

Book Review: "God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer" by Bart Ehrman

by Sandi Dolbee "CNS"

"God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer" by Bart Ehrman; HarperOne; \$26.

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'GOD'S PROBLEM' - The more New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman studied the Bible, the less he believed in God. Ehrman is the author of a new book, 'God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer.' CNS photo. Once a committed evangelical Christian, convinced that every word in Scripture was literally true, Ehrman grew increasingly disturbed by the discrepancies he found in the biblical books.

"I realized that we don't really have the words of the original manuscript," he says. "It made me realize that my belief that the words of the Bible were inspired by God didn't make sense anymore."

He became a liberal Christian "who didn't put much stock in the Bible as the only authority."

But then came the problem of suffering. That, says the 52-year-old religion professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, "put me over the top."

"I realized I couldn't explain any longer why there could be such pain and misery in the world that was supposedly ruled by an all-powerful and loving God," he says.

He could chalk up cruelty and inhumanity to free will, the belief that God gave each individual the capacity to make his or her own choices. But what about natural disasters? Where is God in the devastating mudslides, hurricanes and tornados? Not to mention famine and poverty and disease.

"So," Ehrman says, "I became an agnostic."

Ehrman, a prolific and popular author, has put his journey into words in a new book: "God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer."

Over 300-plus pages, he shares his change of heart while also exploring the common biblical explanations for why bad things happen.

The worst explanation, he thinks, is that suffering is God's punishment for sin.

"If your daughter dies in a car wreck on the way to a high school prom, to think that God did this because you did something wrong, because you cheated on your husband or something, I think that's completely inappropriate and unhelpful," Ehrman says.

He argues that this is a harmful theology that feeds guilt and self-doubt. He wants nothing to do with it. "I don't believe in a God that would maliciously cause pain and misery."

The most comforting explanation, he says, comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in Ecclesiastes, about how suffering is a mystery that mere mortals can never understand. But that's not enough to persuade him to become a believer again.

"If you say it's all a mystery, then what you're saying is there's no answer," he explains. "I'm happy to say there's no answer, but that means you don't have a God who's actively involved."

In other words, if God's an absentee landlord, then Ehrman would just as soon not be a tenant.

He wrestles mightily with when God intervenes in the Bible, and when God doesn't. Why save the Israelites

from the Egyptian army but not at other times? If God's going to make all things right in the end, as apocalyptic theology claims, then why let evil people prosper in the meantime?

"God's Problem" isn't exactly anti-religion - at least not compared with such emphatic best-sellers as Sam Harris' "Letter to a Christian Nation" and Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion."

Still, his stands aren't always well-received among some people of faith. One evangelical Christian described him as "the devil's dream come true."

Ehrman says he's not trying to turn people into agnostics. "I don't think everybody has to agree with me or to follow my path at all. The reason I talk about my path is simply to explain why this problem is so important to me, personally. I have no objection to people being people of faith, so long as they struggle with these questions as well."

Publishers Weekly was underwhelmed with "God's Problem." After raving about Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus" in 2005 and naming his "Peter, Paul & Mary Magdalene" one of the best religion books of 2006, the magazine calls Ehrman's newest work a "sometimes provocative, often pedantic memoir."

The review concludes: "Although Ehrman's readings of the biblical texts are instructive, he fails to convince readers that these are indeed God's problems, and he fails to advance the conversation any further than it's already come."

Ehrman actually ends "God's Problem" on an upbeat note, a kind of call to arms for people to be good - to themselves and to others - for goodness' sake.

"For me," he says, "the solution has always been to embrace life for all its fullness and help others enjoy the fullness as well."

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