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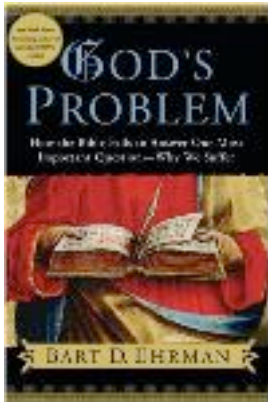
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# God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer

reviewed by William H. Willimon



**God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer**

HarperOne, 304 pp., \$25.95

by Bart D. Ehrman

Bart Ehrman has written another book that is probably destined to be a best seller. *God's Problem* is a lively, though thoroughly conventional and utterly predictable, dismissal of Jewish and Christian views of God. It is a real page-turner, quickly written by an author who assumes a position of moral and intellectual superiority to just about everyone who is unlucky enough not to be a tenured professor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

*God's Problem* begins not with God but with Ehrman, and with antitheology as autobiography. We learn that suffering has "haunted" Ehrman "for a very long time" and that it is the reason he lost his faith. The faith he lost was Christian evangelical fundamentalism, which, as we are told, crumbled under "critical scrutiny." Ehrman told NPR's Terry Gross that for a while he tried the Episcopal Church, finding its rituals aesthetically pleasing, but that he eventually left because "even in the Episcopal church they say the creed." Even Episcopalians were too gullible and credulous for the agnostic Ehrman.

Being subjected to the puerile theodicy of undergraduates while he was teaching courses in religion at Rutgers was the coup de grâce for what was left of Ehrman's faith. So the professor ventured forth on the journey that he apparently considers heroic, even though it has been made by millions in the West before him: the journey of taking God less seriously and himself more so. While this is now an old story, Ehrman seems invigorated by the telling of it—I presume because it his own story. The radical subjectivity and narcissism of evangelical pietism must be tough to shake.

While reading *God's Problem*, I kept asking myself, why bother? There are no new insights or discoveries here. All of this is common knowledge to anyone who has taken a few Bible classes in any first-rate, state-funded, secular department of religion. And if one no longer believes in God, why attempt theodicy in the first place—who cares whether the God who isn't is just or unjust, caring or uncaring? Any argument against the goodness of God that begins with the announcement that God probably doesn't exist is a strange argument. Why beat a dead horse?

The answer to that question probably lies in Ehrman more than his subject matter. Ehrman proves the dictum that old fundamentalists never die; they just exchange fundamentals and continue in their unimaginative, closed-minded rigidity and simplicity. It's just too confusing to imagine that God's alleged omnipotence might be something other than what we think of as omnipotence or that God's love might be other than what we conceive of as love.

Ehrman appears to have a low tolerance for intellectual ambiguity of any sort. He demands logic as he defines it, and finding the God of Jews and Christians to be caught in a web of contradictions and irrationality, he therefore dismisses God. Ehrman showed this inability to tolerate ambiguity or interpretive dissonance in his book *Misquoting Jesus* as well. Trouble is, ambiguity, dissonance and conflict are the usual way that scripture presents its peculiar truth. Ehrman seems to want to read scripture as argument, defense and apology when many of the texts he cites are testimony, praise and narrative.

I really liked one question Terry Gross put to Ehrman in her interview: "Did you try another god?" If the God who's worshiped by Christians and Jews is unsatisfying for Ehrman's needs, surely there is another god out there that Ehrman—with his heightened moral sensitivity and probing intellect—could learn to love. Why did he spend so much effort criticizing the God of Christians and Jews for not being the sort of god worthy of his worship?

Many Christians believe that knowing Jesus Christ has considerably expanded their limited notions

of love and omnipotence, maybe even disrupted their idea of suffering. This is an intellectual journey that Ehrman apparently is unwilling or unable to undertake, so he castigates those who are still on the trip.

Even though *God's Problem* is addressed to an audience that is uninitiated into the issues raised by theodicy and is written in a disarmingly simple, engaging style, Ehrman's relentless modernistic reductionism and oversimplification quickly become annoying. So does his presumed superiority to his subject. Without much argument, he assumes that suffering is the whole point of the Bible. It seems not to occur to him that one reason not every part of the Bible is preoccupied with suffering and the few biblical discussions about suffering are unsatisfying is that unlike us, biblical people may have had more to think about than themselves. Perhaps they were unconvinced that the question of suffering is the only question worth asking. Possibly they were able to begin and end a discussion of something so perplexing without beginning and ending with themselves.

Ehrman starts most of his chapters by noting contemporary evils that he seems to think the rest of us have failed to notice (curiously, few of them are generally committed by people who work in North American universities and drive Volvos). Then he cites a biblical text to illustrate how woefully God flops. He makes no attempt to explore the complexity of the evils cited; nor does he make much attempt to delve into the complexity of the biblical texts themselves. He has a tin ear for the literary nuance and subtlety in these texts; he even reduces Job to two simple themes. When Ehrman finally pulls out Dostoevsky, whom he judges to be a far superior writer to anyone in the Bible (even though Dostoevsky came to conclusions very different from his), he once again shows an inability to appreciate the richness of a complex literary work. Imagination is not one of Ehrman's strong suits.

I know that Ehrman wants to present a readable, popular argument, but the total effect of his reductionism is likely to be that readers will come away wondering how on earth these Jews could have been so dumb as actually to live and die for so inadequate a philosophy of suffering. In a footnote he cites books on theodicy by Ken Surin and Terrence Tilley, but I found no evidence in *God's Problem* that he had actually read them. My own reading of Surin and Tilley suggests that they would have questions about Ehrman's project. By the end of the book, Ehrman has dismissed all available biblical options (or at least those he notices) as intellectually unsatisfying and has curtly dismissed all attempts at theodicy by contemporary philosophers without really discussing any of them.

Readers will naturally expect Ehrman to offer his own constructive answer to humanity's most important question, but they will be sorely disappointed. Ehrman's answer is the one that we modern, educated, affluent North Americans love, now that there's no God but us: "to work to alleviate suffering wherever possible and to live life as well as we can." I find it amazing that after the bloodiest century on record there is someone still arguing that humanity just might be able to get organized and straighten out what God almighty has messed up. This book seems an awful lot of fuss to reach so banal a destination.

William H. Willimon is United Methodist bishop of the North Alabama Conference.