

In life and literature, suffering and service inevitably, it seems, accompany each other. This thinksheet is some notes on this phenomenon, especially as seen in 2 Isaiah (and thus, Jesus).

1. My two favorite books on suffering are C.S. Lewis' THE PROBLEM OF PAIN and Dorothea Soelle's SUFFERING [Fortress/75; the Lewis being now an old book, of many editions]. In addition to sharing these with those suffering, especially those suffering from a deficiency of meaning-in-suffering, their own or others, I've found these two books--+ a few pamphlets--most helpful.

2. More technical works are Mircea Eliade's COSMOS AND REALITY, Paul Ricoeur's EVIL, and vol.3 of Paul Tillich's SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY. Eliade is especially strong on the servant mode and suffering vis-a-vis healing miracles. All three are on theodicy, the theology of evil--positively usually put as the justification of God as both powerful and god in spite of and even because of the existence of what is un-toward us.

3. Jeremiah "the suffering prophet" on the time-boundary between Pre-Exile and Exile; 2nd Isaiaish "the suffering-servant prophet" during [and after?] the Exile.

4. When I got the water for the Administrative Faculty, a black colleague said, "I would be willing to do that, but I'd have to think about it first. You don't." Old sufferers must view service through the question of new dignity.

5. The Bible squeezes positive* juice out of suffering--in the naive moralism of Deuteronomism, in the sophisticated enlightenment-mode of Job, in the vision of vicariousness in 2nd Isaiah and the New Testament....Last Saturday evening at dinner a Jew who at age two was saved when his grandfather, a split second before being killed by a streetcar, pushed his pram out of the way. An oldtime friend at the dinner asked, "For the likes of you somebody should die?" The interstitial male, son/father, chose to focus on his dead father [and went atheist] instead of on his saved son [which would have made him grateful, and a deeper believer]. Christianity does indeed say that for the likes of us Christians, Jesus-God died, and rose again! "Love embraces everything, even death," as Ingmar Bergman's "Face to Face" closes.[*#615, "Thorn."]

6. In John 17, Jesus recognizes himself in the suffering servant of 2nd Isaiah, in whom the priestly and prophetic characters blend. Is.53.4,9: sinless, he atones for all others' sins; his own blood, not animals', is the sacrifice, which is mixed with intercessory prayer. We can't be sure Jesus made a verbal messianic self-claim, but his willingness to suffer points in the direction of his implied claim of messiahship--says Nils A. Dahl [Yale, NT], THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH [Augsburg/75].

7. Facing its causes, biblical religion seeks to eliminate suffering; faces its meaning, to humanize suffering....One can escape suffering, to some extent, in either of these opposite directions: apathy and pleasure [masochism]--but neither is authentic escape. Accepting suffering always at least to some extent liberates the sufferer, whether or not the acceptor is the sufferer, and whether the suffering is physical or meta-physical. Life-love is great enough to include injury and pain, as in the death scene at end of "Face to Face" [the healed psychiatrist seeing the love between her grandmother and her dying grandfather]....In social suffering, the sanction of being despised and isolated is added; but the confession of powerlessness may lead to communication and acceptance and thus conquest of the very powerlessness in the existing structure, thus on to solidarity and changed structure--see Soelle, in her concern in W.German prayergroups for POLITICAL PRAYER (her "political theology").

8. Put here your deepest experience of suffering, then view in light of above.