

## READING THE BIBLE FROM THE SUFFERERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Suffering is our common experience. We cannot deny the fact that the world is full of suffering – suffering of all kinds.<sup>1</sup> Suffering has ever been part and parcel of human existence here on earth. Men and women of all times, places and cultures have grappled with this eternal and universal problem. Even today the entire planet is afflicted with the modern social plagues such as global poverty, cruel wars, large scale violence, organized crimes and ever growing unemployment.

The problem of suffering eludes humankind which has not to this day succeeded both in understanding it and in its various attempts to do away with it. We are not able, in spite of the sophistication of our medical care, to save people from suffering

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<sup>1</sup> R. Sparks, "Suffering," in M. Downey (ed), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Bangalore: TPI, 1995) 950, describes suffering as follows: "Suffering may be defined as any experience that impinges on an individual's or a community's sense of well-being. Synonyms include pain, grief, distress, disruption, affliction, imposition, oppression, discrimination, and any sense of loss or of being victimized. The negative experience may be physical, psychological, interpersonal, or spiritual, though in most instances it involves a combination of these. Suffering, then, is one's consciousness of life's dark side, the human experience that all is not peaceful and harmonious in our bodies, in our souls, in our relationships, in the cosmos." See E. S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980).

and death; we only manage to diminish suffering and to postpone death. However the problem of suffering is not so easily dismissed, especially in cases of innocent suffering, when individuals or even whole populations undergo suffering for no apparent reason. As a result we are forced to pose a series of questions – surprisingly questions about God: How can an all-loving and all-powerful God allow suffering? Where is God when human beings suffer? Is God a sadist?<sup>2</sup>

It is despite the non-sense of suffering that the believer affirms the existence of God. All the major religions of the world have shown particular interest in this perennial problem and have tried to make sense out of it by proposing many and varied solutions.<sup>3</sup> However the problem of suffering is not perfectly solved in any system of philosophy or religion and it always remains a mystery. That is why humans always attempt to wrestle with it.

The Bible deals particularly with this important problem elaborately and offers various answers or better, attempts at interpretation.<sup>4</sup> However, they give only theological justifications and often rationalise suffering and provide the basic aetiology for the presence of suffering in 'God's world' (e.g., Gen 2-3), based on certain abstract principles or models depending on different world-

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<sup>2</sup>J. Kuttianimattathil, "God and Suffering – Anecdotes and Parables," *Kristu Jyoti* 14 (1998/IV) 18-19; H. S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981) 2; J. A. Selling, "Moral Questioning and Human Suffering: In Search of a Credible Response to the Meaning of Suffering," in J. Lambrecht and R. F. Collins (ed), *God and Human Suffering* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990) 155; L. Richard, *What Are They Saying About the Theology of Suffering?* (New York: Paulist Press 1992) 4-6, 80-83.

<sup>3</sup>T. J. Van Bavel, "Where is God When Human Beings Suffer?," in J. Lambrecht and R. F. Collins (ed), *God and Human Suffering* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990) 137-153; P. W. Gooch, "Religious Perspectives on Suffering and Evil and Peace-Experience," *Journal of Dharma* 11 (1986) 124-144; J. Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed study, see J. M. McDermott, *The Bible on Human Suffering* (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publication, 1990).

views.<sup>5</sup> They are primarily doctrine-oriented and the sufferer's point of view is not sufficiently articulated as in the non-biblical writings. This can only drive the sufferer to utter despair ending up in miserable death. Hence Dorothy Soelle brands all traditional attempts to find an answer to the problem of suffering as 'theological sadism'.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of this article, therefore, is not to present one more solution to this unresolved problem, but rather to explain how the sufferers perceive this problem and might understand the biblical message as specifically addressed to them and thereby find meaning like Job in the otherwise meaningless suffering.

### **Suffering, the Central Focus of the Bible** ✓

God is generally known in two distinct ways: by reason (theodicy) and by faith (theology). There is yet a third way, namely by experience or personal relationship. God is experienced by humans, and the Bible speaks of the human experience of God, i.e., how the Israelites in the midst of untold suffering and unending servitude, grief and pain, encountered the person of God and experienced him as a liberator. Hence L. J. Hoppe writes: "The experience of grief is something no person can escape. A good portion of the Bible was written in response to this experience."<sup>8</sup>

The central focus of the Bible, according to Walter Brueggemann, is suffering – suffering of the people and suffering of God – rooted in the foundational event of the Exodus (Ex 3:7-10).<sup>9</sup> Jos Luyten also considers the theme of suffering as central to

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Van Bavel, "The Meaninglessness of Suffering and Attempts at Interpretation," in J. Lambrecht and R. F. Collins (ed), *God and Human Suffering* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990) 121-136.

<sup>6</sup> D. Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 24.

<sup>7</sup> D. Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> L. J. Hoppe, "Editorial," *Bible Today* 34 (1996) 3. Also M. Maruvathrail, "The God of Hearsay and the God of Experience," *Kristu Jyoti* 5 (1989/II) 1-7.

<sup>9</sup> W. A. Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 265; "A Shape of Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985) 415; "A Gospel Language of Pain and Possibility," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 (1991) 260-282; "Suffering Produces Hope," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998) 95-103. However T. E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) focuses more on the suffering of God.

the religious experience of ancient Israel, but identifies the Babylonian exile, considered the new Exodus, as the very crucial event,<sup>10</sup> in the light of which the Israelites started to reconsider many of their traditional ways of seeking meaning in suffering.<sup>11</sup>

Incidentally – interestingly too – modern theologians also speak of the social reality of suffering as the context for theologizing – as the starting point and central point of theology.<sup>12</sup> For G. Gutiérrez the basic task of theology today is: How are we to talk about God in the context of Latin America, and more concretely in the context of the suffering of the poor.<sup>13</sup> This is much more true of Indian theology which, as Felix Wilfred has correctly pointed out, needs to begin with the experience of suffering of the victims at the margins of the society.<sup>14</sup>

Written during the early post-exilic period (538-400 BC), which was for the Jewish community a time of great trial and suffering, a time of economic and political oppression and social conflict resulting in a spiritual crisis (Neh 5),<sup>15</sup> the book of Job is the classic biblical discussion of the problem of suffering. It not

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<sup>10</sup> J. Lyuten, "Perspectives on Human Suffering in the Old Testament," in J. Lambrecht and R. F. Collins (ed), *God and Human Suffering* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990) 30.

<sup>11</sup> D. J. Simundson, "Suffering," in D. N. Freedman (ed), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. VI (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 220-224.

<sup>12</sup> J. Moltmann, "Theology in the Project of the Modern World," in V. Miroslav (ed), *A Passion for God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning, and the Christian Self* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 2; J. Sobrino, "Theology in a Suffering World," *Theology Digest* 41 (1994) 25-30; E. K. Kim, "'Outcry': Its Context in Biblical Theology," *Interpretation* 42 (1988) 229-239; W. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 160; D. Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 90; C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987) xviii.

<sup>14</sup> F. Wilfred, "The Shape of Indian Theology," *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) 7.

<sup>15</sup> R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period 2: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (London: SCM Press, 1994) 437-453, 615-649; A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2000) 92-94.

only addresses the question in greater depth and length, but also grounds the arguments on experience, challenging the accepted beliefs of its day in a profound way. As A. R. Ceresko observes, "The questions the book raises and the assertions it makes arise out of *experience*, Job's own personal experience of innocent suffering."<sup>16</sup> Carol A. Newsom clarifies this point further: "He [Job] knows that his friends' common sense and their traditions, their rationality and their revelations are inconsistent with his own experience. For Job, to hold fast to his integrity means to insist on the validity and authority of his own experience, even when it seems to be contradicted by what all the world knows to be true."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, in the book of Job the problem of suffering is not dealt with absolutely, but in terms of one man's agony. Job is in a sense *everyman*, because he is representative of others in situations of suffering and his questions become everyone's questions. This is the reason why the book continues to enjoy universal appeal.<sup>18</sup>

### **Job Suffers Greatly**

Job is a man of personal integrity and a socio-centric personality. As a result he was blessed by God with all the good things that would give him a happy and meaningful life: a faithful wife, many obedient children, true friends, numerous relatives, riches in plenty (cattle, property and slaves), honour in society, good health, etc. He was the greatest (Hebrew adjective *gadol*) person – the ideal wise man – in the then known world (1:1-5; 29:1-25)!

The portrait of Job, masterly depicted by the narrator, catches the attention of the heavenly council. God himself was pleased

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<sup>16</sup> Ceresko, *Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> C. A. Newsom, "Job," in C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (ed), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992) 133.

<sup>18</sup> Ceresko (*Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 91-92) says: "...we rarely come away from a reading of Job without new insights and renewed admiration both for the character of Job himself and for the literary work, a monument of human creativity and spiritual depth."

with his superb character (1:8; 2:3). Even Satan<sup>19</sup> did not doubt Job's integrity, but only suspected his ulterior motives (1:9-11; 2:4-5). This occasioned a wager between Satan and God who accepted the former's challenge and permitted the test to be done.

All of a sudden Job's world began to crumble and a series of calamities rained down upon him in a single day. He was stripped of all his possessions (1:14-17) and was reduced to utter poverty.<sup>20</sup> He was deprived of all his ten children (1:18-19). Left behind without a progeny, he became a man without future (29:18-20) and his name was destined to be blotted out from the face of the earth (TJob 24:2).

Moreover he was stricken with a deadly and horrible disease<sup>21</sup> and he endured unbearable physical pain (2:7-8). He was so disfigured and became so loathsome in appearance that even his close friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar could hardly recognize him and also performed the rites of mourning as if he were already dead (2:12-13).<sup>22</sup>

To physical death that was already at work in his flesh, there is now added social death. His sympathetic and supportive wife seems to have distanced herself from him (2:9-10); all his relatives and acquaintances deserted him (cf 42:11; 16:20; 19:13-19). To make

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<sup>19</sup> It is a designation of the office like the public prosecutor and not the devil of later Jewish and Christian theology. See Ceresko, *Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 101-102.

<sup>20</sup> The Apocryphal *Testament of Job* (TJob) chs 21-25 graphically portray how his wife Sitis worked as a maidservant in order to earn her daily bread which she shared with her husband and how finally she sold her hair to Satan just for three loaves of bread.

<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew word *shehin* can mean a variety of skin diseases and a clinical diagnosis of Job's sickness is not possible in spite of several allusions to his pathological state (7:4-5, 13-15; 16:13-16; 19:17-22; 21:6, 30:17, 27, 30). The author is not concerned here to identify the disease but to show the intensity of his suffering. See F. I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1976) 91-92; J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1988) 82.

<sup>22</sup> D.J.A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 59-63; E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 203.

matters worse, as an outcast he was ostracized from the community which had hitherto held him in the highest esteem, was isolated from the warmth of human fellowship and was forcefully pushed from the centre of society to its periphery (2:8).<sup>23</sup> In the words of R.A.F. MacKenzie, "The perfect and ideal Man has been rudely thrust out of Paradise, to share the common lot of his fallen brethren."<sup>24</sup>

The catastrophe is total. Everything worthwhile in life has been taken away from him. The most blessed on earth has now become the accursed of all, because poverty, sickness and death were considered direct punishments of God for sins.<sup>25</sup> The fact Job was suffering greatly was itself an indication to his contemporaries that he was a great sinner, even though he knew that he was innocent (6:30; 9:15, 20-22).<sup>26</sup>

A close reading of ch 30 clearly shows that he was tormented not so much by his losses, not even by the loss of his health, as by shame – the loss of status and honour in the community. He grieved that he had become a laughing stock (12:4) and an object of scorn even to people whom he had always held in disdain (cf 10:15; 17:6; 19:15-16, 18).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 6. TJob 21:1 states that he spent there 48 long years!

<sup>24</sup> R.A.F. MacKenzie, "The Transformation of Job," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 9 (1979) 52. He adds that the greatest person in the whole world has become the lowest and the least of all!

<sup>25</sup> J. Luyten, "Perspectives on Human Suffering in the Old Testament," 4-12; C. Mesters, *God, Where are You? Rediscovering the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995) 117-119. According to D. Cox, "As Water Spilt on the Ground," *Studia Missionalia* 31 (1982) 6-7, death's power reaches into life and manifests itself in sickness, poverty, oppression, etc. which are but death's outriders.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. Rodd, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990) 9, notes that sitting among the ashes is a sign that he is cut off not only from human society, but also from the religious community, because as a sinner he is an 'outcast'.

<sup>27</sup> L. M. Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991) 47-76; N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 418-420.

This state of affairs aggravated his physical suffering (30:16-17) and reduced him to a state of despondency and despair – a feeling that God has turned against him and is cruelly persecuting him to the point of eliminating him completely.<sup>28</sup> Job remained alone, abandoned by one and all (30:29). The sense of alienation haunted him continually (ch 6; 19:13-22).<sup>29</sup> This was the most agonizing of all!

Above all Job did not know, like Abraham (Gen 22:1-14), that he was being tested, while the readers know it, and this made his suffering all the more real and intense. Indeed Job was the greatest (Hebrew verb *gadal*) of all even in his suffering (2:13; cf 6:2-3; 16:6-7)!<sup>30</sup>

### **Job Rebels against the God of Injustice**

Crushed under the weight of affliction of his body and agony of his soul, Job immediately went into mourning according to the customs of his time. However soon he broke the silence of seven days and seven nights and gave a heartrending expression to his bitter feelings by means of a lament (ch 3). The proverbial patience of Job abruptly came to a dramatic end, never to appear again in the story. In a way the patient sufferer becomes a rebel and probably here emerges the real Job!<sup>31</sup>

Lament is the language, very often, the only language, of the oppressed and the afflicted.<sup>32</sup> Although lament tradition, i.e.

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<sup>28</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1970) 195.

<sup>29</sup> K. Thompson, Jr., "Out of the Whirlwind: The Sense of Alienation in the Book of Job," *Interpretation* 14 (1960) 51-63, beautifully analyses Job's triple alienation from God, friends and self. Similarly N. C. Habel, "Only the Jackal is my Friend': On Friends and Redeemers in Job," *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 227-236.

<sup>30</sup> J. G. Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983) 88, notes that the shift from the adjective *gadol* (1:3) to the verb *gadal* (2:13) properly signifies the process of 'growing, becoming great,' and may indicate the friends' seeing that Job's agony is not abating, but is deepening in silent intensity with each passing day.

<sup>31</sup> H. L. Ginsberg, "Job the Patient and Job the Impatient," in J. A. Emerton (ed), *Congress Volume, Rome 1968* (Vetus Testamentum Supplement 17; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969) 88-111.

<sup>32</sup> C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 264; M. Neary, "The Importance of Lament in the God/Man Relationship in Ancient Israel," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986) 184.

crying out to God for help while in trouble, sickness, need, calamity, war and the like – individual as well as communal – is prevalent throughout the OT, it comes to the fore in the Psalms (e.g., 6; 32; 51; 102; 103; 130; 143).<sup>33</sup> The lament does not solve all of the sufferers' intellectual questions about the origin and meaning of suffering, but does provide a structured way to bring their suffering to God's attention and to cope with it.<sup>34</sup>

Job struggled for life in the face of death. His suffering was so intense that he became weary of life and could, therefore, only curse the day of such a miserable birth and look for deliverance from it in death (Sir 41:2).<sup>35</sup> Even though Job did not curse God explicitly, by deliberately cursing the origins of his life (3:3-10), he implicitly cursed him, the creator and author of all life, and thereby revolted against him. He did not seek restoration of his losses, but an escape from life, because God's preservation of his life, in his view, would mean only an artificial prolongation of his misery. On the contrary, in the netherworld he sees no social distinction or discrimination between kings and subjects, masters and slaves, the great and the small, though they were in life locked together in a bitter social relationship (3:11-26). That is what makes Sheol a restful place!<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> J. D. Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope, and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993) 1, argues that not only the Psalms of lament, but all the Psalms "represent Israel's way of speaking to God in a world of individual pain, political oppression, and communal distress."

<sup>34</sup> U. Onunwa, "Individual Laments in Hebrew Poetry: A Positive Response to the Problem of Suffering," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1988) 101-111; K. Luke, "The Problem of Suffering: The Tradition of the Psalmists and the Sages," *Jeevadhara* 4 (1974) 120-136; T. S. R. Rao, "Agony and Anguish: The Psalmist in His Sufferings," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1988) 94-100.

<sup>35</sup> D. Cox, *Man's Anger & God's Silence: The Book of Job* (Middlegreen: St Paul Publication, 1990) 38-39; T. P. Townsend, "Soteriology and the Book of Job," *Bible Bhashyam* 14 (1988) 122. One should remember here that curse is another form of prayer for the suffering masses. See C. Stuhlmüller, *Psalms 1* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983) 213-215; I. Nowell, "The 'Cursing' Psalms," *Bible Today* 32 (1994) 218-222.

<sup>36</sup> J. E. Hartley, "From Lament to Oath: A Study of Progression in the Speeches of Job," in W.A.M. Beuken (ed), *The Book of Job* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994) 81-82; L. G. Perdue, "Job's Assault on Creation," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986) 306.

At this point he personally experiences life at the bottom of the social pyramid; he looks outside himself at the darker side of society, especially the misfortunes and injustice which the oppressed and the despised suffer (24:1-12). His sense of fellow-feeling and solidarity with the lowly deepens as the dialogue progresses and he voices their silenced protests very sharply. Therefore his language more closely resembles the language of the prophets.<sup>37</sup> Indeed lament is a language of protest which is a legitimate response to suffering; it does articulate and accentuate the cry for justice to a God who has a preferential love for the oppressed.<sup>38</sup>

### **Job Attacks the God of his Friends**

Moved by genuine compassion and a sense of loyalty, the three friends of Job came to condole with him and to console him. Sitting on the refuse heap beside him for a whole week, they spoke, without uttering a word, "perhaps the wisest consolation, their silence" (2:11-13; cf 13:5).<sup>39</sup>

Since they were soon shocked by Job's lament bordering on despair and blasphemy, they abandoned their wise silence; they were more interested in the disease than in the patient. In their passionate attempt to explain the cause of suffering, they expounded with conviction and vigour, and reiterated in one form or another the iron law of retribution (4:7-9; 5:14-27; 8:11-22; 11:6; 15:20; 18:12-13; 20:23). This boils down to saying that some sin of his, however secret or inadvertent it might be, must have brought all the misery down upon his head. Hence in their eyes he could only be classified as a hypocrite and a secret sinner. This is the

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<sup>37</sup> Ceresko, *Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 111. Gutiérrez (*On Job*, 19-49) calls Job's language as the 'language of prophecy'. Cf K. J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> J. Susaimanickam, "Protest: The Language of Prophecy," in T. Kadankavil (ed), *Little Traditions and National Culture* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000) 19-21.

<sup>39</sup> M. D. Guinan, "Job," in D. Bergant and R. J. Karris (eds), *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989) 679.

main burden of their argument which runs through three rounds of speeches and counter-speeches (chs 4-14, 15-21, 22-27).<sup>40</sup>

The friends, whom Job calls as treacherous wadis (6:15), worthless physicians (13:4) and miserable comforters (16:2), generally caricature God as "the impartial celestial administrator", who is passionless, unconcerned and too mechanical, reacting according to a rigid code of reward and punishment (4:7-9).<sup>41</sup> For them his suffering itself is a sufficient evidence to conclude that he is a sinner worthy of punishment (19:5-6). But the same logic leads Job to the conclusion that God is a criminal who perverts justice (8:30), because he knows well that he is righteous and yet he suffers – so also the victims of society like himself are righteous and yet suffer inordinately – while the wicked do all sorts of barbarous, inhuman atrocities and yet go about with impunity. He contests the traditional doctrine of retribution, because they had come to equate it with justice and thereby defend social evils and injustice in the world. He also raises the perennial question, Why do the wicked prosper? (21:7-16). His contention is that God either makes no distinction between the good and the wicked (9:21-24; 21:22-26), or takes no interest in the world, with the result injustice holds sway.

God, for Job, is a mighty hero or warrior who attacks and thereby causes suffering (10:2-12; 13:23-27; 16:7-12). Therefore he calls him names: gangster God (9:17-19; 10:17; 16:7-14), savage God (19:5-12, 22; 30:19-23), watcher of humanity (7:19-20; 10:14; 13:27), hunter of human beings (6:4; 10:16; 13:15), oppressor (7:1-6, 12-15; 10:3; 13:25-27; 19:21-22; 23:2, 13-16), monstrous tyrant (13:21; 23:16; 31:23), criminal (9:21-24; 10:2) and so on. He accuses God of

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<sup>40</sup> L. Alonso Schökel, "Toward a Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job," *Semeia* 7 (1977) 52-56; D. J. A. Clines, "The Arguments of Job's Three Friends," in D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn and A. J. Hauser (ed), *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1982) 206. A large number of commentators, therefore, have identified the age-old doctrine of retribution as the central message of the book. See K. J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*, 35-39.

<sup>41</sup> R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job," *Biblica* 46 (1959) 440.

being a violent anarchist who reverses his own cosmic order (10:8-12; 12:7-10; 9:4-10; 26:5-14), and of favouring the wicked and the chaotic forces in order to oppress human beings, especially the poor and the powerless (24:2-12). All this is tantamount to plain heresy.<sup>42</sup>

### Job Challenges God

The friends speak to Job a great deal about God, but never address him; whereas Job speaks to him directly.<sup>43</sup> Even though he is terrified by his presence (6:4; 7:13-15; 9:34; 13:20-21; 23:13-17), he is simply devastated by the lack of any relationship with him whom he had served so long. Therefore he lamented that he could not find him and longed to see him (23:3-12; 7:7-8; 9:3, 14-20, 28-35; 13:15-16, 22).

Job's suffering is an indication for him that God has taken some sort of legal action against him (10:2; 19:5-6). Therefore he charges him of having perverted justice and summed him to appear in the court for a fair trial (9:28-29). His legal complaints are both addressed to God, his judge (9:14-21; 27:7-12) and are ultimately directed against him, his adversary; he appeals to God against God himself (10:3-12)!<sup>44</sup>

Job thus sinks into the depths of despair (9:16, 22-24; 13:15; 14:7-12; 17:11-16; 23:1-7) and rises up to the heights of hope (13:15-18; 14:13-17; cf 33:23-30). In this vacillation between his mounting frustration and confidence, he clings to the belief that God will yet vindicate him, if he can summon him to court for a formal trial. In this context the so-called 'Redeemer Passages' (9:32-35; 16:18-22; 19:21-27) acquire prime importance.

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<sup>42</sup> Cox, *Men's Anger & God's Silence*, 62.

<sup>43</sup> D. Patrick, "Job's Address of God," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91 (1979) 268-69; C. M. Cherian, "The Sufferer's Struggle with God: A Biblical Lesson in Counselling," *Vidyajyoti* 40 (1976) 247-249.

<sup>44</sup> C. Chin, "Job and the Injustice of God: Implicit Arguments in Job 13.17-14.12," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 64 (1994) 91-101; Ceresko, *Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 99.

Job does not trust God to conduct a fair trial (9:30-31), and therefore he looks for an 'umpire' who is not simply a neutral arbiter, but an advocate and a powerful redeemer who would stand at his side, espouse his cause and fight for his rights (9:33). To appropriate the words of Habel, he longs for someone who will identify with an oppressed human being and strive to remove the rod of oppression imposed by his celestial taskmaster.<sup>45</sup>

Finding no support on earth, Job gropes for a celestial 'witness' who would appear on his behalf and bring his case to court (16:19) – for a 'friend' who would support him and act as his interpreter and advocate (16:20). Abandoned by one and all, by humans and God alike (19:1-22), Job takes still a step beyond the 'umpire' and the 'witness', and searches for a liberator or 'redeemer' (*goel* - 19:25-27; cf Isa 44:6) who "maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12-13).<sup>46</sup>

Prompted by this hope, Job could now nostalgically talk of the heyday of his prosperity and reputation when he dwelt in the shadow of the solicitous care of God (ch 29), who, he imagines, has humbled him for a while and ignored his cry for justice (ch 30). Finally he works up the courage to confront him with his titanic challenge (ch 31) which betrays his hope against hope that God would appear as his 'hearing officer' (31:35) and declare him innocent.<sup>47</sup>

### **Job is Confronted by God**

God does break his stony, oppressive silence and speaks out of the whirlwind (38:1; 40:6), a traditional imagery for divine revelation (2 Kgs 2:11; Isa 29:6; Ezek 1:4). Ironically he does not address Job's questions directly nor offer him any solution; instead

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<sup>45</sup> Habel, "Jackal is my Friend," 232-233.

<sup>46</sup> J. Holman, "Does My Redeemer Live or Is My Redeemer the Living God?: Some Reflection on the Translation of Job 19, 25," in W. A. M. Beuken (ed), *The Book of Job* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994) 377-381.

<sup>47</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 438-439. Hartley (*The Book of Job*, 426) notes that in chs 29-31 Job is a model of how the human spirit can struggle against all aspects of suffering – physical, emotional, social, spiritual – and sustain a search for God while he remains hidden.

he deals entirely with the marvels of cosmic order; rather he allows creation to do the speaking for him (cf 12:7-8).<sup>48</sup>

God first conducts a 'cosmic tour' and points out to Job several features of the cosmos (38:4-38). It is not enough that God merely creates the universe; he has to continue to create it; he has to continue to display his power and liberate it from the destructive forces, or else it would be in danger of sinking back into chaos (3:8; 7:12). He is, therefore, immanent and compassionate in the sense that he is active in his creation. This explains the care, the providential nurturing that God expends upon his creation (Ps 146:5-9).

Then a gallery of wild animals is paraded before Job (38:39-39:30). He cares for them by providing them with all the necessities of life (cf 10:8-12; 33:4; Ps 50:10-11). What is particularly interesting in this section is that God is alluded to by parental images as father and/or mother: he is a kind father (38:28; 10:12) and a loving mother who provides for her young ones (38:39-41). God thereby demonstrates the breadth and depth of his tender care and loving concern for the entire creation.

The elaborate and elegant description of Behemoth, the fiercest of the land animals (40:15-24), and of Leviathan, the most dreadful of the sea monsters (41:1-34), comprises the bulk of the second discourse. Definitely the stress here is on the power and majesty of God who, against the background of the combat motif in the book (26:5-14; 9:5-14; 38:8-11; 3:8; 7:12; cf Gen 1:1-5; Pss 74; 104), emerges as victor, creator-liberator, who subjugates the evil and chaotic forces, and takes full control over them.<sup>49</sup> Since the proud, the powerful (40:11-13; 41:34), the wicked (38:12-15, 22-23; 40:12), etc. align themselves with these destructive, oppressive elements,

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<sup>48</sup> G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972) 225. It is good to note here that wisdom theology is creation theology.

<sup>49</sup> J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 38-49, 62-87; M. K. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973).

he keeps them also under his direct control and constant watch (cf 4:10-11), and thereby actively takes care of his creation.<sup>50</sup>

God then cannot be the author of evil, and hence both good and evil cannot come from his hand (cf 2:10). However, he is the primordial sage, "who designed a world of rhythms and paradoxes, of balanced opposites and controlled extremes, of mysterious order and ever-changing patterns, of freedom and limits, of life and death."<sup>51</sup> He does not eliminate chaos but keeps it within bounds, does not promote violence but controls and contains it, and channels destructive forces for constructive purposes. He watches over some creatures in a personal way, not as a spy but as the moderator of excesses and the protector of the helpless.<sup>52</sup> Put most simply, "There is evil in the world, but the world is not evil. There are chaotic forces within the cosmos, but the cosmos is not a chaos."<sup>53</sup>

God thus makes it abundantly clear that he is vitally concerned with justice, cosmic as well as social, which can be established only through a constant struggle with the evil forces – supernatural, natural and human.<sup>54</sup> His triumph over them can give a sense of hope and security especially to the poor and the oppressed. God's nature or character is thus defined, even conditioned by his relation to the victims of society.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> R. J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994) 194.

<sup>51</sup> Habel, "In Defense of God the Sage," in L. G. Perdue and W. C. Gilpin (ed), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 33-38. Also A. A. Di Lella, "An Existential Interpretation of Job," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985) 55.

<sup>52</sup> Habel, "In Defense of God the Sage," 33-38; K. M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988) 178.

<sup>53</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 80.

<sup>54</sup> J. C. L. Gibson, "On Evil in the Book of Job," in L. Eslinger and G. Taylor (ed), *Ascribe to the Lord* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 413.

<sup>55</sup> J. Susaimanickam, "An Indian Problem of Evil: The Caste System – A Dalit Reading of the Book of Job," in A. Thottakara (ed), *Indian Interpretation of the Bible* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000) 192-195.

## Job is Enticed by God

In biblical tradition seeing God can be fatal to sinful human beings (13:16; cf Ex 3:4-6; Isa 6:5-7); whereas the fact that Job saw him face to face, heard him speaking and yet survived is in itself an automatic vindication of his innocence.<sup>56</sup> God did not strike Job down as his friends might have expected (20:2, 3, 26-27), but seems to ignore the questions raised by Job and the friends, especially about the reason for Job's suffering. Instead he seems to tease Job with his endless questions. And yet God seems to have recognized the validity of Job's protestation of innocence and the falsity of the imputations of the friends, and confirmed his righteousness (42:7-9).<sup>57</sup>

It seems that Job has found some kind of answer, although it is not clear precisely what it is.<sup>58</sup> Face to face with God, he discovers that God is very different from what he had imagined or what his friends had portrayed him to be: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). He realizes that not only he, but also and above all God is just and he governs the universe with justice and love, with passion and compassion. "But now, Job had seen God, not so much, with his physical eyes, but with 'eyes of the heart enlightened' (Eph 1:18), which enable man to recognize the hope which is opened up to him by God's call. Job experienced God in an intimate fellowship which realizes and surpasses that which he hoped for (cf 19:26f)."<sup>59</sup>

By the same token Job begins to understand that there is natural suffering like sickness and death which are part of the

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<sup>56</sup> L. Alonso Schökel, "God's Answer to Job," *Concilium* 169 (1983) 46-47.

<sup>57</sup> C. R. Seitz, "Job: Full-Structure, Movement, and Interpretation," *Interpretation* 43 (1989) 15; Alonso Schökel, "God's Answer to Job," 47.

<sup>58</sup> K. J. Dell, *Shaking a Fist at God: Understanding Suffering through the Book of Job* (London: Fount, 1995) 72. Alonso Schökel ("God's Answer to Job," 48) remarks that as Job listens to God, he finds compassion, understanding and persuasive arguments – all that he failed to find in his friends. A. Brenner, "God's Answer to Job," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981) 136-137, specifies that Job's realization that God is with him is a more than adequate consolation.

<sup>59</sup> M. Vellanickal, "Problem of Suffering in the Book of Job," *Bible Bhashyam* 4 (1978) 307-308.

fabric of human life. Moreover there are the societal evils like poverty and violence which are caused by humans and the poor are the ones who suffer most by them. Therefore their unmerited and undeserved suffering need not be a sign of their guilt or divine displeasure, as the friends attempted to explain, but of the dominance of the demoniac forces, of social injustice. N. K. Gottwald would say that "sometimes there is suffering totally beyond our ability to understand it and we should at least spare ourselves and others the stupidity and cruelty of imposing meanings that will not fit."<sup>60</sup> Job was innocent in spite of the fact that he suffered; so also the poor.

Job finally realizes, as Mesters observes, that the problem in life does not come from God himself, but from the mistaken image of God as informed by wrong tradition, and with that realization peace and tranquility return to him.<sup>61</sup> Job is indeed overpowered, enticed by God (cf Jer 20:7)!

As a result Job accepts his own creatureliness with its necessary dimension of suffering (40:4-5; cf 10:9), acknowledges God as the omnipotent creator and benevolent protector of the universe (42:2-6), and completely surrenders himself to God. "No one has experienced humanity to the full unless he or 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 completely plumbed."<sup>62</sup>

In fact, Job's two brief responses are not simply expressions of his resignation and submission to the Almighty – an attitude similar to his initial reaction (1:20-21; 2:10) – but indicators of his inner transformation and are far from being his acknowledgement

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<sup>60</sup> N. K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 576.

<sup>61</sup> Mesters, *God, Where are You?*, 122-123.

<sup>62</sup> W. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 84.

of guilt and repentance.<sup>63</sup> "Viewed as an answer to the problem of suffering, then, the argument of the Book of Job is: By all means let Job the patient be your model so long as that is possible for you; but when equanimity fails, let the grief and anger of Job the impatient direct itself and yourself toward God, for only in encounter with him will the tension of suffering be resolved."<sup>64</sup>

Here Job gives up his language of prophecy and learns another kind of language, 'the language of contemplation'.<sup>65</sup> "The truth that he [Job] has grasped and that has lifted him to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. Only when we come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith."<sup>66</sup> This is the transformation Job undergoes and the climax of the drama, elaborated by the 'happy ending' (42:10-17).<sup>67</sup> He is no more the same person at the end of the book as at the beginning but has become the 'New Man,' in a way he was not before.<sup>68</sup>

### Job Experiences a God who Suffers

The God who appeared to Job is not an almighty God, invested with all power and authority in heaven and on earth controlling everyone and claiming responsibility for

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<sup>63</sup> E. J. Van Wolde, "Job 42, 1-6: The Reversal of Job," in W. A. M. Beuken (ed), *The Book of Job* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994) 223-250. Gutiérrez (*On Job*, 82) notes that the transformation Job undergoes is due to the change in his understanding of God.

<sup>64</sup> D. J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, xxxix. See Ceresko, *Introduction to OT Wisdom*, 90. These two responses are not incompatible as one can lead on to the other because God's comforting presence in the midst of suffering helps us go through the process of anguish, of protest and of eventual acceptance. See Dell, *Shaking a Fist at God*, 83.

<sup>65</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 51-108.

<sup>66</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 87.

<sup>67</sup> J. Susaimanickam, *Comitment to the Oppressed: A Dalit Reading of the Book of Job* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation; Rome: PGU, 1996) 53-55.

<sup>68</sup> Mackenzie, "The Transformation of Job," 51-52, 56-57; W. Vogels, "The Spiritual Growth of Job: A Psychological Approach to the Book of Job," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981) 77.80.

everything; nor is he a sadist who delights in inflicting pain on his own creation for nothing. On the contrary, he is an all-loving God who is personally interested in the world, especially in Job and appreciates him for his righteous living and blesses him with total well-being. He does not take away human responsibility and freedom; he trusts others and that is why he takes the risk of being challenged by Satan. He allows himself to be weak and vulnerable.<sup>69</sup> He tries to prevent, or at least to diminish suffering (1:12; 2:6). Above all, he prefers to suffer with his creatures as with Job: "The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason'" (2:3).

He is the God of the victims, a fellow-sufferer with the suffering humanity. He struggles together with human beings against injustice to sustain a just world order. He can maintain order and justice only by his vigilant care and compassionate humaneness, exhibited in his partiality to the weak, as highlighted by the speeches of God (38:1-42:6).<sup>70</sup> T. E. Fretheim emphasizes the suffering of God since he enters into a death-filled situation and experiences suffering: God suffers *because* of the people's rejection of him as Lord; God suffers *with* the people who are suffering; God suffers *for* the people.<sup>71</sup> God is so engrossed with the history of humankind that he grows with his creation, groaning as a woman in labour (Isa 42:14), and holding us as our mother in her lap, until we stand up again with renewed strength.<sup>72</sup>

Christian tradition very firmly asserted the impassibility of God, i.e., God's inability to suffer. Luther's theology of the cross

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<sup>69</sup> B. Z. Cooper, "Why God? A Tale of Two Sufferers," *Theology Today* 42 (1985) 423-434.

<sup>70</sup> J. Susaimanickam, *Commitment to the Oppressed*, 107-110.

<sup>71</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*. Dell (*Shaking a Fist at God*, 78-79) says that God suffers *in* and *with* the world.

<sup>72</sup> J. Luyten, "Perspectives on Human Suffering in the OT," 30; D. Soelle, "God's Pain and Our Pain," M. H. Ellis and M. O. Maduro (ed), *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) 326-333.

resulted in the notion of a crucified God and yet the Reformed Churches remained faithful to the tenet of the *apatheia* of God. However from the nineteenth century onwards there has been a 'structural shift' and a growing consensus about divine suffering. Christian theologians, notably process theologians, as well as spiritual writers show a special interest, especially after the two world wars, in the theme of the suffering God. According to them God does not prevent suffering, but who is able to understand the sufferers, accompany them in their suffering and thereby enable them to come to terms with it.<sup>73</sup> "I do not thank God for suffering, since it is something evil, but I thank God for being with me in my suffering, for strengthening me and allowing me to meet him in it..."<sup>74</sup>

### A Joban Paradigm for Reading the Bible

Wisdom is primarily concerned with life, with the stark realities of daily social life. Its starting point is the experience of reality which leads to reflection and action.<sup>75</sup> Like the sages of old, the friends of Job point to their own experience (4:8; 15:17; 5:27); they bring together their inquiry (5:27; 8:8) and critical examination (12:7-11; 34:3-4) in order to evaluate experiences and discover those things that promote human life.<sup>76</sup> Admittedly they were not open to human reality, refused to see what was happening to Job under their very noses, assumed his guilt as a necessary deduction from the justice of God, and attempted to pigeon-hole God and thereby falsify him (32:3) in spite of their good faith to defend him. That

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<sup>73</sup> M. Steen, "The Theme of the 'Suffering' God: An Exploration," in J. Lambrecht and R. F. Collins (ed), *God and Human Suffering* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990) 69-93; T. J. Van Bavel, "Where is God When Human Beings Suffer?," 137-153. J. Susaimanickam, "God Bears our Diseases and Alleviates our Grief," in D. Amudhan (ed), *Souvenir: X World Day of the Sick* (Vailankanni, 2002) 5-9. It is good to bear in mind that, while developing the theology of suffering, biblical theologians and liberation theologians focus on God (Yahweh), whereas systematic theologians concentrate mainly on Jesus Christ.

<sup>74</sup> Rex A. Pai, *Discernment: A Way of Life* (Dindigul: Vaigarai Publications, 2000) 86.

<sup>75</sup> R. E. Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom: A Biblical Model of Salvation," *Studia Miissionalia* 30 (1981)39-42; D. Bergant, *What are they saying about Wisdom Literature* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 3-18; K. O'Connor, *Wisdom Literature*, 17-19.

<sup>76</sup> Newsom, "Job," 132-133.

was why God was indignant with them and told them to their faces that they did not speak of him what was right (42:7).<sup>77</sup>

Job, on the contrary, starts from the concrete reality of his experience rather than from traditional beliefs and assumptions – from experience that confounded tradition.<sup>78</sup> He turned the whole OT theology on its head.

Job's cry and quest is for a new image of God and a new language of God. Raising legitimate questions about the traditional concept of God, he paints a picture of the 'existential God of human experience'.<sup>79</sup> In the process, he learns to speak correctly about God (42:7). He demonstrates thereby that one can raise legitimate questions about one's faith, and yet remain a staunch believer – indeed a rebellious believer or a God-fearing rebel.<sup>80</sup> As K. J. Dell notes, "Job metaphorically shook his fist at God and yet retained his faith in him – we should feel justified in doing the same."<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly Job is also sensitive to the needs of the 'crucified people' and experienced life in solidarity with them, and that made his God-talk more real and authentic. Thus the book of Job offers a paradigm, a model for contextual reading of the Bible.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> J. G. Williams, "'You have not spoken Truth of Me': Mystery and Irony in Job," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1971) 231-255. According to von Rad (*Wisdom in Israel*, 65), they are practical atheists in so far as they are inattentive to God's ordering of creation. Hence Gutiérrez (*On Job*, 29) remarks: "The friends believe in their theology rather than in the God of their theology".

<sup>78</sup> Job's words are a critique of every abstract theology that is out of contact with reality. See Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 30.

<sup>79</sup> Cox, *Man's Anger & God's Silence*, 58.

<sup>80</sup> P. R. House, "Job: How to Struggle with Doubt," *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 221; J. Susaimanickam, "Protest: The Language of Prophecy," 39.

<sup>81</sup> Dell, *Shaking a Fist at God*, 87.

<sup>82</sup> J. Susaimanickam, "Dalit Hermeneutics: A Proposal for Reading the Bible," *Vaiharai* 5 (2000/ III & IV) 23-24.

The primary objective of such a reading – a subaltern reading of the book of Job – is not meant to offer another interesting reading of the book, but to empower the sufferers and to capture the message of the Bible as specifically addressed to them: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:4, 6, 10). Only those who have experienced real suffering can fully comprehend the meaning of the Bible and encounter the God of the Bible!

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