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Introduction

God in traditional understanding is considered to be Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient. However, situations where the wicked in the society cherish and prosper, meanwhile the honest and the truthful suffer makes a believer question about the potency and greatness of God. Possible questions that arises includes Is God good? Is God powerful? Why did God allow such things to happen? Is God just/unjust? It is hard for a human with finite understanding to comprehend and understand the reason of the occurrence. This question of the Problem of Evil leads the reader to the concept of Theodicy which makes an attempt to defend God. This paper presents a brief exposition of the understanding of Theodicy in Psalms with special reference to Psalm 73.

1. Theodicy

James L. Crenshaw defines Theodicy as an attempt to defend divine justice in times of aberrant (unexpected or something against what is normally accepted) phenomena that appear to indicate the deity's indifference towards virtuous people.¹ This term 'Theodicy' was first coined by the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhem Leibniz in 1710.² Theodicy is derived from the Greek words *theos* + *dike* which means the "justice of God".³ Marcel Sarot views that though this term was introduced by Leibniz, it could be rightly applied to the tradition before him.⁴ This concept of theodicy is widely discussed among various scholars and theologians across the centuries. Laato and Moor refer to Weber's view where he views theodicy as an attempt to render suffering and evil intelligible.⁵

2. Theodicy in the Old Testament

The problem of theodicy was always felt in the lives of the Israelites. In the Pentateuch, the most comprehensive view of YHWH's righteousness is expressed in Abraham's rhetorical question in Gen 18:25b "Shall he who is Judge of all the earth not act with justice?" Cornelis Houtman explains this question with respect to its context stating that YHWH is a righteous God and he is not a God who makes the innocent suffer with the wicked.⁶ Having a quick look

¹ James L. Crenshaw, "Theodicy," *ABD* 6:8774-75.

² Andrea Poma, *The Impossibility and Necessity of Theodicy: The "Essais" of Leibniz* (Hiedelberg: Springer, 2008), 3.

³ Larry M. Jorgensam and Samuel Newlands, "Introduction," in *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, ed. Larry M. Jorgensam and Samuel Newlands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

⁴ Marcel Sarot, "Theodicy and Modernity," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, eds., Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1.

⁵ Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor, "Theodicy and Modernity," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, x.

⁶ Cornelis Houtman, "Theodicy in the Pentateuch," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, 151.

at the life of the prophets, one can observe that they struggled valiantly with this problem. Many prophets such as Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had big questions about the prosperity of the wicked, sorry fate of the virtuous etc.⁷ Wisdom Literature also contributes to the study of the problem of Theodicy. Book of Job offers several partial answers such as human ignorance, divine mystery, corrective discipline, delayed punishment and rewards considering the problem as an insolvable mystery where the best response would be to remain silent in the presence of the self-revealing creator. Under the Hellenistic influence, Ben Sirra insisting on the metaphysical and psychological answers bring into light that nature rewards the virtuous and punishes the vice, and that evil people suffer psychic stress. Wisdom of Solomon on the other hand accepts both the views emphasizing the Ben Sirraic view keeping in account the experience of the Egyptians who held the Israelites in bondage.⁸

3. Theodicy in Psalms

The Hebrew name of the book of Psalms, תהלים 'Songs of Praise', reflects its final redaction. Fredrik Lindstrom makes a claim that 'Praise and Thanks' comes from the experiences of YHWH who continuously gives and restores life to the Individual, to Israel and to the World. He further states that there is a major genre in the Book of Psalms, תפלות 'prayers' and this occurs more frequently.⁹ The prayers were either composed for use in situations of acute danger for the individual and to small extent for the community. In Psalms, evil is usually existential and victim orientated. Suffering is not a theoretical problem but an experienced reality. Characteristically the experience of God's passivity does not introduce a theoretical denial of God's existence, but rather leads the sufferer into deep existential and religious tribulations. Lindstrom views that this refers to God's temporary inactivity in this world – God is absent, hiding etc. Experiences of being abandoned by God belong to the historical and theological core of the Book of Psalms.¹⁰ Various psalms having been written based on these different life experiences contribute to Theodicy in different ways. Crenshaw highlights that Psalm 37 responds to theodicy by denial, Psalm 49 as an appeal to mystery and Psalm 73 as a liturgy wherein the awareness of the deity's presence in the sanctuary is manifested.¹¹

⁷ Crenshaw, "Theodicy," 6:8775-76.

⁸ Crenshaw, "Theodicy," 6:8776.

⁹ Fredrik Lindstrom, "Theodicy in The Psalms," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, 256.

¹⁰ Lindstrom, "Theodicy in The Psalms," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, 256-57.

¹¹ Crenshaw, "Theodicy," 6:8776.

4. Psalms 73

4. 1. Structure¹²

I.	Superscription	1a
II.	Instruction: Rule and Exception	1b-3
III.	Portrayal of the Godless	4-12
IV.	Complaint	13-17
	A. Description of Suffering	13-14
	B. Reflection; Confession of Guilt	15-16
	C. Account of Reversal	17
V.	Warning	18-20
VI.	Personalized Account	21-26
	A. Reminiscence	21-22
	B. Confidence and Petition	23-26
VII.	Imprecation and Confidence	27-28

4. 2. Genre

Form Critics have not arrived at a consensus concerning the psalm.¹³ Gerstenberger agrees with Marvin E. Tate about the difficulty in determining one genre of the psalm among the 4 proposals from different scholars that are enlisted by Leslie C. Allen. They include wisdom psalm, individual complaint, individual thanksgiving and psalms of confidence.¹⁴ Gerstenberger further highlights a few traces of Individual complaint. But psalm 73 as a whole does not fall into this category.¹⁵ One individual ‘I’ speaks throughout; it can be presupposed that it is directed towards a listening congregation.¹⁶ The text portrays parallel two ideal figures of the ‘godless’ and the ‘pure hearted follower of God’ in a sapiential and argumentative framed in prayer language. Gerstenberger brings in yet another view point as an exemplary ‘Meditation’ having in mind the dramatic struggle for a correct estimation of God, suffering, justice and faith. Gerstenberger finally derives at a proposition as a dramatic Confession of faith highlighting Erich Zenger’s view ‘A Creedal Statement Grown Out of a Crises of Faith.’¹⁷

¹² Edhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, vol 15 of *Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, ed. Edhard S. Gerstenberger (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 2001), 70.

¹³ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* WBC 20 (Texas: Word Books, 1990), 410-11.

¹⁴ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 73; Tate, WBC 20: 410.

¹⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 73.

¹⁶ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 73-74.

¹⁷ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 74.

4. 3. Setting

Gerstenberger views that the psalm was not meant to be recited private but in some kind of public gathering. The author refers to a community gathering of the early Jewish period under the Persian rule where the poem/meditation/confession was used. Its content reveals the *Sitz-im-leben* i.e. the presence of the wicked and the just where the just suffered meanwhile the wicked were found to be in bliss (a state of extreme happiness).¹⁸

4. 4. Intention

In order to stay unified in a very pluralistic culture which is dominated by powerful foreign elements, it was necessary for a faith community like dispersed Israel to have a good amount of self-discipline in the exilic and postexilic times. The need for insistence on the focusing of the attention and dedication towards the only one God was essential for survival. It is significant to note that the exilic and post exilic people contended for the right path to be recognized by YHWH himself. In critical moments of uncertainty the worshippers had to be reassured about the solidarity about their God. It is this goal that had to be maintained as to communicate and teach by means of this Psalm.¹⁹

4. 5. Context and Background of the Text

The Psalm starts with superscription 'A Psalm of Asaph'. Michael D. Goulder ascribes 12 Psalms (50 and 73-83). Asaph is known to be David's senior musician. Goulder sees the german theologian Franz Delitsch in a dilemma with respect to the dating of the Psalm. The dating varied from Davidic to Post-Exilic times.²⁰ Goulder divides the 12 to various occasions such as 'Before the Festival, Opening of the Festival, The Vigil, The Days of Petition, and New Year Celebrations'.²¹ Psalm 73 is included in the before the festivals psalms. Goulder picturizes for the audience context of the Psalm which is quite probable based on exegesis. He leads the readers 732 BC when the Assyrian empire was at the peak of its power. Tiglath Pileser's army defeated the Syrian-Israelite allies, captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh and Hazor, and imposed humiliating terms. Half of the Israelite national territory including Gilead, Galilee and all the lands of Naphtali was annexed to Assyria. Pekah, the king of Israel was

¹⁸ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 74.

¹⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, 75.

²⁰ Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalms, III* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 15.

²¹ Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 5-6.

deposed and killed. Goulder compares Tiglath Pileser or Rabshekah's treatment of the Israelites to the likeness of Hitler's treatment of the French in 1940.²²

Tiglath Pileser III established the characteristic Assyrian policy of deporting conquered populations to alien habitats, where mingling with the natives, they might lose their unity and identity and have less opportunity to rebel.²³ The Army played a vital role in supporting the government.²⁴ Soldiers were rewarded for every severed (cut) head, they had brought from the war field. Most often the prisoners were made to kneel with their backs to their captors. The captors then hit the head with clubs or cut them off with cutlasses. The nobles who were defeated were given even more special treatment. Their ears, noses, hands and feet were sliced off, or they were thrown from high towers, or they and their children were beheaded or flayed alive, or roasted over a slow fire.²⁵

Such was the life of the Israelites who were captured. The Israelites were then deported and enslaved. Some were even killed. His successor Shalmaneser V invaded Israel again in 725. There was no rest for the Godly.²⁶

4. 6. Analysis of the Text

Willem A. WenGemerer gives a chiasmic structure which enables the reader to have a picture of theodicy and its response.²⁷

A Experience and Belief (vv.1-3)

B Prosperity of the Wicked (vv.4-12)

C Personal Reaction (vv.13-17)

D Affirmation of God's Justice (vv.18-20)

C' Evaluation of the Psalmist's Reaction (vv.21-22)

B' The Desire of the Godly (vv.23-26)

A' Experience and Hope (vv.27-28)

The psalm is a prayer arising from the anguish on account of the freedom enjoyed by the wicked while the righteous enduring suffering. The psalmist although seem to possess a slight irritation concerning the prosperity of the wicked, the belief he has over God's justice is the turning point

²² Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 55.

²³ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part I – Our Oriental Heritage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 270.

²⁴ Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 270.

²⁵ Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 271.

²⁶ Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 55.

²⁷ Willem A. VanGemerer, *Psalms*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 780.

that gives a shift in the psalmist's emotions leading to experiences of joy and freedom when reflecting on the fellowship with his YHWH.²⁸ According to VanGemerén, though the problem of the suffering of the righteous has no clear resolution, yet the pain is relieved by the experience of God's presence.²⁹

4. 6. 1. Experience and Belief (vv.1-3)

The Psalmist opens up with the idea that God is good to Israel. The word 'truly' denotes the phenomenon 'despite anything'³⁰ God is good to the pure in heart. It proceeds as an encouragement to the community to hold on to their faith and keep themselves pure in heart and thereby taste the goodness of God.³¹ The term 'pure' here does not refer to perfection but a sense of loyalty towards God in speech, thought and action.³²

The righteous while leading such an upright life, face terrible situations in their life when compared to the blissful life of the wicked. Looking at the happy go life of the wicked the righteous feel jealous and hold on to a feeling of irritation and anger. He/she envies the arrogant.³³

4. 6. 2. Prosperity of the Wicked (vv.4-12)

The Psalmist gives a summary of the power and freedom of the wicked (vv.4-9). They seem to be lethargic and unconcerned about anything. They have a good life with lot of wealth and the increase in power. They seem to enjoy great freedom of movement and speech. They are not aware of any kinds of struggles or sufferings in life. Though their hearts are filled with wicked imaginations and plans, yet it is evident that they prosper.³⁴

They do not regard God or his commandments and their hearts are filled with pride and arrogance. The wicked scoff, boast, and threaten and they are well aware of the usage of their tongue as an instrument of evil, because their heart's imaginations are also filled with evil.³⁵

4. 6. 3. Personal Reaction (vv.13-17)

VanGemerén affirms that it is not easy to react honestly to the prosperity of the wicked while suffering adversity. The Psalmist here acknowledges and admits his problem. Firstly, he

²⁸ VanGemerén, EBC: 780-81.

²⁹ VanGemerén, EBC: 781.

³⁰ Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 55.

³¹ VanGemerén, EBC: 781.

³² VanGemerén, EBC: 781.

³³ VanGemerén, EBC: 782.

³⁴ VanGemerén, EBC: 783-84.

³⁵ VanGemerén, EBC: 784.

confesses that he doubted the necessity of being pure in heart and being innocent.³⁶ Secondly, the psalmist confesses the turmoil of his own experiences. His emotions express self-doubt and envy. The terms ‘plagued’ and ‘punished’ may not refer to sickness but may indicate experiences of mental turmoil.³⁷ Thirdly the psalmist confesses a deep concern for the people of God. He confesses that he thought about removing himself for the sake of the prosperity and peace of his soul, but the Lord kept him from sliding.³⁸ Fourthly, he confesses that though he cannot understand the ways of God (v.16), he experienced a new peace from God when he entered the sanctuary (v.17).³⁹

4. 6. 4. Affirmation of God’s Justice (vv.18-20)

The Lord had not permitted the psalmist to slip into sin, the wicked were doomed to fall. This fall is characterised by the element of surprise (v.19) and an evident judgement of God (v.18). The scripture assures that the wicked will be judged suddenly and completely. All kinds of terrors or troubles overtake them.⁴⁰ The wicked are like a dream which has a sense of reality in a dream but is vanished when awakened. With the coming of God’s righteous judgement the wicked vanish. The godly live with vision that the wicked are nothing but fantasies.⁴¹

4. 6. 5. Evaluation of the Psalmist’s Reaction (vv.21-22)

The Psalmist here considers his reaction to the prosperity of the wicked. He is deeply affected by envy and anguish. Deep inside he feels grieved and embittered, eventually depressed. VanGemeren remarks that the psalmist had to go through such experiences before he could more fully enjoy fellowship with God. Questions, anguish and a sense of stupidity may be used by the Lord to mature his servants.⁴²

4. 6. 6. The Desire of the Godly (vv.23-26)

The experience of pain and anguish held by the Psalmist is here replaced by the joy of God’s presence. God is the psalmist’s chief desire (v.25). He repeats the term ‘with you’ twice (vv. 23, 25 [heb.]) to express the joy of fellowship with God. Because of God’s presence, the psalmist is more assured of his protection and guidance. The Lord guides his servant with wisdom and insight (v.24).⁴³

³⁶ VanGemeren, EBC: 786.

³⁷ VanGemeren, EBC: 786.

³⁸ VanGemeren, EBC: 786-87.

³⁹ VanGemeren, EBC: 787.

⁴⁰ VanGemeren, EBC: 788.

⁴¹ VanGemeren, EBC: 788.

⁴² VanGemeren, EBC: 789.

⁴³ VanGemeren, EBC: 790.

4. 6. 7. Experience and Hope (vv.27-28)

The Psalmist, from the start of the song to the conclusion, is led through a series of experiences and understandings. His perspectives changes in various aspects. Transformation occurs in the thought process as he gets involved in the presence of God. The psalmist, in anticipation of God's just acts of vindication, declares his hope in his God. VanGemeran further highlights a few characteristics where he states that the envy has turned into hope, and God's goodness to Israel is also experienced at an individual level: "it is good for me to be near God" (v.28)⁴⁴

5. Evaluation

In the given psalm a dramatic shift can be observed in the thoughts and mood of the psalmist. The psalmist opens the song with an expression of the personal belief and experience of God. Though, the Psalmist starts with an assertion of the goodness of God, yet it does not satisfy the relationship of God at an individual level. The Psalmist continues to describe his irritation, and anguish towards the prosperity of the wicked. The parallel observations of the prospering wicked and the suffering righteous is making the psalmist's heart fill with envy. In doing so, it was quite probable for the psalmist to slip away, yet God did not allow the psalmist to fall. The psalmist continues to focus and keenly ponders on the life of the wicked and enlists their drawbacks and setbacks. The psalmist is further provoked observing the wicked to prosper inspite of the said drawbacks and setbacks. The psalmist's irritation and hatred towards the wicked continues until the moment he enters into God's sanctuary, and experiences God's presence. It is in this sanctuary that God reveals that the life of the wicked are like fantasy. This instant becomes a turning point in the story where all the bitter feelings of the Psalmists are transformed into joy. With the coming of the new joy, comes the assurance of God's protection and guidance. The song ends with a change in orientation, views and perspectives.

The psalmist deals with the problem of theodicy by providing an assurance to the believers of the divine guidance and protection when they come to the presence of the Lord and rely on his promises. The psalmist here highlights here that the wicked may seem to be prospering but may soon fade away or vanish away at any time. But it is God's guidance and protection that will lead God's people to glory. The psalmist describes a temporal celebration of the wicked along with an eternal glory of the people of God.

⁴⁴ VanGemeran, EBC: 790.

6. Implication

In today's context, it can be seen that there could be rarely any place that is unaffected by corruption. Due to corruption and malpractices found in the government offices, there is a great impact on the people of God. Corruption in finance, injustice in policies (educational, environmental, judicial etc.) has a grave impact on the people. The few power holding individuals by their involvement in such corrupt practices wax strong politically and financially. On the other hand unemployment, poverty, hunger increases in the other part of the society. The rich grows richer and the poor becomes poorer. This aspect has a big impact on the life and faith of the people of God. It makes the believer question the reason of his faith and integrity. In such times, the psalmist's contribution plays a vital role in sustaining the faith of the people of God. The Psalmist's view of looking at the advancement of the wicked as a temporal one and finding joy in the presence of God encourages the believer to further cling on to God inspite of unfavourable circumstances.

Mary Ann Donovan, adds to the view of Theodicy in Psalms 73. Donovan believes that if humankind were not created good or evil by nature, it would be impossible to reward the good and punish the evil.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Irenaeus also believes that, one can scarcely enjoy the good which is got freely by nature compared to the one which he strives and wins.⁴⁶

Conclusion

It may be quite evident to see the wicked in the society prosper, whereas the people of God to be suffering. Psalmist's experience encourages the people of God to find peace and strength in the presence of God. The wicked may exist but their triumph is temporal, but the believer is assured of a hope of a glorious end to which God's own guidance will lead them.

⁴⁵ Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? : A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 132.

⁴⁶ Donovan, *One Right Reading?* , 132.

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