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JOB AND THE INNOCENT CONFRONTING GOD IN HUMAN SUFFERING

*This Long Essay paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a
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Student's Declaration

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for academic credit to any other institution. All sources have been cited in full.



NICHOLAS O. OBIERO

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents and more especially to my late brother (Aloyce O. Obiero), and to my late sister-in-law (Millicent A. Obiero) who had been very inspiring to me and encouraged me in moments of despair, pain and suffering. To all those who are undergoing through human pain and suffering, but more especially to the HIV/AIDS orphans and victims who like Job, have to cry out to God in their anguish and hope.

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To all of you and more gratefully to Tangaza College Library and Passionist “Kisima” Library which did provide me with the necessary materials, I say, “*Thank you very very much!*”

Obiero O. Nicholas,
Nairobi, Kenya, 2001.

*"My face is red with tears, and shadow dark as death covers my eyelids.
None-the-less, my hands are free of violence, and my prayer is pure." Job 16:16-17.*



1 This picture is taken from Blumenkrantz David's book: Survival: The Undugu Society of Kenya's intergrated Approach to Urban Development, (Nairobi: Power BASE, 1994), p.3.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

Human existence as we know, is limited, fragile and is full of dissatisfaction. It is as insubstantial as the bloom of a flower that blossoms in the morning and withers at evening, or again it is like a shadow, or a moth-eaten garment. Human desire is to live forever but the fact of life is that we have to experience pain, suffering and lastly death. Thus, the reality of human history is that we have to survive so much pain and disappointment.

When we are faced with the reality of death, and when we see innocent people undergoing pain, suffering and death, we are forced to ask, "Why do the innocent suffer?" We can glibly say that God is good, God is merciful, that he is kind and faithful. But a great many people on earth can say, "I don't have any evidence for that. Maybe you do, but I don't." If we were to be honest with ourselves maybe many of us would admit that we do not have a lot of conviction about God's goodness either. If we do have a lot of conviction about God's goodness then, why bad things happen to good and innocent people will still remain a universal dilemma that forever we will be forced to confront. Our struggle here on earth is always to reconcile a good God with a seemingly evil world. In most cases, we are forced to ask, "What is the meaning of human suffering? What role does God play in life as humans experience suffering? These are some of the questions, which human beings have asked throughout history and we as well continue to ask the same questions.

In ancient Israel, the tightly constructed world-view was incapable of offering a satisfying explanation to the problems of human pain, suffering and death. For human pain, suffering and death were more often than not attributed to human sinfulness. The

dilemma which was left in struggling with these problems of human pain, suffering and death threatened the entire structure of order of explanation of things and this had to be resolved if the system was to survive. But strictly speaking, these were not only problems in and for Israel. Israel was but one among several ancient peoples who wrestled with these problems. The Book of Job as we will see, is a classic example of a challenge thrown in the face of the claim of an ordered world.

Today, there are many innocent people who undergo sufferings, misfortunes and difficulties in their everyday lives. To these, especially to the AIDS orphans and victims, it seems as if the world has turned upside down; are their sufferings symbols and consequences of sin, or a punishment, a scourge from God? What good comes of all these? Does God listen to these cries in their baffling varieties or even see the many who suffer and die everyday? What is evident in the case of Job is the actual human experience that confronts many of us who have to face ill fortunes in our lives. It is the silent and innocent cry of these people, the hatred, anger, fear, terror, turmoil, rage, confusion, death, darkness but also the confidence, longing, trust, rediscovery of God and faith that I intend to research and discuss in my long essay.

In so doing, I will carry out my research, discussions and findings through reading and reflections on the Book of Job, through reading relevant books, documents and articles on the Book of Job and on human suffering, through dialogue with those terminally ill, HIV/AIDS patients and HIV/AIDS orphans who are undergoing physical sufferings in their lives and through my own reflections on and experience of human suffering in moments of sickness and loss of loved ones. Thus I will basically apply both historical and descriptive methods in my work.

In the first chapter of this essay, I will try to point out the problem the author of the Book of Job is addressing and also to try to describe the context from which the author speaks. I will also try to see who the upright were thought to be in that society, what was the path of the wicked and lastly why was the Book of Job written. The second chapter will try to describe who the man Job is, why and how is Job innocent, what is Job's plight and from where does Job get the strength to continue living? The third chapter will be an attempt to situate Job in our contemporary society, the innocent suffering in our society, what are the attitudes towards the innocent, what are their sufferings and cry, and do we have something to say to the innocent suffering in our society? In the fourth and the last chapter of my essay, I will try to discuss whether there is God's justice and love in human suffering, and whether human pain and suffering can bring one closer to God.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE AUTHOR'S CONTEXT AND PROBLEM:

Throughout human history and in different cultures of the world, there has been an attempt to fathom the issues of pain, suffering and death. Looking at the surroundings, and at times turning to God for answers, the human person has forever asked the question “why is there evil in the world?”, more so when a just person is afflicted with sufferings. For many, religion has been a refuge for seeking meaning, strength and solace in the face of insurmountable, seemingly arbitrary, misery and loss. Confronted and threatened with sufferings, human person begins to philosophize and to theologize on what possible explanations are available for the mystery of human life, both on earth and after death.

In the ancient Near East, belief in the moral governance of the universe was widespread. This conviction gradually and slowly gave rise to confidence that certain actions ensured the wellbeing of a person most of the time. The Egyptian *Ma'at* designates the right order of things established by God (*netjer*) in creation, and with which human conduct must agree. On the other hand, the problem of the “righteous sufferer” – the theme of Job - is well represented in ancient Mesopotamia, written in a Sumerian text “Man and His God” and the *AKK Ludlul be`l ne`meqi* (I will praise the Lord of Wisdom)¹ These two works in ancient Mesopotamia blame the divinity for failure to act in favor of a suffering devotee. Thus the undeserved suffering of the innocent posed an immense intellectual and religion problem in the ancient world.

¹ R.A.F. MacKenzie and Roland E. Murphy, “Job” In: The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, (Englewood Cliffs, 1990), 450 - 451.

The Jewish community, like their neighbors, were not left behind for it was in constant movement and had frequent contact with the elements of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and the Hellenistic world as well. They lived and interacted with the pagans, the people of other cultures. A variety of religions and philosophical systems offered wisdom and/or a view of the real meaning of life. The result of this was the existence of a new outlook on the world around them and the individualistic mentality, skepticism and, above all of these, dissatisfaction with traditional ideas and teachings.

In ancient Israel there were three principal intellectual and spiritual currents: The priest, the prophet, and the sage. The third strand, that is, the sage, in the pattern of Jewish religious and cultural creativity was what influenced the author of the Book of Job.² The Law (*Torah*), which was the preoccupation of the priest and later of the scribe, and the vision, which was the experience of the prophet and later of the apocalyptic, these two, did not exhaust the range of spiritual activity in ancient Israel.

The sage cultivated wisdom, which was more inclusive and more concrete in dealing with the problem of the transcendence of God, the problem of evil, the question of retribution and the problem of human suffering. The sages were less concerned with the will of God than the way of the world. Observation and reasoning therefore, needed to be applied to the practical problems of daily life, one's destiny after death, the basis of morality and the problem of evil. In seeking to penetrate the great abiding issue of suffering and death of the innocents, the sages, or wisdom writers, were unwilling to rely on tradition and conventional ideas of their time. The wisdom teachers, at the same time, stressed the efficacy of righteous living. In their effort to understand human existence, the

² Robert Gordis, The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 30.

wisdom teachers aimed at reducing the arbitrary and unpredicted elements in life. They held that there are moral laws that govern life, of which God is the custodian and guarantor.³ Prudent choice and blameless behavior could lead to the knowledge of these. As a result, one could live in harmony and be assured of happiness and success in life.

In the experience of the Exodus from Egypt, Yahweh had revealed himself to his people Israel as a God whose justice was salvific. His intervention produced justice, the state in which all had what they ought to have. In Exodus 3:7-8 we read, *"I have indeed seen the misery of my people... and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them..."* If Israelites were oppressed and were suffering, Yahweh would rescue them, If they sinned, he would punish them.⁴ This concept of God's justice was applied to the lives of individuals; thus, sinners suffer and the righteous prosper.⁵ It was the decline of faith in the fortunes of the nation, coupled with the growth of interest in the individual person and in his/her destiny, his/her personal happiness and success, his/her fears and hopes, that stimulated the development of wisdom. Wisdom was not concerned with the group, but with the individual, with the realistic present rather than with a longed-for future.

³ MacKenzie and Murphy, *NJBC*, 467.

⁴ Cf. Exodus 20:2, Judges, Prophets and Deuteronomic tradition

⁵ Cf. Proverbs and Traditional wisdom. The exercise of retributive justice that is, the upright were to be rewarded by God for having done and lived good lives on earth. This reward was supposed to be experienced and received while living on earth. On the other hand, those who had sinned were to receive punishment for their sinful acts while still on earth.

Therefore, the aim of the Book of Job "is to confront human suffering in a world created by God. Job insists throughout that there must be some satisfactory answer to this Question. But he never finds it."⁶ Job's questioning, petulance, and anger melt away in the heat of God's overwhelming rhetorical questions. But still, the existence of both God and human suffering remains a mystery for believers.

1.1 WHO WERE THE UPRIGHT?

According to the traditional teaching and belief of the Jews, it was deemed that the rich were the friends of God. They were rewarded (due to their great wealth) and protected by God for their 'innocence' and thus they were taken as a sign of God's justice and love among his people Israel. There was a belief that the rich, who were thought to be innocent and upright, do not perish. The rich, again it was believed due to their great wealth, are not cut off from God's protection and love. Eliphaz tells Job in his speech:

Can you recall anyone guiltless that perished? Where then have the honest been wiped out? I speak from experience: those who plough iniquity and sow disaster, reap just that. Under the breath of God, they perish: a blast of his anger, and they are destroyed (4:7-11).

The Upright, it was believed, were those who had good health since God was seen to reward the good and protect them. Those who had many children and servants around them were also seen as the upright. The upright again were seen as those persons of great material wealth and those who had long life. But human experience contradicted this

⁶ Bill Thomason, God on Trial: The Book of Job and Human Suffering, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1997), 9.

traditional belief and teaching of the Israelites. For Job is described at the outset as a good and just man. Job is a symbol of the just every-person, the good person, the person of faith.⁷ He is a clear example of a true upright person though in the eyes of his friends, this cannot really be true because he suffers and according to their traditional belief and teaching, the upright cannot suffer.

The Israelites also believed that the upright were those who helped the poor and the needy. The upright were thought to be those who took care of the less fortunate in the society. They were also thought to be the helpers of the widows and the orphans. They were, in fact, those who were thought to be standing for justice and those who followed the law (*Torah*). Thus, the upright were those who were to be cherished and admired by many people who knew them. The Israelites believed that the upright lived to their fulfillment and were rewarded with great happiness and plenty.

This was the general belief and teaching of the people of Israel, but the rich were not really the upright in the proper sense. Certainly the life of the rich and their way of living were in contrast with the qualities of the upright. More often than not, it was the poor who stood for justice and followed the law. Therefore, the poor were greatly dismayed by what they saw and what they could learn from experience. It was at this point that experience contradicted the traditional belief and teaching of the people. Were all those who had acquired great wealth upright? Were the sick, the beggars, the poor and the oppressed sinners? Thus Job asks you and me to go just a little farther than the traditional belief of equating human suffering to sin.

⁷ Richard Rohr, Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections, (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 31, 36.

1.2 THE PATH OF THE WICKED:

The Israelites believed that God was punishing those who were undergoing any kind of suffering due to their sins or wickedness. One could not suffer without a cause of that suffering and since God is good and transcendent, he could not be the cause of that suffering. The human person was therefore the cause of his/her suffering and needed to plead to God for forgiveness.⁸ Because of this conception, the wicked were said to have no peace of mind, they suffered black moods and got depressed. They lost their material wealth as well, and their only offspring were mischief, trouble and deceit. Brothers, friends, kinspeople treated a wicked person as an alien or a stranger or an outcast. In fact, they were those who had been ostracized from society. The wicked lived tormented lives,⁹ but the fact is that the wicked were often not punished for their sins. Their prosperity was not fleeting. As Job had said,

*Why do the wicked still live on, their power increasing with their age?
They see their prosperity assured, and their offspring secure before
their eyes. The peace of their houses has nothing to fear, the rod that God
wields is not for them. No mishap with their bull at breeding-time, no
miscarriage with their cow at calving. They let their infants frisk like lambs,
their children dance like deer. They sing to the tambourine and harp, and
rejoice to the sound of the pipe. They end their lives in happiness and go*

⁸ MacKenzie and Murphy, NJBC, 467.

⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent, (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 28.

down in peace to Sheol.¹⁰ Yet these are the ones who say to God, 'Go away!

We do not want to learn your ways. What is the point of our serving

Shaddai? What should we gain from praying to him?' (21:7-15).

Their whole lives are filled with good things of life so that they can go down to *Sheol* in peace. There seems to be no justice in this life. The wicked not only prosper, they actually are honored.

Poverty and sickness were seen as a punishment for the sins of the individual or the family¹¹ or the society as a whole. The lower classes, ground down by poverty and oppression at the hands of domestic and foreign masters, were tormented by the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Holding resolutely to their faith in God, they were nevertheless unable to see divine justice operating in the world about them.¹² It was at this point, that experience did contradict the traditional belief and teaching. Those who had lived a pious and moral life could not understand the meaning of their suffering. If God was to reward their good deeds then, why were they to suffer? If God is just, then why couldn't he protect their lives?

1.3 WHY JOB?

In order to exhibit the tragedy of human suffering, the poet has selected a man of great prosperity who is hurled to the lowest depths of misfortune, rather than a member of the lower classes who has suffered a life time of poverty and misery.¹³ The author of the

¹⁰ *Sheol* is the great leveler where there are no distinctions between Kings and Princes, and the lowliest laborer. It is a place of rest for the dead (the grave), cut off from the full vitality of earthly existence and cut off from God.

¹¹ Gutierrez, *On Job*, 6.

¹² John Tal Murphree, *A Loving God and a Suffering World*, (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1981), 48.

¹³ Gordis, *God and Man*, 46.

Book of Job, was roused to indignation, not by human's intellectual limitations in a world he/she had not made, but rather by human's suffering in a world into which he/she had not asked to be born. Thus, the Book of Job struggles with one of the profound questions we can ask – why do innocent and good people suffer? There are only two possible answers to this question. “We can believe that these things just happen and that there is no explanation for them and that we must bear them the best we can. Or we can believe there is some explanation that would at least intellectually satisfy us.”¹⁴ Job tries to find out the meaning of his suffering that will at least satisfy him and his friends as well. He is unable to find the meaning of human suffering in the traditional belief and teaching.

‘Why do innocent people like himself have to suffer?’ He appeals to God for an answer.

The author brings into the picture the four friends of Job namely, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and later Elihu, to act as the preservers of their traditional faith, the certain, the knowing and the defenders of God. The disagreement between Job and his friends focuses on what the explanation is for the suffering of the upright. For Job's friends the explanation is that suffering is a sign of sinfulness, and one suffers because he/she has sinned and is being punished for sin. The author, I suppose, undertook to show that God may have other purposes than merely the exercise of retributive justice. As a medium, he chose an old story that was no doubt familiar to his contemporaries: Ezekiel 14:14,20 “refers to three legendary figures of the past, Noah, Daniel and Job as proverbial for their righteousness”.

¹⁴ Thomason, God on Trial, 84.

The author rejects the traditional answer to human suffering but offers no new solution. Job challenges the accepted wisdom of his day by citing his experience against that of his friends. The author uses a non-Jewish name (Job) in order to give his story a universal appeal that transcends national boundaries.¹⁵

The author of the Book of Job knew that suffering is a mystery, thus he comes to the understanding of this with all the wisdom available for his time. He tried to deal with the profound theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of a just man, Job.

¹⁵ Gutierrez, On Job, 3.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE MAN JOB:

Is Job a historical figure? If so, then when and where did he live? Just who is Job? The readers may be tempted to ask more of these questions and certainly many scholars have asked them too. I would love to make it clear to my readers from the very beginning of this chapter that I would rather take the book as it is presented to us. You may have noticed that even in dealing with the context and the problem of the author of the Book of Job, I did not make any reference to a particular date of the writing of the Book of Job. This dateless nature of the work would refer to the timelessness of the problem of the innocent suffering that is at all times and in all ages.

Job¹⁶, we read, lived in “the land of Uz” (1:1). Unfortunately the position of the land of Uz cannot be closely determined. Some scholars maintain that this land may have been part of Edom, but with no certainty. The author’s choice of the name “Job” and the land of “Uz” most likely would refer to the universality of the problem of human suffering. Since human suffering is a reality which no person could and can boldly deny, the author chooses Job, a non-Jew, as his hero. Thus there is no reason to affirm or to deny the historical existence of Job¹⁷ for Job would be a historical figure among us even today. The references to Job in Ezekiel 14:14,20 and to his perseverance in James 5:11 imply his historicity no more than the parable of the Good Samaritan in the gospels would demand a historical background.

¹⁶ The name *Job* in its Hebrew form *iyob* means “the persecuted” or “the one attacked”

¹⁷ John McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1965), 440.

The story tells us that Job, who had lived a very happy and a prosperous life, is suddenly reduced to great misery of mind, body and estate. From Psalms 22 and 102, we also get the description of the suffering of the innocent and their cry like that of Job. The friends of Job, who come to console him and to counsel him to pray for forgiveness, present us with the reality of the problem of innocent suffering. Job insists both on the extremity of his misery and on the absence of any wrongdoing that would justify the imputations of his friends.¹⁸ Job learns, under the prodding of his friends, that the theory or the dogma that all shared of retribution is false.¹⁹ Otherwise, Job should not have suffered the misfortune that had befallen him. Therefore, Job is able to bypass the problems of the observance of Jewish ritual law, “which loomed so large in the religious consciousness of the integrity and piety of those who fear God and avoid evil.”²⁰ Job is prepared and is ready to challenge the religious and social authority of the experts in the law and the usual view of his contemporaries of equating suffering with the sinfulness of a person. He is attacking the very foundation of the religious and the traditional belief and teaching - namely, how could the upright suffer while the wicked prosper?

Yet Job, a man of integrity and honesty (1:1), a sound and honest man who feared God and shunned evil, a man of a happy family²¹ and of great material wealth²² (1:2-5), this great and perfect man, a servant of God, is the one that the author chooses to grapple with the crucial questions, which had remained the greatest stumbling blocks to the

¹⁸ Patrick O’Boyle, “Job” in The New Catholic Encyclopedia: Vol. VII. (USA: Jack Heraty and Associates, Inc., 1981), 999.

¹⁹ O’Boyle, New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1001.

²⁰ Gordis, God and Man, 45.

²¹ Seven sons and three daughters adding up to ten which is a sign of strength, security and perfection, and of the banquets which they were holding from one house to another.

²² Vast number of sheep and goats, of camels for distant journeys and transport, of asses and oxen for work in the fields and many slaves.

religious faith. It is this innocent man that has to suffer the misery of mind, body and estate.

2.1 JOB'S INNOCENCE:

It is essential that Job should be and is a lover of God²³, innocent, a saint so to speak, if he is to be the author's and our main character in the suffering of the innocent. Job is pictured to us as a great man, outstanding for his goodness and blessed with great possessions. With no doubt, Job is blameless, upright, righteous, straightforward, God-fearing, avoiding evil and thus blessed.

This prompts me to equate Job to people like Noah before the flood (Genesis 6:9), like Abraham (Genesis 17:1) and like Jacob (Genesis 25:27), who were complete, sound, free from defect, and whose ways and conduct were perfect. They were those who walked in the law of Yahweh (Psalm 19). But for Job, I suppose, innocence does not mean innocence in the sense of absolute sinlessness,²⁴ but the presence in him of the sins common to humanity, as he maintains and admits. In 13:26; 14:4,16 and 27:5 he says, *"For you lay bitter allegations against me and tax me with the faults of my youth. Who can bring a clean thing out of unclean? No one can! Whereas now you count every step I take, you would then stop spying on my sin. Far from admitting you to be in the right, I shall maintain my integrity to my dying day."* Job's life had offered many opportunities

²³ Gordis, God and Man, 40.

²⁴ Antonio Magnate, Why Suffering? The Mystery Of Suffering In The Bible, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 131.

of wrongdoing, but he had refused to use them.²⁵ He adhered constantly to the path of right.

We also read that Job took consideration to the poor, the widows and the orphans, as a Jewish gentleman would do (31:16-21). Job had never departed from the way of rectitude, nor consented to deprive his neighbor of anything of his that his eyes coveted, nor had any fruit or stain of unjust gain or fraud ever struck to his hands.²⁶ Job had never lurked about his neighbor's house secretly watching till he should go out so as to obtain access to his wife (31:9). He had never treated his slaves despotically, but had been governed by the thought that the same God who had lavished such care on him in the womb had lavished no less on his slaves.²⁷ Job's hospitality had been so universally and richly shown to all strangers and passers-by.²⁸ Job's wealth had never tempted him to ignorance (31:24-28). If traces of Job's life were to be followed one by one, then for sure, he would be declared innocent. He is a man of good thought, good words and good actions, and to these he testifies his integrity.

Job reveals a wholly admirable quality in his innocence. Yet in this moral courage and scorn for the mob, there is at least an echo of the pride of the well-born and well-circumstanced person. He is renowned for his righteousness yet he suffers. This suffering of Job presents his friends with a hard choice. They can either admit the facts and give up

²⁵ Gordis, *God and Man*, 42.

²⁶ Samuel R. Driver and George B. Gray, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 264.

²⁷ Before the Jewish law, slaves had some (Exodus 21:1-11), but few, rights.

²⁸ Driver and Gray, *Critical Commentary*, 270.

their dogma, or they can deny the facts and cling to their dogma.²⁹ But Job's belief is that God will be fair and will exonerate him sometime, somehow, somewhere. And whether or not God appears, Job is not ready to compromise his innocence by giving in to sins he had not committed.

2.2 JOB'S CRY:

In Job 13:23-24 we read:

"How many faults and crimes have I committed?

Tell me what my misdeed has been, what my sin?

Why do you hide your face, and look on me as your enemy?"

Job's strength is shattered to the point that the only future he can hope for is death and so he cannot stop crying, though innocent. He becomes impatient when death is so long in coming so as to release him from his pains. He has been stripped of everything. His great wealth is gone. His seven sons and three daughters are all dead. The slaves are gone. Happy and peaceful moments that he used to have around him have suddenly fallen into sad, dark and gloomy moments. As if these were not enough, his very self, his body, his flesh, has been smitten with a malignant and loathsome disease that leaves no corner of his body sound. What other hope can one expect from a man like Job? Who will rescue him from this misery of pain, suffering and death?

Ruthlessly assailed by God and abandoned by other people, ostracized from the community, even by those nearest him. Job is already little better than a skeleton and his hold on life precarious.³⁰ He has suddenly turned into a laughing stock (30:1-2). Even the

²⁹ Thomason, God on Trial, 84.

³⁰ Driver and Gray, Critical Commentary, 168.

young children mock at Job's diseased appearance and at the difficulty with which he can rise from the ground (30:8-10). Nobody wants to be close to Job, not even to associate themselves with him. The three friends caught sight of Job, "a conspicuous object on the lofty ash-mound, while they were still some distance away."³¹ When they draw near enough to discern his features, they find them marred by disease beyond recognition (Cf. Isaiah 52:14). And for a whole week they sit there, dumbfounded, unable even to utter a word with him.

After seven nights of sitting surrounded by his friends, Job "broke his silence and cursed the day of his birth":

"Perish the day on which I was born and the night that told of a boy conceived. May that day be darkness, may God on high have no thought for it, may no light shine on it. May murk and shadow dark as death claim it for their own, clouds hang over it, eclipse swoop down on it. See! Let obscurity seize on it, from the days of the year let it be excluded, into the reckoning of the months not find its way. And may that night be sterile, devoid of any cries of joy! Let it be cursed by those who curse certain days and are ready to rouse Leviathan. Dark be the stars of its morning, let it wait in vain for the light and never see the opening eyes of dawn. Since it would not shut the doors of the womb on me to hide sorrow from my eyes" (3:2-10).

Like Jeremiah 20:14-18, these are cries of torment in a cruel situation. This is an outpouring of bitter grief. Job cries for the day of his birth to be obliterated from the calendar, swallowed up in darkness, as if it had never been.

³¹ Driver and Gray, Critical Commentary, 165.

What has happened to Job is so terrifying in its implications that it threatens even the order God established in creation.³² Job curses and cries also for the night of his conception (3:3). This night too should perish and be obliterated. Human history should be as if that night had never occurred. This night should be a never ending darkness and should be barren for ever, a night when no cry of joy is heard – that is, a night in which no child is conceived, much less conceived in happiness and in joy.

Job is so desperate for his plight not to occur again that “he goes so far as to invoke outlawed powers in bitterness and anguish.”³³ If Job’s existence could not have been cut off at its very beginning, then perhaps it might have been cut off at birth. This is Job’s wish: “*Why did I not die at birth...*” (3:11-19). The words of Job are rolling like thunder. Job is saying he would have been better off going straight to *sheol*, the abode of the dead. However inferior existence may be there, it is preferable to Job’s present condition. Job asks a bitter question of why people suffering as he does are compelled to go on living: “*Why give light to a man of grief? Why give life to those bitter of heart, who long for a death that never comes...*” (3:20-26).

Job recognizes his relationship, his kinship with the many people who suffer as he does but are unable to articulate their feelings (12:4-6). Job has lost his great wealth, family, social status and suffers from a skin disease. But the real source of Job’s anguish is deeper than any particular loss or pain. It is not the suffering itself, but rather what this suffering implies (sinfulness) that calls for Job’s cry of anguish. Job’s sickened condition is such that no food appeals to him. It is repulsive. Food that should nourish him, he is unable to swallow. Why doesn’t God just go ahead and kill me? Job asks.

³² Thomason, God on Trial, 13.

³³ Thomason, God on Trial, 20.

“Job no longer has the strength to bear his suffering.”³⁴ He is like an orphan now without any external resources. He expected compassion from his friends. Instead, he has been attacked. His friends have added yet another burden for Job to bear their lack of understanding. “Job knows he is innocent, yet all of the evidence, according to the accepted beliefs of his day, is against him.”³⁵ Therefore, he no longer seeks to convince his friends, or asks them to be just to him; he simply asks them to be kind to him. At least to be compassionate.

2.3 JOB’S STRENGTH:

Despite his many sufferings, Job’s response to his friends is radical. “Existence for him is a gift from God.”³⁶ Job has based his life on the implicit belief that the universe is orderly and reasonable, “that he could know that order and conduct his life in accord with it, and that as a consequence, he could confidently expect certain good things from life.”³⁷ But now his undeserved and unexplained suffering calls that into question and threatens to plunge him into despair. Job still holds on and hopes that his cry of anguish must be answered.

This kind of calamity does not befall an innocent person, Eliphaz tells Job (4:2-9). One reaps what he sows; the innocent do not perish, only the guilty. Eliphaz states this assumption explicitly, and the implication is inescapable. Most likely, Job must have done something wrong to deserve what has happened to him. Thus the reason why people

³⁴ Thomason, God on Trial, 33.

³⁵ Thomason, God on Trial, 24.

³⁶ Gutierrez, On Job, 8.

³⁷ Gutierrez, On Job, 12.

suffer is because they have sinned.³⁸ But Job knows that he is innocent and thus God and nobody else would vindicate him because it is difficult even for his friends to understand why he suffers. It is the belief and the hope of Job that God will be fair and will exonerate him.

Basically, Job has raised the issue at stake by appealing to justice. God is supposed to be just, according to the belief of the people of Israel. If Job were innocent, then a just God would appear and hear his case. But God has not answered Job. And since Job is innocent, he is forced to the conclusion that God is not just. Isn't God's seeing different? Doesn't God see into the human heart and know people as they really are? Surely, God knows that Job is innocent. And because of Job's integrity, Job can stand in the presence of God fearlessly. He is bold enough to question God and God to answer him and/or God to question him and him to answer if that can help him confront the mystery of human suffering that face him.

Job therefore, has shown us that human suffering is not always due to punishment for sins. The facts and the experiences of human existence are against it.³⁹ And Job being an example, demands justice from God because he is innocent. But, does God need to be just? God does what is right. God's righteousness is infinitely beyond any human concept of justice.⁴⁰ Be that as it may, Job does not hold his tongue for he is innocent and the voice of the ever living Job will always continue to echo, in every nation and at every age in human history.

³⁸ Thomason, God on Trial, 18.

³⁹ Thomason, God on Trial, 86.

⁴⁰ Fr. Aelred Lacomara's class notes on the Book of *Job*.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE INNOCENT IN OUR SOCIETY (KENYA):

The story of Job and the experience of human suffering did not end with the man Job presented to us in the Book of Job. Job's passion goes on in the passion of our suffering people. "Everywhere we find a thirst for justice, a hunger for equality and a yearning for brotherhood."⁴¹ The experience of Job is still the experience of many people in our society today. In fact, the cry of the many 'Jobs' continues to echo in our midst every minute and in every hour of the day. The experience of human suffering like in Job, still remains a universal problem.

The experience of suffering in Kenya and indeed in Africa as a whole gives me a certain feeling that things seem to have got out of hand. Too often, we experience hope thwarted, salvation opposed, the human situation threatened. "Sorrow overpowers rejoicing in too many human lives, and the thread of suffering woven through human history seems to gain texture and destiny in proportion to human progress."⁴²

The world for an African ought to be harmonious, balanced and good. Accordingly misfortune, which means imbalance and disharmony in the universe, does not just happen. If and when it does happen, it is because there is a malevolent cause, either human or supra human.⁴³ Morality in many African Societies demands that these

⁴¹ Leonardo Boff, Way of the Cross - Way of Justice, (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 7.

⁴² Theological Studies: September 1999, Vol.60, NO.3, "Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx" by Kathleen McManus, 476.

⁴³ Laurenti Magesa, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 174.

causes of disruption and affliction in human life, and their motivations, be identified.⁴⁴ Even if a person goes against the traditional beliefs and teachings, and happens to be the victim, it was/is still important that the fact of one's suffering be known and something be done about it.

Looking at the faces of many Kenyans today, we see (as presented to us on the television and by the press) an immediately obvious image. It is the image that consists of the starving people and rioters in the townships, immense growth of slums and the poor farmers, increasing numbers of accidents and the desperate street children, increasing cases of rape of poor young women and girls, and the AIDS pandemic ravaging families and homes, leaving behind innumerable orphans who innocently have to suffer the consequences of the tragedy. The image is clear, as Boff says, speaking of a similar situation in Latin America, "it is the image of countless people who are defamed, isolated, persecuted, hurt in their work life and family life, incarcerated, tortured, exiled or displaced and people condemned to heavy assaults."⁴⁵ Fortunately or unfortunately, these and many more are our daily experiences in Kenya. This is certainly the image of Kenya and of many Kenyans as well. This is the plight of the present 'Jobs' who heed the value of their sufferings.

The cry of Job goes on in the plight of our afflicted and suffering people today as they continue to ask, 'What good comes of all these? What is life really about? Can there be any meaning or purpose in life? Is it really worth living? If there is a good God, how can he permit such things to happen?'

⁴⁴ Magesa, African Religion, 175.

⁴⁵ Boff, Way of the Cross, 9.

3.1 WHO ARE THE INNOCENT?

I would like to mention that the experiences of suffering in Kenya are complex and that it may be difficult for me to make a kind of synthesis. This complexity of the problem of human suffering in Kenya brings about many different categories of the innocent suffering in our streets, at our doors and in our houses. I will briefly have a look at some of these categories.

The Poor:

The poor in Kenya can be termed as those who have lost power and control over their destiny. That is to say, other people have taken over this power, so that the poor are typically a dependent lot, obliged to pay with their freedom the basic things that are right of any human being.⁴⁶ They are those individuals and groups who in one way or another, are deprived of what makes for a decent and happy human life: food, water, shelter, clothing, land, security, freedom and control over their life.

Victims of Ethnic clashes:

In Kenya, land has become an important asset. It has been privatized so as to legalize land concentration regardless of the concomitant consequences to the landless people.⁴⁷ Many Kenyans are forced to live as displaced people because the notion of community and social obligation is so strong within different groupings that others or neighbors are neglected and are killed. Blood of innocent Kenyans is shed mercilessly in

⁴⁶ Patrick Kililombe, *Cry of the Poor in Africa*, (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1987), 202.

⁴⁷ Francis Wambua Mulwa, *Enabling the Rural Poor Through Participation*, (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1994), 52.

many parts of Kenya everyday. This experience calls for dialogue, healing and reconciliation among different communities.

Famine Victims:

In the face of hunger, all hope seems lost. Life becomes meaningless and the future seems hopeless. This is a daily experience of many in Kenya.⁴⁸ Certainly, many people are forced by circumstances to go without a meal or with a single meal a day.

Victims of Rape:

Many lives have been shattered and many children too born out of rape. Not so long ago, “on the night of May 28, 1996, a man violently broke Pauline Wahito’s door after she had refused to open. The thug, in a night-long-orgy, brutally raped Pauline leaving her badly bruised and unconscious.”⁴⁹ Later, Pauline learnt that she had been infected with HIV/AIDS. In the same manner, a 20-year-old woman was gang-raped before she was murdered in her family’s city house in *Umoja One Estate*. She was preparing to go to school when the rapists broke into their house. The girl’s, (Miss Damaris Wanjiru’s) half-naked body was found lying in a pool of blood in the sitting room.⁵⁰ These and many more,⁵¹ are the stories that we read on our Newspapers and magazines.

⁴⁸ “Face of Hunger,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), Monday, September 18, 2000, 8.

⁴⁹ “The Big Issue: A Life of Courage with AIDS,” *East African Standard* (Kenya), Monday, January 24, 2000, 1.

⁵⁰ “Gangsters Murder Woman: Daytime attack shocks city’s Umoja Estate,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), Friday, September 22, 2000, 5.

⁵¹ “Sunkuli’s Rape Case Goes to CJ,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), Tuesday, September 19, 2000, 1. (A Honorable Minister in the Office of the President accused of a rape case. The victim recounts how the Minister repeatedly raped her on the red carpet in his office thus resulting to a conception and birth of a baby boy.)

Street Children:

These are the children for whom the streets have become their only known home. Some of these children have been born in the streets, others have been abandoned by their parents in the streets, while others have run away from their homes due to several reasons. They have become victims of sex abuse, drug abuse and have to sleep in the cold outside. Society generally treats these children with cruelty and they are brutally beaten when caught stealing or committing a crime.

Women and Children:

Many women have been deserted by their husbands and/or are left alone with the children in the villages or in the slums to shelter, feed and clothe let alone to pay school fees for their children as well. These women, frequently, have turned to prostitution in order to survive.⁵² They are standing at a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

In many African Traditional Societies, children were seen as the property of their parents, (in the same way, women as the property of their husbands) who had the legal right to treat or mistreat children in any way they saw it fit. The same concept has been carried on to today and is applied by many parents and guardians on their children. Thus today, children are used in sex trade, burnt with irons or doused with paraffin and set aflame as a form of punishment. Children are so severely beaten that they are disfigured

⁵² "Midweek: Where is the alternative if prostitution is not right?" *East African Standard* (Kenya), Wednesday, March 1, 2000, 3.

for life.⁵³ Child labour is no longer a strange sight in some of our homes and many children are working as house-helps in some of the houses around us.

Aborted Children:

To many women and young girls in our society today, abortion seems to be the right decision at the time of an unwanted pregnancy. The woman may not be ready to carry to term the child of a rapist or she may want to continue with her studies, thus the best option for her could be to abort. But, “from the moment of conception, life must be guarded with greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.”⁵⁴

HIV/AIDS Orphans and Victims:

HIV/AIDS orphans are those children whose parents have died due to HIV/AIDS related illnesses. These children may either be HIV positive or negative. But whether HIV positive or negative, these children do undergo a lot of sufferings in their lives.

Some of them have not known what it means to be a child for they have to work hard in the farm and/or in the house so as to feed themselves and their younger brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, HIV/AIDS victims are those who are living with HIV virus or those with full blown AIDS.⁵⁵ A person with AIDS suffers a lot because, more often than

⁵³ “Lifestyle: Curbing Child Abuse,” *The Sunday Nation* (Kenya), September 24, 2000, 6.

⁵⁴ Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II: Gaudium Et Spes*, 51, (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 255.

⁵⁵ “The Big Issue: A Life of Courage with AIDS,” *East African Standard* (Kenya), Monday, January 24, 2000, 1-8.

not, people will get afraid of him/her and he/she ends up without a friend even if the victim is “innocent”. Is it their fault that they have contracted the disease? Have they sinned that they have to suffer the wrath? These are some of the questions that can be asked when one is in such a difficult situation.

Brutally murdered and/or innocent people jailed without trial:

Many innocent Kenyans are shot and killed mercilessly everyday.⁵⁶ Some are brutally murdered in their struggle for justice and human rights.⁵⁷ Many innocent people are jailed everyday and are sentenced in our courts to months and years of imprisonment without trial.

Indeed, the history of human struggle for justice and freedom knows few successes. As Boff says in reference to the situation in Latin America, “It is full of martyrs, full of defeats and full of long-standing hopes. It is a history of unrestrained and inexhaustible hope.”⁵⁸ It is a history of inner anguish, terrible fear and depression, abandonment by friends, betrayal, deprivation of freedom, injustice, excommunication, rejection, bodily pain, utter fatigue, misunderstanding, helplessness, a sense of failure and finally death.

3.2 ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INNOCENT:

In African Religion, wrongdoing relates to the contravention of specific codes of community expectations, including taboos.⁵⁹ Taboos can be defined as systems of

⁵⁶ “Shot man innocent, assert kin,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), Friday, September 22, 2000, 52.

⁵⁷ “Why Fr Kaiser was murdered,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), Friday, September 1, 2000, 1.

⁵⁸ Boff, *Way of the Cross*, 99.

⁵⁹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 166.

prohibitions with regard to certain persons, things, acts, or situations.⁶⁰ These objects, which were considered as taboo, were perceived to contain within them a certain assumed danger that always had repercussions against anyone who transgressed them. Thus individuals and the whole community were expected to observe these forms of behavior so as to preserve order and to assure the continuation of life in its fullness with little pain or without pain of suffering at all.

If the community members had perceived that a person's act or attitude was contrary to the accepted codes of ethical living, then the person could be made to understand the effects. The wrongdoer could be made to feel remorse or shame for the wrong committed. The community could insist that the wrongdoer redress the wrong, thus be led to admit and confess in an appropriate rite of reconciliation (including some form of punishment for the wrongdoer) with the community, with the ancestors and with God.

On the other hand, if the person presumed guilty by the society or the community does not feel shame and does not admit wrongdoing, then means are sought to prove innocence or guilt.⁶¹ The community could then apply either legal means, for example, a trial before a chief, but in most cases the means were religious. In the African mentality, wrongdoing (which meant sin/evil committed by a person) always has consequences to the wrongdoer and at times to the wrongdoer's community. Consequences may come in form of calamities such as various afflictions, usually perceived as illness, which eventually could lead to the death of a wrongdoer or a misfortune to the society.

⁶⁰ Magesa, African Religion, 75.

⁶¹ Magesa, African Religion, 169.

The Luo⁶² believed that death reflects God's (*Nyasaye's*) wisdom, since how could life go on without death? The earth would soon be filled up. There would not be enough pastures for the cattle, not enough land on which to build houses and not enough fields to cultivate.⁶³ But even with such kind of a belief, the Luo still hold that there was no natural death expect at old age. Every human suffering and human death had a cause and the cause of human suffering and of death⁶⁴ had to be known when one was either very ill or before the burial of a dead person. A magician or a witchdoctor had to be consulted so as to determine who was/is to blame for the sufferings and the death of a person.

In Kenya, society today has come to perceive AIDS as a disease affecting 'sinners' that is to say, the prostitutes, the drug addicts, the sexually promiscuous people and even the women, the truck drivers and the poor. Thus AIDS is seen as an epidemic due to God's punishment for licentious sexuality, promiscuity or some other unthinkable irreligious transgression.⁶⁵ As a result of this, the sufferers of the disease are cut off from social networks, which are the critical survival asset for the poor.⁶⁶

Certainly, there is a general fear within many people who find it difficult to come close or to be in contact with the AIDS victims. The result is that the AIDS victims end up without friends or, worse still, is that the few friends who remain around them demand their proof of innocence just like the friends of Job probed him to prove his innocence. If their suffering is not due to their sinfulness, then let them prove it.

⁶² Luo is a Nilotic ethnic group of people living along the shores of lake Victoria in western part of Kenya.

⁶³ A.B.C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*, (Sweden: Uppsala, 1976), 169.

⁶⁴ Martin Nkafu Nkumnkia, *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999), 118.

⁶⁵ Regina W. Wolfe and Christine E. Gudorf, *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 381.

⁶⁶ Deepa Narayan, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 246.

On the other hand, while other people continue to equate AIDS with divine punishment, other churches continue implicitly to link AIDS with 'sin'. The Catholic Church, for example, has framed its calls for compassion towards persons with AIDS "with a reminder of its sexual morality, thus of the 'sinfulness' that caused their infection in the first place."⁶⁷ Therefore, the innocent sufferers find themselves dejected, rejected, abandoned and ostracized from the society. Like Job, they have suddenly been striped of everything and turned into a laughing stock, a people despised and rejected by many.

3.3 THE SUFFERINGS AND THE CRY OF THE INNOCENT:

The pain of human suffering is real.⁶⁸ And no human person can certainly deny such a fact. Human suffering is unwanted pain. We do not like it. We do not even choose it. It is against our will. It is a personal distress, a pain we know as misery. It defies rejection. It forces itself upon us and also forces a response from us.⁶⁹ Human suffering seems so unfair, so unjust and so wrong. Suffering inevitably raises the question in those who suffer, Why? Why me? Why me Lord? Why this suffering? Suffering is something that cries out for an explanation. It is making us aware of its presence and like Job, it forces us to look for its meaning.

Human suffering consumes a person interiorly and makes one a burden to others. The person therefore, feels condemned to receive help and assistance from others and at

⁶⁷ Wolfe and Gudorf, *Ethics and World Religions*, 381.

⁶⁸ Richard J. Gilmartin, *Suffering: Issues of Emotional Living in an Age of Stress for Clergy and Religious*, (USA: Mercantile Printing Company, 1984), 16.

⁶⁹ Gilmartin, *Suffering*, 24.

the same time seems useless to himself/herself. One would possibly be tempted to ask as Job had asked, 'Why doesn't God just go ahead and kill me?' This is at times the most common experience of physical pain for those who are weighed down with a chronic illness.

Despite the psychological and the material consequences of the pain and suffering that the innocent people in our society are undergoing, they also have to face rejection, shame and social isolation from the community. The innocent sufferers are asked by the community "to endure the worst plight a human being can experience,"⁷⁰ that is, they are asked to die feeling abandoned by relatives and friends, and by God for whom they lived and sacrificed their lives. They have tried to live 'good' and moral lives in the society but all in return is pain and suffering.

The innocent in our society suffer physically as experienced in disease and illness (AIDS), accident and aging. They suffer psychologically as experienced in depression, anxiety and loss. And they suffer spiritually as experienced in 'sin', alienation and loss of the divine in their lives. Human suffering makes some people to think that God is cruel, that he tortures and torments those who suffer. For, if God is all-powerful and all-loving, then how can he permit suffering?

The cry then is that, at the bottom of one's cup of life, at the end of one's toil and sweat, after a person's dreams have been dreamt, there is a graveyard waiting for him/her, and worse, for those he/she loves, from whom the mere thought of separation leaves him/her utterly destroyed.⁷¹ Who then can explain the mystery of human suffering and death? What is life all about? 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,' says Qoheleth.

⁷⁰ Boff, Way of the Cross, 100.

⁷¹ Carlo Carretto, Why O Lord? The Inner Meaning of Suffering, (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 23.

My dependence on reason and traditional beliefs no longer help me, my heart grows dry, and my strength leaves me. In darkness I feel that I must search elsewhere, and possibly need to turn to a witchdoctor. It is not easy. But Job says that it is better to turn to God. This “turning to God is an experience of the mystery of God’s love.”⁷² Thus Job says, “*Before, I knew you only by hearsay, but now, my eyes have seen you*” (42:5). That which is always and everywhere present has been, at long last, noticed, acknowledged and accepted by Job. It is no longer a search for meaning but an experience of God himself.

⁷² Carretto, Why O Lord?, 25.

CHAPTER FOUR:

GOD'S JUSTICE AND LOVE:

Human experiences of pain and suffering, as we have seen in the cases of Job and the innocent suffering in our society, tend to change one's perception of God. Job cries in 19:7, "*Behold, I cry out, 'violence!' but I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice.*" The experience of human pain and suffering indeed, becomes a critical question about God. For almost every person of religious conviction, the most difficult test of faith comes with the suffering of oneself and with the suffering and death of a loved one.⁷³ In such a situation, a believer is challenged to ask, "If God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can he permit suffering? How are we to speak of the God of life when cruel murder on a massive scale goes on in the corner of the dead?"⁷⁴ Is there a just suffering or justice in human suffering?"

When we are truly bereaved, expressions like "God has a bigger plan" fall flat. It is true but all wrong. For at the moment of pain, suffering and death, what we may want to do is to curse God.⁷⁵ To tell a person, "We know you have lost your wife, husband, child, father, mother, brother or sister, but we know he/she is up in heaven now!" – is a sufficient answer only for a person who hasn't lost a wife, husband, child, father, mother, brother or sister. The question of pain and suffering forces upon us the most serious questions about the meaning and goal of human life. What we desire and hope for is to understand, to know the truth, but we seem not to reach our ultimate desire.

⁷³ Richard Lucien, What are they saying about the theology of suffering? (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 4.

⁷⁴ Gutierrez, On Job, 102.

⁷⁵ Rohr, Job and the Mystery of Suffering, 13.

The basic human experience in the world is that of finiteness, of negativity and of contrast. Walter Kasper writes: "No one has experienced humanity to the full unless he/she has experienced its finiteness and suffering. But then experience becomes a way of leading into an open immensity, into a mystery that is ever greater and never to be plumbed."⁷⁶

4.1 BEYOND JUSTICE:

For many people and in many cultures of the world, God is thought to be the ultimate holder of the moral order. God is believed to be a good judge⁷⁷ and therefore, justice is seen to be for God. The people of Israel believed that God punishes the sinners and rescues those who are good (Genesis 7:1 and Exodus 20:5). Thus the instruments for God's will to punish are death, droughts, floods, locusts, earthquakes and other natural calamities.

The people of Israel believed in strict retribution by God. But even though the Israelites also believed that God was the ultimate holder of the cosmic order, the sustaining of that cosmic order was readily deployed to legitimate political order.⁷⁸ It was simply assumed that the order was right and to challenge the system was tantamount to blasphemy. There came, however, a recognition in Israel that political and religious powers could be unjust and oppressive. Thus there were voices of protest like that of Job, but in a world-view in which everything was traced back to God, this meant challenging God himself.

⁷⁶ Walter Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 84.

⁷⁷ Ocholla-Ayayo, Traditional Ideology and Ethics, 168.

⁷⁸ Wilfrid Harrington, The Tears of God: Our Benevolent Creator and Human Suffering, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 26.

Justice is seen by Job's friends and it is also seen by many people in our society today, as the principle of fairness, that is to say, that like cases should be treated alike. Many people see justice as a particular distribution of benefits or rewards and burdens fairly in accordance with a particular conception, belief or teaching of a given society. Furthermore, human justice demands that punishment should be proportionate to the offence.⁷⁹ Thus a person who commits a crime or a sin is to be punished accordingly and in this way people would see and claim justice as prevailing. God was seen in Israelite traditional society and he is also seen by many people in our society today in this manner of retributive justice whereby he punishes the sinners (Genesis 3:14-19) and he rewards the good.⁸⁰

Among the *Luo* community, it is believed that God holds justice. Therefore, the breaking of a social order whether by the individual or by a group is ultimately an offence by the individual or the corporate group against God. The *Luo* classify offences and the consequences that would result from committing such crimes. Thus the offences like, people eating meat of a stolen animal belonging to a member of the community, committing incest, murder and witchcraft have specified consequences.⁸¹ These kinds of offences are seen as going against the nation, against the founder of the tribe and against God.

The *Luo* also believe that if a person does wrong, God will sooner or later punish him/her, but the punishment might affect not just the individual alone, but also the whole

⁷⁹ Harrington, *The Tears of God*, 96.

⁸⁰ This punishment (in form of sickness or death) and reward (in form of wealth or good health) was seen to take place while the person was still living here on earth, as many people did not believe in future life.

⁸¹ Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics*, 111.

community of which he/she is a member.⁸² Therefore for the *Luo*, by committing a particular offence, a person puts himself/herself and the other members of the community in a dangerous situation where God (*Nyasaye*) punishes him/her and the other people related to him/her. But also among the *Luo*, the sustaining of the moral order is deployed to the religious order or political order.

In Job's experience of life, divine justice is not given to individuals. The justice of God is not bound by the formalities of human justice. There is the expression of sovereign freedom and goodness.⁸³ Certainly, we see in the Book of Job that God is not a prisoner of the "give to me and I will give to you" mentality. Nothing, no human work however valuable, merits grace, for if it did, grace would cease to be grace.⁸⁴ God is out of space and time and yet he intervenes in our human history. God is eternal. Therefore if one believes that God will really see justice done for the individual while still living here on earth, and this does not really happen according to Job's life experience and according to our experiences, then the fact of the suffering of the innocent demands and requires a belief in future life (16:19-20). It is only in future life⁸⁵ that God will vindicate the innocent suffering. And in fact this is the hope of Job.

Job says to his friends in 21:1-34, "*Listen carefully to my words and let this be the consolation you allow me. Permit me to speak in my turn, and you may jeer when I have spoken. Is my complaint just about a fellow-mortal? Why should I not be impatient? Look at me, and be appalled, and lay your hand upon your mouth. When I think of it I am*

⁸² Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics*, 112.

⁸³ Gutierrez, *On Job*, 90.

⁸⁴ Gutierrez, *On Job*, 88.

⁸⁵ My perception of an afterlife and of retribution beyond death should not dispose me to seek a facile answer to the problem of human suffering and pain.

dismayed, and shuddering seizes my flesh. Why do the wicked still live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? ... Do we often see the light of the wicked put out, or disaster overtake them or the retribution of God destroy their possessions or ... But the wicked themselves should be punished ...” And yet, in Job’s life experience, the wicked are not punished. Where then is God’s justice?

“Job’s thirst for understanding, which his trials and sufferings have awakened and inflamed, is not satisfied by the traditional beliefs and teachings about justice”⁸⁶ as his friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu) are trying to present to him. How can we equate human justice to divine justice, for the two are not and cannot be the same? How can one compare finite to the infinite? Gropingly, and resisting false images, Job looks insatiably for a deeper insight into divine justice and unlimited encounter with the God in whom he believes and hopes. Thus Job comes to an understanding that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. There is therefore, a need to go beyond human understanding of justice.

This way of understanding of the divine justice by Job is not a question of forgetting about the demands of justice. It is certainly a question of positing those demands within the context of God’s gratuitous love.⁸⁷ For God’s love does not seek anything in return and God does what is right.

⁸⁶ Lucien, The theology of suffering, 99.

⁸⁷ Lucien, The theology of suffering, 100.

4.2 GOD'S LOVE:

The reality of suffering is directly connected to our ability to love and therefore to our vulnerability.⁸⁸ A person who can no longer love, even himself/herself, no longer suffers, for he/she is without grief, without feeling and he/she is indifferent. The power of human suffering lies not simply in protest, but also in the fact that the fundamental reason why one suffers is because one loves.

Only when we have come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith. We are able to experience human suffering and even death because and insofar as we love. For the more one loves, the more one suffers. And in this shared understanding, we come to realize our oneness with ourselves, among others and with our God.

If one loves, then one cannot escape suffering. The very meaning of love is to render oneself present even to those who do not choose us and to continue to render ourselves present over and again.⁸⁹ There is no love without sacrifice, no love without pain and suffering, no gift of oneself without self-forgetfulness.⁹⁰ In 1John 4:18 we read, *"In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love. Because to fear is to expect punishment and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love."* By directly facing our fear and actively accepting our suffering with love, we come to discover our true selves. And in that discovery, we find our God.

⁸⁸ Lucien, The theology of suffering, 44.

⁸⁹ Edward J. Farrell, The Father Is Very Fond Of Me: Experiences in the love of God, (New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1975), 52.

⁹⁰ Georges Lefebvre, The Mystery of God's Love, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 116.

the will of God becomes our only good and our only joy. As in the case of Job (19:26-27), our only good and our only joy lies in surrendering ourselves to the will of God entirely.

4.3 HUMAN PLIGHT AND SEARCH FOR GOD:

Harrington says, "One can only be comfortable with God if one's God is a comfortable God. But a comfortable God is a false God."⁹⁵ In most African traditional religious beliefs and in many other Western traditional religious beliefs, strangely God is quite firmly presented as one gravely offended by human sin while, on the other hand, he has been made to appear unaffected by human suffering.

Certainly, when we are prompted by the problem of human pain and suffering, we are obliged to ask, "How are we to speak of the God of life when many people are dying of AIDS everyday? How are we to preach the love of God amid such profound contempt of human life?" These are our questions and this is our continuous challenge. And "*that is why I cannot keep quiet: in my anguish of spirit I shall speak, in my bitterness of soul I shall complain,*" says Job in 7:11.

The cry of Job and the cry of the innocent in our society, becomes their prayer in the face of human suffering. Their cry of anguish thus becomes their essential contact with God. It is always a cry which is a search for God's presence and a personal encounter with God. In the recent past, I had a friendly talk with a HIV/AIDS patient in one of my usual pastoral visits to Mbagathi District Hospital in Nairobi and I was stunned

⁹⁵ Harrington, The Tears of God, 9.

by the expressions of deep faith in God with which she answered my questions and received me. In fact, “in the face of human suffering and pain, everything seems lost; yet at this very moment we do enter on the serious task”⁹⁶ of our encounter with God.

“Suffering brings us to the heart of things.”⁹⁷ When we are happy and everything seems to be on our side, we do not normally feel the need of making a greater effort, we are generally at peace as we are. But when we are faced by trials, by sufferings and by pain, then God’s demands become clear, we come to understand what he asks of us in order to draw closer to him. “Suffering forces us to turn back towards God.”⁹⁸ Human suffering shows in God, the only end we should pursue, the only happiness that we long for and it teaches us to consider the rest solely as means leading us to God.

But this does not mean that we must necessarily come to prefer always or even to choose what is most painful, for that would be out of proportion to our strength, excessive and presumptuous. What we need is simply to desire God and to be able to realize his plan for us. This is not an easy task for it requires us to surrender our entire selves to God. Thus God will lead us into the unknown but we have only to follow him, taking care all the time to go at the pace he asks of us – that is to try to discern how to act in every circumstances.

⁹⁶ Lefebvre, The Mystery of God’s Love, 85.

⁹⁷ Lefebvre, The Mystery of God’s Love, 119.

⁹⁸ Lefebvre, The Mystery of God’s Love, 120.

CONCLUSION:

The story of Job and of innocent suffering in our society is nonetheless, our suffering story too. What I have presented in this essay is not something of the past but, is or could be a cruel present experience and a dark tunnel with no apparent end. But as we have seen throughout this essay, in waiting or in protest or in searching, we have probably heard God's silent steps for God comes. God ever comes, in every moment and at every age. He comes every day and every night in our pain and suffering.

What I have said and written about the sufferings of Job, no doubt prefigured the suffering of Jesus Christ. Jesus, Son of God accepted abandonment, pain, suffering and death precisely in order to reveal God to us as love. And it is this act of love that raises Jesus Christ, and also unites Christian believers with God. It is certainly the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which proves that Christ was upright all along and that his enemies condemned him unjustly. Thus the Christian believers are to see their pain and sufferings in the light of Jesus' cross and resurrection as their restoration to life.

The language that we use at the moment of pain and suffering, as we have seen in the cases of Job and innocent suffering depends on the situation we are in. As in 16:4, Job tells his friends, "*I too could talk as you do, if you were in my place.*" The friends of Job talk as they do because they have not experienced the abandonment, poverty and pain that Job has experienced.⁹⁹ The dividing line is basically drawn by personal experience, which sometimes brings a painfully acquired closeness to God and which Job's friends and many people in our society today, were/are unable to know.

⁹⁹ Gutierrez, On Job, 30.

The friends of Job were all interested in meaning,¹⁰⁰ “Why is this happening?” This approach to human suffering or innocent suffering tends to assume that if we knew the reasons why one suffers, then we would easily cope with the situation. It is really frustrating because these questions about the innocent suffering can hardly get any answer satisfying to the human intellect.¹⁰¹ What is needed on our side is to be attuned to the pain and sufferings of others with love and kindness, and not to cling to the order of the day.

When the innocent people are inflicted with pain and suffering, it seems like a total calamity to them and to us as well. But salvation as we have seen in Job, is born of suffering that is apparently meaningless. It was certainly in his own pain and suffering that Job found the Lord.

Job, like the AIDS victims in our society today, had an experience of human suffering. It was and it is their sufferings that prompt them to cry out for help from God but also from us as well. Dismayed by what is going on around them, they see God as their only source of strength and hope at the moment of suffering. It is my wish that all those who live with pain and suffering, and still try to express their faith and hope in God amid unjust suffering will some day have to say humbly with Job, *“I spoke without understanding marvels that are beyond my grasp but now my eyes have seen you Lord.”*

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Kuira, Ministering To Job And The Innocent Suffering Of Today, (Nairobi: CUEA, 2000), 46.

¹⁰¹ Kuira, Ministering To Job And The Innocent Suffering, 46.

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