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Religion and Spirituality (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality.aspx)

Theodicy

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Theodicy is an unfamiliar word that relates to the question of why a benevolent God would allow [evil](#)

(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/origin_of_evil_1053.aspx)

and suffering to exist in this world. Stanley Fish, a columnist for *The New York Times*, examines two new titles that address this problem from opposing viewpoints: Bart Ehrman's *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, and Antony Flew's *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*.

Something we can easily forget in a world that prizes rationalism is that this problem has perplexed people throughout time. The [Hebrew Scriptures \(/visionmedia/series-the-law-prophets-and-writings-old-testament-bible-history-3951\)](#) tell us about how Job wrestled with this issue, and Fish appropriately notes the statement by a third-century BCE Greek philosopher:

These questions are as old as Epicurus, who gave them canonical form: "Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence, then, evil."

Circumstances during the time of Jesus Christ and the early church gave plenty of opportunity for these questions to arise again. Jesus Himself drew attention to those who had been killed by a tower falling on them as well as the case of the Galileans who had been slaughtered by Pontus Pilate as they were sacrificing in the temple to their God! (Luke 13:1-5). This was not the only occasion in which Jews had been slaughtered in the temple by the

Roman authorities or other rulers before them. Nor were such events the limit of the problems that the church faced. Think of the opportunity for raising the question of God's apparent absence when Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:58-59), or when James the brother of John was executed by Herod Antipas (Acts 12:1-2), or when persecution made the brethren flee from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Add to that famine in Judaea and the situations Paul describes as he pursued his calling to preach the gospel to the nations (2 Corinthians 11:23-30). His challenges were more than sufficient to require a normal person to consider a change of occupation. Yet the early church was able to mourn the loss and carry on with its mission. Paul was undeterred by the challenges.

Despite facing all the types of personal "anguish" that Ehrman takes to himself, somehow these people had a vision of the future that put present suffering into context and made it bearable. They had an explanation for theodicy that we seldom consider. The idea of eschatology that is so often discussed in terms of the early church implies another factor that is frequently overlooked. If the present age had to come to an end and be replaced, then something was clearly wrong with the current situation. Many saw it in geopolitical terms: the Jewish nation was downtrodden, and better times would only come when that changed. But Paul addressed this question, not in terms of geopolitics, but by reference to the fact that this was not God's world. The world was ruled by another god who was able to transform himself into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 4:4; 11:14-15). Paul, like the rest of the early church, believed in a spirit world that was able to influence the physical domain. His eschatology was based on the replacement of the malevolent power by that of the true God of Israel. Today, that is seldom part of our thinking. So often we see things only on a physical plane and consequently the divine has no real place in our life.

Kudos to Stanley Fish for raising the issue and addressing these two books.