his mercy, he has provided guidance for humanity through his messengers and books, conclusively through Muhammad and the Qur’an. However, humanity has for the most part rejected him, his messengers, and his books. Humanity’s rejection of Allah’s commands explains the current chaos the world is experiencing. Therefore, the solution is for individuals and societies to submit to Allah by following his divine law, *Shari’ah*. Only by following *Shari’ah* will individuals and societies fulfill the purpose for which Allah created them. As those who submit to Allah, the *ummah* plays a crucial role in the world since they alone can teach humanity how individuals should live, and how societies should be ordered. Finally, on the Day of Judgment, Allah will bring all humanity to himself for judgment. He will reward the righteous believers with Paradise, and will punish the disbelievers with hell.

The Suffering of God’s People in the Qur’an

The Qur’an depicts suffering as a natural part of the created order, and, like everything else, falls under Allah’s omnipotent care. Unlike in the Bible, the Qur’an does not describe suffering and death as an intrusion into the created order, but rather as a natural part of how Allah designed the world (2:28-32; 56:60; 90:4).¹⁰⁹ Although suffering is a natural part of life, it is still under the power of Allah’s control since “the

¹⁰⁸ Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell*, 305.

¹⁰⁹ Abdin Chande states that in the Qur’an, suffering is ultimately “a fact of life, a reality of creation.” Abdin Chande, “Suffering,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 604.

behavior of each atom of matter to the large-scale occurrences of human history to events of cosmic proportions” are determined by Allah either by permission or decree.¹¹⁰

Life and death are in Allah’s hand (15:23; 22:66; 23:80; 30:40; 45:26; 53:44). For example, 22:66 reads, “It is He Who gave you life, will cause you to die, and will again give you life: Truly man is a most ungrateful creature!” The same applies to suffering in life. In 6:17, Allah states that, “If Allah touch thee with affliction, none can remove it but He; if He touch thee with happiness, He hath power over all things.”¹¹¹ Of this verse, Ibn Kathir comments that Allah “alone brings benefit and harm, and that He does what He wills with His creatures, none can resist His judgment or prevent what He decrees.”¹¹² Moreover, Allah encourages believers by stating that “No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a decree before We bring it into existence: That is truly easy for Allah” (57:22). Similarly, 64:11 reads that “No kind of calamity can occur, except by the leave of Allah: And if anyone believes in Allah, (Allah) guides his Heart (aright): for Allah knows all things.” Commenting on this verse, ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali states that people “should in all circumstances hold firmly to the faith that nothing happens without God’s knowledge and leave; therefore there must be some justice and wisdom according to His great universal Plan.”¹¹³

In addition to these verses of assurance, Allah also makes it clear that Satan cannot harm believers without his permission, as long as they continue on “the straight path.” When Allah cursed *Iblis* (Satan) for not obeying his command to bow down

¹¹⁰Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 46.

¹¹¹Also see 10:107, “If Allah do touch thee with hurt, there is none can remove it but He: if He do design some benefit for thee, there is none can keep back His favour: He causeth it to reach whomsoever of His servants He pleaseth. And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

¹¹²Ismail Ibn Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 2nd abridged ed. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003), 3:325.

¹¹³Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1479.

before Adam, *Iblis* made it his aim to tempt the human race away from “the straight path,” thus, making him an enemy of believers (2:208; 15:26-39; 17:61-65). However, upon pronouncing his evil ambitions, Allah declared that *Iblis* has no authority over Allah’s servants, unless they begin to follow *Iblis* (15:42; 17:65). Even conspiracies against believers, which are inspired by Satan, cannot harm them without Allah’s permission (58:10).¹¹⁴ To conclude, Satan has no authority over those who “believe and put their trust in their Lord”; however, Satan does have authority over those who “take him as a patron and who join partners with Allah” (16:98-100).

In light of Allah’s omnipotence, suffering is not meaningless or accidental; suffering is part of Allah’s purposes and plans.¹¹⁵ Even Abdalati, who downplays predestination, states that believers should “accept with good Faith” what Allah does even if they think it bad.¹¹⁶ Therefore, it would be natural for Sunni believers to reflect on Allah’s purposes behind the suffering they experience. However, in reflecting, true believers will not question Allah’s judgment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴Aya 58:10 reads, “Secret counsels are only (inspired) by the Evil One, in order that he may cause grief to the Believers; but he cannot harm them in the least, except as Allah permits; and on Allah let the Believers put their trust.” Commenting on this verse, Ali states that “Evil can harm no one who is good, except insofar as (1) there is some question of trial in Allah’s Universal Plan, or (2) what appears to be harm may be real good. Nothing happens without Allah’s will and permission. And we must always trust Him, and not our cleverness or any adventitious circumstances that draw us the least bit from the path of rectitude.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1436.

¹¹⁵Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 46.

¹¹⁶Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 14.

¹¹⁷The traditional Asharite position has been that whatever Allah does is good and just since good and evil are determined by divine fiat. Saeid Edalatnejad, “The Islamic Point of View on the Problem of Evil,” in *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies*, ed. Jerald Gort, Henry Jansen, and H. M. Vroom, Currents of Encounter 33 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 309; Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali’s “Best of All Possible Worlds”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 24. In contrast, the Mu‘tazilites, who emphasize free will, developed a philosophical-rooted theodicy. For an extensive discussion of the Mu‘tazilites view of suffering, see Margaretha Heemskerk, *Suffering in the Mu‘tazilite Theology: Abd al-Jabbar’s Teaching on Pain and Divine Justice*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, vol. 41 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

What Are God's Purposes behind the Suffering of His People?

The Qur'an provides three possible reasons why Allah may have his people suffer. First, Allah may be punishing his people for their sins. Second, Allah may be testing his peoples' faithfulness in the face of suffering.¹¹⁸ Finally, Allah may have his people suffer as a means to "purify" them.

Punishment for sins. According to the Qur'an, the suffering of God's people may be attributed to his punishment of their sins. However, it should be noted that in the Qur'an, punishment for sins is for the most part associated with eschatological punishment in hell. In addition, usually in the Qur'an, individuals are said to be rewarded or punished in the next life, while nations are rewarded or punished in this world.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the idea that Allah may punish his people, individually or collectively, before the Day of Judgment is present in the Qur'an.

God's punishment of people for their disobedience is first seen with Adam and Eve's disobedience. Because they ate from the forbidden tree after being tempted by Satan, Allah sent them out from the Garden and cast them down to earth, where life there would be characterized by enmity (2:35-36; 7:24-25; 20:123).¹²⁰ In addition, Allah punished Lot's wife for betraying her husband (7:83; 11:81; 66:10). Ali states that she

¹¹⁸John Bowker, Alan L. Berger, and Kedar Nath Tiwari contend that in the Qur'an and in Islam, suffering is due to Allah's punishment or trial. John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 106-11; Alan L. Berger, "Evil and Suffering," in *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, ed. T. William Hall, Ronald R. Cavanagh, and Alan L. Berger (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 189; Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 162.

¹¹⁹Mir, "Sin," 73. Allah has destroyed past civilizations for rejecting his messengers: 7:3, 130-32; 19:98; 17:60; 41:15; 28:58; 29:39; 50:35.

¹²⁰Al-Tabari states that the enmity mentioned in 2:36 involved enmity between three parties: Adam, his descendants and Iblis. Adam and his descendants' enmity towards Iblis is mutual, and there is enmity between Adam and his descendants in that many of them have rejected Allah and his commands. Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, 1:258-59.

sympathized and followed the wicked world rather than her righteous husband.¹²¹

Similarly, Asad argues that contrary to the biblical text where Lot's wife looks back inadvertently, the quranic text teaches that "she remained deliberately, being at heart one with the sinning people of Sodom and having no faith in her husband."¹²²

The Qur'an also teaches that Allah punished the nation of Israel and specific Israelites for their disobedience. After the Exodus, Allah warned the Israelites that his wrath would descend on them if they disobeyed him (20:81-82). In addition, the Israelites who experienced the Exodus were forced to wander forty years because they were unwilling to fight for the land Allah had given them (5:24-26).¹²³ Allah let the Israelites who opposed Moses go astray (61:5). Also, they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah because they kept rejecting his signs, and slaying his prophets (2: 61).¹²⁴ Allah dispersed them among the nations (7:167-168),¹²⁵ and sent enemies to destroy them two different times (17:4-7).¹²⁶ Moreover, as an example to those who came after them,

¹²¹Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1494.

¹²²Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration*, complete ed. (Bitton, England: Book Foundation, 2003), 246.

¹²³Ibn Kathir states that they were punished because they refused to engage in *jihad*. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 3:147.

¹²⁴*Aya* 2:61b reads, "They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah. This because they went on rejecting the Signs of Allah and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing." Ali argues that this explains their Assyrian captivity, and why they have been under the yoke of the Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 33. Asad argues that this second half of the *aya* refers to later Jewish history. Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 21. Ibn Kathir states, "Allah's anger that descended on the Children of Israel was a part of the humiliation they earned. . . . Surely, there is no form of disbelief worse than disbelieving in Allah's *Ayāt* and murdering the Prophets of Allah." Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:246.

¹²⁵Ali believes that this refers to the "dispersal of the Jews," while Ibn Kathir takes it to mean that Allah "divided the Jews into various nations, sects and groups." Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 393; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 4:194.

¹²⁶Ali identifies these two events with the Babylonian captivity in 586 BC and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, where Allah punished the Jews for "their backslidings, and their arrogance." Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 674. Ibn Kathir references Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 5:578-80.

Allah turned some of the children of Israel into “apes” because they transgressed the Sabbath, and because “in their insolence they transgressed (all) prohibitions” (2:65-66; 7:163-66).¹²⁷

Finally, Allah also speaks of punishing those who commit specific sins. For example, in 89:15-20 Allah speaks of restricting peoples’ subsistence because of their greed, and lack of concern for the orphan and the poor.¹²⁸ In addition, believers who do not obey Muhammad’s commands may face some “trial” or even a “grievous penalty” (24:62-63).¹²⁹ Also, a believer who turns his back on the enemy during battle draws on himself Allah’s wrath and hell (8:15-16).¹³⁰ These examples demonstrate that one way for Sunni believers to interpret suffering in their life is by seeing it as punishment from Allah for straying from the straight path.

¹²⁷2:65-66 reads, “And well ye knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath: We said to them: ‘Be ye apes, despised and rejected.’ So We made it an example to their own time and to their posterity, and a lesson to those who fear Allah.” Ibn Kathir states that Allah actually transformed the people into monkeys. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:253-54. Al-Tabari also argues that they were literally turned into apes. He points to *aya* 5:60 which mentions Allah punishing people by turning them into apes, swine, and idol worshipers. He challenges those who deny that they were literally turned into apes to provide their proof, besides just their opinion. Al-Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur’an*, 373. In contrast to Ibn Kathir and al-Tabari, Ali attributes this account to a “Jewish tradition.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 34. Asad argues that Allah only changed their hearts into “apes,” meaning that they could no longer restrain their “appetites or passions.” Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 260.

¹²⁸The passage reads, “Now, as for man, when his Lord trieth him, giving him honour and gifts, then saith he, (puffed up), ‘My Lord hath honoured me.’ But when He trieth him, restricting his subsistence for him, then saith he (in despair), ‘My Lord hath humiliated me!’ Nay, nay! but ye honour not the orphans! Nor do ye encourage one another to feed the poor!—And ye devour inheritance—all with greed, And ye love wealth with inordinate love!”

¹²⁹Ali interprets the “trial” as “some misfortune in this life,” and the “grievous penalty” to be “punishment in the Hereafter.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 887. Ibn Kathir interprets the “trial” (*fitnah*) as letting “some disbelief or hypocrisy or innovation enter their hearts,” and the “grievous penalty” as punishment by law, like capital punishment and imprisonment. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 7:133-34. Although the exact type of suffering is unclear in the *aya*, the principle that disobeying Muhammad brings punishment is clear.

¹³⁰The passage reads, “O ye who believe! When ye meet the Unbelievers in hostile array, never turn your backs to them. If any do turn his back to them on such a day - unless it be in a stratagem of war, or to retreat to a troop (of his own)- he draws on himself the wrath of Allah, and his abode is Hell,- an evil refuge (indeed)!”

A test and a trial. The Qur'an describes life itself as a time of probation, where Allah tests people with both good and evil, prosperity and suffering.¹³¹ Allah warns that "Every soul shall have a taste of death: and we test you by evil and by good by way of trial. To Us must ye return" (21:35). Ali comments on this verse that "In our life of probation on this earth, our virtue and faith are tested by many things: some are tested by calamities and some by good things of this life."¹³² Ibn Kathir understands this passage in a similar way. He states that Allah tests people with "difficulties and with times of prosperity, with health and sickness, with richness and poverty, with lawful and unlawful, obedience and sin, with guidance and misguidance."¹³³ Because in a general sense, life is a trial and test from God, then it is natural that in the Qur'an the suffering of God's people is also described as a trial or test.

The testing of professing believers serves to reveal which ones are *true* believers or to see the depth of a believer's commitment to Allah. In 29:2-3 Allah states, "Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, 'We believe,' and that they will not be tested? We did test those before them, and Allah will certainly know those who are true from those who are false."¹³⁴ In other words, Allah's testing of his "believing servants" is inevitable.¹³⁵ Similarly, in 2:214 Allah warns believers:

Or do ye think that ye shall enter the Garden (of bliss) without such (trials) as came to those who passed away before you? They encountered suffering and adversity, and were so shaken in spirit that even the Messenger and those of faith who were with him cried: "When (will come) the help of Allah?" Ah! Verily, the

¹³¹See 6:165; 7:168; 8:28; 18:7; 20:131; 21:35; 39:49; 39:49; 57:25; 64:15; 76:2.

¹³²Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 802.

¹³³Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 6:446.

¹³⁴Concerning these verses, Ali comments that "Mere lip profession of Faith is not enough. It must be tried and tested in the real turmoil of life. The test will be applied in all kinds of circumstances, in individual life and in relation to the environment around us, to see whether we can strive constantly and put Allah above Self. Much pain, sorrow, and self-sacrifice may be necessary, not because they are good in themselves, but because they purify us, like fire applied to a goldsmith's crucible to burn out the dross." Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 987.

¹³⁵Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 7:457.

help of Allah is (always) near!

Based upon this verse, Ibn Kathir concludes that “victory only comes after succeeding in the trial,” which may include “illnesses, pain, disasters and hardships.”¹³⁶ If God’s messengers and the faithful that came before suffered, then the faithful who come later should expect the same. The Qur’an not only teaches the general principle that God will test the faith of his people, but it also provides specific examples.

The Qur’an describes the trials of God’s messengers, including Abraham and Job. The Qur’an explains God’s call of Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael as a trial (37:100-111). Muhammad Asad explains that the severity of this trial implied that Abraham was capable of bearing it, thus demonstrating his “high moral distinction- in itself a reward from God.”¹³⁷ In passing the trial, Allah rewards Abraham’s obedience with generations of descendents (37:108-110). Saiyad Fareed Ahmad concludes from this incident that Abraham and Ishmael’s passing of the test with their “extraordinary faith, patience, and perseverance. . . remains an extraordinary example for mankind to this day.”¹³⁸ The Qur’an also calls believers to remember Job who suffered afflictions from Satan, and how God rewarded him for his patience and constancy (21:83-84; 38:41-44). Ibn Kathir and Asad state that these afflictions from Satan, which affected his health, wealth, and his children, were actually a test from God.¹³⁹ The Qur’an presents Abraham and Job as quintessential models of what Allah’s servants should do when experiencing suffering, namely, they should remain faithful and patient. Allah commends Job: “Truly We found

¹³⁶Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:591-92.

¹³⁷Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 776. Ali argues that the trial was not only of Abraham, but also of Ishmael who had to consent to being sacrificed. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1149. However, in the subsequent verses, only Abraham is praised for his obedience (37:107-10).

¹³⁸Saiyad Fareed Ahmad, “Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?” *Hamdard Islamicus* 29 (2006): 95.

¹³⁹Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 8:335; Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 555-56; 789.

him full of patience and constancy, how excellent in Our service! Ever did he turn (to Us)! (38:44).¹⁴⁰

In addition to depicting the trials of individual figures, the Qur'an also describes the suffering of the nation of Israel, and the suffering of the early Muslim *ummah* as tests from God. The Qur'an describes Israel's suffering under the Egyptians, including their hard tasks, punishments and the slaughtering of their sons, as a "tremendous trial" from Allah (2:48-49; 7:141; 14:6).¹⁴¹ Moreover, Allah even tested Muhammad and his early community of faith through suffering. The Qur'an describes the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench, between the Muslim and Meccan armies, as trials from God.¹⁴² In reference to the Battle of Badr,¹⁴³ Allah states "It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah. . . it was not thy act, but Allah's: In order that He might test the Believers by a gracious trial from Himself: for Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth (all things)" (8:17). After their defeat in the battle of Uhud, Allah reassures believers (3:139-42):

So lose not heart, nor fall into despair: For ye must gain mastery if ye are true in Faith. If a wound hath touched you, be sure a similar wound hath touched the others. Such days (of varying fortunes) We give to men and men by turns: that

¹⁴⁰Ali argues that "patience and constancy" are an active form of service to Allah, and "not mere passivity." Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1171. A. H. Johns argues that even though Job is only mentioned four times in the Qur'an (4:163; 6:83-88; 21:83-84; 38:41-44), he plays a distinctive role in the community of prophets since his prophetic vocation was to preach "by his endurance of undeserved suffering." A. H. Johns, "A Comparative Glance at Ayyub in the Qur'an," in *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job has Nothing to Say to the Puzzled Suffering*, ed. David B. Burrell (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 79-81.

¹⁴¹Ibn Kathir suggests that *both* the suffering under Pharaoh, and their subsequent deliverance may be considered "trials" from God. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 5:313.

¹⁴²In the first major battle, Battle of Badr (AD 623), the Muslim army, even though they were outnumbered, defeated the Meccan army. In the second major battle, Battle of Uhud (AD 625) the Meccans defeated the Muslim army, killing many Muslims and even injuring Muhammad. In the Battle of the Trench (AD 627) (also known as the Battle of the Confederates or of the Ditch), Arab and Jewish tribes laid siege to Medina for several weeks, but eventually, after severe weather conditions and conflicts within the alliance, they ended the siege. Glassé, *The New Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 79-82.

¹⁴³Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 413.

Allah may know those that believe, and that He may take to Himself from your ranks Martyr-witnesses (to Truth). And Allah loveth not those that do wrong. Allah's object also is to purge those that are true in Faith and to deprive of blessing those that resist Faith. Did ye think that ye would enter Heaven without Allah testing those of you who fought hard (In His Cause) and remained steadfast?

Much could be noted about this passage, but germane to the topic at hand, this passage reveals that God at times, "out of wisdom" allows enemies to defeat his servants because the battle reveals those who are true believers, namely, those willing to be "killed in Allah's cause and gladly offer their lives seeking His pleasure."¹⁴⁴ Muhammad Al-Jibali comments on this verse that Allah is all-knowing so he already knows those who are true believers; however, he wanted to "realize their belief in actual existence."¹⁴⁵

In reference to the Battle of the Trench,¹⁴⁶ Allah states that "in that situation were the Believers tried: They were shaken by a tremendous shaking" (33:11). In this battle, the Muslim *ummah* and army were under siege for over a month in Medina, were outnumbered by an army of 9,000 to 12,000, and a neighboring Jewish tribe that had been an ally decided to join the attacking forces.¹⁴⁷

In addition to these references to specific battles, the Qur'an also includes general passages which present the opportunity to fight against disbelievers as a trial or test from Allah to identify true believers, those willing to sacrifice all for Allah's cause. For example, in 47:4, Allah states that he allows his servants to fight, instead of fighting himself, in order to test them:

¹⁴⁴Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 2:277. The same thought, in reference to their defeat at the Battle of *Uhud*, can be found in 3:166 where Allah states, "What ye suffered on the day the two armies met, was with the leave of Allah, in order that he might test (lit. know) the Believers."

¹⁴⁵Muhammad al-Jibali, *Sickness: Regulations & Exhortations* (Arlington, TX: al-Kitab & as-Sunnah, 1998), 17.

¹⁴⁶Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1058; Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 719; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 7:646; Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language: With Comments from Tafsir At-Tabari, Tafsir Al-Qurturbi and Tafsir Ibn Kathir and Ahadith from Sahih Al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim and other Ahadith Books* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), 6:207.

¹⁴⁷Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 719; Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1053; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 7:646; Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 81-82.

Therefore, when ye meet the Unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks; At length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: Until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded): but if it had been Allah's Will, He could certainly have exacted retribution from them (Himself); but (He lets you fight) in order to test you, some with others. But those who are slain in the Way of Allah,- He will never let their deeds be lost.¹⁴⁸

In reference to this *aya*, Asad comments that Allah wills his servants to fight in order to “enable the believers to prove by actual deeds the depth of their faith and their readiness for self-sacrifice.”¹⁴⁹ Ali comments that “Believers are tested in Faith by the extent to which they are willing to make sacrifices, even to laying down their lives.”¹⁵⁰ Ibn Kathir makes a similar comment when he states that Allah has “ordered *Jihad* and fighting against enemies” so that he can try and test believers.¹⁵¹

Moreover, Allah promises that he will test those who fight for his cause with fear, hunger, and loss of goods and life; however, he will bless those who persevere when afflicted (2:153-57):

O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer; for Allah is with those who patiently persevere. And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah: “They are dead.” Nay, they are living, though ye perceive (it) not. Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, Who say, when afflicted with calamity: “To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return”:- They are those on whom (Descend) blessings from Allah, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance.

To conclude, the most prevalent explanation for suffering in the Qur’an is that it is a test from God. First of all, life in general is depicted as a time of probation before Judgment Day. Moreover, even Allah’s messengers, like Abraham and Job, were tested through times of suffering. The Qur’an also describes the suffering that Israel suffered

¹⁴⁸Like in Ali’s translation, Asad inserts “He wills you to fight,” and Khan and Al-Hilali insert “He lets you fight.” Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 884; Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an*, 7:376.

¹⁴⁹Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 884.

¹⁵⁰Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1316.

¹⁵¹Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 9:89.

while in slavery in Egypt as a test from God. In addition, Allah tested Muhammad and the early Muslim community through times of suffering, especially as they faced their enemies in battle. Allah used these times of suffering to identify true believers and to see his people's depth of faith. Therefore, based upon the quranic text, it would appear that Sunni believers would most likely interpret suffering in their life as a test from Allah that they can pass or fail, depending on their steadfastness.

Purification. Closely related to the idea that Allah tests believers with times of suffering, is the idea that Allah uses suffering to purify believers. In other words, testing can purify. For example, referring to the Muslim defeat at the Battle of *Uhud*, Allah states that his “object is also to purge those that are true in Faith” (3:141a).¹⁵² Commenting on this verse, Jibali states that Allah wants to purify true believers of their sins through their repenting and seeking forgiveness for the sins that made their enemy's victory possible.¹⁵³ Moreover, again in reference to their defeat at the Battle of *Uhud*, Allah states that, “But (all this was) that Allah might test what is in your breasts and purge (يحص) what is in your hearts. For Allah knoweth well the secrets of your hearts” (3:154).¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the Qur'an teaches that God might use suffering to purify his people; however, it is not explicit about what it means for them to be purified. Ali argues

¹⁵² *يحص* (*yumahhis*) which Ali translates as “to purge” in this *aya* has three meanings, including to test, to purify, and to get rid of. Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an*, 1:295; Ambros and Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, 252. Ali is not alone in translating *yumahhis* as “to purge” in this *aya*. Asad translates the *aya* as saying, “and that God might render pure of all dross those who have attained faith.” Khan and Al-Hilali translate the passage as, “And Allah may test (or purify) the believers (from sins).” M. H. Shakir translates the passage as reading, “And that He may purge those who believe.” Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 104; Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an*, 1:287; M. H. Shakir, *Holy Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1983), 60.

¹⁵³ Jibali, *Sickness*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Although *يحص* has three meanings, in this context, it would seem best to translate it as to purge or purify. Asad, Shakir, and Khan and Al-Hilali all translate *يحص* as meaning to purify or purge in this *aya*. Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 104; Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Qur'an*, 1:296; Shakir, *Holy Qur'an*, 62.

for a variety of ways in which suffering may purify.¹⁵⁵ First, he states that resistance and struggle will purify any “dross” in people. Second, in reference to the Battle of *Uhud*, the struggle “cleared out the Hypocrites from the ranks of the Muslim warriors.” Third, the time of testing strengthened the faith of “the weak and wavering.”¹⁵⁶ Fourth, Muhammad’s steadfastness, in spite of his injury, “put new life in the Community.” Fifth, the battle served to purge the warriors of “any grosser motives, that will be searched out by calamity.” Therefore, according to Ali, suffering may purify by removing impurities in people, getting rid of hypocrites within the *ummah*, strengthening the faith of the weak, invigorating the *ummah* through the steadfastness of its leaders, and by revealing impure motives. Although Ali’s explanations of how suffering purifies are not found in the quranic text, he does provide some ways that Sunni Muslims may understand these passages about suffering and purification. In any case, it seems reasonable to believe that Sunni believers would for the most part agree with Ali when he states that “Much pain, sorrow, and self-sacrifice may be necessary, not because they are good in themselves, but because they will purify us, like fire applied to a goldsmith’s crucible to burn out the dross.”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, A. B. Philips states that tests from God can come as calamities, which “contribute to the spiritual growth of the true believers and purify them of sin.”¹⁵⁸

Finally, the Qur’an also teaches that Allah may afflict his people that they may repent, which could be understood as a form of purification. Speaking of Israel, Allah states, “We broke them up into sections on this earth. . . . We have tried them with both

¹⁵⁵Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 163, 167.

¹⁵⁶In a similar manner, commenting on 3:165, in reference to the Battle of *Uhud*, Ali states that God allowed the Muslim army to be defeated because he wanted “to test and purify the faith of those who followed Islam, and to show that they must strive and do all in their power to deserve Allah’s help.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 171.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 987.

¹⁵⁸Philips, *The Purpose of Creation*, 52.

prosperity and adversity: In order that they might turn (to us)” (7:168).¹⁵⁹ Fadhllalla Haeri argues that if people disobey Allah, he gives them suffering and punishment that they may realize their fault and repent.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Chande argues that when Allah punishes believers for their sins, it is designed to spare them from even greater suffering by them straying from the straight path.¹⁶¹ Although not directly speaking of God’s people, the Qur’an does teach that Allah may bring suffering in order to teach people humility. For instance, Allah states that he afflicted nations with suffering and adversity that they might learn humility, but their hearts just became hardened instead (6:42-44).¹⁶² Commenting on this verse, Ali states that suffering and sorrow may be “the best gifts from Allah” because through suffering people learn humility, “the antidote to many vices and the fountain of many virtues.”¹⁶³

To conclude, based upon the quranic text, Sunni believers will most likely interpret suffering as a test from Allah. Moreover, believers may further interpret their suffering as Allah’s attempt to purify their faith and commitment to him. Finally, believers may interpret their afflictions as Allah punishing them for their sins, that they may repent and learn humility.

How Are God’s People to Respond to Suffering?

Based upon the quranic text, believers have various ways to respond to

¹⁵⁹Khan and Al-Hilali interpret their turning as turning to obey Allah. Khan and Al-Hilali, *The Noble Qur’an*, 2:235. Asad interprets their turning as them “mending their ways.” Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 260.

¹⁶⁰Haeri, *Journey of the Universe as Expounded in the Qur’an*, 10.

¹⁶¹Chande, “Suffering,” 601.

¹⁶²Also see 7:94, which reads, “Whenever We sent a prophet to a town, We took up its people in suffering and adversity, in order that they might learn humility.”

¹⁶³Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 304. On a similar note, W. Montgomery Watt comments that Muslims believe that Allah may send suffering as training or discipline. W. Montgomery Watt, “Suffering in Sunnite Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979): 12.

suffering. First, if believers feel that they are suffering because Allah is punishing them for their sins, naturally, they should repent and seek Allah's forgiveness. Second, when believers are suffering they should trust Allah, be patient, and not fall into despair. Third, in trusting Allah, believers can call out to him for his help. Finally, when facing opposition or persecution, the Qur'an presents two options for believers, namely, to emigrate or to struggle with opponents.

Repent if being punished. Naturally, believers who interpret their suffering as Allah's punishment should respond with repentance, since Allah is "most gracious, most merciful."¹⁶⁴ For example, when Adam and Eve were cast out from paradise they repented and sought Allah's forgiveness saying, "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If thou forgive us not and bestow not upon us Thy Mercy, we shall certainly be lost" (7:23). Throughout the Qur'an, sinners are called to repent and turn to Allah. In most instances though, repentance and Allah's forgiveness relates to eschatological judgment and entrance into paradise:

And those who, having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring Allah to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins,—and who can forgive sins except Allah?— and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done. For such the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing underneath,—an eternal dwelling: How excellent a recompense for those who work (and strive)! (3:135-36)¹⁶⁵

Nevertheless, God's people are still called to repent and seek Allah's

¹⁶⁴Throughout the Qur'an, Allah is described as being a forgiving God. 5:73-74 reads, "They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them. Why turn they not to Allah, and seek His forgiveness? For Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." Also, 110:3 reads, "Celebrate the praises of thy Lord, and pray for His Forgiveness: For He is Oft-Returning (in Grace and Mercy)."

¹⁶⁵Also see 66:8, which reads, "O ye who believe! Turn to Allah with sincere repentance: In the hope that your Lord will remove from you your ills and admit you to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow,- the Day that Allah will not permit to be humiliated the Prophet and those who believe with him. Their Light will run forward before them and by their right hands, while they say, 'Our Lord! Perfect our Light for us, and grant us Forgiveness: for Thou hast power over all things.'"

immediate forgiveness:

Say: “O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Turn ye to our Lord (in repentance) and bow to His (Will), before the Penalty comes on you: after that ye shall not be helped. And follow the best of (the courses) revealed to you from your Lord, before the Penalty comes on you - of a sudden while ye perceive not!” (39:53-55)

Commenting on this passage, Ibn Kathir states that it is “a call to all sinners, be they disbelievers or others, to repent and turn to Allah” because he “will forgive all the sins of those who repent to Him and turn back to Him, no matter what or how many his sins are, even if they are like the foam of the sea.”¹⁶⁶ Therefore, if believers are suffering “disasters and calamities,” they should “repent frequently and seek His forgiveness for the sins that they have committed.”¹⁶⁷

Trust Allah and be patient. The Qur’an extols those who exhibit *tawakkul* (trust) and *sabr* (patience and longsuffering) in the face of affliction and suffering.¹⁶⁸ The Qur’an describes disbelievers as impatient and “fretful when evil touches them” (70:19-

¹⁶⁶Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 8:406. Ali states that the point of *aya* 39:54 is “Repent and work righteousness before it becomes too late.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1196. Also see 4:110 and 11:03.

¹⁶⁷Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination: In the Light of the Qur’an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 3rd ed., Islamic Creed Series 8 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 89.

¹⁶⁸توكل (*tawakkul*) means “absolute trust in” or “unmitigated reliance upon.” The Qur’an calls believers to trust in Allah because he is One, omnipotent, trustworthy, and the sole agent in all affairs. Scott C. Alexander, “Trust and Patience,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 5:379; Richard McGregor, “Tawakkul,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, 649-50.

صبر (*sabr*) carries the idea of patience, longsuffering, perseverance, steadfastness, persistence, resignation, and endurance. *Sabr* appears over one hundred times in the Qur’an, in various forms. Oliver Leaman, “Sabr,” in *The Quran: An Encyclopedia*, 554; Mir, *Dictionary of Qur’anic Terms and Concepts*, 155; Ambros and Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, 156-57; A. J. Wensinck, “Sabr,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C.E. Bosworth et al., new ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 8:685-87.

W. Montgomery Watt argues that nomadic Arabs lived a precarious life, facing constant threat from their natural environment, and also from neighboring tribes. Therefore, they developed the virtue of accepting and dealing with whatever happens “manfully,” without shaming themselves or their tribe. Watt, “Suffering in Sunnite Islam,” 8-9. Similarly, Toshihiko Izutsu contends that the harsh living conditions called for courage and the “inflexible determination to stand by one’s cause whatever might happen.” This was for personal and tribal survival. *Sabr* came to be an “essential element of genuine ‘belief,’ *iman*, in God.” Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, 101-02.

20), and condemns hopelessness and utter despair (3:139; 12:87; 15:56; 29:23; 39:53).¹⁶⁹

Aya 9:51 reads, “Say: ‘Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has decreed for us: He is our protector’: and on Allah let the Believers put their trust.” True believers trust Allah with their lives:

Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, Who say, when afflicted with calamity: “To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return”: They are those on whom (Descend) blessings from Allah, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance. (2:155-57)¹⁷⁰

Moreover, Allah is the protector of believers (2:257, 286; 3:68, 150; 9:51; 42:9, 28); therefore, they should seek refuge in him (7:200; 11:47; 41:36; 72:22; 113:1; 114:1). Believers should fear Allah and not their opponents (3:173, 200; 5:3, 11, 44, 54), trusting Allah and knowing that he is with those who fear him (9:123; 33:48).

Because believers trust in Allah, they can be patient during times of suffering. The Qur’an commands believers to persevere under trial, and promises that Allah will be with them (2:153, 249; 3:146; 8:46, 66) and that he will reward those who show patience and endure.¹⁷¹ Instead of panicking or falling into despair, believers should accept times of suffering knowing that Allah has decreed the test, and that they will be rewarded if they endure.¹⁷² The Qur’an not only commands believers to exemplify *sabr*, but it is also

¹⁶⁹Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 27.

¹⁷⁰Commenting on aya 2:156, Ibn Kathir states that those who recite “To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return” to “comfort themselves in the face of their loss, know that they belong to Allah and that He does what He wills with His servants. They also know that nothing and no deed, even if it was the weight of an atom, will be lost with Allah on the Day of Resurrection. These facts thus compel them to admit that they are Allah’s servants and that their return will be to Him in the Hereafter.” Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:446.

¹⁷¹See 3:15-17, 200; 7:137; 11:11, 115; 12:90; 16:42, 96; 23:111; 25:75; 28:54, 80; 33:35; 39:10; 76:12. Aya 2:153 reads, “O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer; for Allah is with those who patiently persevere.” 11:9-11 reads, “If We give man a taste of Mercy from Ourselves, and then withdraw it from him, behold! he is in despair and (falls into) blasphemy. But if We give him a taste of (Our) favours after adversity hath touched him, he is sure to say, ‘All evil has departed from me’: Behold! he falls into exultation and pride. Not so do those who show patience and constancy, and work righteousness; for them is forgiveness (of sins) and a great reward.”

¹⁷²Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination*, 118, 142; Bakker, *Man in the Qur'an*, 106.

a key characteristic of true believers, and those who will be rewarded with Paradise.¹⁷³

Aya 2:177 provides an extended description of a true believer:

It is righteousness—to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah-fearing.

In the Qur'an, the prophets exemplify *tawakkul* and *sabr*. In the face of opposition, Allah commands Muhammad to “patiently persevere” like the messengers of “inflexible purpose,” knowing that those who reject his message will be ultimately punished (46:35).¹⁷⁴ Although Noah was heavily opposed, he sought refuge in Allah and continued in his obedience (11:3-49). To conclude the narrative of Noah, Allah states, “Such are some of the stories of the unseen, which We have revealed unto thee: before this, neither thou nor thy people knew them. So persevere patiently: for the End is for those who are righteous.” Commenting on this *aya*, Ali states “The sum of the whole matter is that the righteous. . . may be traduced, insulted, and persecuted. But they will be sustained by Allah’s Mercy. They must go on working patiently, for the End will be for them and their Cause.” In addition, after receiving his family and forgiving his brothers, Joseph praised God, showing his submission and trust in him:

O my Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams and events,- O Thou Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Take Thou my soul (at death) as one submitting to Thy will (as a Muslim), and unite me with the righteous (12:101).

Moses and the Israelites also exemplified trust and perseverance when Pharaoh opposed them. In response to the threat of having their male children killed, Moses said

¹⁷³See 13:22-24; 22:11; 28:54, 80; 29:10, 59; 76:12, 24.

¹⁷⁴Ibn Kathir states that the messengers with “inflexible purpose” were those that were patient when their people rejected their message. He identifies Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad from 33:7 and 42:13. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 9:82.

to his people, “Pray for help from Allah, and (wait) in patience and constancy: for the earth is Allah’s, to give as a heritage to such of His servants as He pleaseth; and the end is (best) for the righteous” (7:128). Moses also said to his people, “If ye do (really) believe in Allah, then in Him put your trust if ye submit (your will to His)” (10:84). They responded, “In Allah do we put our trust. Our Lord! Make us not a trial for those who practice oppression; And deliver us by Thy Mercy from those who reject (Thee)” (10:85-86). Allah then fulfilled his promise by giving them land, and blessing them because they exhibited *sabr* (7:137). Finally, the Qur’an also presents Job as an example of patience and longsuffering (38:41-44).¹⁷⁵ Allah blessed and commended Job, saying “Truly We found Him full of patience and constancy, How excellent in Our service! Ever did he turn (to Us)!” (38:44).¹⁷⁶

Call out to Allah. Trusting Allah and being patient does not exclude calling out to him in times of affliction. First, Allah is the one that hears the distressed, and can relieve their suffering. In *aya* 27:62, Allah commands Muhammad to ask rhetorically, “Who listens to the (soul) distressed when it calls on Him, and Who relieves its suffering, and makes you (mankind) inheritors of the earth? (Can there be another) god besides Allah?” Moreover, *aya* 2:153 reads, “O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer; for Allah is with those who patiently persevere.”¹⁷⁷ Second, Allah is the one that can heal. Confronting the idol worshipers around him, Abraham said that he worships “the Lord of the worlds,” namely, the one who created him, guides him,

¹⁷⁵Unlike in the Bible, Job in the Qur’an does not curse the day of his birth, attribute the suffering to God, ask God why he is suffering, protest the injustice, or argue for his righteousness. These differences demonstrate that Job’s patience involved not just his endurance, but also “his unquestioning and presumably placid acceptance of suffering and adversity.” Alexander, “Trust and Patience,” 380-81.

¹⁷⁶Sherif states that Job’s patience under suffering “pays in the end” because God removed his distress, and restored all his people and possessions. Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’an*, 81.

¹⁷⁷Similarly, 40:60 reads, “And your Lord says: ‘Call on Me; I will answer your (Prayer): but those who are too arrogant to serve Me will surely find themselves in Hell - in humiliation!’”

provides him with sustenance, heals him when sick, will cause him to die, will resurrect him, and will hopefully forgive him of his faults in the Day of Judgment (26:78-82). Moreover, the Qur'an teaches that Jesus was only able to heal those born blind, the lepers and raise the dead with Allah's permission (3:49), since only Allah has the power to heal.

The Qur'an also provides multiple examples of those in need calling out to Allah for help. Noah called out to Allah for help when his people rejected his message (26:116-120; 37:75-77; 54:9-11). When Noah delivered his warnings, they threatened to stone him to death, accused him of being possessed by an evil spirit, and they cast him away. Noah then called out, asking Allah to help him and to deliver him from his opponents. Allah responded to his prayer by sending a flood, and delivering Noah and those with him in the Ark. When Job was suffering in his afflictions, he appealed to Allah's mercy and cried out for deliverance; Allah listened to him and removed his distress (21:83-84). When Jacob heard from his sons that one of their brothers was detained in Egypt for theft, he said, "I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allah. . . O my sons!. . . never give up hope of Allah's Soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of Allah's Soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith" (12:86-87). Moses called out for Allah's help when he fled Egypt after slaying a man (28:20-21). The children of Israel prayed to Allah, asking him to deliver them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians (10:85-86). When the Israelites faced Goliath and his army, they prayed, "Our Lord! Pour out constancy on us and make our steps firm: Help us against those that reject faith"; with Allah's permission, David slew Goliath and they defeated their enemies (2:250-251). Zechariah cried out to Allah and asked him for an heir; Allah cured his wife's barrenness and gave them John (3:38-41; 19:2-6; 21:89-90). Finally, when Muhammad and his followers confronted their enemies at the battle of Badr,¹⁷⁸ they

¹⁷⁸Ali, Asad, and Ibn Kathir all state that 8:9-10 refers to the battle of Badr. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 413, 416; Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 268; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 4:265-66.

called out to Allah for help and he responded by saying, “I will assist you with a thousand of the angels, ranks on ranks” (8:9-10). In the verses following the reference to Allah’s promise to send angels to help them, he also called believers to remember how he assisted them that day:

Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness, to give you calm as from Himself, and he caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith. Remember thy Lord inspired the angels (with the message): “I am with you: give firmness to the Believers: I will instill terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their finger-tips off them.” This because they contended against Allah and His Messenger: If any contend against Allah and His Messenger, Allah is strict in punishment. (8:11-13)

In addition to calling believers to trust Allah, to be patient, and to call out to him during times of affliction, the Qur’an also guides believers in relating to those who oppose them.

Emigrate or *jihad*. Depending on the socio-historical context, Allah’s prophets and their followers had three options in responding to oppression: (1) bear oppression and suffer; (2) emigrate, which itself is a form of suffering; (3) resist and fight back.¹⁷⁹ Historically, Muhammad and his followers responded in all of three of these ways. When Muhammad began his prophetic ministry in Mecca, he and his small community of followers endured ridicule, opposition, and at times even outright persecution (AD 613-622). In AD 622, as the persecution intensified, Muhammad and his followers emigrated from Mecca to Medina, and established the *ummah*.¹⁸⁰ From AD 622 to 632, the year of his death, Muhammad and the Muslim forces engaged militarily with the Meccans and others who opposed Islam. This three-part early history of the

¹⁷⁹Mehmet S. Aydin, “Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 12, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1998): 61-62.

¹⁸⁰The Arabic term for emigration is هجرة (*hijra*), and it carries the idea of “cutting oneself off from friendly or social relations, ceasing to speak to others, forsaking, abandoning, deserting, shunning, and avoiding (Q4:34; 25:30; 74:5).” Muhammad al-Faruque, “Emigration,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, 2:18.

Muslim community reflects the three ways Muhammad responded to those who opposed him and the *ummah*. However, of these three options, the quranic text deals much more with emigration and *jihad*, struggling with opponents.

Before delving into the texts that discuss how believers should respond to opponents, it is imperative to first cover two foundational principles found in the Qur'an. First, Allah's messengers, and by extension his people, will face opposition. Second, Allah, his messengers, and his people will be victorious over their enemies. Allah states that he appointed an enemy for every prophet he sent, and that his help would be enough for them (6:112; 25:31).¹⁸¹ Ibn Kathir argues that Allah told this to Muhammad so that he would not be saddened by the fact that he had opponents, since every other messenger had them as well.¹⁸² In addition, every time Allah sent a messenger to a people the messenger was mocked (13:32; 15:11; 36:30; 43:6-8) and was accused of being a sorcerer and of being possessed (51:52). Moreover, every messenger was plotted against, and some were even killed (2:87). Besides these general statements about how prophets have always been rejected, the Qur'an includes numerous narratives that flesh out these principles.

Since narrative is the main literary form of the Qur'an, the narratives about the prophets make up a substantial portion of the Qur'an. Moreover, these narratives have a didactic purpose, to reassure Muhammad and his community that they will be victorious, and to warn their opponents that Allah destroys those who reject his messengers.¹⁸³ The Qur'an called Muhammad and his followers to relate their situation to that of previous

¹⁸¹Aya 6:112 reads, "We make for every Messenger an enemy, evil ones among men and jinns, inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception." Aya 25:31 reads, "Thus have We made for every prophet an enemy among the sinners: but enough is thy Lord to guide and to help."

¹⁸²Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 3:443.

¹⁸³Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 64; Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in Its Scripture* (Rockport, MA: Oneworld, 1994), 170-71.

prophets who although they were rejected, Allah soon destroyed their opponents.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Ali contends that the struggle and eventual deliverance of the prophets prefigured “the early struggles and eventual triumph of Muhammad.”¹⁸⁵

The Qur’an clearly teaches that Allah’s messengers and prophets were “doubted, insulted, threatened, and persecuted.”¹⁸⁶ Noah was ridiculed, rejected, and cast out.¹⁸⁷ Job was afflicted by Satan (38:41-44). Abraham’s family opposed him when he destroyed their idols, and his opponents tried to kill him by throwing him into a fire (21:51-73; 29:24).¹⁸⁸ The people of Sodom and Gomorrah rejected Lot’s message (26:160-175). Joseph was imprisoned for many years even though he was innocent (12:33, 42). Pharaoh and the Egyptians ridiculed and opposed Moses, calling him a sorcerer (43:46-49). The worshippers of Baal rejected Elijah’s message (37:123-130). The people of Ad rejected Hud (11:50-60; 26:123-139; 41.13-18), and the people of Thamud rejected and plotted to kill Salih (11:66; 26:141-159; 27:45-53). The people of the wood opposed Shu’ayb, accused him of being bewitched, and wanted to stone him to death (11:91; 26:176-189). Finally, Jesus was accused of being a sorcerer (61:6), and was almost crucified, but Allah delivered him before he could be killed (3:55; 4:157-

¹⁸⁴Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 85-86.

¹⁸⁵Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 373.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 602.

¹⁸⁷See 10:73; 11:25-49; 21:76; 23:23-29; 25:37, 26:115-120.

¹⁸⁸Ibn Kathir adds details about this incident: “They spent a long time gathering a huge amount of firewood, they built a fence around it, then they set it ablaze until its flames reached up to the sky. No greater fire had ever been lit. Then they went to Ibrahim, seized him and put him into a catapult, then they threw him into the fire. But Allah made it cool and safe for him, and after spending several days in it, he emerged unscathed. For this reason and others, Allah made him an Imam for mankind, he offered himself to the Most Merciful, he offered his body to the flames, he offered his son as a sacrifice, and he gave his wealth to care for his guests. For all of these reasons he is beloved by the followers of all religions.” Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 7:478-79.

158).¹⁸⁹ Like the messengers before him, Muhammad also faced opposition and suffered. His opponents accused him of forging the Qur'an, inventing his message, and of being insane, a possessed poet, and a sorcerer.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, his opponents in Mecca plotted to imprison or exile or kill him (8:30).¹⁹¹ Therefore, the fact that Muhammad and his followers faced opposition was not unusual; rather, opposition is the norm for Allah's messengers.

In addition to teaching that Allah's messengers will be opposed and experience suffering, the Qur'an also teaches that they will be victorious, while their enemies will be the losers.¹⁹² Allah will not fail his messengers, and will keep his promise to deliver them from their enemies (14:46-47).¹⁹³ Similarly, 58:20-21 reads, "Those who resist

¹⁸⁹Aya 3:55 reads, "Behold! Allah said: 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein ye dispute.'" And 4:157-158 reads, "That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not: Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise."

¹⁹⁰The people accused Muhammad of forging the Qur'an and inventing his message (10:38; 11:13, 35; 16:103; 21:5; 25:4; 32:3; 34:43; 42:24; 46:8; 52:33; 74:25), of being insane (7:184; 15:6; 17:47; 25:8; 34:8, 46; 51:52-53; 52:29; 68:51), of being a possessed poet (21:5; 34:8, 46; 51:52; 52:30; 69:41), and of being a sorcerer (6:7; 10:2; 46:7; 52:29; 69:42; 74:24).

¹⁹¹In "Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering," Ahmad highlights the suffering Muhammad endured. His father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was six. His first wife died before him, and all but one of his children died before him. Finally, he also endured years of persecution in Mecca. Ahmad, "Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?," 95.

Al-Qarni provides an even more extensive list of the afflictions Muhammad suffered during his life. He writes, "The entrails of a camel were placed upon his head; his feet bled; his face was fractured; he was besieged in a mountain pass until he was forced to eat tree leaves; he was driven out of Makkah; his front tooth was broken in battle; his innocent wife was accused of wrongdoing; seventy of his Companions were killed; he was bereaved of his son and most of his daughters; he would tie a stone around his stomach to lessen the pangs of hunger; and he was accused of being a poet, a magician, a soothsayer, a madman, and a liar- all at the same time." Aaidh ibn Andullah al-Qarni, *Don't Be Sad*, trans. Faisal Ibn Muhammad Shafeeq, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2003), 55.

¹⁹²Cragg states that the suffering of the prophets is only there as a "preliminary to its redress. . . It is that which has to be endured before it can be terminated." Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, 172.

¹⁹³Kathir states that Allah's promise is that he will grant his messengers victory in this life and on the Day of Judgment. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 5:370.

Allah and His Messenger will be among those most humiliated. Allah has decreed: ‘It is I and My messengers who must prevail’: For Allah is One full of strength, able to enforce His Will.” Victory is reserved not only for Allah’s messengers, but also for believers. *Aya* 5:56 reads, “As to those who turn (for friendship) to Allah, His Messenger, and the (fellowship of) believers, it is the fellowship of Allah that must certainly triumph.”¹⁹⁴ Therefore, those on Allah’s side “will gain success in this life and the Hereafter.”¹⁹⁵ Allah tells believers not to worry since those who ridicule, slander, and persecute Allah’s messengers and their followers will find hell as their resting place (3:196-197; 9:7; 85:7-10), and that on the Day of Judgment believers will be the ones mocking them (83:29-36).

The Qur’an provides various examples of Allah delivering his messengers and destroying those who rejected them (38:14; 43:6-8). He delivered Noah, and flooded his opponents (7:59-64; 10:73; 21:77; 25:37; 29:14). He miraculously saved Abraham when he was thrown into a fire by his opponents (21:68-71; 29:24); his opponents were the ones who were humiliated (37:97-98). Allah rained down brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah for their immorality and for ignoring Lot’s warnings (7:80-84; 11:82; 26:173; 27:54-58). Allah delivered Moses and the Israelites, but to Pharaoh and the Egyptians he sent plagues, drowned them, and consigned them to hell (7:130-136; 40:37-45; 43:54-65; 79:15-26). Allah strengthened David, enabling him to kill Goliath (2:249-52; 38:17). He destroyed those who rejected Sh‘ayb with an earthquake (29:37). He delivered Hud and those who believed him, and he destroyed the people of Ad with a furious wind (11:58-60; 26:123-139; 53:50; 54:18-19). He also saved Salih, and destroyed the people of Thamud who rejected him (26:141-159; 27:45-53; 54:23-31). Finally, Allah also saved

¹⁹⁴Also see 4:141, which reads, “And never will Allah grant to the unbelievers a way (to triumphs) over the believers,” and 14:27, “Allah will establish in strength those who believe, with the word that stands firm, in this world and in the Hereafter; but Allah will leave, to stray, those who do wrong: Allah doeth what He willeth.”

¹⁹⁵Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 3:210.

Jesus from being crucified, and made the children of Israel that followed Jesus prevail over those who rejected him (4:157; 61:14). In summary, “Those who resist Allah and His Messenger will be among those most humiliated” (58:20).

As the persecution intensified in Mecca, Muhammad and his followers had two choices, either to emigrate from Mecca (*hijra*) or resist their opponents (*jihad*). Both of these options are found in the Qur’an. The great prophets, Abraham and Moses, both fled persecution. The Qur’an recounts that after Allah miraculously saved Abraham from the fire, he led him away from his home to a land of blessing (21:66-71). In a similar way, Moses and the children of Israel also fled from persecution in Egypt. In addition to these two examples, the Qur’an also praises those who emigrate in Allah’s cause. *Aya* 9:20 reads, “Those who believed and emigrated and strive hard and fought in Allah’s Cause with their wealth and their lives, are far higher in degree with Allah. They are the successful.”¹⁹⁶ Moreover, Allah promises to provide for and reward those who give up their home because of their commitment to Allah. *Aya* 4:100 reads, “He who forsakes his home in the cause of Allah, finds in the earth many a refuge, wide and spacious: Should he die as a refugee from home for Allah and His Messenger, his reward becomes due and sure with Allah.”

Muhammad’s *hijra* from Mecca to Medina was a turning point in the early history of Islam; from that point, Allah allowed and even commanded believers to fight their oppressors.¹⁹⁷ Muslims were expected not only to leave a godless society and form

¹⁹⁶Khan and al-Hilali translation. Khan and al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an*, 2:333. Also see 2:18; 8:72.

¹⁹⁷Aydin, “Muhammad,” 61. Aydin points to *aya* 9:13. Quranic verses 9:13-15 read, “Will ye not fight people who violated their oaths, plotted to expel the Messenger, and took the aggressive by being the first (to assault) you? Do ye fear them? Nay, it is Allah Whom ye should more justly fear, if ye believe! Fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands, cover them with shame, help you (to victory) over them, heal the breasts of Believers, And still the indignation of their hearts. For Allah will turn (in mercy) to whom He will; and Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.”

Ibn Kathir and Philips argue that Allah commanded *jihad* only after Muhammad left for Medina because if the Muslims would have tried to fight in Mecca they would have been destroyed. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 6:584; Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer*, 213.

their own, but also to “struggle against the forces of evil and unbelief, and if necessary sacrifice their lives, in order to establish God’s rule.”¹⁹⁸ In the first *aya* revealed about *jihad*, Allah gives believers permission to fight their opponents: “To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged- and verily, Allah is Most Powerful for their aid” (22:39).¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the Qur’an not only gave believers permission to engage in *jihad*, but also commanded it:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where that have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith. But if they cease, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression. (2:190-193)

Ibn Kathir states that according to Al-‘Aliyah, 2:190 was the first *aya* about *jihad* that Allah revealed to Muhammad while in Medina; from that time forward, Muhammad would only fight those who fought him, while avoiding non-combatants.²⁰⁰ Ibn Kathir rejects the argument by some that *aya* 2:190 was abrogated by *aya* 9:5 “fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them,” since *aya* 9:36 states “fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together.”²⁰¹ Therefore, Ibn Kathir argues that believers

¹⁹⁸John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

¹⁹⁹Ibn Kathir writes that Ibn Abbas and others reported that 22:39 was the first *aya* revealed about *jihad*, and that it was revealed to Muhammad when he was exiled from Mecca. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 6:582.

²⁰⁰Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:527. Khan and Al-Hilali state that 2:190 was the first verse revealed in connection with *jihad*. Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an*, 1:124.

²⁰¹Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:527. Rudolph Peters states that it is not clear if the Qur’an teaches that fighting is allowed only defensively (2:190, 9:13) or under all circumstances (9:5, 9:29). Rudolph Peters, “Jihad,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 2:370. *Aya* 9:29 reads, “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the people of the book, until they pay the *Jizyah* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”

should only fight those who have first fought against them. Commenting on 2:190 and agreeing with Ibn Kathir, both Ali and Asad assert that Allah commands believers to fight only in self-defense, since they are only allowed to fight those who have fought them first.²⁰² In reference to 2:190, Khan and Al-Hilali provide an extended definition of *jihad*:²⁰³

Al-Jihad (Holy fighting) in Allah's Cause (with full force of numbers and weaponry) is given the utmost important in Islam and is one of its pillars (on which it stands). By *Jihad* Islam is established, Allah's Word is made superior. . . and His Religion Islam is propagated. By abandoning *Jihad* (may Allah protect us from that) Islam is destroyed and the Muslims fall into an inferior position; their honor is lost, their lands are stolen, their rule and authority vanishes. *Jihad* is an obligatory duty in Islam on every Muslim, and he who tries to escape from duty, or does not in his innermost heart wish to fulfill his duty, dies with one of the qualities of a hypocrite.

According to the Qur'an, believers are expected to fight in the cause of Allah when called upon to do so (2:190, 216, 244; 4:76; 5:35, 54; 9:13-15, 29; 48:29). *Aya* 2:216 reads, "Fighting is prescribed upon you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and ye know not."²⁰⁴ Commenting on this *aya*, Ibn Kathir states that "Allah made it obligatory for the Muslims to fight *Jihad* against the evil of the enemy

²⁰²Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 76; Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 51.

²⁰³Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an*, 1:124. It should be noted that the term *jihad*, which literally means "struggle," is used in two ways in Islam. The greater *jihad* is one's internal moral struggle. The lesser struggle is the external, physical struggle in Allah's cause. However, in the Qur'an, the "emphasis is distinctly on warring against non-believers with the object of propagating Islam." Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*, 167. In contrast to Sherif's position, Rahman argues that Islam did not spread by the sword. Rather, the "political domain" of Islam was spread with the sword, helping Islam set up the order on the earth as commanded by the Qur'an. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 63.

²⁰⁴Commenting on this *aya*, Ali states "To fight in the cause of the Truth is one of the highest forms of charity. What can you offer that is more precious than your own life?" Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 86. Ahmad argues that this verse expresses the principle that there are circumstances which may appear as "evil" or "bad," but are actually beneficial, as determined by God. Ahmad, "Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?," 96. Also see 9:41 and 61:11 which state that striving in Allah's cause (*jihad*) is "best for you."

who transgress against Islam.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, the mark of a true believer is the willingness to strive in Allah’s cause: “Only those are Believers who have believed in Allah and His Messenger, and have never since doubted, but have striven with their belongings and their persons in the Cause of Allah: Such are the sincere ones” (49:15).

However, believers do not fight their opponents by themselves. Allah promises to be with them, fight for them, and sends angels to help them during battle (8:17, 19, 45, 66; 9:16, 25-26). For example, God sent angels to fight alongside his people during the battle of Badr (8:9; 31:123-125), and the battle of the ditch (33:9).²⁰⁶ Ultimately, Allah is the one that helps, and gives victory to his people.²⁰⁷ Therefore, Allah is displeased, and will punish those who refuse to fight or turn their backs and flee from the enemies (4:77; 8:15-16; 9:38-39, 81-82; 48:16). Instead, believers should exemplify *sabr* (8:65-66), and fight hard against their enemies when they face them in battle (4:104; 5:33; 47:4-6; 66:9).²⁰⁸ Allah’s prophets set an example for believers to follow:

²⁰⁵Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:596. Ibn Kathir interprets the command to fight in *aya* 9:14 in the same way, stating that it applies to all Muslims. *idem*, 4:386. Reflecting this same interpretation, Khan and Al-Hilali insert “Muslims” in a parenthesis next to “you” in their translation of 2:216. Khan and Al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an*, 1:144. Moreover, Sherif states that “the Qur’an makes it the inescapable duty of every Moslem to take part in fighting for the cause of God; only the blind, the lame, and the sick are exempt (48:17).” He also states that if the commands of the Qur’an apply beyond the specific circumstances of the revelation, then the commands to holy warfare still apply today. Thus, “The obligation to engage in holy warfare is meant to persist. . . until God’s religion reigns supreme.” Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’an*, 168. Peters notes that the classical interpretation is that “Sword Verses,” with the unconditional command to fight unbelievers, abrogate all previous verses that discuss interaction with non-believers. Peters, “Jihad,” 370.

²⁰⁶Ashqar, *The World of the Noble Angels*, 91.

²⁰⁷See 3:126-27; 8:10-13, 17; 48:20-25; 49:11.

²⁰⁸Cragg argues that *sabr* presupposes triumph. It is not just waiting patiently as if the suffering itself will bring victory. Rather, that through struggle, endurance, and God’s help victory will come. Cragg, *The Event of the Qur’an*, 158. Al-Ashqar argues that the belief that everything is decreed by Allah and that one’s life is in Allah’s hands “was one of the greatest motives which spurred the *mujaahideen* (warriors in the way of Allah) to acts of courage on the battlefield without feeling scared. They would seek death wherever they could find it, throwing themselves into dangerous situations where they thought they could be killed. Then you would find one of them later on, dying in his own bed (of natural causes); he would weep for not having fallen in battle as a shaheed (martyr) even though he exposed himself to dangers.” Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination*, 144.

How many of the prophets fought (in Allah's way), and with them (fought) large bands of godly men? But they never lost heart if they met with disaster in Allah's way, nor did they weaken (in will) nor give in. And Allah loves those who are firm and steadfast. All that they said was: "Our Lord! Forgive us our sins and anything we may have done that transgressed our duty: Establish our feet firmly, and help us against those that resist Faith. And Allah gave them a reward in this world, and the excellent reward of the Hereafter. For Allah Loveth those who do good" (3:146-148).

Finally, Allah promises to reward those who strive in his cause, especially those who die as martyrs, for "Truly Allah loves those who fight in his cause in battle array, as if they were a solid cemented structure" (61:4). Allah will reward believers if they suffer thirst, fatigue, hunger, and loss of property in the cause of Allah, and respond with *sabr* (2:155-57, 262; 9:120). Moreover, the Qur'an teaches that those who suffer exile and strive in the cause of Allah have a higher rank than other believers; therefore, they will receive a greater reward in paradise (2:118; 4:95-96, 100; 8:74; 9:20-22, 88-89; 16:41, 100). Among those who strive in Allah's cause, a شهيد (*shaheed*),²⁰⁹ one killed for Allah's sake, receives the greatest honor.²¹⁰ Allah forgives them and admits them into paradise:²¹¹

Those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah, and are then slain or die- on them will Allah bestow verily a goodly provision: Truly Allah is he who bestows the best provision. Verily he will admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased: For Allah is all-knowing, most forbearing (22:58-59).

²⁰⁹As with the Greek term μάρτυς, which originally meant "witness," but later took on the meaning of those who suffered and died for the faith, so the Arabic term شهيد, meaning "witness," also took on the meaning of a martyr. Ambros and Procházka argue that the double meaning of شهيد was influenced by the Syriac form of the word which took on the double meaning from the Greek μάρτυς. Ambros and Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, 153. For a helpful discussion of the varied uses and semantic development of μάρτυς see Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, and Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), "μάρτυς"; Erlangen Hermann Strathmann, "μάρτυς," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 4:473-514.

²¹⁰B. Todd Lawson argues that the Islamic admiration for martyrdom blends the exaltation of *sabr* in the Qur'an with the belief in "the suffering of apparently of all the prophets at the hands of persecutors." B. Todd Lawson, "Martyrdom," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 3: 54.

²¹¹See 3:157-59, 169-171, 195, 4:74-76, 9:111; 22:58-59; 47:5.

Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord; they rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah. . . . They glory in the grace and the bounty from Allah, and in the fact that Allah suffereth not the reward of the faithful to be lost (in the least) (3:169-171).²¹²

In conclusion, the Qur'an provides possible responses to the two questions this case study seeks to answer: (1) what are God's purposes behind the suffering of his people and (2) how are God's people to respond to suffering? First, the Qur'an depicts suffering first and foremost as a test or trial from God, giving believers the opportunity to prove their faith and commitment to Allah. Second, Allah may have his people suffer as a way to purify them. Third, believers may also experience suffering as Allah's punishment for their sins. Responses to suffering depend on the context. Nevertheless, believers should always manifest trust in Allah's decrees and patience in the face of suffering. In addition, believers should pray and call out to God when experiencing afflictions of various kinds. If believers feel that they are suffering because Allah is punishing them for their sin, they should immediately repent, knowing that Allah is merciful and forgiving. Finally, the Qur'an emphasizes two ways believers could respond to opposition and persecution. They can either flee the persecution or they can struggle with their opponent, knowing that Allah and those who submit to him will ultimately be victorious.

The Suffering of God's People in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*

After the Qur'an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* is the most important and influential sacred text that shapes Sunni belief and practice. Therefore, investigating *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* may help shed light on how Sunni Muslims might interpret suffering in their lives. *Al-Bukhāri's* collection of *ahadith* includes more than ninety "books." Some "books" deal

²¹²Ayoub demonstrates that there is disagreement whether martyrs enter paradise immediately after death or if they enjoy tastes of paradise while still in their graves, while they await the Resurrection. Nevertheless, he also notes that the majority position is that martyrs are actually in paradise. Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, vol. 2, *The House of 'Imran* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 372-73.

with doctrine, but by far, the majority of the “books” have to do with Muslim practice. Unfortunately, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* does not contain a specific chapter dealing with suffering; consequently, the data must be brought together from the diverse “books” in the collection.

In order to highlight the potential influence of some *ahadith* from *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, it will be noted in the footnotes if they appear in either of two popular collections of *ahadith* among Sunni Muslims by Abu Zakariya Yahya Bin Sharaf Al-Nawawi (1234-1277). In *Forty Hadith*, “one of the most widely read books after the Quran among Sunni Muslims,”²¹³ al-Nawawi brought together what he thought to be the most important *ahadith* that compose “the fundamental points of religious belief.”²¹⁴ In *Riyadh Us-Saliheen (Gardens of the Righteous)*, al-Nawawi presents a larger collection of *ahadith* which provide guidance on appropriate Muslim behavior.²¹⁵ Brown states that *Riyadh Us-Saliheen* is “extremely popular,” and notes that it is the main *hadith* text for Tabligh-I Jama‘at, “one of the largest missionary institutions in the modern Muslim world.”²¹⁶ In addition, although certainly biased, it is worth noting that in an introduction to *Riyadh Us Saliheen*, the publishers claim that the text “occupies second rank after the Holy Qur’an” and that it is in “every house of every Muslim.”²¹⁷ Moreover, in Laurence B. Brown’s book for recent converts to Islam, *Bearing True Witness (Or, “Now That I’ve Found Islam, What Do I Do With It?)* he recommends three collections of *hadith*, two of

²¹³Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 56.

²¹⁴Muhyi al-Din Abu Zakariya Yahya bin Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Imam Nawawi's Collection of Forty Hadith* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1996), x.

²¹⁵In *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, Nawawi includes chapters on the commandments of Allah, courtesy, etiquette of eating, etiquette of sleeping, salutation, visiting the sick, etiquette of journeys, merits, forbidden matters, and signs of the Last Day. Abu Zakariya Yahya Bin Sharaf an-Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen (Gardens of the Righteous)*, 2 vols. (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat, 1998).

²¹⁶Brown, *Hadith*, 35.

²¹⁷Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:15.

which are Nawawi's *Forty Hadith* and *Riyadh-Us-Saliheen*.²¹⁸ To conclude, it is unquestionable that these two collections of *ahadith* by al-Nawawi play an important role in disseminating *ahadith*, many of which are from *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*.

What are God's Purposes behind the Suffering of His People?

Throughout the *ahadith* in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, two possible answers surface to the issue of God's purposes behind the suffering of his people. First, believers may experience suffering because Allah is punishing them for their disobedience or transgressions. Second, believers may experience suffering because Allah wants to test them and bless them with an opportunity to be rewarded, either by having some of their sins expiated or by giving them entrance into paradise.

Punishment for sins. Like in the Qur'an, the *ahadith* collected in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* reveal that Allah may cause his people to suffer as punishment for their disobedience and transgressions. Some of the *ahadith* reveal that Muhammad believed that Allah may choose to punish nations or individuals before judgment day. For instance, Anas narrated that "whenever a strong wind blew, anxiety appeared on the face on the Prophet" (1034).²¹⁹ Muhammad Muhsin Khan comments that Muhammad reacted this way because he thought the "wind might be a sign of Allah's wrath."²²⁰ If Khan is correct in his analysis, then Muhammad did believe that Allah's judgment and punishment for sins was not completely eschatological. Moreover, Ibn 'Umar narrated that Muhammad said, "If Allah sends punishment upon a nation then it befalls upon the whole population indiscriminately and then they will be resurrected (and judged)

²¹⁸Laurence B. Brown, *Bearing True Witness (Or, "Now That I've Found Islam, What Do I Do With It?")* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2005), 107.

²¹⁹*Ahadith* will be referenced based on the numbering found in Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997).

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 2:97.

according to their deeds” (7108). Similar *ahadith* report Muhammad saying that Allah has sent plagues to punish or torture nations, or to punish whom he wishes (3473; 3474; 5734; 6974).²²¹ In addition, it is reported that Muhammad did not like to offer *salat* in the land of Babylon, and would pass through it quickly because the earth had sunk down and Allah’s punishment had fallen there. ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar narrated that as they were going to the battle of Tabuk and when they reached Al-Hijr, Muhammad said to his companions at Al-Hijr (or about the dwellers of Al-Hijr), “Do not enter places of those people where Allah’s punishment had fallen unless you enter weeping. If you do not weep, Allah’s curse and punishment that fell upon them will fall upon you” (433; 3380; 3381; 4419; 4420; 4702).²²² These *ahadith* alone demonstrate that Muhammad believed that Allah may punish people, including believers, in this life.

In other *ahadith*, Muhammad mentions historical examples of Allah punishing individuals for their sins in this life, including even some of Allah’s prophets. First of all, Muhammad tells of a conversation between Adam and Moses in which Moses blames Adam for his mistake, which led him to be thrown out of paradise. Adam replies that he could not be blamed because it was preordained. Muhammad concluded that Adam had won the argument, and stated his conclusion three times (3409; 4736; 4738; 6614; 7515). Although the main point of the *hadith* appears to be Muhammad’s belief that Adam’s disobedience was preordained by Allah, he does appear to affirm that Allah punished Adam by throwing him out of paradise for eating of the forbidden fruit. Muhammad also tells of an account when Solomon decided to have intercourse with all of his wives²²³ so

²²¹The specific *hadith* stating that Allah punishes with a plague whom he wishes appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54.

²²²This *hadith* appears in the section on “weeping and expressing fear over the graves of tyrants, submissiveness to Allah and admonition against failure to do so” in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:50.

²²³The number of wives varies in the different accounts of the story. One account mentions 60 wives, another 70, another 90, another 99, and another mentions 100 wives.

that each of them would give him a son to fight in Allah's Cause (2819; 3424; 5242; 6639; 6720; 7469). However, Muhammad states that because Solomon forgot (or refused) to say "*in sha Allah*" (if Allah wills), only one of his wives conceived and she conceived a malformed son. Finally, Ibn 'Umar narrated that Muhammad said "While a man was walking, dragging his dress with pride, he was caused to be swallowed up by the earth and will go on sinking in it till the Day of Resurrection" (3485). In these *ahadith*, Muhammad tells of how Allah had punished Adam, Solomon, and a proud man in this life for a specific sin each of them committed.

In addition to mentioning historical events in which Allah punished individuals for their sin, Muhammad also warned that Allah may punish people, including believers, for their sins even before the eschatological judgment. For example, he warned misers, oppressors, freed slaves, and wives that they may be recipients of Allah's punishment. Abu Huraira narrated that Muhammad said, "Every day two angels come down and one of them says, 'O Allah! Compensate every person who spends in Your Cause,' and the other angel says, 'O Allah! Destroy every miser'" (1442). Muhammad also warned oppressors by saying, "Be afraid, from the curse of the oppressed as there is no screen between his invocation and Allah"²²⁴ (2248). He also taught that if a freed slave takes another as a master without the permission of the one who freed him, he will incur the wrath of God, angels, and all the people (1870). Finally, Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said that if a husband calls his wife to his bed for sexual relations, but she refuses, the angels will curse her until morning (3237; 5193). In a similar *hadith*, Abu Hurairah narrated Muhammad saying that if a wife does not spend the night in her husband's bed, the angels will send curses on her until she comes back (5194).

Muhammad also warned Muslims to be careful in religious matters. Abu

²²⁴Khan comments on this *hadith* that Allah will respond and "punish the oppressor sooner or later." Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 3:364.

Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said, “Isn’t he who raises his head before the Imam afraid that Allah may transform his head into that of a donkey?” (619). Similarly, An-Nu‘uman bin ‘Bashir narrated that Muhammad said, “Straighten your rows or Allah will alter your faces” (717). Moreover, Muhammad declared Medina a sanctuary, and listed specific sins which would bring divine and human punishment (1867; 1870; 7306; 3172; 3179). He said that anyone who cuts trees in it, creates a heresy, or commits a sin in it (like giving shelter to a sinner or heretic, or a freed slave taking on a master other than his real master, or betraying a Muslim and not providing him asylum) will incur the wrath of God, angels and all the people. In these warnings, Muhammad does not clearly specify if the punishment is eschatological or not; however, since Allah’s wrath is listed next to that of angels and people it seems logical to understand Allah’s wrath as taking place in this life.

In addition to Muhammad’s statements, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* also contains statements by other believers describing incidents in their own days in which they believed Allah punished people for their disobedience. ‘Abdullah bin Mas‘ud narrated an incident in which Muhammad put his face to the ground while reciting the Qur’an, and all those with him did the same. However, an old man just picked up some small stones and dirt, and touched it to his forehead saying that was enough. ‘Abdullah bin Mas‘ud states that he later saw the man killed as a disbeliever (1067; 3853; 3972; 4863).²²⁵ Al-Bara narrated an incident at the Battle of Uhud in which Allah punished some of the fighters for their disobedience and lack of self-control (3039; 4043). He narrated that at the battle of Uhud, Muhammad placed ‘Abdullah bin Jubair over a group of fifty and told them to stay at a specific location. However, when the men saw the women of the enemies fleeing, lifting up their clothes, and revealing their leg-bangles, the men said “The booty,

²²⁵This *hadith* is the first one al-Bukhāri lists in the section on “prostration during the recitation of the Qur’an.” Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 2:117.

the booty!” and they started running after them. ‘Abdullah bin Jubair tried to stop them, but could not. When they refused to stop, they became confused and did not know where to go and thus, seventy men were killed. Khan inserts in the *hadith* that Allah was the one that confused them.²²⁶

These *ahadith* presented suffice to demonstrate that Muhammad taught that Allah may choose to punish nations and individuals, including believers, for sins they commit. Consequently, one answer to the question of God’s purposes behind the suffering of his people is that he may be punishing them for their sins. However, the *ahadith* also present another, more positive, view of suffering.

A test and a blessing. Although Allah may send times of suffering as punishment, he may also send times of suffering as a blessing for believers. Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said, “If Allah wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials” (5645).²²⁷ In *Sickness: Regulations & Exhortations*, Muhammad al-Jibali comments about this *hadith* that “Afflictions are an indication of Allah’s love for a believer.”²²⁸ In *Don’t Be Sad*, Aaidh ibn Andullah al-Qarni refers to this *hadith* and argues that one should not “feel overly troubled” if one is “afflicted with sickness, the death of a son, or a loss of wealth.” If one believes that it has been decreed by Allah and because of this belief, one does not become overly troubled, one will be “rewarded well,”

²²⁶Ibid., 5:230.

²²⁷This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:56.

²²⁸Jibali, *Sickness*, 9. Through the influence of the Sufis, the idea that suffering is a sign of Allah’s love has become an important element in Muslim piety. Suffering may reveal Allah’s love because it provides the opportunity for him to reward his “faithful servant.” Ayoub, “The Problem of Suffering in Islam,” 285. For example, Al-Hallaj (858-922), the great Sufi “martyr of mystical love,” taught that the love between himself and Allah is “realized through suffering,” by accepting and longing for it. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 62, 72. Ahmad states that even though “ordinary people” go through times of suffering, the prophets and messengers of God are the ones that have experienced the most afflictions. Ahmad, “Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?,” 95. Ashqar notes that in the Tirmidhi collection of *ahadith*, it records Muhammad saying that prophets are the ones tested more severely. Ashqar, *The Messengers and the Messages*, 111.

and one's sins shall be "atoned for."²²⁹ Al-Qarni's statement reveals the two main ways in which times of suffering may be a blessing from Allah, namely, an opportunity to have some of one's sins expiated and to be given entrance into paradise.

First of all, Muhammad taught that if a Muslim suffers any harm or calamity, like a disease, sorrow, sadness, hurt, and distress, Allah expiates some of his sins because of it, even if it was only a prick he receives from a thorn (5640; 5641; 5642; 5647).²³⁰ Allah removes his sins like leaves that fall from a tree (5647). Moreover, Ibn Abbas reported that whenever Muhammad would visit someone sick he would say, "No harm will befall you, if Allah will, (your sickness will be) an expiation for your sins" (3616; 5656; 5662; 7470).²³¹ 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud narrated that once he visited Muhammad when he was suffering from a high fever (5647; 5648; 5660; 5661; 5667).²³² During the visit, Muhammad said that he was suffering the fever of two men. 'Abdullah replied, "You will have a double reward." Muhammad agreed, and said that no Muslim is afflicted, but Allah removes his sins.

In addition to having sins expiated, Muhammad also taught that Allah may grant paradise to Muslims who endure times of intense suffering with patience, trusting in Allah's decrees. As stated previously, Muhammad taught that Allah sends plagues to punish whom he wishes. However, in the second half of the *hadith*, he states that these same plagues are "a source of mercy for believers" because *if* they stay hoping patiently for Allah's reward, and believe that nothing will happen to them except what Allah has written for them then they will be rewarded similar to how a martyr is rewarded (3474;

²²⁹Qarni, *Don't Be Sad*, 40.

²³⁰This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:56.

²³¹This *hadith* appears in the chapter on what to supplicate for the sick in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 2:28.

²³²This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 1:56.

5734; 6619).²³³ If they are rewarded similar to how martyrs are rewarded then at least they would be guaranteed paradise.

Muhammad also gives the hope of paradise to Muslims who have lost a loved one. Muhammad is reported to have taught that if a Muslim woman (some accounts say this applies to men as well) loses her two or three sons (some accounts just read “children,” and others add the stipulation that the children must die before the age of puberty) she will be “screened by the Fire by them,” and rewarded with Paradise (101; 102; 1248; 1249; 1250; 1381; 7310). Although the *ahadith* literally state that paradise is guaranteed, al-Bukhāri appears to add the stipulation that the person must endure the experience with patience, *sabr*.²³⁴ Preceding *ahadith* no. 1248-1250, al-Bukhāri includes a portion of the quranic *aya* 2:155, which reads, “Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.” In like manner, Khan comments on *hadith* no. 101 that the woman will be shielded from hell “If she will bear their deaths with patience for getting reward from Allah.”²³⁵ This concept appears in a similar *hadith qudsi*.²³⁶ Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said, “Allah says, ‘I have nothing to give but Paradise as a reward to my slave, a true believer of Islamic Monotheism, who, if I cause his dear friend (or relative) to die, remains patient (and hopes for Allah’s reward)’” (6424).²³⁷

²³³This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54.

²³⁴Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 2:202.

²³⁵Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 1:116.

²³⁶*Ahadith qudsi* are *ahadith* in which Muhammad quotes Allah’s speech. The meaning is from Allah, but the wording is from Muhammad. Thus, it is not literally the word of Allah as in the Qur’an. Muhammad may have heard God in his Ascension to heaven, or in a dream or through inspiration. Brown, *Hadith*, 62.

²³⁷This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54.

Moreover, Muhammad also gave the hope of paradise to Muslims suffering from epilepsy and blindness. On one occasion a woman who suffered of epilepsy, and who would often become uncovered, came to Muhammad asking him if he would invoke Allah for her (5652).²³⁸ Muhammad responded that if she remained patient she would enter paradise. In reference to this *hadith*, al-Jibali points out that the *ulema* do not agree if the sick are rewarded merely for being sick or if they are rewarded for remaining patient during the sickness. He argues that the correct position is that if a sick person remains patient and “content with Allah’s decree,” they will be rewarded for *both* their sickness and their patience.²³⁹ In a *hadith qudsi*, Anas bin Malik narrated that he heard Muhammad say, “Allah said, ‘If I deprive my slave of his two beloved things (i.e., his eyes) and he remains patient, I will let him enter paradise in compensation for them’” (5653).²⁴⁰

To conclude, based upon the *ahadith* in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, Allah may have his people experience times of suffering either because he wants to punish them for their sins or because he wants to bless them with an opportunity to be rewarded. On the one hand, although punishment for sins is mostly reserved for the grave and hell, Allah may choose to punish nations and individuals, including believers, for their sins before they die. On the other hand, Allah may have his people suffer as a way to offer them the opportunity to have some of their sins expiated or to grant them entrance into paradise, *if* they pass the test and remain patient, trusting in Allah’s decrees.

How Are God’s People to Respond to Suffering?

The *ahadith* collected in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* provide a diverse array of

²³⁸This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 1:55.

²³⁹Jibali, *Sickness*, 25.

²⁴⁰This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54-55.

prescriptive and descriptive directions on how God’s people should respond in times of suffering. Naturally, responses to suffering are context specific. Consequently, the *ahadith* discussed below will be divided into three general contexts: (1) suffering as punishment for one’s sins; (2) general suffering in life; (3) suffering due to opposition and persecution.

Repent if being punished. As shown in the previous section, Muhammad taught that Allah may choose to punish people, including the people of God, for their disobedience and transgressions before the Day of Judgment. In this context, the best response is repentance since Allah is willing to forgive. Although most references to Allah’s forgiveness in both the Qur’an and in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* refer to the forgiveness Allah gives on the Day of Judgment, it would be only natural for believers who are suffering as punishment for their sin to repent and seek Allah’s forgiveness as soon as possible. Abu Hurairah narrated Muhammad saying, “By Allah! I seek forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance for more than seventy times a day” (6307).²⁴¹ If Muhammad needed to turn to Allah for forgiveness more than seventy times a day, how much more would this be the case for the average Muslim believer? ‘Aishah also narrated that Muhammad used to ask Allah for forgiveness (6368):

O Allah! Wash away my sins with the water of snow and hail, and cleanse my heart from all the sins as a white garment is cleansed from the filth, and let there be a long distance between me and my sins, as You made east and west far from each other.

Moreover, Shaddad bin Aus narrated that Muhammad taught his followers “the most superior way” of asking for forgiveness from Allah (6306; 6323):

The Prophet said, “The most superior way of asking for forgiveness from Allah is: ‘O Allah, You are my Lord! None has the right to be worshipped but You. You created me and I am Your slave, and I am faithful to my covenant and my promise (to You) as much as I can. I seek refuge with You from all the evil I had done. I

²⁴¹This *hadith* appears in the chapter on repentance in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:28.

acknowledge before You all the blessings You have bestowed upon me, and I confess to You all my sins. So I entreat You to forgive my sins, for nobody can forgive sins except You.”

Shaddad bin Aus reports that after teaching this invocation of forgiveness, Muhammad said that if one recites this prayer the day one dies or if one recites it at night and then dies in the morning, one will be granted paradise. These *ahadith* provide clear examples of Muhammad asking Allah for forgiveness, and of Muhammad teaching believers to do the same. To conclude, the natural response, and supported by Muhammad’s *Sunnah*, is for believers to repent and seek Allah’s forgiveness if they believe that they are being punished for their sins. Al-Nawawi states that it is an obligation for Muslims “to feel penitence for every sin,” and that “repentance is obligatory in the light of the consensus of opinion of Muslims, verses of the Holy Qur’an and Traditions of the Holy Prophet.”²⁴²

However, if the believer does not think Allah is punishing her for any specific sins, how should she respond to the suffering she is experiencing? The *ahadith* provide *both* general principles and specific instructions about how to respond to suffering in life. First, she should remain patient and long-suffering throughout the ordeal. Second, depending on the context, she should invoke Allah for provision, protection or healing. Finally, if death is a possibility, then she should try to see the goodness in death.

Be patient and long-suffering. First and foremost, the people of God should respond to suffering by continuing to praise Allah and being patient, seeking Allah’s reward. Muhammad taught this principle in both word and deed. It is reported that when Muhammad was suffering from his “fatal illness” and nearing his time of death, he sat on the pulpit in front of the people and thanked, glorified, and praised Allah, before extolling Abu Bakr, his successor (467; 3628; 3656; 3657; 3799; 3800; 6738). Moreover, at the death of Muhammad’s infant son, Ibrahim, Muhammad wept and said “The eyes shed

²⁴²Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:27-28.

tears and the heart grieves, and we will not say except what pleases our Lord, O Ibrahim! Indeed we are grieved by your separation” (1303). Muhammad, although grieving the loss of his son, he wanted to remain faithful to Allah. On another occasion, Muhammad’s daughter sent for him as her daughter was dying. Muhammad returned the messenger with this message: “Whatever Allah takes is for Him and whatever He gives, is for Him, and everything with Him has a limited fixed term (in this world) and so she should be patient and hope for Allah’s Reward” (1284; 5655; 6602; 6655; 7377; 7848). Soon after, Muhammad went to visit them and wept as he held the dying girl. In these three occasions of personal suffering, Muhammad continued to praise Allah, submitted to Allah’s will, and remained patient, seeking his reward.

Muhammad also pointed to the example set by previous prophets who remained patient and endured through affliction. Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said that if he had had to stay in prison for such a long time as Joseph did, he would have accepted the offer of freedom without having his guiltlessness declared (3372; 3387; 4694; 6992). In other words, Muhammad was praising Joseph for being patient as he waited for his innocence to be declared.²⁴³ Muhammad also extolled Moses for his patience when afflicted by his own people. Once, when Muslims from Medina complained to Muhammad about how he was distributing the war plunder, he got angry and said, “May Allah bestow His Mercy on Moses, for he was harmed more than this; yet he endured it patiently.”²⁴⁴ Muhammad then told those who complained to be patient for their reward at “the Hour,” and he explained that he was giving the newly-converted from Mecca the plunder in order to attract their hearts to Islam (4330-4336).

Muhammad expected true believers to manifest *sabr*, patience and

²⁴³Khan notes that the quranic text (12:36-50) states that the king of Egypt had sent a message to Joseph to set him free, but he decided to stay in prison until he was declared innocent by the wife of Aziz who had falsely accused him. Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 9:92.

²⁴⁴See *ahadith* 3405; 3150; 4335; 4336; 6059; 6100; 6291; 6336. This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:58.

longsuffering, in the face of suffering, while waiting for Allah's reward. Muhammad taught that a true believer is like a fresh tender plant the wind bends sometimes and at other times makes it straight (5643; 5644; 7466). In contrast, he describes the hypocrite as a pine tree which remains straight and is uprooted suddenly with the wind. He concludes that the true believer is like the tender plant that bends when calamity comes, and that the hypocrite is like the pine tree which Allah cuts down when he wishes.²⁴⁵

Muhammad also told the story of a lady, while nursing her baby, saw a handsome man on a horse, and she prayed that her baby would become like the man (3436; 3466). The baby then miraculously spoke and said "O Allah! Do not make me like him." Then the mother saw a young slave girl being teased and pulled by the people. She prayed that her baby would not become like the girl. The baby miraculously spoke out again and asked Allah to make him like the girl. The mother asked her baby why, and he said that it was because the rider was a tyrant and the woman was being falsely accused of theft and fornication. However, in spite of being falsely accused, she would respond with, "Allah is sufficient for me." Khan interprets this as meaning that Allah is sufficient for her because he knows the truth.²⁴⁶ Although the girl's response is not completely clear, she does manifest *sabr* in the face of opposition, apparently trusting Allah to vindicate her.

In another occasion, Muhammad saw a woman sitting and weeping beside a grave and he told her "Fear God and be patient" (1252; 1283; 7154). She rebuked him, not knowing who he was. She later went to him and apologized, and he responded by saying, "No doubt, patience is at the first stroke of calamity" (1283; 7154). That is, believers should always be longsuffering, even at the start of calamity. In another *hadith*, a martyr's mother exemplified the steadfastness that Muhammad expected from those in

²⁴⁵Of this *hadith*, al-Jibali comments that afflictions serve as opportunities that reveal a believer's belief and faith. Jibali, *Sickness*, 10.

²⁴⁶Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 4:422.

the *ummah*. Anas bin Malik narrated that one day Haritha's mother came to Muhammad, asking if her son (Haritha) was in paradise after being killed in battle. She said that she would weep bitterly if he was not, but that if he was in paradise, she would be patient and hope for a reward from Allah (2809; 3982; 6550; 6567). Muhammad reassured her that her son had received the best part of the gardens in paradise.

As demonstrated previously, Muhammad also taught that affliction may be good and a source of mercy from Allah (3474; 5645; 5734; 6619), and that when a Muslim suffers, even in the slightest degree, Allah expiates some of his sins (5640; 5641; 5642; 5647). Moreover, Muhammad taught that Allah guaranteed paradise to Muslims who patiently endure the death of two or three children (101; 102; 1248; 1249; 1250; 1381; 7310), the loss of a loved one (6424), a plague (3474; 5734; 6619), epilepsy (5652),²⁴⁷ and blindness (5653).²⁴⁸

At times, this patience and longsuffering is manifested by not showing outward signs of sorrow. In his chapter on funerals, al-Bukhāri includes a section on those who show no sign of grief when facing calamity. He begins the section with a quote from Muhammad bin Ka'b Al-Qurai which reads, "Impatience means a bad saying or a bad thought." Al-Bukhāri relates this quote to the quranic *aya* 12:86, which quotes Jacob saying, "I only complain of my grief and sorrow to Allah."²⁴⁹ This quote and verse appear to be teaching that those who are patient under affliction do not complain about their situation, and that they only grieve before God. Al-Bukhāri then includes a *hadith* narrated by Anas bin Malik which exemplifies the principle (1301; 5470).²⁵⁰ The account

²⁴⁷This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:55.

²⁴⁸This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid.

²⁴⁹Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 2:225.

²⁵⁰This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:60.

involves an incident in which a man's young child dies, and he appears to be rewarded for his response. One night, Abu Talha's young son got ill and died; however, his wife did not tell him that this had happened until after they had intercourse that same night. The next morning, Abu Talha got up, offered *salat* with Muhammad, and then told him what had happened the previous day. Muhammad replied, "May Allah bless you both concerning your night," referring to Abu Talha and his wife's sexual relations the night before. The *hadith* ends with a report that Abu Talha ended up have nine sons, and that all of them became reciters of the Qur'an. Although the exact meaning of the event is unclear, the fact that Abu Talha is not described as showing outward grief, that he ended up having nine sons who became reciters of the Qur'an (with Muhammad's blessing), and that al-Bukhāri includes this account under the specific heading of not showing grief, implies that having patience may include not showing outward grief. The *ahadith* which follow the section on not showing grief in al-Bukhāri's arrangement further support this argument.

After the heading of not showing outward grief, al-Bukhāri includes the heading of "Patience is to be observed at the first stroke of calamity." Under this heading, al-Bukhāri includes an account of Umar stating, "How good the two equals are and how good the reward is for those who when afflicted say: 'To Allah we belong and truly, to Him we shall return.'" This phrase comes from the quranic passage 2:156-157, which reads, "Who say, when afflicted with calamity: 'To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return': They are those on whom (Descend) blessings from Allah, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance." Moreover, Umar references quranic *aya* 2:45, which reads, "Nay, seek (Allah's) help with patient perseverance and prayer: It is indeed hard, except to those who bring a lowly spirit."²⁵¹ After presenting these quranic

²⁵¹Khan describes those with a "lowly spirit" as "true believers in Allah- those who obey Allah with full submission, fear much from His punishment and believe in His promise (Paradise) and His Warning (Hell)." Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 2:226.

passages, al-Bukhāri includes Muhammad's statement that "The real patience is at the first stroke of calamity" (1252; 1302). To conclude, true believers respond to suffering with patience and longsuffering, waiting for Allah's reward, be it expiation of sins or even paradise. Moreover, they continue to praise Allah, and they may refrain from showing emotion as they trust in Allah's decrees. However, Muhammad did not fully condemn showing outward signs of sorrow, but rather he called for them to be restrained.

In addition to the *ahadith* already discussed, there are other *ahadith* in which Muhammad appears to discourage outward signs of sorrow. 'Aishah narrated that when Muhammad announced the martyrdom of the three commanders (Zaid bin Haritha, Ja'far and 'Abdullah bin Rawaha), someone came and told Muhammad that the women of Ja'far were crying. Muhammad then sent the messenger back, instructing him to tell the women to stop crying. The man was unable to stop them so he returned to Muhammad. Muhammad sent the man again, but the man returned a second time saying that he could not stop them. Muhammad then said "Put dust in their mouths." And 'Aishah said to the man "May Allah stick your nose in the dust. By Allah you could neither fulfill the order, nor did you relieve Allah's Messenger" (1299; 1305). From this incident, it seems that Muhammad did not approve of the way in which the women were weeping for the deceased.

In addition to the incident just described, there are *ahadith* which seem to report Muhammad teaching that the weeping of relatives tortures the deceased. For example, 'Abdullah bin 'Umar narrated that Muhammad said, "the dead person is tortured by the crying of his relatives" (1286; 1287; 1304). While at the funeral of one of Uthman's daughters, 'Abdullah bin 'Umar questioned Uthman for not prohibiting crying, saying that Muhammad had taught that crying tortures the deceased (1286). Even when 'Abdullah bin 'Umar himself was stabbed, he told Suhaib, who was by his side, to stop weeping because Muhammad had said that the dead are tortured by the weeping of their relatives (or the living) (1287; 1290). It appears that Ibn Umar believed that Muhammad

condemned any form of crying for the deceased because it tortured them in their grave.²⁵²

However, ‘Aishah said that Ibn Umar misunderstood Muhammad (3978). She narrated that Muhammad said, “The dead person is punished for his crimes and sins while his family cry over him” (3978). She narrated an incident in which Muhammad was passing by the grave of a Jewish woman while her relatives were weeping over her, and Muhammad said, “They are weeping over her and she is being tortured in her grave” (1289). Thus, ‘Aishah did not appear to believe that Muhammad taught that weeping tortures the deceased at all. To complicate the matter, Ibn Abbas narrated that he once told ‘Aishah what Ibn Umar had been saying and she rejected it, and said that what Muhammad actually said was that “Allah increases the punishment of a disbeliever because of the weeping of his relatives” (1288). Space does not permit, nor is it imperative to determine what Muhammad actually said about the dead being tortured by the weeping of their relatives. What is important to note is that Muhammad did not forbid believers from crying over the deceased. Rather, he forbade believers from mourning in the way that disbelievers did.

Instead of condemning crying altogether, Muhammad appeared to condemn the way people did so in the time of *al-jahiliyyah*, the pre-Islamic period of ignorance. ‘Abdullah narrated that Muhammad said, “He who slaps (his) cheeks, tears (his) clothes, and calls to (or follows) the ways and traditions of the Days of Ignorance is not one of us” (1294; 1297). Sufyan narrated that ‘Ubaidullah said, “I heard Ibn Abbas say that one of the traits of the people of the period of *al-jahiliyyah* was that they wailed over the dead” (3850). Therefore, it appears that what Muhammad condemned was the pre-Islamic form of wailing for the deceased. For instance, when women would come to Muhammad to pledge their loyalty to him, he would command them to not associate

²⁵²However, it should be noted that Ibn Umar’s statements might be interpreted in a different way. He could have been condemning at the funeral and during his own injury, what he believed to be excessive wailing.

anything with God, and that they could not wail for the deceased (1306; 4892; 7215). Moreover, ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar narrated that once Muhammad went to visit Sa’d bin ‘Ubada who was sick, and while the people were weeping, he began to weep as well. He then proceeded to say that Allah does not punish nor bless people for weeping and having grief, but he does punish the deceased if his relatives are wailing for him (1304).²⁵³ Moreover, Al-Mughira narrated that Muhammad said, “The deceased who is wailed over is tortured for that wailing” (1291). Therefore, it would seem that Muhammad actually condemned wailing over the dead as disbelievers did; he did not condemn simply crying over the deceased.

Many *ahadith* reveal that Muhammad did not forbid crying altogether. For instance, Muhammad did not reprimand Abu Bakr for weeping over Muhammad’s impending death. ‘Aishah narrated that Muhammad wanted Abu Bakr to lead *salat* even though he was weeping (716). Moreover, when Muhammad “addressed the people,” and announced that Allah had given him the choice of this world or to be with Allah, and that he chose to be with Allah, he did not reprimand Abu Bakr when he began to weep (3654; 466; 3904). Rather, he praised Abu Bakr, saying that next to Allah, Abu Bakr was his closest friend. In addition, Muhammad did not reprimand his daughter Fatima when she wept after he told her that he was going to die of his illness (3715; 3716; 3623; 3625; 3715; 4433, 6285). Aishah narrated that the people wept loudly when Muhammad died (3668).²⁵⁴

²⁵³This *hadith* appears in the chapter on the permissibility of shedding tears over the dead without wailing and loud weeping in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:36.

²⁵⁴Various other *ahadith* show that Muhammad did not forbid crying altogether. For example, Muhammad did not forbid Jarir from weeping when his father died as a martyr at the battle of Uhud, although the people tried to stop Jarir from crying (1244; 1293). In this incident, Muhammad comforted those weeping by saying that the body of Jarir’s father was being covered by the wings of angels until he was taken away for burial (1293; 2816; 4080). Muhammad also taught that women could mourn someone’s death, although with some stipulations. Zainab bint Abi Salama narrated that she heard one of Muhammad’s wives, Umm Habiba, say that when her father died, Muhammad told her that it was not legal for a Muslim woman to mourn for more than three days for anyone but her husband, whom she should mourn for four months and ten days (1280; 1281; 5334; 5339; 5345).

Some *ahadith* even report Muhammad himself crying. For instance, when Muhammad announced the death of three of his military commanders who had been martyred (Zaid, Ja ‘far, and ‘Abdullah bin Rawaha), his eyes “overflowed with tears” and he said that it is better for them to be where they are now (1246; 3757; 2798; 3063; 3630; 4262). Commenting on *hadith* no. 2798, Khan states that Muhammad was crying because he pitied the families who would grieve the loss, although he knew they went to a better place.²⁵⁵ In addition, Anas bin Malik narrated that Muhammad wept when his infant son, Ibrahim, died and he said, “The eyes shed tears and the heart grieves, and we will not say except what pleases our Lord, O Ibrahim! Indeed we are grieved by your separation” (1303).²⁵⁶ Muhammad also wept when he held his dying granddaughter (1284; 5655; 6655; 7377).²⁵⁷ When asked why he was crying, he replied, “It is mercy which Allah has lodged in the hearts of His slaves, and Allah is merciful only to those of His slaves who are merciful.” To conclude, Muhammad expected true believers to respond to suffering with patience, which may include not showing outward signs of mourning. However, he did not restrict Muslims from crying; he restricted them from wailing excessively as the disbelievers did. Nawawi confirms this analysis in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen* when he states that wailing is unlawful, while weeping is permissible and evident in many *ahadith*.²⁵⁸

Invoke Allah for provision, protection, and physical healing. In addition to being longsuffering, the *ahadith* instruct believers to invoke Allah for provision, protection, and healing. One of the most important provisions needed in the Arabian

²⁵⁵Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 4:52.

²⁵⁶This *hadith* appears in the chapter on the permissibility of shedding tears over the dead without wailing and loud weeping in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:36.

²⁵⁷This *hadith* appears in the chapter on the permissibility of shedding tears over the dead without wailing and loud weeping in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:36.

²⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 2:35.

Peninsula was water. Therefore, Muhammad was known for calling out to Allah for rain (1008; 1009; 1012; 1025), and during times of draught, people would ask him to invoke Allah for rain and it would rain (1010). Anas bin Malik narrated an incident in which Muhammad invoked Allah, and miraculously controlled rainfall in Medina.²⁵⁹ On one occasion, while Muhammad was living in Medina, the people were suffering heavily because of a drought. Once during the drought, Muhammad was giving a religious talk at Friday prayers, and someone yelled out and asked him to pray for rain because the animals were dying, possessions were being destroyed, and children were hungry because of lack of water. Muhammad then raised his arms and invoked Allah for rain. It then rained everyday until the following Friday when a Bedouin asked him to pray that the rain would stop because their possessions and livestock were drowning. Muhammad raised his hands and wherever he pointed it would stop raining.²⁶⁰ In addition to praying for rain, Muhammad also invoked Allah after they arrived in Medina, where the living conditions were worse than they were used to in Mecca (1889; 3926; 5654; 5677; 6372). When they first arrived in Medina, many people got sick and Muhammad referred to it as “land of epidemics.” Muhammad invoked Allah and asked him to make them love Medina like they did Mecca, to bless them with food, improve the climate, and to remove the epidemic. Muhammad thus invoked Allah to provide during times of drought, and while living in difficult conditions.

In addition to invoking Allah for provision, the *ahadith* present that Muhammad also sought protection from Allah. The *ahadith* recount Allah’s deliverance

²⁵⁹See *ahadith* 932; 933; 1013; 1014-1019; 1021; 1029; 1033; 3582; 6093.

²⁶⁰See *ahadith* 932; 933; 1013; 1014-1019; 1021; 1029; 1033; 3582; 6093. Related to this account, other *ahadith* report on Muhammad’s ability to miraculously produce water from his fingers (3576; 3579; 4152; 4153; 4154; 4840; 5639). ‘Abdullah narrated that he was once a part of a group traveling with Muhammad, and while traveling, they were running short on water (3579). Muhammad asked them to bring the remaining water. He put his hand in the container with the remaining water, and said, “Come to the blessed water, and the Blessing is from Allah.” Then water began to flow from his fingers. Other *ahadith* add that the water was enough for 1400 (or 1500) men who were there to do ablution and to drink (3576; 4152; 4153; 4154; 4840; 5639).

of Sarah from a tyrant king who had taken her from Abraham (2217; 2635; 3358; 5084; 6950),²⁶¹ his sending of the angel Gabriel who provided water for Hagar and Ishmael (3364; 3365),²⁶² and his deliverance of Moses and the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (3397; 3943; 2004; 4680; 4737).²⁶³

The *ahadith* present Muhammad as firmly believing that Allah was his protector. In one *hadith*, Muhammad was resting under a tree and hung his sword on it.²⁶⁴ He awoke, and found a Bedouin standing in front of him holding his sword.²⁶⁵ Threatening to kill Muhammad, he said, “Who will save you from me?” Muhammad replied three times saying “Allah.” The Bedouin ended up putting the sword back into the sheath and sat down with Muhammad, who decided not to punish him.²⁶⁶ Muhammad then called his men over and he told them what had happened. They began to threaten the man, but the call to prayer was announced, so Muhammad and the men performed *salat*. In another *hadith*, Allah empowered Muhammad to overcome a demon. Abu Huraira narrated that Muhammad said that one night while he was performing *salat* in the mosque, a big demon from the jinns (or maybe Satan himself) came to interrupt his prayers, but that Allah enabled him to overpower him. Muhammad then said that he was

²⁶¹The *ahadith* recount that Allah caused the king to become unconscious (or have an epileptic fit or stiffened his hand) so that he could not move. The king then let Sarah go, giving her Hagar as a gift.

²⁶²The *ahadith* recount that the angel Gabriel hit the ground with his heel, creating the zamzam well that provided water for them.

²⁶³In this *hadith*, Muhammad saw Jews in Medina fasting on Ashura (the tenth of Muharram). He asked them why they fasted on that day, and they replied that it was to commemorate Moses’ victory over Pharaoh. Muhammad replied that Muslims are closer to Moses than they are; therefore, Muslims should fast on that day as well.

²⁶⁴This account can be found in *ahadith* no. 2910; 2913; 4135; 4136. This *hadith* appears in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:83.

²⁶⁵*Hadith* no. 4136 describes the Bedouin as a polytheist named Ghaurath bin Al-Harith.

²⁶⁶Khan references another Muslim source which explains that the angel Gabriel hit the hand of the Bedouin, causing the sword to fall. Muhammad picked it up and could have killed him, but chose to forgive him instead. Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 4:106.

going to tie him up so others could see him in the morning, but let him go instead (461; 1210; 3284; 3423; 4808).

Since Muhammad believed that Allah could protect him, he would often invoke Allah for protection and would seek refuge in him. Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad would take refuge with Allah from difficult moments, calamity, destruction, an evil end, and the malicious joy of enemies (6347; 6616).²⁶⁷ Moreover, various *ahadith* report that Muhammad used to invoke Allah and seek refuge with him from affliction of this world, worries and grief, weakness, being overpowered by other men, affliction of *Masih Ad-Dajjal* (“false messiah”), committing sins, being in debt, cowardice, senile old age, being a miser, helplessness, laziness, affliction of poverty, affliction of wealth, affliction of life and death, affliction and punishment of the grave, and from affliction and punishment in hell.²⁶⁸ In addition, the *ahadith* record that Muhammad would also invoke Allah and seek refuge in him from evil spirits when using the restroom, after hearing a donkey bray, before having sexual relations with his wives, and when going to bed.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷This *hadith* appears in the book of invocations in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54.

²⁶⁸Affliction of this world (2822), from worries and grief (2893), from weakness (6363), from being overpowered by other men (2893), from affliction of *Masih Ad-Dajjal* (832), from committing sins (832), from being in debt (832), from cowardice (2822), from senile old age (2822), from being a miser (2893), from helplessness, (2823), from laziness (2823), from affliction of poverty (6368), from affliction of wealth (6368), from affliction of life and death (832), from affliction and punishment of the grave (832), and from affliction and punishment in hell (1377).

²⁶⁹Restroom (142), donkey braying (3303), sexual relations (141), and going to bed (247). Muhammad also provided specific directions about how to avoid evil spirits and seek refuge in Allah when the sun went down (3280; 3304; 3316; 5623; 5624), and after having a bad dream (3292; 5747; 6984; 6995; 7005; 7044). For example, Muhammad agreed that if one recited quranic *aya* 2:255, then a guardian from Allah would be there to protect the believer and that no satan would approach until dawn (2311; 3275). In addition, Al-Bara' bin 'Azib narrated that Muhammad told him that when going to bed one should perform ablution like for *salat*, lay on one's right side, and invoke Allah (247; 6311; 6313; 6315; 7488): “O Allah! I surrender to You and entrust my affairs to You and depend upon You for Your Blessings, both with hope and fear of You. There is no fleeing from You, and there is no place of protection and safety except You. O Allah I believe in Your Book and in Your Prophet.” Muhammad also taught that good dreams are from Allah, but that evil dreams are from Satan. Therefore, he taught that when one has a bad dream and wakes up afraid, one should spit on one's left side (or blow three times) and seek refuge with Allah from evil, for then it will not bring harm (3292; 5747; 6984; 6995; 7005; 7044).

According to these *ahadith*, Muhammad believed that Allah could protect him, and be a refuge for him from Satan, all forms of evil, suffering, and from falling into sin.

Muhammad would also invoke Allah to protect and save others. For instance, Ibn Abbas narrated that Muhammad used to seek refuge for Hasan and Husayn (his grandchildren), telling them that Abraham used to seek refuge with Allah for Ishmael and Isaac by reciting “O Allah! I seek refuge with Your Perfect Words from every devil and from poisonous pests and from every evil, harmful, envious eye” (3371). Muhammad is also recorded to have invoked Allah to give refuge to ‘Ammar bin Yasir from Satan, and Allah did so (3742; 3743; 3287; 3761; 4943; 4944; 6278). Moreover, Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad used to invoke Allah after performing *salat* and say, “O Allah! Save ‘Ayyash bin Abi Rabi’a. O Allah! Save Salama bin Hisham. O Allah! Save Walid bin Walid. O Allah! Save the weak faithful believers” (1006; 2932). Although Muhammad had a unique status with Allah, he was not the only one who invoked Allah for protection. ‘Aishah narrated that whenever Muhammad was ill, his wives would take turns reciting an invocation, asking Allah to protect Muhammad from all evils, so when he was dying she did the same (4451).

In addition to invoking Allah for provision and protection, Muhammad would also invoke Allah for healing. ‘Aishah narrated that when Muhammad would visit the ill or when his wives were sick, he would invoke Allah by saying “Take away the disease, O Lord of the people! Cure him as You are the One Who cures. There is no cure but Yours, a cure that leaves no disease” (5675; 5743; 5744; 5750). The *ahadith* contain reports of Muhammad invoking Allah for the sick, and even healing some. For instance, as discussed already, when Muhammad and others in the *ummah* first arrived in Medina Abu Bakr and Bilal became ill. In this situation, Muhammad asked Allah to move the fever to another location (5654; 5677; 1889; 6372). Moreover, As-Sa’ib bin Yazid narrated that when he was ill as a child, his aunt took him to Muhammad (190; 3540; 3541; 5670; 6352). As-Sa’ib reports that Muhammad passed his hands on As-Sa’ib’s

head, prayed for Allah's blessing, performed ablution, and then As-Sa'ib drank the remaining water. Al-Ju'aid bin 'Abdur-Rahman reported that when As-Sa'ib bin Yazid was ninety-four years old, "quite strong and of straight figure," he said "I know that I enjoyed my hearing and seeing powers only because of the invocation of Allah's Messenger" (3540). On another occasion, Ali was suffering from eye problems so Muhammad ordered to have Ali brought in front of him. Muhammad spit in Ali's eye, invoked Allah to cure him, and Ali was immediately cured (2942; 3009; 3701; 4210).

However, it should be noted that invoking Allah for healing did not preclude other types of remedies. Abu Hurairah reported that Muhammad said, "There is no disease that Allah has sent down except that He also has sent down its treatment" (5678).²⁷⁰ Al-Jibali contends that this *hadith* shows that taking medicine does not conflict with "true reliance" on Allah as some claim.²⁷¹ In addition to natural remedies, Muhammad and others would recite *ruqa* (sing. *ruqya*) as treatment for illness.²⁷² Once some of Muhammad's companions came across an Arab tribe, but the tribe did not receive them well. However, the chief of the tribe was bitten by a snake (or stung by a scorpion), and they asked Muhammad's men if they had any medicine or if someone was able to treat him with a *ruqya*. The men replied that they could help, but only if they were paid for it. The tribesmen agreed to give them a flock of sheep. Then one of Muhammad's men began to recite *Al-Fatihah* (the opening chapter of the Qur'an), and spit on the snakebite. The man was cured, but Muhammad's men did not want to take the

²⁷⁰This *hadith* opens al-Bukhāri's "Book of Medicine" (5678-5782). The *ahadith* in this "book" record Muhammad and others using and recommending a variety of natural remedies like drinking honey, drinking camels milk and urine, breathing in crushed black cumin seeds, eating porridge, sniffing a specific kind of Indian incense, water from truffles for eye diseases, placing burnt palm leaf ashes on wounds, eating dates or a specific date pastry to avoid being affected by magic or poison, and cupping.

²⁷¹Jibali, *Sickness*, 70-71.

²⁷²Khan states that a *ruqyah* is "the recitation of some Divine verses as a treatment for a disease." Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 7:348. Cyril Glassé states that a *ruqya* is literally an "incantation" used to ward off evil and harm. Glassé, *The New Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 388-89.

flock before asking Muhammad. Muhammad smiled and replied, “How do you know that *Surat Al-Fatiha* is a *Ruqya*? Take it (flock of sheep) and assign a share for me” (2276; 5007; 5736; 5737; 5741; 5749). In addition, ‘Aishah reported that Muhammad would tell others to do a *ruqya* if there was some effect from an evil eye (5738). For example, Umm Salama narrated that once Muhammad saw a girl in her house whose face had a black spot, and that Muhammad said, “She is under the effect of an evil eye, so treat her with a *Ruqya*” (5739). Muhammad himself would also recite *ruqa*. ‘Aishah narrated that Muhammad used to treat people with a *ruqya*, by saying, “O Lord of the people! Remove the trouble and bring about healing as You are the healer. There is no healing but Your healing, a healing that will leave no ailment” (5744). She also narrated that when Muhammad’s wives were sick, he would pass his right hand over the place of the ailment and would recite a *ruqya* (5750). Finally, ‘Aishah reported that when Muhammad was dying he used to recite *Surat An-Nas* and *Surat Al-Falaq*, and would blow his breath over his body by blowing on his hands and then passed them over his face. However, when he was too ill to do this himself, she would do the *ruqya* for him (4439; 5016; 5735; 5748; 5751).

See the goodness in death. According to Muhammad, believers should not wish for death; however, they should see the goodness in death. Anas bin Malik narrated that Muhammad said, “None of you should wish for death because of a calamity befalling him, but if he has to wish for death he should say ‘O Allah! Keep me alive as long as life is better for me, and let me die if death is better for me’” (5671; 6351; 7233).²⁷³ Therefore, Muslims should not long to die in the face of suffering, but rather trust in Allah’s timing for their death. Nevertheless, believers should see the goodness in death. Abu Qatada bin Rib‘I Al-Ansari narrated that once a funeral procession passed by Muhammad and he

²⁷³This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:56-57. Al-Jibali includes this *hadith* among others to argue that believers should not ask for death. Jibali, *Sickness*, 38-40.

ended up saying that “A believer is relieved (by death) from the troubles and hardships of the world and leaves for the Mercy of Allah” (6512; 6513). Moreover, ‘Ubada bin As-Samit narrated that Muhammad once said “Whoever loves to meet Allah, Allah loves to meet him, and whoever hates to meet Allah, Allah hates to meet him” (6507; 6508). ‘Aishah or some of his wives objected saying, “But we dislike death.” He replied by saying that they had misunderstood what he had said:

It is not like this, but it is meant that when the time of death of a believer approaches, he receives the good news of Allah’s Pleasure with him and His blessing upon him, and so at that time nothing is dearer to him than what is in front of him.²⁷⁴ He therefore loves the Meeting with Allah, and Allah loves the Meeting with him. But when the time of the death of a disbeliever approaches, he receives the evil news of Allah’s Torment and His Requital, whereupon nothing is more hateful to him than what is before him. Therefore, he hates the Meeting with Allah, and Allah too, hates the Meeting with him.

Ibrahim M. Kunna states that this *hadith* teaches that a Muslim, when he thinks of death, should hope to enter paradise. In contrast, a disbeliever fears death because they do not believe in Paradise, but a believer who likes Paradise also likes death so that he can meet Allah.²⁷⁵ Finally, Muhammad is reported to have said that “there is no life except the life of hereafter” or that “the real goodness is the goodness of Hereafter,” pointing to the goodness that awaits believers after death. Those from Medina who had accepted Islam used to say, “We are those who have given the pledge to Muhammad for *Jihad* as long as we live.” Muhammad would reply “O Allah! There is no life except the life of the Hereafter (or the real goodness is the goodness of Hereafter); so please honour the *Ansar* and the *Muhajrun*” (3796; 3824; 2835; 2961; 4099; 4100; 6413).²⁷⁶ To

²⁷⁴Similarly, Muhammad also said that no prophet dies before Allah shows him his place in paradise, and then are given a choice to go or stay. As Muhammad was dying, he became unconscious, saw paradise and then said “O Allah with the highest companion.” Thus, ‘Aishah saw that he had chosen paradise (6509; 4435; 4436; 4437; 4463).

²⁷⁵Ibrahim M. Kunna, ed., *110 Ahadith Qudsi: Sayings of the Prophet Having Allah's Statements*, trans. Syed Masood-ul-Hasan, 3rd ed. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2006), 27.

²⁷⁶The *Ansar* (helpers) was an honorific title Muhammad gave to those from Medina who embraced Islam. The *Muhajirun* (those who migrated) are the believers that fled from Mecca to Medina because of persecution. Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopædia of Islam*, 50, 320.

conclude, believers should not yearn for death, yet at the same time, they should be aware of the goodness that may await them, namely, relief from this world, meeting Allah, and life in paradise.

Forgive, call on Allah to punish, and repay opponents. The *ahadith* present a diverse array of responses to opposition. In some situations Muhammad forgives those who oppose him, and prays that they may embrace Islam. At other times, he calls on Allah to punish his opponents. Finally, some *ahadith* describe Muhammad repaying those who have wronged him and the *ummah*.

In some instances, Muhammad forgave those who opposed him or caused him harm. For example, Muhammad did not punish the Bedouin who woke him from his nap and threatened to kill him with his sword (2910; 2913; 4135). Also, there is no evidence in *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* that Muhammad sought to punish Labin bin Al-Asam, a Jewish man or an ally with the Jews, for bewitching him.²⁷⁷ ‘Aishah narrated that Labin had bewitched Muhammad so that he began to imagine he had done things that he had actually not done, like having sex with his wives. Muhammad called out to Allah and he healed him. On another occasion, Muhammad was walking and wearing a “Najrani *Burd* (sheet) with thick margin.” A Bedouin ran up to him and violently pulled on the *Burd* leaving a mark on the Muhammad’s shoulder. The Bedouin said “O Muhammad! Give me some of Allah’s wealth which is with you.” Muhammad turned, looked at him, and smiling ordered that he be given something (3149; 5809; 6088).²⁷⁸

In another situation, Muhammad set a traitor free after he had been caught

²⁷⁷This account can be found in *ahadith* no. 3175; 3268; 5763; 5765; 5766; 6063; 6391. The *ahadith* recount that the man performed the magic with a comb with a hair stuck to it. He buried the hair and pollen from a date-palm tree under a stone in a well.

²⁷⁸This *hadith* appears in the chapter on forgiveness and avoiding the ignorant in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:386.

sending information to their enemies.²⁷⁹ Muhammad's men caught Hatib bin Abi Balta'a sending secrets to the Meccans, and they asked Muhammad if they could behead him. Hatib assured them that he still was a Muslim and had not given up the faith. Muhammad replied that since he had fought in the battle of Badr that maybe God had already declared him forgiven, so that he could do whatever he wanted. So they did not kill him. Moreover, Salama bin Al-Akwa' recounts an incident when Muhammad's she-camels were stolen as they were grazing. Salama caught up with the thieves, starting shooting arrows at them, and was able to get the camels back. He also took thirty garments from them. He returned to Muhammad and told him what had happened. He asked Muhammad to send people after them, but Muhammad replied that since they had been overpowered already, they should be forgiven (3041; 4194).

In another situation involving camels, Muhammad did not seek retaliation against a drunken man who killed two of Ali's camels. Ali narrated that when he was preparing to marry Fatima, Hamza bin 'Abdul-Muttalib got drunk and killed two of his she-camels (he had received one as plunder from the Battle of Badr, and the other one Muhammad had given to him). After Ali found the two dead camels, he went and told Muhammad. Muhammad went to where Hamza was and began yelling at him for what he had done. Hamza responded "You are not but my father's slaves." When Muhammad saw that he was drunk, he "retreated, walking backwards, went out" (4003; 2089).

Muhammad also taught that enemies should be forgiven if they become Muslims. Once Al-Miqdad bin 'Amr Al-Kindi came to Muhammad and asked him what would happen if a disbeliever cut off his hand, and then hid in a tree and said "I have surrendered to Allah" thus embracing Islam. Al-Miqdad asked Muhammad if he could still kill him, but Muhammad responded in the negative (4019; 6865).

A final example of forgiveness involves Abu Bakr, Muhammad's closest

²⁷⁹This account can be found in *ahadith* no. 3007; 3081; 3983; 4274; 4980; 6259; 6939.

friend and eventual successor. When Abu Bakr found out that Mistah bin Uthatha, one of his relatives, had been involved in spreading the rumor about ‘Aishah, he said that he would no longer support him financially as he once did. However, Allah then revealed quranic *aya* 24:22, leading him to forgive and start supporting Mistah again (2661; 4141; 4750; 4757; 6679).

In addition to forgiving those who harmed him, in at least two occasions, Muhammad responded to his opponents by praying that they or their children would someday embrace Islam. Abu Hurairah narrated that Tufail bin ‘Amr came to Muhammad and told him that the Daus people had disobeyed and refused to embrace Islam. He asked Muhammad to invoke Allah’s wrath against them, but Muhammad replied by saying, “O Allah! Guide the tribe of Daus and let them come to us” (2937; 4392; 6397). Moreover, ‘Aishah recounts Muhammad telling her that one day after the battle of Uhud had occurred, he was dejected because the people would not accept his message. He told her that Allah then sent Gabriel to provide shade for him, and to do whatever Muhammad said. Gabriel asked him if he wanted the two mountains to fall on them, but Muhammad replied that no, rather “I hope that Allah will let them beget children who will worship Allah Alone, and will worship none besides Him” (3231). Based upon these *ahadith*, one possible option for believers is to forgive those who have caused them harm, and to pray for those who have rejected Muhammad and Islam.

A second option for believers is to ask Allah to punish one’s opponents. Muhammad would often invoke Allah to punish and repay his opponents. When Muhammad began his prophetic ministry in Mecca, he and his followers often faced ridicule and opposition.²⁸⁰ Once while Muhammad was performing *salat* near the Kaaba, some men from the Quraysh tribe put dung, blood, and abdominal contents from

²⁸⁰In response to their opponents, the *ahadith* record that Muhammad told Hassan, a Muslim poet, that if he would abuse or lampoon the polytheists with his poetry, then the angel Gabriel would be with him (3213; 4123; 6153).

slaughtered camels on his shoulders when he was prostrated on the ground.²⁸¹ They “laughed so-much-so that they fell on each other.” Fatima, his young daughter at the time, came and removed what had been thrown on her father, and she cursed the men. When Muhammad finished his prayers he said “O Allah! Destroy the Quraysh.” He repeated the statement two more times and then said “O Allah! Destroy ‘Amr bin Hisham, ‘Utba bin Rabi‘a, Shaiba bin Rabi‘a, Al-Walid bin ‘Utba, Umaiyya bin Khalaf, ‘Uqba bin Abi Mu‘ait and ‘Umara bin Al-Walid.” ‘Abdullah added that he later saw them all dead and thrown into a well at Badr.

In addition to invoking Allah to destroy those who humiliated him, Muhammad also invoked Allah to send a famine, destruction, and a curse to those who rejected his message. Abu Hurairah reported that after performing *salat*, Muhammad would pray for “the weak faithful believers,” but that he would also invoke Allah to “be hard” to the pagan tribes of Mecca, asking him to send years of famine like in the days of Joseph (1006; 2932; 3386; 6393; 6394). Similarly, Masruq narrated that he heard ‘Abdullah bin Mas‘ud say that when the Quraysh tribe in Mecca refused his message, Muhammad invoked Allah to curse them by sending seven years of famine like in the days of Joseph. Masruq reported that drought came for one year, and that it “destroyed every kind of life to such an extent that the people started eating hides, carcasses and rotten dead animal.”²⁸² In addition, when Muhammad found out that Khosrau had torn up the letter he had sent to the governor of Bahrain, he invoked Allah against them and asked him to tear them into pieces and disperse them (64; 2939; 4424). In another *hadith*, “the Jews” came to Muhammad and greeted him by saying, “Death be upon you” instead of “Peace be upon you” (2935; 6024; 6030; 6256; 6395; 6401; 6927).²⁸³ ‘Aishah, who

²⁸¹ *Ahadith* no. 520; 240; 2934; 3185.

²⁸² *Ahadith* no. 1007; 1020; 4693; 4774; 4809; 4822; 4823.

²⁸³ In Arabic, السام (*As-Sāmu*), meaning “death,” sounds similar to السلام (*As-Salāmu*), meaning “peace.”

was with Muhammad at the time, got upset and told them, “Death be upon you, and may Allah curse you and shower his wrath upon you” (6030). Muhammad told her to calm down because Allah loves that one should be lenient in all matters, and not to use harsh words (6024; 6030). He asked her, “Have you not heard what I replied? (I said), ‘The same is upon you.’” He then told her that his invocation against them will be accepted, but theirs against him will not (6030; 6401). Ibn ‘Umar narrated that Muhammad told believers to respond the same way as he did, whenever “the Jews” greeted them with “Death be upon you” (6257; 6928).

Muhammad also would curse and invoke evil on those who had physically opposed and harmed him and the *ummah*.²⁸⁴ For instance, when Muhammad emigrated from Mecca and reached Medina, Abu Bakr and Bilal became ill (1889; 3926; 5677). Muhammad said, “O Allah! Curse Shaiba bin Rabi‘a and ‘Utba bn Rabi‘a and Umaiyya bin Khalaf as they turned us out of our land to the land of epidemics (1889; 3960).²⁸⁵ ‘Aishah narrated that Muhammad would invoke Allah to take the fever away from Medina and send it to al-Juhfa (1889; 3926; 5677; 6372).²⁸⁶ On another occasion, Muhammad sent seventy (or forty) of his men to assist some polytheistic tribes in fighting against their enemies.²⁸⁷ However, the tribes had feigned conversion, broke their

²⁸⁴In addition to cursing those who opposed him, Muhammad also cursed those who committed particular sins. In the section on the permissibility of cursing the wrong doers, Nawawi states that the *ahadith* show that Muhammad cursed those who wear false hair, thin clothes, men who wear women’s clothing, women who resemble men, those who paint pictures of living things, those who commit theft, murder, fornication and other major sins, those who try to innovate ideas in Islam, and those who give something in charity other than in the name of Allah. He also points out that Allah and Muhammad have both cursed Jews and Muslims who turn the grave of their prophets into places of worship. Based upon these examples, Nawawi concludes that one is justified in cursing those who disobey Allah, Muhammad, and parents. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:54.

²⁸⁵Abdullah bin Mas‘ud reports that he saw their bodies putrefied by the sun at the battle of Badr (3960).

²⁸⁶Al-Juhfa was a village between Jeddah and Medina, near Rabagh. Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 5:164.

²⁸⁷The account can be found in *ahadith* no. 1002; 1003; 2801; 2814; 3064; 3170; 4088; 4089; 4090; 4091; 4094; 4095; 4096.

treaty with Muhammad, and ended up killing the seventy men. After Muhammad found out what had happened, he invoked evil on those tribes every morning for thirty days, asking Allah to punish them. Finally, before the battle of the Confederates (Battle of the Trench), Muhammad prayed that Allah would fill the house and grave of the infidels with fire because they forced them to miss the midday *salat* (2931; 4111; 4533; 6393; 6396). He also invoked evil against them, calling Allah to defeat them and shake them (2933; 2966; 3025; 4115; 6396; 7489). Based upon these *ahadith*, when believers face opposition, they could invoke Allah to punish those who have harmed them.

In addition to invoking Allah to punishing his opponents, other *ahadith* report Muhammad repaying his opponents. ‘Aishah narrated that Muhammad “never took revenge for himself concerning any matter that was presented him, but when Allah’s limits were transgressed, he would take revenge for Allah’s sake” (3560; 6126; 6786; 6853). At one point, some tribesmen came to Medina, and Muhammad allowed them to drink milk and urine (as medicine) from his camels. However, the men ended up killing Muhammad’s shepherd and drove away the camels. Muhammad sent men after them, and ordered “to cut their hands and feet (and it was done), and their eyes were branded with heated pieces of iron.” They were left in a stony place at Medina “biting the stones.” Abu Qilaba adds that this was done because they committed theft, murder, became disbelievers after embracing Islam, fought against Allah and his messenger, and spread evil in the land.²⁸⁸ In addition, Ibn Umar narrated that when the Jewish tribes of Bani An-Nadir and Bani Quraiza violated their treaty with Muhammad, he exiled Bani An-Nadir from Medina, but allowed Bani Quraiza to stay. However, when the tribe of Bani Quraiza fought against him, he killed their men and distributed their women, children,

²⁸⁸This account can be found in *ahadith* no. 233; 1501; 3018; 4192; 4193; 4610; 5685; 5686; 5727; 6802; 6803; 6804; 6805; 6899.

and property among the Muslims (4028; 4121; 4122).²⁸⁹ From these *ahadith*, it is clear that Muhammad would often seek to repay those who had opposed or harmed him or the *ummah*.

Exemplify *sabr*, emigrate, and *jihad*. The *ahadith* also record the various ways Muhammad and his followers responded to persecution and violent opposition. First, during their time in Mecca they exemplified *sabr*, and endured ridicule and persecution. Second, they responded to the persecution by emigrating from Mecca to Medina. Finally, they responded to opposition by engaging militarily with their opponents. However, before delving into the specifics of how believers could respond to opponents, it is important to first discuss foundational principles found in the *ahadith* which undergird possible responses.

First, the *ahadith* affirm that it is natural for Allah’s prophets and messengers, and by extension their followers, to face opposition. In the first chapter of *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, which deals with revelation, ‘Aishah narrated that when Muhammad first encountered the angel Gabriel he was filled with fear (3). After the revelation ended, he went to his wife Khadija to be comforted, and told her of the encounter. She quickly took him to her elderly cousin Waraqa, who was a Christian that used to write “the writing” and “the Gospel” in Hebrew. Muhammad told Waraqa about his angelic visitation, and Waraqa responded that Gabriel had also appeared to Moses, and thus, his encounter was

²⁸⁹The *ahadith* contain various other examples of Muhammad retaliating. For instance, Muhammad once sent out a military expedition with orders to kill two men of the Quraish tribe with fire, but he later changed his mind and said that only Allah burns people, so he told them just to capture and kill them (2954; 3016). Moreover, Muhammad once sent a group of *Ansari* to kill Abu Rafi (3022; 3023; 4038; 4039; 4040). In addition, Muhammad sent Muhammad bin Maslama to kill Ka’b bin Al-Ashraf because he had hurt Allah and his messenger (3031; 3032; 4037). Once an infidel spy came to Muhammad while on a journey, and spent time with him. When the spy left, Muhammad sent men after him to kill him (3051). Muhammad also sent some of his men to Dhul-Khalasa, a house of idols located in Yemen (3020; 3823; 4355; 4356; 4357; 6333), and they burned the house, and killed whoever they found there. When they returned, Muhammad invoked Allah to bless them and their horses five times (3823; 3020; 4355; 4356; 4357; 6333). Finally, when Muhammad peacefully conquered Mecca, he had Ibn Khatal killed, who had been holding on to the curtains of the Kaaba (1846; 3044; 4286).

from Allah. Muhammad asked him, “Will they drive me out?” Waraqa replied, “Anyone who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility; and if I should remain alive till the day (when you will be turned out) then I would support you strongly.” In addition, ‘Urwa bin Az-Zubair narrated that he once asked ‘Aishah what the quranic *aya* 12:110 meant when it stated, “when the messengers give up hope and think that they were treated as liars.”²⁹⁰ ‘Urwa asked whether this meant that the messengers had given hope in Allah, thinking that he had betrayed them. ‘Aishah vehemently rejected this interpretation:

Allah forbid! By Allah, Allah never promised His Messenger anything but he knew that it would certainly happen before he died. But trials were continuously presented before the Messengers till they were afraid that their followers would accuse them of telling lies.

Second, although Allah’s messengers face opposition, Allah vindicates them and makes them victorious. Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said, “Doesn’t it astonish you how Allah protects me from the Quraish’s abusing and cursing? They abuse *Mudhammad* and curse *Mudhammad* while I am Muhammad” (3533).²⁹¹ In addition, Abu Wa’il narrated that he heard Muhammad say, “I am the Messenger of Allah and Allah will never degrade me” (3182). Commenting on how Muhammad had both won and lost battles, ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abbas stated that “So the Messengers are put to trials in this way but the ultimate victory is always theirs” (2804). This was not only true for Muhammad, but also for other prophets. Muhammad recounts an incident in which Allah vindicated Moses (278; 3404; 4799). Muhammad recounts that Moses was a shy person, and used to cover his body completely. People would mock him, and say that he covered himself because he had a body defect (scrotal hernia, leprosy or some skin defect). Allah

²⁹⁰This account can be found in *ahadith* no. 3389; 4525; 4695.

²⁹¹Khan notes that “the infidels,” because they hated Muhammad (محمد), would not call him by his name since it means “highly praised.” Rather, they called him *Mudhammad* (مذمما), which means “greatly dispraised.” Khan therefore argues that the curses “fell on that name which was not the name of the Prophet.” Khan, *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, 4:454.

wanted to vindicate him, so once when Moses was taking a bath in seclusion and put his clothes on a rock, the rock ran off with his clothes. Moses chased the rock and ended up in front of a group of people. They saw him and “found him the best of what Allah has created, and Allah cleared him of what they had accused him of.” Moses then hit the rock and the mark might still even be there, recounted Muhammad. Therefore, Allah defends and vindicates his messengers.

Moreover, the *ahadith* also present examples of Allah vindicating the righteous. Muhammad told the story of an Israelite man named Juraij who lived in a hermitage. One day his mother called for him, but he did not come. His mother then called out to Allah and said, “O Allah! Do not let him die until he sees the faces of prostitutes.” She sent a shepherdess to him, but he refused. The shepherdess later got pregnant by a shepherd, but she told everyone that it was Juraij’s child. The townspeople came and tore down his hermitage, and abused him. He went to the shepherdess and asked the baby who his father was. The baby miraculously spoke and said it was the shepherd. The people then repented and rebuilt his hermitage (1206; 2482; 3436). Allah had vindicated the righteous Juraij.

Allah also vindicated ‘Aishah when she was falsely accused of marital infidelity.²⁹² When ‘Aishah heard about the rumors that people were spreading, she wept for days. She reported that she looked to Jacob’s example of patience, as he turned to Allah for help when they reported that Joseph had been killed. She reported that she hoped and knew that Allah would prove her innocence. Muhammad told her that if she was innocent, Allah would declare her innocent. Soon after, Allah vindicated her by revealing to Muhammad the quranic *aya* 24:11, which declared her innocent, and called

²⁹²The account can be found in *ahadith* no. 2593; 2637; 2661; 2688; 2879; 4065; 4141; 4690; 4749; 4750; 4757; 6662; 6679; 7369; 7370; 7500; 7545. For a detailed explanation of the situation, see Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, ed. 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām and Alfred Guillaume (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2006), 493-503.

for severe punishment for those guilty of spreading the lies.²⁹³ Now that some foundational principles have been covered, we can turn to specific responses to persecution and violent opposition prescribed or described in the *ahadith*.

While in Mecca, Muhammad expected his followers to endure with *sabr* the persecution they were experiencing. Because the concept of *sabr* in the face of suffering has already been discussed, presenting one incident of what Muhammad expected from his followers while in Mecca will suffice. Khabbab bin Al-Aratt recounts a time when he approached Muhammad, and complained to him about the abuse they were experiencing from the infidels (3612; 3852; 6943).²⁹⁴ He asked Muhammad to invoke Allah for his help. Muhammad replied that in nations before them, people were sawn in two, or their bodies were combed with iron combs, removing their flesh from the bones or nerves, yet this did not make them abandon their religion. Muhammad concluded by saying that Muslims should fear no one, but Allah. In other words, Muhammad expected his followers to endure patiently, not to fear their opponents, and to entrust themselves to Allah.

The *ahadith* also provide insight into the early Muslim understanding of *hijra*, or emigration. First, the *ahadith* report that Muhammad had warned Muslims that they would one day have to flee from affliction and trials (19; 3600; 6495; 7088). Second, another report explains the circumstances of the emigration, stating that Muhammad and Abu Bakr ended up having to flee to Medina because the Meccans decided to reward whoever arrested or killed them with one hundred camels (3906). Third, the *ahadith* reveal that that the early companions of Muhammad believed that they would be

²⁹³Mistah, Hassan, and Hamnah, who had been involved in spreading the lies, were later scourged as prescribed in a revelation after the incident for slandering an innocent woman. Nothing happened to the men who did not confess. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 246.

²⁹⁴This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:57.

rewarded for being willing to emigrate for the sake of Islam. Khabbab reports that a group of Muslims, including himself, fled to Medina with Muhammad, and that they would surely be rewarded by Allah for it (3913; 3914; 4082).²⁹⁵

Finally, the *ahadith* report that after Muhammad conquered Mecca, he said there was no longer the need for Muslims to emigrate; all that was left was *jihad*. After conquering Mecca, Muhammad said that there is no more emigration (*hijrah*) from Mecca, but that there is now *jihad* and intentions to engage in *jihad*. He also said that whenever believers are called for *jihad* they should go immediately.²⁹⁶ Similarly, ‘Aishah explained that formerly there was *hijra*, when a believer would flee with his religion to Allah and Muhammad lest he should be put to trial because of his religion. She explained that now, “Allah has made Islam triumphant” so instead of being rewarded for *hijra*, one can now be rewarded for *jihad* and good intentions (3080; 3900).

The *ahadith* exalt believers who are willing to give up everything for Allah. The *ahadith* present those who engage in *jihad* in Allah’s cause with courage and resilience as the ones who best exemplify this complete devotion to Allah.²⁹⁷ When asked what the best deed was, Muhammad replied that the best deed was to believe in Allah and his messenger, and that the second best deed was “to participate in *Jihad* in Allah’s Cause” (26; 1519). In another account, he states that the best deed is to perform

²⁹⁵Al-Bara’ bin Azib provides a list of those who emigrated from Mecca to Medina (3924-3925).

²⁹⁶*Ahadith* no. 1834; 2783; 2825; 2962; 2963; 3077; 3078; 3079; 3080; 3189; 4305; 4306; 4307; 4308.

²⁹⁷Muhammad explained that *jihad* is only in Allah’s Cause when one fights that “Allah’s Word should be superior” (123; 2810; 3126; 7458). This *ahadith* appears in the book of *Jihad in Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:195. Even Muslim women wanted to participate in *jihad*. ‘Aishah once asked Muhammad if she could fight, but Muhammad said that the best *jihad* for women was to go on the *Hajj* (1520; 1861; 2784; 2875; 2876). On another occasion, Muhammad had a dream of his fighters sailing on the sea like kings on thrones (2788; 2789; 2799; 2800; 2894; 2895; 6282; 6283; 7002). Umm Haram bint Milhan asked Muhammad to pray that she would be one of those fighters in Allah’s cause that he had seen in the dream. She eventually did go on a naval expedition with her husband, but she died when she fell off an animal she was riding soon after landing on land.

salat at the early fixed times, next was to be good and dutiful to parents, and then to participate in *jihad* in Allah's Cause (527; 2782; 7534).²⁹⁸ When asked, who was the best among the people, Muhammad replied that it was a believer who strives his utmost in Allah's Cause with his life and property (2786; 6494).²⁹⁹

The *ahadith* record Muhammad being willing to strive his utmost in Allah's cause with courage and steadfastness. Ibn Umar narrated Muhammad saying that he had been ordered to fight against the people until they say "There is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah" (25; 1399; 2946).³⁰⁰ In addition, the first *hadith* in the book of Al-Maghazi (the fighters) records that Muhammad fought in nineteen assaults and battles (3949; 4404; 4471). Anas describes Muhammad as "the best, the bravest, and the most generous of all the people" (2820; 3040). For example, at the battle of Hunain, no one was seen braver than Muhammad (3042) since he did not flee before the archers as they were collecting the plunder (2864; 2874; 2930; 3042; 4315; 4316; 4317).

Muhammad expected this same courage and steadfastness out of his men. Muhammad commanded his men to exemplify *sabr* when facing their enemies (2833;

²⁹⁸This *hadith* appears in the book of *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 2:175.

²⁹⁹This *hadith* appears in the book of *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 2:175. It is interesting to note that when Muhammad told the story of Solomon wanting each of his wives to bare him a son, he describes Solomon as wanting sons who would all fight in Allah's Cause, showing the value of *jihad* (2819; 6639; 6820; 7468).

³⁰⁰Al-Bukhāri precedes *hadith* no. 25 with a reference to *aya* 9:5 which reads, "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful."

It should be noted that although Muhammad highly valued *jihad*, the *ahadith* record that he would rather avoid it. For instance, he stated, "Do not wish to meet the enemy and ask Allah to save you, but if you should meet the enemy, then be patient and let it be known that Paradise is under the shades of swords" (2966; 3025; 3026). This *hadith* appears in the chapter on patience, *sabr*, and in the chapter on *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 1:64; 2:190. Based upon this *hadith*, al-Jibali argues that Muslims should not wish for affliction, even though there are benefits to being afflicted. Jibali, *Sickness*, 21. Moreover, when confronting the Khaibar, Muhammad told Ali to first offer them Islam since it is better for people to embrace Islam than having to fight them (2942; 3009; 3701; 4210).

2966; 3025; 3026) since one of “the seven destructive sins” is to show one’s back to an enemy and to flee the battlefield (2766).³⁰¹ Muhammad would also pray that his men would fight valiantly and not back down from their enemies. For example, the *ahadith* record that before the battle of the Confederates (or Ditch), Muhammad would pray and recite poems asking that Allah would bless them with tranquility, give them firm feet before their enemies, and that he would give them victory (2837; 2966; 3025; 3034; 4106). Muhammad knew that Allah held his life and that of his men in his hands,³⁰² and that he alone could grant victory.³⁰³

In accord with the high value of *jihad*, Muhammad asserted the great reward awaiting those who assisted or engaged in *jihad*. Muhammad said that a single act in Allah’s cause is “better than the world and whatever is in it” or that it “is better than all that on which the sun rises and sets” (2792; 2793; 2794; 2796).³⁰⁴ Therefore, Allah will reward not only those who engage in *jihad*, but also those who assist in some way. For instance, Muhammad said that if someone keeps a horse for the purpose of *jihad*, he will be rewarded on the day of resurrection for “what the horse has eaten or drunk and for its dung and urine as good deeds in his balance” (2853; 2860). Similarly, Zaid bin Khalid narrated that Muhammad said that whoever prepares a fighter of *jihad* or whoever takes

³⁰¹The other six great destructive sins are committing shirk, practicing sorcery, killing in a way that Allah has forbidden, usury, stealing from the orphan, and accusing innocent women of sexual immorality.

³⁰²Muhammad would often describe Allah as the one who held his life in his hands (14; 240, 644; 1904; 2597; 2731; 2732; 2798; 2803; 3248; 3256; 3298; 3516; 6535; 3683; 3786; 3825; 3976; 4234; 4235; 4304). The first three Caliphs that ruled the *ummah* after Muhammad’s death, Abu Bakr (3667; 3712), Umar (3915), and Uthman (3717), described Allah the same way.

³⁰³The *ahadith* record that whenever Muhammad returned from battle, *hajj* or *umra*, he would say “None has the right to be worshiped but Allah, the One and has no partner. To Him belongs the kingdom, and all the praise be to Him, and He is Omnipotent. We are returning from our journeys with repentance and worshipping and praising our Lord. He has fulfilled His promise and helped His slave, and He alone defeated all the confederates” (1797; 2995; 3084; 4114; 4116; 6385).

³⁰⁴This single act may include guarding Muslims from infidels for one day or taking a morning or evening journey in Allah’s cause (2892). *Hadith* no. 2892 appears in the book of *Jihad in Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Nawawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:175.

care of the dependents of a fighter of *jihad* will be rewarded as a fighter of *jihad* (2843).³⁰⁵ In other reports, Muhammad even promises paradise for those who expend the slightest energy in Allah's cause. Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said that whoever spends two things in the cause of Allah will enter paradise and never be destroyed (2841). Abu 'Abs narrated that Muhammad said that anyone whose feet get covered with dust in Allah's cause will not be touched by Hell-fire (907; 2811).

Logically, if those who assist in *jihad* will be rewarded, so will those who actually engage in *jihad*. Abu Hurairah narrated that he once asked Muhammad for a deed one could do to get the same reward as participating in *jihad* (2785; 2787). Muhammad replied that there was none. He stated that those who engage in *jihad* are rewarded as if they performed *salat* and *sawn* continuously, which is impossible. Abu Hurairah added that those who engage in *jihad* are rewarded even for the footsteps of their horses while it wanders about tied to a rope (2785). Muhammad also said that Allah has reserved one hundred levels in paradise for those who engage in *jihad*, the distance between each level is the distance between the heaven and the earth (2790; 7423).³⁰⁶ Abu Hurairah also narrated that Muhammad taught that wounds which Muslims receive while fighting in Allah's cause will appear on the Day of Resurrection and will bleed, but they will smell like musk (237; 2803; 5533).³⁰⁷ Finally, Muhammad also explained that those who engage in *jihad* are guaranteed to be rewarded, with either plunder or with paradise (36; 3123; 2787; 7457; 7463).

Martyrs stands in the position of greatest honor among those who engage in

³⁰⁵This *hadith* appears in the book of *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid.

³⁰⁶Muhammad also stated that a place in paradise the size of one of their bows or whips is better than the entire world (2793; 2796; 2892; 3253). This *hadith* appears in the book of *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Niwawi, *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*, 2:176.

³⁰⁷This *hadith* appears in the book of *Jihad* in *Riyadh Us-Saliheen*. Ibid., 2:178.

jihad.³⁰⁸ Muhammad is reported to have said, “had I not found it difficult for my followers. . . I would have loved to be martyred in Allah’s Cause and then made alive, and then martyred and then made alive, and then again martyred in His Cause” (36; 2972; 2797; 7226; 7227). In addition, he said that whoever dies and goes to Paradise would not want to come back, except the martyr who would like to come back and die ten times as a martyr again because of the honor and dignity he receives (2795; 2817). In the *ahadith*, as in the Qur’an, martyrs are rewarded with paradise. Muhammad would say, “Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords” (2818; 2966; 3025). After the battle of Uhud, someone asked Muhammad whether it was true that those who died in battle were in paradise, and Muhammad replied in the affirmative (3182; 4046). Moreover, Anas narrated that once when seventy of Muhammad’s men were martyred, the angel Gabriel informed Muhammad that the martyrs had met their Lord, and that the Lord was pleased with them and made them pleased (2801). This promise of paradise was even for recent converts, and for those who had killed Muslims before their conversion.³⁰⁹ In addition, Muhammad taught that entrance to paradise was guaranteed even if the martyr was killed by an unidentified person (could have died by “friendly fire”) or by an accidentally self-inflicted wound (2809; 3982; 4196; 6550; 6567).

The *ahadith* record the willingness of those in the early Muslim community to fight for Allah and even offer their lives for his cause. For instance, the *ahadith* record that on the day of the battle of the Confederates, the Ansar (believers who joined

³⁰⁸Interestingly, Muhammad states in the *ahadith* that there are six types of martyrs in Islam: (1) those who die in Allah’s cause; (2) those who die in a plague; (3) those who die of abdominal disease; (4) those who drown; (5) those who are buried alive; (6) those who die protecting their property (653; 720; 2480; 2829; 2830; 5732; 5733; 5734). Ayoub argues that in spite of the fact that the term martyr was used widely and applied to a variety of cases, the “true martyr” is the one who is “slain in the way of God.” Mahmoud Ayoub, “Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 84.

³⁰⁹Al-Bara narrated that one time a man converted to Islam, went immediately to fight, and was martyred. Muhammad then said “A little work, but a great reward” (2808). Abu Hurairah narrated that Muhammad said that Allah forgives even those who have killed Muslims if after they convert, they also die as martyrs in Allah’s cause (2826).

Muhammad in Medina) pledged themselves to Muhammad for *jihad* as long as they live (2834; 2835; 2961; 3795; 3797; 4099; 4100; 6413; 7201). Muhammad responded by calling Allah to honor them and the emigrants (believers who emigrated from Mecca) with his blessing and generosity. As Muhammad and his men headed towards their confrontation with the people of Khaibar, a poet named ‘Amir bin Al-Akwa recited a poem reflecting the desire to sacrifice all for Allah (4196):

O Allah! Without You we would not have been guided on the right path. Neither would we have given *Sadaqa* (in charity), nor would we have offered *Salat* (prayer). So please forgive us, what we have committed (i.e., our defects); let all of us be sacrificed for Your Cause. And send Sakinah (i.e., tranquility and calmness) upon us to make our feet firm when we meet our enemy, and if they will call us towards an unjust things, we will refuse. The infidels have made a hue and cry to ask other’s help against us.

When Muhammad heard this poem he said, “May Allah bestow His Mercy on him.” Showing a similar willingness to die in Allah’s cause, Zaid bin Aslam narrated that his father Umar said “O Allah, Grant me martyrdom in Your Cause, and let my death be in the city of Your Messenger” (1890).

The *ahadith* also record two poignant examples of martyrdom. First, the *ahadith* record that Anas bin An-Nadr apologized to Muhammad for not having been able to fight in the battle of Badr, and that he was looking forward to showing Allah how he could fight. Later, as Muslims fled from the battle of Uhud, Anas bin An-Nadr stopped Sa’d bin Mu’adh who was fleeing and said, “Paradise! I am smelling its aroma coming from before Uhud.” Anas bin An-Nadr then proceeded toward the enemy, and he was martyred. They found his body with more than eighty wounds by sword and arrows on his body. He was so badly mutilated that only his sister could recognize him by looking at his fingers or by a mole on his body (2805; 4048). Sa’d bin Mu’adh reports that they used to think that *aya* 33:23 was revealed in response to Anas bin An-Nadr’s martyrdom. It reads, “Among the Believers are men who have been true to their covenant with Allah: of them some have completed their vow (to the extreme), and some (still) wait: but they have never changed (their determination) in the least.” Other *ahadith* record the

martyrdom of Khubaib (3045; 3989; 4086; 7402). Once Muhammad sent out ten spies, but men from Bani Lihyan caught up with them. Seven of the men were killed with arrows,³¹⁰ and the other three remaining were eventually caught. Khubaib, one of the three, was purchased by the Meccans and kept as a prisoner. While in captivity, Allah would miraculously provide grapes for him. Eventually, the Meccans decided to kill him, but they allowed him to perform *salat* first. After performing *salat*, he called out, “O Allah, kill them all with no exception,” and then he recited, “I, being martyred as a Muslim do not mind how I am killed in Allah’s Cause, for my killing is for Allah’s sake, and if Allah wishes, he will bless the amputated parts of the body.” This began the tradition of doing *salat* of two rak‘a when a Muslim is sentenced to death in captivity.

In summary, based upon *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, believers could interpret suffering as Allah punishing them for their sins or as a trial and blessing from Allah. Suffering may be a blessing because if the believer passes the test by remaining patient, she may have some of her sins expiated or even be admitted into paradise. The *ahadith* provide a variety of possible responses to suffering. First, if the believer feels he is being punished, he should respond by repenting and seeking Allah’s forgiveness. Second, in all circumstances, believers should be patient and longsuffering. Third, believers should invoke Allah for provision, protection, and healing, depending on the situation. Fourth, if the suffering involves death, believers should look to the goodness in death, hoping for paradise. Fifth, when facing opposition, believers may choose to forgive or call on Allah to punish them. The believer may also choose to repay their opponent themselves. Finally, the *ahadith* present possible responses to persecution and violent opposition. Believers may endure the suffering patiently, emigrate away from the persecution or they may engage in *jihad*, struggling in Allah’s cause against those who oppose Allah, his

³¹⁰Allah sent a swarm of bees over Asim’s body (one of the martyrs) to give him shade, and prevent the enemies from cutting off any of his flesh.

messenger, and the *ummah*.

Conclusion

Analyzing the content of Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* provides invaluable insight into the textual resources that Sunni Muslims have when interpreting suffering they may experience in life. The Qur'an is clear that Allah is omnipotent; therefore, the suffering of believers is not accidental or without purpose. Consequently, believers will naturally consider the possible reasons why they are suffering, though a true believer will not call Allah's judgment into question.³¹¹ Moreover, these texts provide an array of possible responses to suffering, depending on the situation.

The most prominent theme throughout the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* is that suffering and affliction is a test or trial from Allah. Even Allah's prophets and messengers have endured trials through suffering.³¹² For instance, Allah sent affliction to Abraham, Job, and Moses. Moreover, Allah tested the children of Israel through slavery in Egypt, and he tested Muhammad and the *ummah* with the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench. These trials serve various functions. They may help distinguish true believers from those that are not. They may demonstrate or deepen the level of faith a believer has in Allah. They may lead a sinful believer to repentance or teach him humility. In addition to these functions, times of suffering are also potential sources of blessing for believers since Allah rewards those who respond with trust and patience. If a believer is afflicted in any way, even with a prick of a thorn, and responds with *sabr*,

³¹¹Edalatnejad argues that for Muslims, God is omnipotent, just, and wise; therefore, he must have a plan for evil and suffering. Humans are not in the position to question God's plan since their knowledge is limited. Edalatnejad, "The Islamic Point of View on the Problem of Evil," 306.

³¹²Ahmad states that "the extent of the afflictions and trials endured by the prophets and messengers of God is such that no ordinary person can complain of having suffered or been tested more than them." Ahmad, "Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?," 95. Riffat Hassan states that Sunnis and Shi'ites "have derived great emotional strength" and have been "consoled" by their belief that those nearest and dearest to God have often suffered more than the "average" person. Riffat Hassan, "Messianism and Islam," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 287.

Allah will expiate some of his sins.³¹³ Moreover, if believers endure intense affliction (like a plague, the loss of a loved one, or suffering from epilepsy or blindness) with trust in Allah's decrees, he will admit them into paradise. Therefore, believers should receive Allah's will with "patient and trusting acceptance" with the "expectation that it may prove to be a source of good and of ultimate blessing in the broader perspective of the life-to-come."³¹⁴

In addition to testing his people, Allah may send times of affliction as a way to punish them for their sins. Allah cast out Adam and Eve from paradise, and exiled the nation of Israel for their sins. He punished Lot's wife for her rebellion, Solomon for his pride, and some disobedient Muslim fighters at the battle of Uhud for disobeying orders. Moreover, the oppressor, the proud, and those who lack concern for the orphan and poor are warned of punishment in this life. In addition, believers who do not want to spend of their goods in the cause of Allah or do not perform *salat* properly risk Allah's punishment. Finally, Allah warns slaves, wives, and those in Medina to avoid a variety of sins for which they could immediately incur Allah's wrath. If believers feel that they are suffering because Allah is punishing them for their sin, they should repent and seek Allah's forgiveness since he is merciful and gracious. Adam and Eve quickly repented and were forgiven after being cast out of paradise. Muhammad himself would daily pray for forgiveness, and taught his followers the best prayer when asking for forgiveness.

Believers should respond to suffering by trusting³¹⁵ in Allah's decrees and enduring patiently, knowing that Allah will reward those who persevere. Muhammad

³¹³Ayoub asserts that even though the *ahadith* affirm "Divine determinism over human freedom and effort," it "tempers" its position by teaching that suffering expiates sins and purges the believer. Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," 282.

³¹⁴Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 48.

³¹⁵Siddiqi argues that the Muslims' primary virtue is *tawakkul*, total trust and reliance on God. Siddiqi, "God," 79.

describes believers as fresh tender plants that bend rather than break when affliction comes. Joseph endured unjust imprisonment with patience, and Moses endured antagonism from his people. Muhammad remained faithful and patient during the death of his son and granddaughter. Instead of falling into despair, believers should call out to Allah since he is the one that can provide, protect, and heal. Noah, Job, Jacob, Moses, the children of Israel, Zechariah, and Muslims at the battle of Badr all called out to Allah for his help. Muhammad would invoke Allah, seeking refuge from his enemies, evil, punishment, and from committing a variety of sins. In addition, Allah is the one that can heal the sick. However, if a believer is not healed and is facing death, she should see the goodness in death, namely, being set free from the troubles of this world, living in paradise, and meeting Allah.

Finally, the Qur'an and *Ahadith* provide a variety of responses to opposition and persecution. Underlying these responses are two foundational beliefs. First, Allah's messengers and their followers have and will always face opposition. Second, Allah and those on his side will be victorious, while their opponents will be the losers, punished and humiliated.³¹⁶ Watt argues that Allah's vindication of Muhammad serves as a "paradigmatic experience" for Muslims, as the Exodus and Exile are for Jews.³¹⁷ In a few instances, Muhammad forgave those who had harmed him or the *ummah*. He also prayed for the conversion of those who rejected his message. At other times, he would invoke Allah, calling him to punish his opponents with famines, destruction, and curses. In addition to calling for Allah's punishment, Muhammad would sometimes retaliate and

³¹⁶Hassan argues that the virtue of *sabr* is rooted in the belief that Islam, as "God's final revelation, must be triumphant both in this world and the next." Hassan, "Messianism and Islam," 284. Commenting on *aya* 3:139, which states that Muslims shall gain mastery and overcome, Qutb argues that it "means to feel superior to others when weak, few, and poor, as well as when strong, many and rich. It means the sense of supremacy which does not give in before any rebellious force, before any social custom and erroneous tradition, before any behavior which may be popular among people but which has no authority in the Faith. Steadfastness and strength on the battlefield are but one expression among many of the triumphant spirit which is included in this statement of Almighty God." Qutb, *Milestones*, 141.

³¹⁷Watt, "Suffering in Sunnite Islam," 10.

punish those who had opposed or harmed him and the *ummah*.

In the face of persecution believers have three options, namely, endure patiently, emigrate, or engage in *jihad*. In the earliest years, Muhammad and his followers patiently endured opposition and persecution in Mecca. However, as persecution intensified, Muhammad and his followers emigrated away from persecution as Abraham and Moses had done previously. Allah promises to reward those who have to leave behind their home in the cause of Allah. Finally, after Muhammad left Mecca, Allah allowed and even commanded his people to struggle (*jihad*) with their enemies. The Qur'an and *Ahadith* both affirm the honor and great reward awaiting those who strive with everything in Allah's cause, especially those who die as martyrs. Ultimately, as *Al-Fatihah* teaches, Muslims must live in light of the Day of Judgment and pray that Allah, the most gracious and merciful, will lead them on the straight path, especially as they face pain and suffering in this world.

CHAPTER 6

COMPARISON AND MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The next step in this case study is to compare and contrast the themes identified in the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts concerning God's motivation behind the suffering of his people, and their response. Comparing these texts will hopefully provide greater insight into each worldview in a way that would not be possible if they were analyzed in isolation from each other. After comparing the texts, this chapter concludes with a discussion of some missiological implications that emerge from the case study.

Comparison of Themes in Sunni and Reformed Texts

Marshall Hodgson, in his article, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life," argues that throughout their histories, Islam and Christianity have emphasized different aspects of the human religious experience.¹ He argues that Islam has delved deep into the questions of obedience, human responsibility and judgment. In contrast, he argues that Christianity has not delved deep into these issues, but has rather focused on "cosmic corruption, suffering, and love," which from the Muslim perspective appears "paradoxical and evasive."² In the article, Hodgson was responding to the common Christian critique that Islam does not "delve deep" into the most important issues in life from their perspective, like "cosmic corruption, suffering,

¹Marshall Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life," *Diogenes* 32 (1960): 57.

²Ibid. Although it is true that Christianity has not emphasized obedience, responsibility and judgment to the degree that Islam has because of their different soteriologies, it would be erroneous to assume that Christians are not concerned with these issues.

and love.” Hodgson argues that comparing Christianity and Islam on the issue of suffering is an unfair comparison because Christianity has focused on this issue while Islam has not. However, Hodgson appears to be making the same mistake that those he is critiquing are making. In response to what he sees as unfair critique, he implies that if Islam and Christianity were compared on the issue of obedience, human responsibility, and judgment, then Christianity would appear deficient. In both instances each tradition is unfairly being judged by the values of another tradition. It would be best to avoid making statements that Islam is deficient in x or that Christianity is deficient in y. Each tradition should be judged by its own standards and values. This principle will be used as the themes found in the Qur’an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible are compared below.

What Are God’s Purposes behind the Suffering of His People?

The Sunni and Reformed sacred texts do share some similarities as they explain God’s purposes behind the suffering of his people, but their differences are more substantial. The Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* contain four main explanations for the suffering of God’s people. The most common explanation is that God uses times of affliction to test his people. Second, God may bless his people by testing them with affliction. By testing believers, God gives them the opportunity of being rewarded for their endurance by expiating some of their sins or even giving them entrance to paradise if they endure extreme hardships. Third, God may be punishing his people for their sin. Fourth, God may be purifying his people by having them endure suffering. The Bible contains these four explanations in some form, but also includes various other explanations. Like in the Sunni texts, the Bible also affirms that God may have his people experience suffering in order to test, reward, punish, and purify them. However, these similarities exist primarily at the surface level. Upon closer inspection, significant differences appear. In addition to these four explanations, the Bible contains a variety of explanations that are rooted in the biblical concept of redemptive suffering. That is, God

uses suffering to bring about a greater good, for his glory and the good of his people. Christ's redemptive work on the cross best exemplifies this dynamic. Consequently, the NT has a far more positive view of suffering than the Sunni texts. In addition to being for God's glory and the good of his people, God may have his people suffer in order to advance the gospel, to benefit others, to deepen their faith, and give them experiential knowledge of a religious truth.

First, both the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts affirm that God may send times of affliction on his people as a test or trial. However, this explanation is far more prominent and important in the Sunni tradition. Since in the Sunni worldview life is a test from God, interpreting suffering as a trial from God is the most prominent explanation found in the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*. Consequently, based upon the direct teaching and the number of examples in these texts, it would appear that a Sunni believer would most likely interpret times of affliction as a test from God. God tested Abraham and Job. He also tested the early Muslim community with the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench, and he sent hardship on those who fought in his cause to see their level of commitment. Sunni believers see all of life, including their suffering, as a test from God which they can pass or fail depending on whether they exemplify trust (*tawakkul*) and patience (*sabr*). The OT also teaches that times of affliction may be a test from God. For example, God tested the children of Israel by letting the nations remain in the land. In the OT, God tests his people in order to reveal or authenticate their faith, which seems to parallel the teachings of the Sunni texts. However, the OT idea of testing emphasizes the positive idea of refining or purifying. The NT also presents a more positive view of suffering as a test from God. James argues that believers should rejoice in their trials because it leads to their spiritual maturity (Jas 1:2-4). Peter also encourages believers to rejoice even though they are going through trials because they serve to prove and purify their faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). In other words, God tests his people in order to build them up and mature them. In the Sunni worldview, how a believer responds to the

various tests throughout life plays a major part in determining where he ends up on Judgment Day. Consequently, tests are for the most part presented as challenges that believers need to overcome.³ In contrast, the NT presents trials in a more positive light, as opportunities for believers to develop spiritually. In addition to teaching that God may test his people with affliction, both sets of texts also teach that times of affliction provide an opportunity for God's people to be rewarded.

Second, the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts affirm that believers will be rewarded for their faithfulness through suffering, albeit in different ways. Although absent in the Qur'an, the *ahadith* explicitly teach that God sometimes afflicts a believer with trials if he wants to do him good (5645). Other *ahadith* clarify that believers may have some of their sins expiated or even be rewarded with paradise if they remain patient through suffering. Therefore, trials may be sources of blessing.⁴ Muhammad taught that if a Muslim suffers in any way, even if it is from a thorn, some of his sins will be expiated (3616). Moreover, he taught that if a Muslim loses a loved one or suffers from epilepsy or blindness, and remains patient (*sabr*), he will be rewarded with paradise (101; 5652; 5653; 6424). These *ahadith* are the closest examples to redemptive suffering as found in the NT. Unlike in the *ahadith*, the Bible does not explicitly state that God has his people suffer in order to increase their rewards; this conclusion is arrived at deductively. The NT *does* teach that God will reward believers that remain faithful through affliction, especially those who are afflicted for Christ's sake. Therefore, it would be reasonable for Christians in the Reformed tradition to believe that God may

³Kenneth Cragg notes that in Islam, trials are not redemptive in themselves; rather, believers must seek "mastery" over the test because "Islam believes in the evident, the effectual, the undeniable, the successful." Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam, The Religious Life of Man* (Belmont, CA: Dickenson, 1969), 98.

⁴Aaidh ibn Andullah al-Qarni even states that "When Allah, the Exalted, takes something away from you, He compensates you with something better, but only if you are patient and seek your reward from Him." Aaidh ibn Andullah al-Qarni, *Don't Be Sad*, trans. Faisal Ibn Muhammad Shafeeq, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2003), 46.

have his people experience suffering in part to increase their rewards.⁵ However, their reward does not involve expiation of sin or entrance into paradise, since these have already been secured for them by Christ. Therefore, what believers earn are additional heavenly rewards. In addition to being potential sources of reward, both texts also teach that God may send affliction on his people as punishment for their sins.

Third, both the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts affirm that God may have his people suffer as punishment for their sins. However, punishment for sin is not the most likely explanation for suffering in either tradition. The OT contains by far the clearest teaching and the largest number of examples of God punishing his people for their sin, individuals as well as the children of Israel as a whole. However, in the larger context of the OT, the punishment of the nation amounts to discipline since God's motivation is their repentance. Compared to the OT, the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* do not contain as many examples of God punishing believers for their sin. In fact, in both of these texts, punishment is usually reserved for Judgment Day. However, the few examples of God's punishment of believers in the Muslim texts seem to parallel those in the OT, rather than the NT. In the NT, corporate punishment of sin as found in the OT is not present. God's punishment for sin amounts to his fatherly discipline of an individual child of his. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, and the death of those who took the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner are the NT examples that most closely parallel God's punishment of sin in the OT. Although the punishment of God's people is a prominent theme in the OT, believers in the Reformed tradition would most likely interpret their suffering for sin as God's fatherly discipline rather than simply punishment, since this is the NT teaching. In addition to punishing his people for their sins, God may also have his people experience

⁵For example, John Feinberg and John Piper come to this conclusion. Feinberg points to 1 Pet 1:7 in support of his position, and Piper references Matt 5:11-12 and 2 Cor 4:7. John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*, rev. and exp. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 485-86; John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 88-89.

suffering as the means to purify them.

Fourth, both the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts teach that God may use suffering to purify his people. However, this motif is far more important in the biblical text. In the Qur'an, there are only two passages that speak explicitly of God purifying his people with suffering (3:141a, 154). In these passages, God explains that he had his people lose the battle of Uhud so that he may test and purge his people. There are also references of God sending calamity to Israel so that they may return to him (7:168), and to nations in general so that they may learn humility (6:42-44). In contrast, God's purifying work is a major theme in both the OT and NT. In the OT, God tests his people with affliction in order to purify and cleanse them (Prov 17:3; Job 23:10). In addition, God punishes Israel in order to cleanse and purify them of their sin.⁶ In the NT, God uses affliction to sanctify his people and conform them to the image of Christ. God may have his people suffer in order to lead them to repentance (2 Cor 7:8-10). He may use affliction to help his people put away sin (1 Pet 4:1-2), and to keep them humble (2 Cor 12:7). In addition, God may use affliction to build up his children's character and spiritual maturity as they endure trials (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4). Based upon these texts, believers in both traditions may interpret their suffering as God's way to purify them. However, the biblical text is far more explicit about God's intention to purify his children by making them more Christ-like.

Finally, Christ's redemptive work on the cross exemplifies the greatest difference in how the suffering of God's people is explained in the Reformed and Sunni sacred texts. Christ's crucifixion was the worst evil ever committed, as God's holy and innocent Son is unjustly killed by those he came to save; however, it is also the event that has brought the most glory to God and has brought the greatest good for sinners. Consequently, the NT vision of suffering tends to be more positive and constructive than

⁶Isa 1:25; 4:4; 48:9-11; Jer 9:7; Ezek 26:13-14; 36:33.

that found in the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, although it is still an evil that will be ultimately done away with in the new heaven and new earth. Suffering itself is not good, but God can use it to bring about what is good. For instance, God's punishment of sin is understood as God's fatherly discipline of his children. God's testing of his people is described as an opportunity to grow spiritually. Moreover, God uses times of affliction to make his children more Christ-like in their character. He can deepen their faith and reliance on him. He can also give them an experiential knowledge of a spiritual truth. In addition, the suffering of God's people may be the means God uses to manifest his love through evangelism and ministry. He may use affliction to send his people with the gospel to new people and places. He may have his people embody the gospel through suffering or he may have them be his witnesses as they remain faithful through their affliction. Moreover, as Christ's suffering was for the good of others, so the suffering of God's people may be for the good of others. God may also have his people experience suffering as they strive for the spiritual growth of others, and so that they may be able to comfort others because of the comfort they received from God.

To conclude, the Sunni and Reformed texts do share some similar themes in explaining God's purposes behind the suffering of his people, namely, to test, punish, purify, and reward his people. However, the explanations differ significantly in the details as each of the explanations fit into the worldview of each tradition. Moreover, the NT contains additional explanations for suffering which reflect the belief that God can use suffering for his glory and the good of his people.

How Are God's People to Respond to Suffering?

The Qur'an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible agree on the general principles of how God's people should respond to suffering; however, there are significant difference in the details. Both the Sunni and Reformed texts teach that God's people should repent

if God is punishing or disciplining them for their sin. They also agree that God's people should call out to God when in distress, and that they should trust God and endure through their suffering. To a lesser degree, both sets of texts also encourage believers to see their suffering from an eschatological perspective. The most significant differences between the texts deal with the issue of how God's people should respond to opposition and persecution. Finally, the NT teaching that God's people can remain joyful amid suffering, and that suffering is an integral part to the Christian identity serve to highlight some major differences between the Sunni and Reformed worldviews.

First, both the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts affirm that believers should repent if God is punishing or disciplining them for their sin. For example, in the Mosaic covenant, God states that his people should repent and turn back to him after he disciplines them for their unfaithfulness (Lev 26:4-45). In the OT, there are examples of individuals, like Eli and David, who recognize their sin, accept God's punishment, and repent after they are disciplined. In the NT, the apostle John encourages Christians to repent of their sin for God is faithful and righteous to forgive them of their sin (1 John 1:9). In the book of Revelation, Jesus calls the churches to repent, and clearly tells the church in Laodicea that he disciplines those he loves so that they may repent (Rev 3:19). Like in the Bible, the Qur'an affirms that God is gracious and merciful, and willing to forgive those who repent. Adam repented of his disobedience and was forgiven. *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* records that Muhammad would teach his people how to best ask God for forgiveness (6306). Moreover, the *ahadith* record Muhammad saying that he asks God for forgiveness, and turns in repentance to him more than seventy times a day (6307). In both traditions, believers are expected to turn away from their sin when they are punished or disciplined by God.

Second, both the Sunni and Reformed texts teach that God's people should call out to him when they are suffering. Throughout the OT, God's people call out to God for deliverance. For example, Hagar, Jacob, Moses, the children of Israel, Hezekiah, and

Isaiah called out to God for his help when facing various hardships. The Psalms best demonstrate that God's people pray and call out to him in their distress. In the NT, Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1-8). Paul taught that believers should not be anxious, but rather pray to God and he will give them his peace (Phil 4:6-7). James commanded believers to pray if they are suffering (Jas 5:1), and Peter called believers to cast their anxiety on God because he cares (1 Pet 5:7). The call for believers to pray in the NT is rooted in Christ's redemptive work on the cross. He has reconciled sinners to God; therefore, God he is near to comfort them, and will not forsake them.

The Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* also provide examples of God's people calling out to him in their distress. Suzanne Haneef argues that since God is the "source of benefit and harm" believers should turn to him for "protection and help."⁷ The Qur'an teaches that God is the one who hears people in their distress (27:62), and that he is the one who heals (26:78-82). Throughout the Qur'an, the prophets of God call out to him. For instance, Noah, Job, Jacob, and Muhammad called out to God in their troubles. The *ahadith* record that Muhammad would invoke God for provision, protection and physical healing. Muhammad would pray for rain and God's blessing. He would also invoke God to protect him from his opponents, a variety of sins, and from punishment. Muhammad would also teach specific prayers to use when performing various daily tasks for protection from Satan and evil spirits. Moreover, he would also recite *ruqa* to invoke God's healing. In summary, both sets of texts teach that God's people should pray when they are in distress, for he is the one that can deliver and heal. The differences have to do with the shape the prayers take. The biblical text, especially the Psalms and the NT, emphasize the intimate relationship between God and his people. God's people approach

⁷Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 14th ed. (South Elgin, IL: Library of Islam, 1996), 47.

God as their caring Father in a more informal fashion. In contrast, the Sunni texts, especially *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, provide specific instructions on how God's people should invoke God when they are in need. In addition to calling out to God, both texts teach that God's people should trust God and endure as they face affliction.

Third, both the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts affirm that God's people should trust God and endure when they are suffering. The principles of trust (*tawakkul*) and patience (*sabr*) should undergird all Sunni responses to suffering. Haneef states that belief in God's decrees is an essential part of a Muslim's sense of trust, dependence, and submission to God.⁸ She further argues that the belief that suffering has a purpose and is part of God's plan helps Muslims have "inner certainty, confidence and peace of heart," and it frees them from fearing anyone or anything besides God.⁹ Therefore, as Muslims trust God and exhibit *sabr* they exemplify their identity as those who submit to God. In the Qur'an, God commends those whose who exhibit *tawakkul* and *sabr* as being true believers (2:177; 9:51). He promises to be with those who exhibit these qualities (2:153), and to reward them (3:15-17). Moreover, the Qur'an points out that the prophets of old, like Noah, Joseph, Moses, and Job, trusted God in their affliction and remained patient (7:128; 11:3-49; 12:101; 38:41-44). Likewise, in the *ahadith*, Muhammad pointed to Joseph and Moses, among others, as examples of *sabr* (3372; 3405). In addition, while in Mecca, he expected his followers to remain patient and endure the opposition they were receiving (3612). Muhammad himself exhibited *tawakkul* and *sabr*, evident at the deaths of his infant son and granddaughter (467; 1303). Finally, both in the Qur'an and the *ahadith*, Muslims who engage in *jihad* are commanded to exhibit *sabr* as they fight. To summarize, instead of falling into despair, believers should accept times of suffering,

⁸Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, 48.

⁹Ibid., 46-47. She also states that "if God decrees some good for him, no one can keep it away, and at the same time, if He decrees some harm for one, no one has the power to avert it except Him." Ibid., 47.

knowing that Allah has decreed the test, and that they will be rewarded if they endure.¹⁰

The biblical text also calls believers to trust God and endure through affliction; however, the emphasis is on remaining faithful to God. In the OT, the people of God are called to put their hope and trust in God for he is their rock, fortress, refuge, shield, stronghold, and their savior and redeemer. Therefore, when affliction comes, they should wait expectantly for God to act on their behalf. For example, Job remained faithful to God. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained faithful to God even at the risk of their lives. In the NT, Jesus' faithfulness to death, even death on the cross, establishes an example for God's people. The early Church in the book of Acts remained faithful to Christ and the gospel even though they faced opposition and persecution. Paul endured suffering and persecution for the sake of Christ and the churches. He commended churches for their endurance, and encouraged others to remain steadfast. These calls to endure and persevere are often rooted in the secure promises of God. Therefore, instead of simply enduring times of affliction, believers should look forward to the guaranteed inheritance that God has for them as his children. In addition to trusting God and enduring, both sets of texts also encourage believers to view their suffering from an eschatological perspective.

Fourth, both the Sunni and Reformed texts encourage believers to view their suffering from an eschatological perspective. However, this approach is more explicit and appears more often in the biblical text. The Qur'an encourages believers who are facing opposition and persecution by stating that those who side with God and Muhammad will be victorious, while those who oppose God and Muhammad will be the most humiliated (58:20-21) and will find hell as their resting place (3:196-197). Therefore, Muslim believers can find rest in their affliction, knowing that they are on the

¹⁰Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin Khattab, 3rd ed., Islamic Creed Series 8 (Riyadh: International Islamic, 2005), 142.

winning side. In addition, in the *ahadith*, Muhammad indirectly teaches believers to see the goodness in death as they suffer. In various statements, Muhammad affirms that death is good for believers because it brings relief from the troubles of the world, it allows them to meet Allah, and because life in paradise is better (6512; 6507; 3796). Muhammad teaches that believers should not long for death when they are suffering (5671); however, in these statements, Muhammad implicitly taught believers to be aware of the goodness that might be awaiting them. This would especially be the case for believers who are suffering in Allah's cause or have been patient in times of intense suffering. The belief that God will expiate some of their sins or grant them paradise because of their patience would certainly bring encouragement to those who are suffering.

Similarly, but to a greater degree, the NT calls believers to approach suffering from an eschatological perspective. Jesus encouraged his disciples by telling them that he was going to prepare a place for them, and that he was going to return for them so that they would be where he is (John 14:1-3). Paul argued that the temporary suffering he was experiencing was not worthy to be compared with his certain future glory (Rom 8:18). Moreover, Paul affirmed the certain salvation and victory of God's people, for those whom God predestines, he calls, justifies, and glorifies (Rom 8:28-30). In addition, in Christ, believers are more than conquerors, and nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:37-39). In 2 Corinthians, Paul taught that believers should not lose heart, but rather be of good courage because they know that their momentary suffering is increasing their experience of glory, and because even death is beneficial for them because they will be at home with the Lord (4:16-5:8). Similarly, Peter teaches that although believers are "distressed by various trials" (1:6) and share in Christ's sufferings (4:13), they can rejoice (1:8; 4:13) because they know that Christ's resurrection has brought them their inheritance, and that they will be saved at his revelation. Finally, various NT passages encourage believers by reminding them of the reward they will

receive because of their endurance,¹¹ and of God's ultimate judgment of their opponents.¹² In summary, as God's people suffer, they should not forget that their salvation is secure, that they will be rewarded for their faithfulness in suffering, and that God will repay those who have persecuted them because of their testimony. Both the Sunni and Reformed texts not only affirm that God's people will be victorious over their enemies, but they also provide instructions on how God's people should respond to their enemies.

Fifth, the Sunni and Reformed sacred texts differ drastically concerning how God's people should respond to their enemies. The biblical text calls Christians to love and pray for their enemies. Jesus taught that his followers should love and pray for their enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:35). Moreover, they should do good and bless those that curse them so that they will reflect their Father's love and mercy (Matt 5:45; Luke 6:26). Paul and Peter echo Christ's teaching. Paul taught that believers should bless and not curse (Rom 12:14). They should live at peace and not repay evil with evil, but should leave it up to God to repay (Rom 12:17-18). They should not be overcome by evil, but should overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21). Similarly, Peter taught that believers should not return evil for evil or insult for insult; they should give a blessing instead (1 Pet 3:9).

In contrast, the *ahadith* record that Muhammad responded to his enemies in a variety of ways. The *ahadith* record a few instances when Muhammad forgave those who harmed him or some of his men (2910; 3149; 3041; 4003). In addition, in a couple of incidents, Muhammad prayed that those who opposed his message would someday embrace Islam (2937; 3231). He also taught that a person should be forgiven of any wrongdoings against Muslims if they convert (4019). Other *ahadith* record that

¹¹2 Cor 4:17-18; 2 Tim 4:6-8; Jas 1:12; Rev 2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:6-7.

¹²2 Thess 1:6-8; Rev 6:9-11; 17-18; 19:2; 20:10, 14-15.

Muhammad would call on God to punish his enemies. He would often invoke Allah to send famine, destruction and curses on those who rejected his message and opposed the *ummah*.¹³ Finally, other *ahadith* record that Muhammad at times would repay those who harmed him and his people. For instance, Muhammad punished those who killed his shepherd and drove away his camels by having their hands and feet cut, and their eyes branded (233). He repaid a Jewish tribe who turned against him by killing their men and distributing their women, children, and property among his followers (4028). He also sent out some of his men to kill specific individual enemies of his (2954, 3022, 3031). He had a spy killed (3051), and he killed a particular odious enemy of his when he took over Mecca (1846). He also sent out some of his men to destroy a house of idols in Yemen, and to kill anyone they saw there (3020). Muhammad's actions paralleled the NT teaching when he forgave and prayed for his opponents, but his other responses stand in stark contrast to the NT teaching.¹⁴

Sixth, the differences between the texts concerning how God's people should respond to their enemies carry over to the issue of how God's people should respond to opposition and persecution. The Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* provide three different responses to opposition and persecution, namely, to endure, to flee, or to engage in *jihad*. In the early years of his ministry, Muhammad expected his followers in Mecca to be patient and endure opposition and persecution (3612). But, he did warn them that someday they would have to flee (19, 3600). When persecution became too intense, Muhammad and the community fled to Medina. The Qur'an commends those who were

¹³*Ahadith* no. 64, 240, 520, 1006, 1889, 2931, 2933, 2934, 2939, 3185, 6030. These curses are not that different from the imprecatory Psalms. However, because of the NT teachings, Christians in the Reformed tradition would not see these imprecatory Psalms as something to emulate.

¹⁴It should be noted though, that Muhammad's actions against his opponents are not that different from the actions of godly leaders like Moses, Joshua, and David. Nevertheless, the distinction between Muhammad's actions and what Christians understand their response to their enemies should be is unmistakable. The prescriptive texts of the NT carry more hermeneutical weight than the descriptive texts in the OT.

willing to emigrate from Mecca in the cause of Allah (9:20; 4:100). After arriving in Medina, God gave Muslims permission (22:39), and later commanded them to engage in *jihad* against those who fought against them (2:190-193; 9:5, 36). In the Qur'an, God commands believers to fight when they are called on to do so.¹⁵ Moreover, the Qur'an describes true believers as those willing to fight in Allah's cause (49:15). Those who suffer loss in Allah's cause will be rewarded,¹⁶ and martyrs who die in Allah's cause will receive the highest honor.¹⁷ The *ahadith* record that after taking over Mecca, Muhammad said that fleeing was no longer the way to honor God, but rather to fight in Allah's cause (3913). He taught that those who engaged in *jihad* were the best among the believers (2786).

The NT records that God's people responded to opposition and persecution by trying to avoid it, fleeing from it, or engaging the persecutors. Jesus avoided persecution and fled from it until he began to set his face toward Jerusalem. Luke records in the book of Acts that Paul and others would often flee cities after persecution broke out. However, he also records that Peter, Stephen, Paul and others would often engage their opponents and persecutors with the gospel, even if it meant their arrest or martyrdom. Even if they did flee, this did not cause them to stop proclaiming the gospel. They simply would go to another city. Besides the obvious ways in which the early Christian and Muslim communities differed in their response to opposition, they also differed in that the Muslim response developed through three stages while the Christian response did not go through any development. Based upon their circumstances, the Muslim community transitioned from enduring persecution, to fleeing, and finally to fighting back. In contrast, the early Christian missionaries could choose to avoid persecution, flee from it,

¹⁵See 2:190, 216, 244; 4:76; 5:35, 45; 9:13-15, 29; 48:29.

¹⁶See 2:118; 4:95-96, 100; 8:74; 9:20-22, 88-89; 16:41, 100.

¹⁷See 3:157-159, 169-171, 195; 4:74-76; 9:111; 22:58-59; 47:5.

or engage their persecutors, as they were led by the Spirit. In addition to the differences concerning how God's people should respond to persecution, the biblical text also differs in emphasizing that God's people should continue to rejoice amid suffering.

Seventh, unique to the NT is the emphasis on rejoicing amid suffering. Paul wrote that believers should rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4), and to rejoice and give thanks in everything (1 Thess 5:16, 18). Christ taught that those persecuted for his sake should rejoice for they will be rewarded (Matt 5:10-12). Paul and James both write that believers should exult in their tribulation because it develops their character (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2). Peter encourages believers to continue rejoicing amid their persecution because their salvation is secure, and because the trials serve to prove and purify their faith (1 Pet 1:3-6, 8). Moreover, Peter writes that believers should rejoice in their suffering for Christ because it demonstrates that they are believers (1 Pet 4:14). The NT also contains various examples of believers rejoicing in the midst of suffering. After being arrested and flogged, the apostles rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer for Christ's sake (Acts 5:40-41). The Thessalonians received the gospel in affliction and joy (1 Thess 1:6). Paul rejoiced in his imprisonment because it led to advance the gospel (Phil 1:12-14). Paul also was able to rejoice in the suffering he endured for the sake of the churches (Col 1:24; Phil 2:17-18; 2 Cor 7:4).

Finally, also unique to the NT is the idea that suffering is part of a believer's identity in Christ. Jesus taught his disciples that they would be hated and persecuted for his name's sake, and that only those who were willing to take up their cross and follow him could be his disciples. Consequently, Peter and John taught that believers should not be surprised if they are hated by the world and therefore, face various trials (1 Pet 4:12; 1 John 3:13). Similarly, Paul taught that believers are destined and gifted to suffer; it is unavoidable (Acts 14:22; Phil 1:29-30; 1 Thess 3:3; 2 Tim 3:2). Moreover, various passages in the NT teach that there is a union or identification between Christ's sufferings

and those of his church; therefore, believers in a sense share in Christ's sufferings.¹⁸ Paul and various other believers mentioned in the NT were willing to suffer and risk their lives for Christ, the gospel, and the kingdom (2 Cor 11:23-30; Phil 2:25-30; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:8-12).

In contrast, suffering is not central to the Sunni identity. To the contrary, victory is central to the Sunni identity. Muhammad and the early Muslim community believed that their victory at Badr over the Meccans, and their rapid military dominance proved that God was on their side. Ron Geaves argues that the early Meccan theology of longsuffering was later replaced by a "Medinan triumphalism."¹⁹ The different paths that Jesus and Muhammad took reflect the difference between the worldviews. John Bowker notes that Jesus chose the way of the cross, but Muhammad "opted for the way of success" in order to cooperate with the power of God to eliminate evil and injustice.²⁰ Graham Tomlin argues that the different ways in which Jesus and Muhammad responded to persecution explains much of the difference between Islam and Christianity.²¹ Tomlin writes that Muhammad fled persecution and migrated to Medina "to set up a new kind of kingdom, with a new role as military and religious leader there." In contrast, he notes that Jesus did not migrate to Rome or Alexandria to set up a revolt against the Roman Empire; rather, he took the road to Golgotha and willingly offered himself. Based on the teachings of the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, one could argue that the Sunni tradition is

¹⁸Acts 9:4; Rom 8:17; 1 Pet 4:13-16; Phil 3:10-11; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Col 1:24.

¹⁹Ron Geaves, *Aspects of Islam* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 117.

²⁰John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 122. Interestingly, in one of the notes included in *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal wrote that Muhammad took the path of success, while Jesus took the path of death. Blaise Pascal, *Blaise Pascal: Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press), 75.

²¹Graham Tomlin, "The Uniqueness of Christ's Suffering and Death on the Cross," in *Christ the One and Only: A Global Affirmation of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 61.

a religion of victory. Suffering is overcome through victory. In *Milestones*, Seyyid Qutb affirms the belief that Muslims are the victors:

Conditions change, the Muslim loses his physical power and is conquered; yet the consciousness does not depart from him that he is the most superior. If he remains a Believer, he looks upon his conqueror from a superior position. He remains certain that this is a temporary condition which will pass away and that faith will turn the tide from which there is no escape. Even if death is his portion, he will never bow his head. Death come to all, but for him is martyrdom. He will proceed to the Garden, while his conquerors go to the Fire.²²

In contrast, based upon the teachings of the Bible, the Christian faith is a religion of victory through suffering. Suffering is not overcome through victory, but rather through suffering. To conclude, both worldviews affirm that God and his people will be victorious, but they have different visions about how this will be accomplished.

Missiological Implications

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate the missiological value of the comparative approach in the study of religion. Therefore, it would be appropriate to reflect some on the missiological implications of the case study. This is not intended to be a comprehensive missiological analysis of the data gathered from the comparison. Rather, the goal is to begin pointing out some of the implications that have surfaced through the study of the Qur'an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible. More specifically, the issues of gospel communication to a Sunni believer, and the role of suffering in the missionary task will be covered.

Communicating the Gospel to a Sunni Believer

As discussed in the opening chapter of this dissertation, communicating the gospel in such a way that the recipient can hear the intended message requires contextualization. David J. Hesselgrave's "three-culture model of missionary

²²Seyyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus: Dar Al-Ilm, 1996), 145.

communication” calls for the gospel-communicator to exegete their culture, the biblical culture, and the recipient culture in order to effectively contextualize the gospel. This dissertation’s proposed method of comparison can assist gospel-communicators by encouraging them to study the Scriptures, the Sunni sacred texts, and hopefully, their own beliefs as they interact with the texts. The reader must decide for himself if this dissertation’s study of the Qur’an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Scriptures has assisted in his exegesis of the Sunni worldview and of the biblical text. However, since contextualization is by definition context specific, a study of this nature cannot replace each gospel-communicator exegeting the “three cultures” in their respective place of ministry.

Investigating the topic of suffering in the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* have shed light on some difficulties that exist when sharing the gospel with a Sunni believer. As would be expected, a major barrier is the cross of Christ. First, Sunni believers argue that Jesus was not crucified because God would not have allowed one of his prophets to have suffered, been humiliated, and killed in such manner. The Qur’an and the *ahadith* make it clear that God vindicates his prophets and messengers. David Cooks notes that from a Muslim perspective, “the fact that Jesus was one of God’s noble messengers precludes any possibility that he could have been made to suffer such humiliation and suffering, let alone for them to have any redemptive value.”²³ Mahmoud Ayoub explains that the quranic teaching that Jesus was not killed on the cross speaks to the truth that human beings cannot “vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.”²⁴ From a Sunni perspective then, if Jesus was actually crucified, this would mean that humans defeated God by killing one of his prophets.

²³David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Themes in Islamic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19.

²⁴Mahmoud Ayoub, “Toward an Islamic Christology II,” *Muslim World* 70, no. 2 (April 1980): 117.

Second, according to Sunni understanding, God not only delivers his messengers, but he makes his messengers victorious. Because the Qur'an presupposes that God will not usually allow one of his messengers to be destroyed by his enemies, Jesus should have entered Jerusalem triumphantly like Muhammad did in Mecca, with his former enemies "intimated by his overwhelming power."²⁵ In addition, S. Nomanul Haq notes that in Islam, a prophet is "duty bound to succeed in history" by establishing a "socioeconomic community here *on earth*."²⁶ Consequently, Jesus could not have died as the Bible teaches because this would mean that Jesus failed in his prophetic role.

Finally, Muslims object to the concept of penal substitution, that Jesus would die in the place of others, and pay the penalty for their sin. Hammudah Abdalati argues that Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion of Christ because "it is contrary to Divine mercy and justice as much as it is to human logic and dignity."²⁷ Each person is responsible for their own sin, and it would be unfair for Jesus, a prophet of God, to be punished for the sins of others. In addition, the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ is unnecessary since man is fundamentally good, and "God loves and forgives those who obey his will."²⁸ In responding to the question of why Islam does not have the "profound analysis of tragedy and defeat" as found in Judaism and especially in Christianity, Ayoub writes that in Islam "man is not a pathetic fallen creature whom God alone, and through a supreme act of sacrifice, could save."²⁹ In summary, a crucified prophet is foolishness to

²⁵William E. Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus: A Comparison of the Prophets and Their Teachings* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 218.

²⁶S. Nomanul Haq, "The Human Condition in Islam," in *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 172.

²⁷Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1994), 17.

²⁸Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 175.

²⁹Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, "The Problem of Suffering in Islam," *Journal of Dharma* 2 (1977): 293.

Sunni believers similar to how a crucified Messiah is foolishness to Jewish believers. In addition to the theological objection to the cross, the current historical context has also made it more difficult for Christians to reach Muslims with the gospel.

The current worldwide Muslim revival has strengthened the barriers that keep Muslims from considering the gospel. As “Christian” nations overpowered Muslim nations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conclusion that the Muslim world eventually arrived at was that they were being punished by God for their unfaithfulness. Geaves argues that the theology of “Manifest Success” in Islam required their failure to be interpreted as a test from God or as a sign that believers were not being faithful.³⁰ Therefore, the Muslim world responded with a succession of revivals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to gain back God’s favor, requiring them to “be self-critical, and seek revival and the reform of Islam.”³¹ This eventually led to the current revivalism and fundamentalism in the Muslim world, which presents Islam as a comprehensive and all-encompassing worldview that gives meaning and direction for all areas of life. It would be appropriate to restate John L. Esposito’s six characteristics of the ideological framework of today’s Islamic revivalism:³² (1) “Islam is a total and comprehensive way of life. Religion is integral to politics, law, and society”; (2) the failure of Muslim societies is due to them abandoning Islam and imitating Western secularism; (3) renewal of society is needed, based upon the Qur’an and Muhammad’s early community; (4) to “restore God’s rule and inaugurate true Islamic social order” requires replacing western-based laws with Islamic law, “which is the only acceptable blueprint for Muslim society”; (5) science and technology must be “subordinated to Islamic beliefs and values”; (6) the process of “re-Islamization” requires organizations of

³⁰Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, 99.

³¹*Ibid.*, 101.

³²John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 165.

committed and trained Muslims to live out their faith and call others to be “more observant” and to “struggle (jihad) against corruption and social injustice.” To conclude, the Sunni understanding of suffering makes the cross a stumbling block, and has intensified existing barriers to the gospel through the current Muslim revival.³³

Though the teachings of the Qur’an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* concerning suffering make it more difficult in some ways to communicate the gospel to Sunni believers, their teachings also provide some potential ways to explain the gospel. The Qur’an and *ahadith* exalt martyrs as the best among the believers, for they are willing to give up everything, even their lives, in the cause of Allah. Instead of cowering away, martyrs valiantly struggle against the evil forces that oppose God and his people. Muhammad himself said that he wished he could have been a martyr (36). Maybe it would be helpful when explaining Christ’s crucifixion to Sunni believers to make comparisons with the death of a martyr in God’s cause. Jesus Christ was obviously more than *just* a martyr, but he nonetheless, was a martyr in God’s cause because he was a witness who sealed his testimony with his own life.³⁴ Presenting Jesus, in part, as a willing martyr in

³³However, J. Dudley Woodberry argues that although the Islamic resurgence has increased opposition and persecution, it has also led some Muslims to Christ. For example, after the Iranian Revolution, the number of Bible sales increased in Iran even though the government had closed down the offices of the United Bible Societies. The same happened when Pakistan president Zia al-Haq tried to impose Islamic Law: “more Bibles were sold than before, more people signed up for Bible correspondence courses, and more accepted Christ as Savior.” In Afghanistan, through the civil war and the rise of the Taliban, many Afghans became refugees and were able to hear the gospel and accept Christ. He argues that a trend through the years has been that when the Islamic resurgence takes a “militant form” and tries to impose Islamic law, and there has been “an attractive Christian presence,” receptivity increases but also persecution. J. Dudley Woodberry, “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ,” in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith*, ed. David H. Greenlee (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2006), 12.

³⁴Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 107. In support of his position, Ton references John 18:37; Rev 1:5; 3:14; 1 Tim 2:6; 6:12-13. John Downing argues that “Jesus was not a martyr but *the* martyr.” John Downing, “Jesus and Martyrdom,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 14 (1963): 293. John Goldingay argues that Jesus died as a martyr like many of the prophets that preceded him. John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 807-08. John S. Pobee argues that in 1 Thess 1:6 and 2:15, Paul presents Jesus as a prototype martyr, who obeyed God and voluntarily offered himself as a sacrifice. John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 6 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 72.

the cause of God against Satan and the evil spiritual forces that rage against God and his people might help minimize the foreignness of the cross to Sunni believers. Moreover, pointing out that Jesus willingly offered himself as a sacrifice helps respond to the critique that it is unfair that God punished Jesus for the sins of others. Geaves notes that the Sunni theology of “Manifest Success” has traditionally not made suffering and martyrdom a topic of concern for Sunnis; however, with the decline of Muslim power, and the rise of western power, Sunni “triumphalism” has been challenged, forcing Sunnis to find value once again in suffering and martyrdom.³⁵ Therefore, using martyrdom terminology in explaining Christ’s redemptive work will carry more weight now than it would have in centuries past.

In addition to pointing out that Jesus died willingly as a martyr, gospel-communicators could also highlight that Jesus exemplified *tawakkul* and *sabr*. Although Jesus knew beforehand that he was going to be betrayed, mistreated, and crucified, he remained steadfast in his mission. He submitted to his Father’s will, and entrusted his soul to God. He remained obedient to death, even death on a cross.

If Jesus died as a willing martyr in the cause of God and exhibited *tawakkul* and *sabr*, then his death does not reflect God’s final and complete abandonment. God does not abandon martyrs; rather, it is a blessing from God to die as a martyr for his name’s sake. In addition, Muhammad taught that “If Allah wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials” (5645). Could this not be said about Christ? It could be suggested to Sunni believers that the intense trials that Jesus went through were not signs of God’s abandonment, but rather of his favor. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, God highly exalted him and gave him the name which is above every name (Phil 2:9). Through his redemptive death, Christ overcame the world (John 16:33) and triumphed over the spiritual rulers and authorities (Col 2:15). God seated Christ at his

³⁵Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, 97.

right hand and placed him over all authority, power, and dominion, and put all things in subjection under his feet (Eph 1:20-22). God did not just give Jesus victory over his earthly enemies, but he also gave him victory over Satan, sin, and death.³⁶ God did not abandon Christ *to* his death; rather, he exalted him *through* his death.

The Christian concept of atonement sounds like “escapist irrationalism”³⁷ to Sunni Muslims in part because they have no context for understanding the belief. Christ’s sacrificial death needs to be understood in light of the OT sacrificial system. Using the storying method, especially chronological Bible storying, might be a valuable tool for gospel-communicators as they explain the gospel to Sunni believers. Through this method, the communicator can present the Christian metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, thus placing Christ’s death and resurrection in context. Through storying, the communicator not only places Christ’s death in the context of the OT sacrificial system, but also shows how Christ’s death fits in the larger issues of suffering and death. As this dissertation has shown, Christ’s redemptive work does not make sense in the Sunni worldview; therefore, the gospel-communicator must begin to present an alternative worldview through stories in which Christ’s redemptive work makes perfect sense.

Suffering in the Missionary Task

According to the NT, suffering is central to a believer’s identity in Christ, and is most evident in the lives of those who devote themselves to taking the gospel to the nations. The NT record is clear that in a fallen world, gospel proclamation involves hardship, opposition, and even persecution. Paul’s life and ministry exemplify this reality

³⁶Paul G. Hiebert writes that “In biblical spiritual warfare the cross is the ultimate and final victory (1 Cor 1:18-25).” Paul G. Hiebert, “Spiritual Warfare and Worldviews,” *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 121.

³⁷Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Frameworks for Religious Life,” 70.

(2 Cor 11:23-28). As Paul took the gospel to the lost, he suffered imprisonments, beatings, scourgings, stonings, and shipwrecks. In his journeys, he faced danger from robbers, his countrymen, the Gentiles, false brothers, and from rivers, in the city, in the wilderness, and at sea. He labored through many sleepless nights, “in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor 11:27). In addition to these hardships, he had the daily pressure on him of concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:28). However, the suffering that Paul experienced was not incidental to his ministry, but was central to his role as Christ’s ambassador. In his article, “The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul,” Scott Hafemann argues that Paul’s suffering was the vehicle that God used to make his “saving power, first revealed in Christ,” known to the world.³⁸ Moreover, he writes that Paul, through his preaching *and* suffering, stood between “the glory of God and the life of his congregation as an instrument in the hand of God to bring about a new life of faith among God’s people.”³⁹ Therefore, God communicated the gospel not only through Paul’s preaching, but also through Paul’s afflictions. If this applies to more than just Paul, then it is imperative for mission agencies, churches, and missionaries to think through the NT teaching that God uses both the preaching and suffering of his people to extend the power of the gospel to the lost.

First, mission agencies, church, and missionaries need to evaluate their philosophy and methodology of missions to see if they take into account the NT teaching on suffering and persecution in the missionary task. In his dissertation, “God’s Mission in Suffering and Martyrdom,” Young Kee Lee asks whether the “poor results of today’s missionary efforts” are due to the unwillingness to suffer and die for Jesus and the gospel,

³⁸Scott Hafemann, “The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul,” in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 183.

³⁹Ibid., 179. Similarly, Thomas R. Schreiner states that Paul’s suffering was God’s means of spreading the gospel. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 87.

since this willingness was part of the successful ministry of Jesus' earliest disciples.⁴⁰ Even Ayoub asks the question whether "committed fundamentalist Christians" have lost the ideal of a Christian martyr who "suffered stripes, imprisonment, crucifixion, and wild beasts," since martyrdom is no longer the impetus it was in the early church.⁴¹ If Christ's power was manifested through Paul's weakness (2 Cor 12:1-12), then maybe his peoples' concern for safety and lack of risk-taking may be restricting what he is doing through them. Warren Chastain goes so far as to say that missionaries may be denying the cross if they preach a message of "ultimate sacrifice but deliver it through a lifestyle which denies sacrifice."⁴²

David W. Shenk makes a poignant observation when he writes that in Islam, God's mercy is supremely expressed through the giving of his perfect law, while in Christianity, God's love is supremely expressed in "the suffering, redemptive love revealed in the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah."⁴³ If Christians are going to communicate this foreign concept of redemptive love through suffering to Sunni believers, they will have to use more than just words; they will have to embody it like the apostle Paul did through his suffering. Is the current philosophy and methodology of missions found in the western Church conducive for missionaries to embody the gospel as Paul did or is the methodology too cautious and safe to make it even possible? For example, Nik Ripken, in his article "Recapturing the Role of Suffering," suggests that the policies of some western mission organizations concerning

⁴⁰Young Kee Lee, "God's Mission in Suffering and Martyrdom" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999), 55.

⁴¹Mahmoud Ayoub, "Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam," in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 87.

⁴²Warren Chastain, "On Turning Muslim Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 3rd ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 654.

⁴³Kateregga and Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, 206.

persecution may not be compatible with their church planting efforts.⁴⁴

Second, missionaries need to develop a working theology of suffering. Since persecution is most likely to occur in the 10/40 window,⁴⁵ it is imperative for missionaries to develop a theology of suffering as they prepare for their work since this is where most missionaries are being sent.⁴⁶ This is especially true for western missionaries who have not had to develop such a theology before since suffering and persecution for Christ have for the most part not been a part of their experience. In order to develop a theology of suffering, western Christians need to study the Scriptures, but they also need to learn from their brothers and sisters in Christ from around the world who have developed such a theology out of necessity.⁴⁷ Because majority world Christians are the ones most affected by persecution, natural disasters, and wars, they are developing deep biblical and experiential insight into suffering.”⁴⁸ Moreover, many of these majority

⁴⁴For instance, He reports that some of these organizations have developed a strategy for responding to persecution which involves stopping the persecution, punishing the persecutors, promoting western forms of government and democracy, and raising funds that will help in rescuing national believers from persecution. He argues that the desire to avoid or stop persecution has led to a silencing of the missionaries and Muslim-background believers (MBBs). He points out that there is overt persecution only when believers have refused to stop sharing their faith. For instance, there is no persecution in Saudi Arabia or Somalia because there is no witnessing occurring. Through interactions with MBBs, he states that they do not want western Christians to pray for their release; rather, that they would pray for their perseverance and ability to share the gospel with their persecutors. Nik Ripken, “Recapturing the Role of Suffering,” in *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues Among Muslims*, ed. John Dudley Woodberry (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 358-59, 363.

⁴⁵A. Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 310.

⁴⁶In the conclusion to *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith*, a book on missions to Muslims, David Smith likewise argues that those who work in Muslim contexts need to develop a theology of suffering. David Smith, “Conclusion: Looking Ahead,” in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, 291-92.

⁴⁷For example, in his article “Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Hinduism,” Paul G. Hiebert advocates that western Christians learn from the Church in India to develop “a theology of persecution, suffering, and the cross.” Paul G. Hiebert, “Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Hinduism,” *Missiology* 28, no. 1 (January 2000): 58.

⁴⁸Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 155.

world Christians are becoming themselves cross-cultural missionaries.⁴⁹ Therefore, western missionaries can learn not only from believers in their context, but also from majority world Christian missionaries that might also be working in their context. Missionaries need to develop a theology of suffering not only for their own benefit, but also for those they lead to Christ.

Third, missionaries need to be prepared to provide guidance to new believers who are experiencing opposition or persecution. This would involve not only leading them through a biblical theology of suffering, but also living as an example for them to imitate. Nik Ripken's article "Recapturing the Role of Suffering" directly addresses the issues of suffering and persecution among missionaries and MBBs.⁵⁰ He states that from numerous interviews with MBBs, he has discovered that many of them believe that "the church in the West has lost its missiological edge" and that it "has grown soft in the face of overt persecution."⁵¹ Although the MBBs are grateful for the missionaries, they believe that the missionaries have taught them to be afraid.⁵² Ripken therefore argues that the MBBs have no examples of what it looks like to "live in Christ" and "die in Christ."⁵³ He writes that missionaries should not only embody the willingness to suffer

⁴⁹Cross-cultural missionaries are being sent out from around the world: North America 36 percent; Asia 35 percent; Europe 11 percent; Africa 6 percent; South America 5 percent; Other 4 percent; Pacific 3 percent. Jason Mandryk, "The State of the Gospel," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 365.

⁵⁰Nik Ripken, "Recapturing the Role of Suffering," 355-65.

⁵¹Ibid., 355-56.

⁵²He reports MBBs saying that the missionaries fear their platform being compromised, of being kicked out of the country, of losing their work permit or visa, that their children might have to move to another country, of having to learn another language, and that their MBBs might be targeted. Ibid., 359.

⁵³He asks, "Who is able to teach these new MBBs how to live in Christ? Who will teach these new MBBs how to die in Christ? . . . It is often immediate family members who beat the new MBBs, place them under house arrest, disinherit them, and arrange marriages for their believing daughters to Muslim men thirty years their senior. It is often immediate family members who turn the new believers over to the religious authorities. Who will teach these new believers how to live in Christ—and, perhaps, even to die in him." Ripken, "Recapturing the Role of Suffering," 357.

for their faith, but that they should also teach the MBBs their “genealogy of faith” from the Scriptures, showing them examples of those who came before them who were willing to suffer for Christ. Ripken’s position is open to criticism; nonetheless, he does point out the importance of missionaries embodying self-sacrifice and being able to teach it from the Scriptures.⁵⁴

Fourth, missionaries must also be able to respond to opposition and persecution in a Christ-like manner, not only in obedience to God, but also as a picture of God’s redemptive love. The NT teaches that God’s people should love and pray for their enemies, and instead of cursing, they should bless. By so doing, they reflect their Father’s love and mercy that is clearly evident in the cross. Their response to suffering not only communicates the gospel, but it also strengthens their witness. Missionaries and national believers alike should reflect the fruit of the Spirit, and continue to love those who hate them because the message is judged by the character of the messenger.⁵⁵ Responding to hatred with love and compassion creates a powerful witness for Christ. For instance, in their article, “Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims,” Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Mucahit Bilici identify that the two most common explanations for why former Muslims left Islam were that they disagreed with the status of women in Islam, and because they came to believe that Muslims were

⁵⁴Ripken provides a list of recommendations for western missionaries: (1) realize that suffering is normal, so they need to prepare themselves and others for it; (2) become “culturally astute,” and try to create a safe place for the lost to hear the gospel before persecution breaks out; (3) lose fear of sharing the gospel, but learn to accept the consequences; (4) “be tough—emotionally, spiritually, and physically” since persecution will spread as people come to Christ through their witness; (5) not run from or seek persecution; (6) not extract believers from persecution; (7) not regret that people they led to Christ are being persecuted; (8) not minimize the price and suffering involved in persecution, although it may lead people to Christ; (9) live a life worthy to be modeled . . . willing to live and die for Christ; (10) through it all, they need to become risk takers so that all people have the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. *Ibid.*, 364-65.

⁵⁵Charles R. Marsh, “Sharing Our Faith with Muslims,” in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed. Keith Swartley (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2005), 305.

“cruel, oppressive, and backwards.”⁵⁶ In some of the conversion narratives, former Muslims stated that they found non-Muslim behavior more attractive, while others were simply repulsed by Muslim behavior. If these reports are true, then Christians have an opportunity to be an attractional force through their Christ-like character. In another study, Eric Adams, Don Allen, and Bob Fish found that a Christian’s exemplary lifestyle is an important factor in fruitful ministries in Muslim contexts. In March of 2007, Adams, Allen, and Fish led a study which surveyed and interviewed three hundred practitioners from thirty-four different agencies working to reach Muslims with the gospel. Through their research, they identified seven themes of fruitfulness, one of which was the exemplary behavior of the Christian worker. Those who experienced fruitfulness in their work were often considered “people of God who met tangible needs,” and were known for persevering through difficulty and suffering.⁵⁷ In addition, J. Dudley Woodberry references an extensive questionnaire filled out by 650 MBBs from forty countries and fifty-eight ethnic groups.⁵⁸ Of the six most important factors that influenced their conversion to Christianity, the number one factor they reported was the lifestyle of Christians they knew, including their moral consistency, treatment of women

⁵⁶They gathered their data from conversion narratives found in various sources: (1) the website of Muslim-turned-Christian Nonie Darwish; (2) the works of Muslim-turned-agnostic Ibn Warraq; (3) Jeffrey Lang’s *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*; (4) two popular websites Answering Islam and Apostates of Islam. They identified a total of nine intellectual and ideological motivations: (1) status of women in Islam; (2) contradiction between Shariah and human rights; (3) problematic nature of the Qur’an; (4) character of Muhammad and other Muslim leaders; (5) Islam is illogical and unscientific; (6) belief in the eternal damnation of good non-Muslims; (7) the unnecessary, strict rules and expectations of Islam; (8) Islam is not universal, but rather Arab-centric; (9) the dubious historicity of the Qur’an and Hadith. They identified six social and experiential motivations: (1) encounters with bad, cruel Muslims; (2) Muslims as oppressive; (3) Muslims as backwards; (4) Muslim ill-treatment of women; (5) Muslim ill-treatment of non-Muslims; (6) Muslims in a state of illusion regarding their own religion. Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Mucahit Bilici, “Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims,” *Muslim World* 97 (2007): 112, 118.

⁵⁷Eric Adams, Don Allen, and Bob Fish, “Seven Themes of Fruitfulness,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 26, no. 2 (April-June 2009): 75-78. The seven themes of fruitfulness were fluency in heart language, the use of storying, exemplary lifestyle, working within existing social networks, using Scripture, intentional reproduction, and focused prayer.

⁵⁸Woodberry, “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ,” 14-16.

and those of other races as equals, loving marriages, forgiveness, generosity, simple lifestyle, etc.⁵⁹

Finally, missionaries need to develop a theology of suffering because they will most likely work among people who experience suffering, not only through persecution, but also because of poverty and natural disasters.⁶⁰ Having a biblical theology of suffering is invaluable for missionaries as they serve in difficult contexts, not only for themselves, but also for those they are ministering to on a day-to-day basis or in crisis situations. It goes without saying that those living in difficult economic conditions are usually the most receptive to the gospel. The number of people living in such conditions will only continue to increase due to urbanization.

Roger S. Greenway notes that “some of the worst suffering” occurs among people from rural peasant classes who move to the cities because they are not prepared for the difficulties they face in an urban setting.⁶¹ However, he also notes that they are the ones most receptive to the gospel; therefore, he concludes that through urbanization, God is drawing the nations to the cities so that they can be reached with the gospel.⁶² For example, in his article, “Factors Leading to Conversion Among Central Asian Muslims,” Hasan Abdulahugli reports that after interviewing one hundred MBBs in the south-central part of the Central Asian country he is serving in, he discovered that the majority were from middle or lower socio-economic classes.⁶³ Sixty-five to seventy percent of the

⁵⁹Woodberry, “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ,” 14-16. The other five factors were answered prayer, miracles and power of God, healing, dissatisfaction with Islam for various reasons, and dreams and visions.

⁶⁰Woodberry points out that natural disasters, like droughts, cyclones and tsunamis, have given missionaries the opportunity to minister to those in need, and to share the gospel. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶¹Roger S. Greenway, “The Challenge of the Cities,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed., 560.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 561.

⁶³Hasan Abdulahugli, “Factors Leading to Conversion Among Central Asian Muslims,” in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, 161-63.

MBBs lived in villages or had moved to larger cities. Eighty-five percent had little to no education, and sixty percent had no profession or were unemployed. He reports that some of the leading factors in conversion were that the MBBs had been living in “hard economic conditions in traditional villages,” and had move to cities away from social and religious pressures, where they were then incorporated into Christian communities.⁶⁴ In addition, he reports that the MBBs had experienced feelings of hopelessness and disappointed about the economic and political situation in their country.⁶⁵ Since this central Asian example is probably not a unique situation, but rather representative of many Muslim contexts, it is imperative for missionaries to be prepared to minister to the poor.⁶⁶ A final point to make concerning working among the afflicted is that cross-cultural workers who are able to successfully identify with those they are ministering to are “well positioned to make an impact in that situation with the gospel.”⁶⁷ Therefore, missionaries should seek to identify with the suffering of their people, by mourning with

⁶⁴Similarly, Woodberry notes that Muslims who migrate, either as refugees, or to the cities, or to the west, are often more receptive to the gospel because they are more open to new ideas in general. Woodberry, “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ,” 13.

⁶⁵Interestingly, in her article, “Messianism and Islam,” Riffat Hassan argues that suffering among the “Muslim masses” has led to what she sees as an “unIslamic” belief in a messianic figure who shares in their human suffering, and who intercedes on their behalf before “an invisible, intangible God.” Examples of this messianic figure include Muhammad, Sufi saints, and the Imams of Shi’ite Islam, which many believe have “redemptive and intercessory powers.” She argues that Muslims developed these beliefs for a variety of reasons, including their sense of alienation from God, and as a way to cope with the difficulties of life. Riffat Hassan, “Messianism and Islam,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 281-87. Obviously, many would disagree with Hassan, arguing that the belief in the redemptive and intercessory powers of Muhammad and Sufi saints, or the Imams is not “unIslamic.” If Hassan is correct in her analysis that suffering has led to the belief in messianic figures, then this is good news for missionaries.

⁶⁶Part of this preparation should involve learning from Majority World missionaries. James E. Plueddemann, in his article “Theological Implications of Globalizing Missions,” argues that because they have a firsthand understanding of poverty, sickness, persecution, and injustice, they are better equipped to carry out wholistic ministries, meeting spiritual and physical needs. James E. Plueddemann, “Theological Implications of Globalizing Missions,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 257.

⁶⁷Robert Don Hughes, “Cross-cultural Communication,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie C. Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 279.

those who mourn (Rom 12:15), and fulfilling the law of Christ, by carrying each other's burdens (Gal 6:2).

To conclude, the NT teaches that suffering for Christ is normative in the Christian life. Timothy C. Tennent argues that as missionaries, believers should rejoice in their suffering for Christ because "this is part of the inevitable response to the extension of God's rule and the inbreaking of the New Creation into the present age."⁶⁸ Moreover, opposition and suffering are not just *consequences* of the inbreaking kingdom, but are also the *means* God uses to extend his kingdom. Mission agencies, churches, and missionaries need to evaluate their philosophy and methodology of missions in light of these NT teachings on missiological suffering and weakness. God manifested his power through Paul's weakness (2 Cor 12:9); therefore, Christian missions should not rely on their "own ingenuity, strength, resources, and talents," so as not to rule out the manifestation of God's glory and presence."⁶⁹ In the same way, Christian missions should not be carried out in such a way that it rules out the possibility of God manifesting his glory and power through the suffering of his people as they proclaim the gospel. It would be fitting to end this chapter with a quote from John Stott's classic work, *The Cross of Christ*:

The greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple lifestyle). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 480.

⁶⁹J. Nelson Jennings, "A Missional Theology of the Glory of God," in *The Glory of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 226.

⁷⁰John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th ann. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 313.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The Muslim world remains the largest unreached religious bloc in the world. The majority of the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world have little to no access to the gospel. In addition to the lack of access to the gospel, a host of theological, historical, political, and cultural barriers keep Muslims from even considering the gospel. In light of the current situation, Christians should not settle for a superficial understanding of the Muslim worldview, especially those who are devoting their lives to reaching Muslims with the gospel. In-depth understanding of the Muslim worldview is imperative if Christians are going to effectively contextualize the gospel. This dissertation has argued that the comparative approach in the study of religion can help Christians contextualize the gospel by providing a better understanding of the respondent religious worldview.

Even though the comparative method was instrumental in the development of the academic study of religion, and is still widely used, it is not without its critics. Critics have rightly accused some early comparativists of assuming the evolution of religion. Moreover, some comparativists have wrongfully ignored the context, and differences between religious traditions. In addition, some comparativists have also lacked a developed methodology of comparison. Other critics argue that comparativists are unable to make fair comparisons because they are religiously motivated. Finally, through the influence of postmodernism, critics have unconvincingly argued that comparison is ultimately oppressive or not even possible.

This dissertation has proposed a method of comparison that takes into account these critiques and potential weaknesses in the comparative method. First, comparativists

need to reflect on and make known their perspective, purpose, and motivation for engaging in their comparative project. Second, comparativists need to select and explain their reasoning for the religious traditions, topic, and texts that they will be comparing. Third, comparativists need to begin their comparison with an overview of the worldview of the two traditions being compared by answering four key questions: (1) how did we get here? (2) what is wrong with the world? (3) what is the solution? (4) where are we going? Fourth, they need to identify both similarities and differences between the texts. Finally, in all elements of the comparison, comparativists need to seek an insider's perspective as much as possible.

This proposed method of comparison was applied to the Sunni and Reformed worldviews. Comparing the Qur'an, *Sahih Al-Bukhāri*, and the Bible revealed similarities and differences in the manner in which believers in each tradition might interpret suffering they experience in life. Both the Sunni and Reformed texts affirm that God may have his people experience suffering in order to test, purify, reward, or punish them. In contrast, the Bible presents a more positive view of suffering, especially in light of the fact that Christ's redemptive death on the cross demonstrates that God can use suffering for his glory and the good of his people. Therefore, the Bible contains additional positive and constructive purposes for suffering. God may have his people suffer for his glory, the advance of the gospel, for the good of others, to deepen their faith, and to give them experiential knowledge of a spiritual truth. On the one hand, believers in the Reformed tradition are most likely to interpret their suffering as ultimately for God's glory and their good. On the other hand, believers in the Sunni tradition will most likely interpret their suffering as a test from God, giving them the opportunity to be rewarded if they trust his decrees and remain patient.

At many points, both sets of texts also agree in the manner in which God's people should respond to suffering. They both affirm that God's people should pray, endure, and trust God during times of affliction. Moreover, they should view their

suffering from an eschatological perspective, and they should repent if they are being punished or disciplined for their sin. In contrast, real differences exist in how God's people should respond to opposition and persecution. The biblical text emphasizes the need for believers to love and pray for their enemies, and to never retaliate. The Sunni texts allow believers to call on God to punish their opponents, and to even engage in a physical struggle with their enemies. Finally, in contrast to the Sunni texts, the biblical text teaches that suffering is part of a believer's identity in Christ, and that believers should continue to rejoice even in times of affliction. In light of the similarities and differences in the Sunni and Reformed texts, it was concluded that Sunni Islam is a religion of victory, in which suffering is overcome through victory. The Christian faith is a religion of victory through suffering, in which suffering is overcome through suffering. To summarize, both worldviews affirm that God and his people will be victorious, but they have different visions about how this will be accomplished.

To conclude the case study, a few missiological implications were covered. The lack of redemptive suffering in Sunni Islam and the Sunni understanding of prophethood create significant barriers in gospel communication. However, the high respect for martyrs in God's cause, who exhibit trust and patience, could be a helpful metaphor in explaining Christ's work on the cross. It was also pointed out that the biblical teaching on suffering in the missionary task should cause mission agencies, churches, and missionaries to evaluate their current philosophy and methodology of missions.

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate that the comparative method in the study of religion can be a useful missiological tool. The proposed method of comparison not only provides a deeper understanding into a respondent's religious worldview, but it also equips Christians to contextualize the gospel more effectively by encouraging them to exegete the Scriptures, themselves, and those they are trying to reach with the gospel.

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ABSTRACT

SUFFERING IN THE SUNNI AND CALVINIST WORLDVIEWS: DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF THE COMPARATIVE APPROACH IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN SERVICE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

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This dissertation argues that the comparative method in the academic study of religion can be a valuable missiological tool for Christians. Chapter 1 explains the need for Christians to have an in-depth understanding of the Sunni worldview in order to better contextualize the gospel.

Chapter 2 provides a history of the comparative method in the academic study of religion, and discusses the seven most common objections to the approach.

Chapter 3 responds to the seven most common objections to the comparative approach, proposes a method of comparison, and presents this dissertation's case study.

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the Reformed worldview, and presents the themes found in the OT and NT concerning God's purposes behind the suffering of his people, and how his people should respond.

Chapter 5 includes an overview of the Sunni worldview, and presents the themes found in the Qur'an and *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* concerning God's purposes behind the suffering of his people, and how his people should respond.

Chapter 6 compares the themes found in the Sunni and Reformed texts, and ends with a brief discussion of some missiological implications from the study.

Chapter 7 summarizes the overall arguments and findings of the dissertation.

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