

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGICAL WHY-QUESTIONS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.

Nietzsche (2012:4)

ABSTRACT

This article provides an introductory overview of a selection of philosophical perspectives on theological why-questions in the Hebrew Bible. Why-questions put to Yhwh in all the various sections of the canon are clarified philosophically via ancient views on causation, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and the philosophy of language. Comparative philosophy of religion is also utilized to argue that while most theological why-questions in the Hebrew Bible are asked in the context of suffering, assumptions related to the deity differ from those of modern philosophical theologies.

INTRODUCTION

Asking “why” seems to have become something of great interest to our species in its recent past (see Jordania 2006:327-346). Why-questions are found in various contexts, asked for various reasons and aimed at eliciting various kinds of answers (see Bromberger 1966:68-111). One example of such questions is of the introspective existentialist kind, e.g., “Why am I doing this?” or “Why am I here?” Popular why-questions are also commonly attested in the context of interpersonal relationships. According to Google’s search engine, the top three auto-completed why-questions are “Why do men cheat?”, “Why do women cheat?”, and “Why did I get married?” (cf. Schopenhauer 1997a:531-567). Yet other why-questions are those of profound metaphysical riddles (e.g., “Why is there something rather than nothing?”), sometimes eliciting infuriatingly easy-going post-metaphysical retorts (e.g., “Why not?”) (see Cupitt 2001:78).

Why-questions are also found as part of popular jokes. One of these is the familiar “Why did the chicken cross the road” question (see *The Knickerbocker* or *The New York Monthly*, March 1847:283) While the original answer is the anti-humorous “To get to the other side”, numerous variations exist. Perhaps the most infamous why-question of all comes in the eternal return of the quasi-philosophical toddler (or rebellious teen) repeatedly asking why something is the case/should be believed/must be obeyed, etc. Irrespective of the answer given, another why-question might follow in a potentially infinite series of infuriating interrogations that are eventually terminated by equally unsatisfying responses such as “I don’t know”, “Because I said so,” “That’s just how it is,” “I don’t want to talk about it,” etc. (cf. Greene 2008:n.p.)

WHY-QUESTIONS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE (HB)

What linguists call “Wh-questions” are relatively common in the Hebrew Bible (HB), and these include why-questions (see Pratt 1972; Moshavi 2013a:306–316; 2013b:1–15) With regard to English translations of the HB (e.g., the RSV), a simple word search yields 314 occurrences of the word “why” for various constructs in the source text. Not all of these are part of why-questions, and those that are represent different kinds of concerns, as the first five instances (all from Genesis, cf. Hyman 1987) readily show:

1. Yhwh said to Cain, “**Why** (למה) are you angry, and **why** (למה) has your countenance fallen?” (Gen 4:6).
2. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, “What is this you have done to me? **Why** (למה) did you not tell me that she was your wife?” (Gen 12:18).
3. Yhwh said to Abraham, “**Why** (למה) did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (Gen 18:13).
4. He said, “Come in, O blessed of Yhwh; **why** (למה) do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels” (Gen 24:31).
5. The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is thus, **why** (למה) do I live?” (Gen 25:22).

As is evident from these examples, the Hebrew word translated as “why” is (usually) למה (< *le + ma*, lit. “for what”, but not necessarily associated with purpose). Less frequently in other texts we find על-מה (< *al + ma*, lit. “over what”, i.e. reasons for), מדוע (< *ma + yadúa*, lit. “what is known”, or denoting cause) and sometimes only מה + x (< *ma + x*, lit. “what [is this] = why [is this]”) (cf. Burnstein 2013:316). Not only can all of these grammatical constructs be translated as “why”, according to cognate studies classical Biblical Hebrew also has an unusually high frequency of why-questions as compared to everyday speech in both ancient and modern languages (see Moshavi 2013:84).

Be that as it may, in the remainder of this study the focus is not on the HB’s why-questions as such. Instead, the analysis will be limited to what could be termed “theological” why-questions, i.e., why-questions put to the deity. In addition, rather than offering the usual linguistic, literary, historical or theological perspective(s), the discussion to follow will opt for a philosophical point of view.

A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Conceptual clarification of and via why-questions can be found in a number of philosophical contexts (cf. Bar-On 1983). Of particular relevance are why-questions in metaphysics, philosophy of language and philosophy of religion. More specifically, the concern will be with a philosophical clarification of theological why-questions in the HB via 1) ancient views on causation; 2) the so-called Principle of Sufficient Reason, and 3) recent philosophy of language’s treatment of why-questions. Given that the focus will be on theological why-questions an additional philosophical dimension will be added by looking at related issues in comparative philosophy of religion, e.g., the divine attributes, the problem of evil, divine hiddenness and the notions of determinism and free will.

ANCIENT VIEWS ON CAUSATION

In ancient philosophy, why-questions can be encountered in the context of philosophizing about causality. In Plato (1997 [*Phaedo*, 95e-96a]) we read:

Socrates paused for some time and was absorbed in thought. Then he said: ‘...When I was young, Cebes, I was tremendously eager for the kind of wisdom which they call investigation of nature. I thought it was a glorious thing to know the causes of everything, why each thing comes into being and why it perishes and why it exists.’

In this section, asking “why” is associated with attempting to know the “causes of everything”. Three causal whys are mentioned: that of source, ending, and being. The same philosophical tradition of asking “why” was also adopted and adapted by Aristotle (1994 [*A Post.* 71b9–11. Cf. *A Post.* 94a20]) who observed that we think we have knowledge of a thing only when we have grasped its cause. Proper knowledge is knowledge of *the* cause or knowledge of why (see Aristotle 1994 [*A Post.* 71b10–12, 94a20]; 1995 [*Phys.* 194b17–20]; 1999 [*Metaph.* 981a28–30]).

As Falcon (2014:n.p.) notes, Aristotle asked four types of why-questions later popularly called his four causes:

1. Why? > “that out of which” (a.k.a. “material cause”);
2. Why? > “what-it-is-to-be” (a.k.a. “formal cause”);
3. Why? > “the primary source of the change or rest” (a.k.a. “efficient cause”);
4. Why? > “that for the sake of which a thing is done” (a.k.a. “final cause”)

Aristotle (1995 [*Phys.* 198a21–23]) insisted that all four causes must be brought to bear on the subject in the attempt to ask and understand “why”. Usually, however, asking why tends to be limited to inquiring about the final/formal cause, i.e., “for/from what (purpose)” something happens. When these are lacking, the efficient cause is thought to provide the answer to the question of “why” (see Aristotle 1999 [*Metaph.* 1044 b 13–15]). Ultimately what one is after is whichever of the causes is primary (Aristotle 1999 [*Metaph.* 983 a 25–26]; cf. 1999 [*Phys.* 194 b 20]).

THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

Another philosophical context with which why-questions have been associated is in connection with the so-called Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) (see Melamed & Martin 2014:n.p.). The basic idea here is that things happen for a reason, which can be interpreted as referring either to causality or teleology (here final causes are considered distinct from the others). Ideas related to the PSR and its formulations are commonly traced back to the early pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander and thought to be succinctly summarised in the familiar slogan of *ex nihillo nihil fit* (“from nothing, nothing comes”; see Wiggins 1996; cf. Aristotle 1922:295). In modern formulations of the PSR, various states-of-affairs have been considered, e.g.:

- For any entity x, if x exists, then there is a sufficient reason why x exists.
- For any event e, if e occurs, then there is a sufficient reason why e occurs.
- For any proposition p, if p is true, then there is a sufficient reason why p is true.

In this regard, three philosophers’ ideas related to the PSR are particularly relevant to our discussion of theological why-questions in the HB. The following represents a selection from and adaptation of parts of the overview provided by Melamed & Martin (2014:n.p.)

First, there is the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza (1985 [Geb. I/158/4–9]) claimed that for everything that exists one can ask what is the cause (or reason), why it exists. Therefore we must assign some positive cause, or reason, why something exists. This cause will either be external or outside the thing itself, or internal, i.e., a cause or reason comprehended in the nature and definition of the existing thing itself.

Secondly, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz introduced the actual jargon of the PSR by stating that everything happens for a reason (Leibniz 1923:321). In this statement the PSR is associated with events, although elsewhere Leibniz limited its application to the truth of necessary and contingent propositions. Leibniz also believed that an infinite amount of reasons could be given to explain any event or truth, and only God knew what they were.

Thirdly, Arthur Schopenhauer’s doctoral dissertation was titled *The fourfold root*

of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Schopenhauer (1997:passim) claimed to have discerned four kinds of objects for which four kinds of reasons could be identified. Conceptual confusion arises from explanations of objects of one kind by arguments more associated with another. In discussing The Fourth Form or The PSR of Acting, Schopenhauer (1997:9) claimed that the reason for some statements or judgments is an act of will which has a motive, i.e., “Motivation is causality seen from within” (Schopenhauer 1997:10)

MODERN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

As Cross & Roelofsen (2014:n.p.) note, after Gottlob Frege philosophers of language focused mainly on propositions and declarative sentences rather than questions. A notable exception was Collingwood (1939) who argued that philosophers should start taking questions more seriously. One major category of questions thought to require attention was why-questions, which were frequently linked with the concept of explanation, especially of the scientific kind. In fact, according to Hempel and Oppenheim (1948:334), a scientific explanation is really the only valid answer to a why-question. Bromberger (1966:68-111) put forward a concurring theory of why-questions in which the general form of a why-question is: Why is it the case that p ? The presupposition of this why-question is p , and this agrees with the usual concept of presupposition for questions, since if p is not the case then the question has no correct answer (cf. Cross & Roelofsen 2014:n.p) Bromberger’s theory was aimed at saving certain intuitions about what should and should not count as correct answers to why-questions (cf. Teller 1974:371-380)

Another major development in the theory of why-questions was brought about by the work of van Fraassen (1980). The latter argued that explanation is just a description of reality that serves a contextually determined purpose, namely that of answering a why-question. So in contrast to Bromberger, for van Fraassen a standard linguistic expression of the why-question is not: Why is it the case that p , but why p in contrast to the rest of x ? In other words, until a contrast class is specified a particular

why-question has not been properly posed (cf. Cross & Roelofsen 2014:n.p)

Garfinkel (1981) advanced a similar view in which explanatory contrast takes centre stage (see Temple 1988). One asks why to ascertain various things, e.g., causal factors, a justification, a purpose, a motive, a function, and so on. Kitcher and Salmon (1987:319), however, criticised van Fraassen's theory on the grounds that it allows just about anything to count as the answer to just about any why-question (cf. Ruben 1987 and Temple 1988)

More recently, according to Cross & Roelofsen (2014:n.p.), the topic of why-questions has once more become somewhat neglected by philosophers of language, at least compared to other topics in the theory of questions. Notable exceptions mentioned are Hintikka and Halonen (1995) who developed a new theory of why-questions and Risjord (2000:70) who also contributed to the ongoing debate by denying the reduction of contrastive and non-contrastive domains to the same thing.

THEOLOGICAL WHY-QUESTIONS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Given the combined perspectives offered on why-questions in the contexts of ancient theories of causation, the PSR and modern philosophy of language, what can be said regarding the meaning of theological why-questions in the HB restated in philosophical language? In addition, since the discourse in theological why-questions is religious, what comparative-philosophical issues are related to the present inquiry? In the attempt to answer these questions, the discussion to follow turns to the entire list of theological why-questions from the HB. Given limitations of space, however, no detailed exegetical discussion will be given and the possibility of alternative renderings and interpretations is readily granted. "Whys" in the text are placed in bold for effect and the emphasis is not part of the original.

Beginning with the Pentateuch, the following theological why-questions appear:

1. Then Moses turned again to Yhwh and said, "O Yhwh, why (למה) have you done evil to this people? Why (למה) did you send me?" (Ex 5:22)
2. But Moses besought Yhwh his god, and said, "O Yhwh, why (למה) does your

wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (Ex 32:11)

3. Why (למה) should the Egyptians say, “With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against your people. (Ex 32:12)
4. Moses said to Yhwh, “Why (למה) have you dealt ill with your servant? And why (למה) have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people upon me?” (Num 11:11)
5. Why (למה) does Yhwh bring us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? (Num 14:3)
6. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why (למה) have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” (Num 21:5)
7.all the nations would say, “Why (על-מה) has Yhwh done thus to this land? What means the heat of this great anger?” (Deut 29:24)

In 1–7 the theological why-questions are all motivated by some sort of suffering in relation to divine action. Despite **why** (למה) being used in 1-6 and **why** (על-מה) in 7, the knowledge being sought by these why-questions appears to pertain to formal rather than final causes (the primary cause seems to be divine motivation or reason) In fact, final causes are sometimes provided (see 3, 5-6; “to x”; “so that y”). The PSR is also presupposed in weak form (not necessarily universally applicable) and seems similar to Schopenhauer’s fourth form (i.e., inner causality as it relates to reasons for events, states of affairs and actions) and not so much concerned with ontological issues, or reasons why things exist. There is also a contrastive element at work as each case presupposes a possible (better?) alternative to the particular divine action and at times these are actually spelled out (see 3, 5 above).

Despite suffering being the motivating factor for the why-questions, instead of linking it to the problem of evil as is popular in biblical theology we are actually dealing with a problem of sufficient reason for divine action. The question then is why

the deity does evil – not per se, for this is allowed for in the morally ambiguous concept of Yhwh – but in relation to (a) his servant, b) his people, c) his plan, d) his image, and e) against the backdrop of certain promises. Yet while sufficient reasons are being sought it is done so in a paradoxical way.

On the one hand, in the broader contexts of the passages quoted the theological why-questions are sometimes dissolved. This happens either when the deity does not act as the why-questions assumed he would (which motivated the question in the first place), or if some sufficient reason is (implicitly) supplied. On the other hand, sometimes it is the why-question itself that seems to prompt the deity to act in a more reasonable manner, seeing that either there was no sufficient reason for the particular course of action or, even if there was, the effects thereof seem to have unwanted consequences (e.g. death of the people or dishonouring of the deity). Sometimes, however, there awaits only silence (cf. in this regard Miller-Naudé 2006:23-43).

The next series of theological why-questions in the Hebrew Bible to be discussed comes from the so-called Deuteronomistic History and Former Prophets section:

8. And Joshua said, “Alas, O Yhwh God, **why** (למה) have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan!” (Joshua 7:7)
9. And Gideon said to him, “Pray, sir, if Yhwh is with us, **why** (למה) then has all this befallen us?” (Judges 6:13)
10. Therefore Saul said, “O Yhwh God of Israel, **why** (למה) have you not answered your servant this day?” (1 Sam 14:41 [LXX])

In these three texts the theological why-questions vary, although **why** (למה) is used each time.

In example 8, the type of causal knowledge being sought pertains to formal and final causes and not to efficient ones. Again, a sufficient reason is sought and also revealed only as the narrative continues. A contrastive state of affairs is explicitly mentioned in the second part (“to...”). The question itself seems valid, seeing that something must have happened to prompt it. But it is also presumptuous since the fears of the people and as expressed in the question do not materialize. In this sense

the why-question is itself suggestive of ignorance or mistrust.

Text 9 is particularly interesting since an efficient cause is sought against the backdrop of what was understood as being the meaning of the concept of the presence of Yhwh. Here the meaning of the expression “Yhwh-with-x” basically turns into a quasi-philosophical problem for the HB since divine presence is no longer seen as a sufficient condition for prosperity as is assumed. In typical fashion, the broader context offers an answer or sufficient reason to the why in a way that is not immediate or obvious. The presence of Yhwh is shown to be real for Gideon only in what follows. Hence the sufficient reason appears as an emergent property of an otherwise complex state of affairs (If x then y, but if and only if z, not at t¹ but at t²)

In example 10 the theological why-question is found only in the LXX which is assumed here to be the correct reading. It not only presupposes but also supplies a sufficient reason as answer to itself. The primary cause in this case was an efficient cause for the divine silence. The theological problem is related to the philosophical problem of divine hiddenness yet not identical to it. Here in the world of the text the deity is not hidden as modern theistic philosophers of religion take for granted and yet hides his face (as the expression goes) in the contexts of alterity and transgressions of the moral order. The sufficient reason is implied to be the presence of sin, or having committed a taboo, either by Saul or someone else.

Turning to the Latter Prophets our first text comes from the Major Prophets, this time so-called Third-Isaiah. It is the only section in the book with theological why-questions.

11. **Why** (מַדּוּעַ) is your apparel red and your garments like treads in the wine press? (Isa 63:2)
12. Yhwh, **why** (לָמָּה) do you make us err from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. (Isa 63:17)

In 11 the question is part of a poem which itself presupposes a question-answer type of rhetoric. Again the primary cause seems to be the efficient cause of the property of redness. The question itself asks for a sufficient reason for divine violence. Not

because the deity is not associated also with this form of evil, but because the reason for it in this case is not immediately clear, even to the speaker. Asking Yhwh why his clothes are red relates to a query concerning how Yhwh in this case has upheld the moral order as agent of retribution. Whether it presupposes Yhwh has acted wrongly or justly and for this a reason is being sought is not *prima facie* apparent. The contrasting element is found in the assumption that the divine clothing is not as a rule drenched in blood.

In the question of 12 in the list one encounters genuine perplexity. The primary cause is a formal cause since the final cause is already known (“so that”). The PSR is assumed, again with reference to divine motivation. The contrastive state is stated in the second part of the verse in the prompting of Yhwh to return. Again, however, the suffering in this Isaiah periscope and motivating the question itself does not relate to the modern versions of the problem of evil, even though it concerns moral evil. In this case once more the deity is implicated in moral evil with the familiar reference to the hardening of hearts.

Clearly free-will theodicies are also out of place here since Yhwh shows his power exactly by overriding the free will of human agents, even if that means turning them into his enemies and making them sin against him. Curiously, this means that according to this text at least the normal state of humans is neither good nor bad and that Yhwh turns it toward the one or the other as he sees fit – an interesting alternative to the later dichotomy of the human condition being seen as either inherently good or bad. Clearly also some form of determinism is presupposed.

Next we come to the book of Jeremiah. Here we find several alternative formulations of theological why-questions.

13. **Why** (על-מה) is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through? (Jer 9:12)
14. **Why** (מדוע) does the way of the wicked prosper? (Jer 12:1)
15. **Why** (למה) should you be like a man confused, like a mighty man who cannot save? (Jer 14:9)
16. **Why** (למה) have you smitten us so that there is no healing for us? (Jer 14:19)

17. **Why** (למה) is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? (Jer 15:18)

Again the theological why-questions (with several Hebrew forms present) are motivated by suffering and are thus existential in as much as they are metaphysical. The concern, however, is not why there is suffering as such vis-à-vis a god of perfect goodness but why there is suffering in a particular context vis-à-vis a just but also trans-rational god. The problem for the book of Jeremiah is that while all the questions presuppose epistemologically that knowledge is gained by knowing the divine reason and purpose, rather than the efficient cause or agent of change, such knowledge is hard to come by.

The first question in 13 presupposes not an efficient but a formal cause since the prophet seeks to know divine motivation and not a naturalist explanation of a certain state of affairs in the world of the text. The PSR is assumed to be operative as it relates to the desolation of the land. The question may be put to Yhwh by the people or even the prophet himself but as it stands here it is asked only to be done away with as the sufficient reason emerges in the texts to follow. The use of why (על-מה) parallels the singular occurrence in Deuteronomy 29:24 discussed earlier in both wording and motif.

In the question in 14, the problem is not as is popularly construed a problem of suffering in the classical sense 4 (i.e., why bad things happen to good people). Rather, and perhaps more curiously, it is a problem of flourishing (i.e., why good things happen to bad people). Hence it may be said that the troubling reality is not evil as such but the absence of evil consequences for evil deeds. It is thus, if anything, a problem of goodness or of the absence of evil (in the sense of wrath and retribution, which the HB also classifies as such). In addition, a sufficient reason in this case is presupposed by the very asking of the question, since the world in the text was assumed to make sense (a problem of justice, rather than evil). Yet the question is also asked to elicit an answer providing a sufficient reason for the given state of affairs. The contrastive element comes in when the prophet both presupposes the accepted moral order as supposed to lead to a better possible state of affairs.

The text in 15 assumes a concern reminiscent of Judges 6. The meaning of Yhwh-with-x is once again rendered problematic on the assumption that if that is the case, certain things should (not) happen. It is not clear which of the four Aristotelian causes should be considered as being assumed to be primary and the knowledge of which would count as an answer to the theological why-question. As for sufficient reasons, the why-question pertains to the assumption of why, if Yhwh is present, he should be in a condition usually attributed by the aniconic polemical tradition to idols – they are called gods but cannot save. This makes no sense to the implied author, who in his mind contrasts it with much more vitality in and action on the part of the deity. Yet there is assumed to be a sufficient reason, hence the possibility of asking the question. Again, no answer is explicit and immediately provided, yet perhaps does emerge as the plot thickens over time.

In the text of 16 the why-question again seems to be about asking for a formal (or even final) cause as the primary source of the suffering. Again the efficient cause is known (i.e., Yhwh), but not the divine motivation. The asking of the question itself may presuppose that a sufficient reason must exist given the possibility and motive for asking it in the first place. Alternatively, it may be implied that no sufficient reason could ever be forthcoming assuming the axioms of a theology vis-a-vis which the hopeless state of affairs makes no sense as it could be contrasted by what the theology implies should be an alternative reality.

The same philosophical clarification as above would be appropriate for the issues at stake in the final question in 17.

Next we move on to the Minor Prophets in the Book of the Twelve where we find theological why-questions only in Habakkuk.

18. **Why** (למה) do you make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? (Hab 1:3)

19. You who are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot not look on wrong, **why** (למה) do you look on faithless men, and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? (Hab 1:13)

In the text in 18 the why-question pertains to the divine tolerance of moral evil. The prophet is seeking for a point to his suffering, i.e., a final cause. Also, he is asking for

a sufficient reason as to why he should be a witness to evil. This is not a problem of evil in the classical sense but more a complaint about unwanted trauma and inconvenience. The why-question pertains neither to the divine nature nor the relation between divine benevolence and an evil state of affairs but to personal jeopardy and disgust. The alternative envisaged is the much better state of affairs of “See no evil, hear no evil”.

In the text of 19, however, there are a number of theological statements that *prima facie* look like casting Yhwh along the lines of an omnibenevolent deity. But this never stated in so many words and Yhwh is only said to be too pure to behold evil. Purity here is a cultic term and pertains to the separation of sacred and profane dimensions – not to divine goodness as such. Yhwh can still be thought of as responsible for the evil even if he cannot behold it, much like a king may not himself want to see war despite his commands causing havoc on the battlefield. Perplexingly, the cause being sought for could be any one of the four and a sufficient reason may or may not be assumed to exist. What is obvious though is that the prophet can easily contrast the actual state of affairs with a better possible one.

The next series of theological why-questions in the HB comes from the Writings. The first group is found in Books I-III in the Psalter.

20. **Why** (למה) do you stand afar off, O Yhwh? (Ps 10:1)
21. **Why** (על-מה) does the wicked renounce God? (Ps 10:13)
22. My god, my god, **why** (למה) have you forsaken me? (Ps 22:1)
23. I say to God, my rock: “**Why** (למה) have you forgotten me? **Why** (למה) go I mourning because of oppression of the enemy?” (Ps 42:9)
24. For you are the god in whom I take refuge; **why** have you cast me off? **Why** (למה) go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? (Ps 43:2)
25. **Why** do you forget our affliction and oppression? (Ps 44:24)
26. God, **why** (למה) do you cast us off forever? (Ps 74:1)
27. **Why** (למה) do you hold back your hand? (Ps 74:11)
28. **Why** (למה) then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? (Ps 80:12)

29. Yhwh, **why** (למה) do you cast me off? (Ps 88:14)

These texts offer a repetition and intensification of those related to the suffering individual/community and already dealt with elsewhere in the canon. Again the theological why-questions appear in the context of suffering in the face of divine absence and rejection. Again the primary cause(s) here seem to be formal/final rather than efficient causes (see 42:9b where the efficient cause is given; 80:12 where the final cause is supplied; it seems efficient causes are requested only if the need is for a type of sin being identified as the reason for the state of affairs). The asking of the theological why-questions here moreover always presupposes a theology in which the question either should not arise or, if it should, a sufficient reason is presupposed. In each case a contrasting state of affairs that does not involve the divine acting in the particular manner is assumed to be possible.

Of course, only silence remains along with the echo of the question itself. Yet once more the problem of divine hiddenness is not the same as is constructed in contemporary discourse on the subject. This is because the divine attributes in the Psalms differ from those of the divine in perfect being theology. The Psalter has a much greater emphasis on the absence of divine intervention as a cause for questioning the divine itself, whereas modern views think mostly of the hiddenness as an argument for atheism. Thus the problem for the psalmists is apparent divine forgetfulness and rejection, rather than non-existence, as can be seen in the anthropomorphic metaphors of being cast off by Yhwh, Yhwh as standing or holding back, and Yhwh not remembering. Also “hiding the face” in the Psalms is not the same as the modern metaphysical notion of divine hiddenness through total transcendence. The hiding of the face is a royal metaphor referring to the divine not responding to the psalmist, not to the divine being “elsewhere” (as a king turns his face even though being seen seated on a throne in the presence of the servant).

Our next selection of theological why-question texts comes from the wisdom literature where they are found in abundance in the Book of Job.

30. **Why** (למה) is light given to him that is in misery? (Job 3:20)

31. **Why** (מה) is light given to a man whose way is hid (Job 3:23)

32. **Why** (למה) have you made me your mark? (Job 7:20)
33. **Why** (מה) do you not pardon my transgression? (Job 7:21)
34. I shall be condemned; **why** (למה) then do I labor in vain? (Job 9:29)
35. **Why** (למה) did you bring me forth from the womb? (Job 10:18)
36. **Why** (למה) do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy? (Job 13:24)
37. **Why** (מדוע) do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty? (Job 21:7)
38. **Why** (מדוע) are not times of judgment kept by the Almighty (Job 24:1)

In these texts (found only in Job's speeches from chapters 3-24) three themes are prominent.

- 1) In the first theme the need for knowing final causes and for a sufficient reason for living is presupposed in the context of perpetual suffering which seems to rob existence of its value and in contrast to which death is assumed to be preferable (questions 30-31, 34-35)
- 2) In the second theme the question probably pertains to any or all of the four causes and a sufficient reason for why Job is pursued and his sin cannot just be forgiven, i.e., why the moral order has to function the way it does and not in an alternative manner (questions 32-33, 36)
- 3) In the third theme again any of the four causes may be applicable and there is the question of divine methodology when it comes to retribution and the punishment of the wicked, which seem to be absent. The alternative or contrasting state of affairs is assumed to be the norm within the system hence the seeming anomalies which lead to the theological why-question in the first place (questions 37-38).

Around these three themes, why-questions are asked related to the meaning of life, the forgiveness of sin and justice in relation to the wicked respectively. The book of Job is in this regard both an answer and no-answer to the philosophical-theological problems presupposed in the three types of why-questions.

The last text in the canon with a theological why-question comes from the book of Lamentations.

- 39) **Why** (למה) do you forget us forever? (Lam 5:20)

In this text we see a continuation of the tradition of communal questioning in the

Psalter (cf. Ps 74:1). Again the language of forgetfulness and forsaking is used and a sufficient reason for this is presupposed but seemingly incomprehensible, or at least absent. The type of cause considered primary is presumably a formal or final cause and the contrasting state of affairs seems more desirable and even reasonable – hence the question. On the one hand, then, it would seem some sufficient reason is presupposed given assumptions about the moral order and the deity’s nature (people suffer because of their sin as well as a result of the divine nature in relation to that). On the other hand, be that as it may and popular orthodox theology notwithstanding, the perplexity remains and a sufficient reason is nowhere to be found. Yet perhaps it is hoped that the very asking of the question can itself be the cause of the forthcoming of some sufficient reason.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an introductory overview of a selection of philosophical perspectives on theological why-questions in the HB. Looking at the textual data vis-à-vis ancient views on causality, the PSR and why-questions in modern philosophy of language, as well as the related issues in comparative philosophy of religion, the following points have been established:

1. Theological why-questions in the HB arise from perceived suffering.
2. Most forms are of the **why** (למה) type with alternatives occurring only infrequently and literal meanings not applicable in terms of cause or reason.
3. The questions appear to stem from ignorance of divine motivation and purpose.
4. The primary cause(s) in most cases are formal/final causes, with efficient and material causes either unknown or not mentioned.
5. The HB’s theological why-questions can also be related to Schopenhauer’s fourth form of the PSR.
6. A linguistic-philosophical contrastive possible state of affairs is either implicitly or explicitly present in most cases.
7. Related issues and topics in comparative philosophy of religion are the divine

attributes, the problem of evil and divine hiddenness but these were shown to have anachronistic assumptions in related to the HB's own presuppositions.

Answers to the theological why-questions of the HB seem to be either non-accessible, unacceptable or arise as an emergent property from the questioning process itself vis-à-vis the larger context of discourse. Mostly the questions themselves dissolve amidst divine silence, leaving the audience only with a dead-end analogous to that found in the following mystical inversion of the why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-road joke:

Chicken.

Road.

The crossing is within.

There is no other side.

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