their pain is increased when they remember their previous life situations. And, second, they experience great physical discomfort in the new roles they are forced to play. Compassion comes from Ganesha who interprets their activity in the temple as a form of devotion and gives them special divine bodies, which indicates liberation has been achieved.

- **Direction for the spiritual life:** The themes of **karma**, good and evil, suffering and reward, favour and disfavour of God, are all developed in this narrative. A clear contrast is drawn between the pious yogins and the townspeople holding Ganesha’s festival, on the one hand, and the three accursed figures, on the other. Constant worship and extreme piety appear to be no match for ignorance, conflict and hatred induced by curse and counter-curse, ultimately by bad **karma**. The lesson here is that Ganesha is impressed only by real devotion, not merely by its appearance. The related themes of reward for pure devotion and repudiation of false piety—manifested in the excessive performance of rituals—appear often in literature and from a very early period. Throughout the history of Hinduism there have been devotional movements associated with lower caste figures that have undermined the authority of the more austere brahmanical system with its emphasis on ritual and philosophy. Conversely, the rewarding of those who appear to be lacking in any religious sensibility is strongly galling to those who perform all the external displays of religious practice, yet are rebuffed right at the end. It is not so much a question of fairness or unfairness as of integrity and hypocrisy and the undisputed right of the god to confer his favour on anyone he chooses.

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**Suffering in sacred writings and stories**

**Buddhism**

The Four Noble Truths

‘And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness and distress are suffering. Being attached to the unloved is suffering, being separated from the loved is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering ...
'And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to rebirth, bound up with pleasure and lust, finding fresh delight, now here, now there: that is to say, sensual craving, craving for existence and craving for non-existence ...

'And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving, its forsaking and abandonment, liberation from it, detachment from it ...

'And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Way of Practice Leading to the Cessation of Suffering? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path ...

From the Pali Canon, in Mahasatipatthana Sutta (Thus Have I Heard), trans. Maurice Walsh, pp. 344-8.

These lines are among the most important in the entire Canon, consisting as they do of a statement of the Four Noble Truths.

Christianity

Suffering is a universal and most common experience for human beings. No one escapes it, and, as such, suffering functions as a common denominator ... Suffering leads to fundamental questions about the self: Why me? Why do things always go wrong in my life? Why live?


The theme of suffering appears under many guises throughout the Christian Bible. Job is described as one whose 'suffering was very great' (Job 2:13). The 'suffering servant', a theme also used in the passion of Christ narratives, is characterised as 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Isa 53:3). Jesus says of himself: 'The Son of Man must suffer many things' (Mk 8:31). Paul advises those Christians experiencing persecution: 'Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation' (Rom 12:12), while elsewhere he identifies the communal dimension of suffering: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together' (1 Cor 12:26).

Suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures is usually described in the context of various injuries, sicknesses, childbirth, and similar pain (2 Kgs 20:1ff.; Gen 21:15ff.). The Jewish Mediterranean view was that any deep felt suffering affected the entire body and soul (1 Sam 1:8; Jer 4:19). The people of the Hebrew Scriptures did not conceal their pain or suffering but expressed it openly as weeping and pitiable lamentation. Their writings hold that the deeper cause of any suffering is the disturbance of the relationship between humanity and God through sin (Gen 3:16-19; Wis 2:24).
In the Christian Scriptures, suffering plays a major part in Jesus' own ministry, especially in his passion and death by crucifixion. He not only predicted suffering in his own ministry, but emphasised that it is willed by God (Mk 8:31). The gospel writers portray Jesus as the suffering servant of God who must lay down his life on behalf of the many (Mk 10:45).

As the master, so too the Christian disciple must follow Jesus in his manner and understanding of suffering. The true disciple must carry the cross after Jesus (Lk 14:27). Through suffering, the authentic disciple comes to understand that the preaching of Jesus crucified is indeed folly, yet ironically it is in Jesus that the power and wisdom of God are revealed (see 1 Cor 1:22-24).

For Paul, suffering is a test by which Christians prove themselves (Rom 5:3f.). Therefore, Christians should rejoice over their sufferings (Jas 1:2-4), which are to be endured for the sake of the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41), and in imitation of his example (Heb 12:1f.). So, in summary, Paul's approach is that Christians should suffer like Christ and for Christ, but also with Christ, because they believe that they exist in Christ, and therefore continually bear the death of Jesus in their own bodies (see 2 Cor 4:10-11; Rom 6:3ff.).

In light of the above, the five key aspects of suffering based on Christian sacred writings can be summed up as:

• suffering as the result of human sin (the main view in the Hebrew Scriptures)
• suffering leading to some greater good (Gen 50:15-21; Rom 5:1-5)
• suffering caused by cosmic evil forces (Job 1–2; Rom 8:35-39)
• the mystery of suffering (Job 38-41)
• permission to lament (Ps 3; 5; Mk 11:24; 2 Cor 1:8-11).


The Christian Scriptures indicate that any 'solution' or 'response' to the mysteries of suffering, sin and death is not intellectual—these can never be explained satisfactorily. The Bible's response is more devotional and advisory—the Christian confronts God in prayer, asking for relief from all types of suffering, yet accepts what God gives as God's Will, whether that be deliverance from suffering or spiritual support throughout it (see Mk 14:32-42; 2 Cor 12:7-10). It could be said that the entire Bible puts forward strategies for responding to suffering, rather than tried and true solutions or explanations.

1 Cite and explain the meaning of four scripture texts on suffering—one from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.
2 Write one paragraph on how Christians understand 'suffering', based on examples from their sacred writings and stories.
3 List the five dimensions of suffering evident in the Bible, providing a scripture reference to illustrate each dimension.
4 Compare suffering to:
   a a flood
   b a piano
   c a barbecue
   d a tree.
5 How would a Christian, knowledgeable about the Bible, respond to: 'Suffering is always deserved and never random or meaningless'?
Islam

It is expected that Muslims will undergo suffering, adversity and trials during this life:

Or think ye that ye will enter paradise while yet there hath not come unto you the like of that which came to those who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, they were shaken as with earthquake, till the messenger of Allah and those who believed along with him said: When cometh Allah’s help? Now surely Allah’s help is nigh.

*Surat al-Baqara 2:214.*

And those who became fugitives for the cause of Allah after they had been oppressed, We verily shall give them goodly lodging in the world, and surely the reward of the Hereafter is greater, if they but knew; Such as are steadfast and put their trust in Allah.

*Surat al-Nahl 16:41-42.*

And make mention O Muhammad of Our bondman Job, when he cried unto his Lord saying: Lo! the devil doth afflict me with distress and torment.

*Surat Sad 38:41.*

Narrated ‘A’isha:
The Prophet said, ‘Or do you think that you shall enter Paradise without such trials as came to those who passed away before you?’

Bukhari.

Narrated Abu Huraira:
Allah’s Apostle said, ‘If Allah wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials.’

Bukhari.

While suffering, like evil, is accepted as part of human existence, Muslims also believe that Allah will not burden them with more suffering than they are capable of withstanding. They are also urged to have patience during adversity and they are obliged to relieve the suffering of others:

We task not any soul beyond its scope.

*Surat al-An’am 6:152.*

But as for those who believe and do good works—We tax not any soul beyond its scope—Such are rightful owners of the Garden. They abide therein.

*Surat al-A’raf 7:42.*

Narrated Abu Musa:
The Prophet said: ‘This people of mine is one to which mercy is shown. It will have no punishment in the next world, but its punishment in this world will be trials, earthquakes and being killed.’

Abu Da’ud.

Did you know?
The concept of suffering for Allah is extremely strong in Shi’i Islam and can be traced back to the martyrdom of Husayn in 61 AH/680 CE. It is reinforced by the interpretation of jihad (‘to strive or struggle’ in the way of Allah) by some contemporary Islamic groups.

*Research the concept of jihad in the history of Islam.*
Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger as saying: ‘He who alleviates the suffering of a brother out of the sufferings of the world, Allah would alleviate his suffering from the sufferings of the Day of Resurrection, and he who finds relief for one who is hard pressed, Allah would make things easy for him in the Hereafter.’

Muslim.

O ye who believe! Seek help in steadfastness and prayer. Lo! Allah is with the steadfast.


So have patience O Muhammad! Allah’s promise is the very truth, and let not those who have no certainty make thee impatient.

Surat al-Rum 30:60.

Abu Huraira reported:
The Messenger of Allah said: ‘When any one of you utters tashahhud [in prayer] he must seek refuge with Allah from four trials and should thus say: “O Allah! I seek refuge with Thee from the torment of the Hell, from the torment of the grave, from the trial of life and death and from the evil of the trial of Masih al-Dajjal [Antichrist].”’

Muslim.

Narrated Abu Da’ud:
I heard the Apostle of Allah say: ‘If any of you is suffering from anything or his brother is suffering, he should say: “Our Lord is Allah Who is in the heaven, holy is Thy name, Thy command reigns supreme in the heaven and the earth, as Thy mercy in the heaven, make Thy mercy in the earth; forgive us our sins, and our errors; Thou art the Lord of good men; send down mercy from Thy mercy, and remedy, and remedy from Thy remedy on this pain so that it is healed up.”’

Abu Da’ud.

Tashahhud:
Reciting the following silently during salat:
‘Greetings are for Allah and all prayers and all good. Peace be on you O Prophet and the Mercy of Allah and His blessing. Peace be on us and on the right-acting slaves of Allah. I bear witness that there is no god except Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Messenger.’

1 Choose three examples from the sacred writings of Islam on suffering and adversity and show how they relate to the obligation to help the poor and needy.
2 How do Islamic beliefs about suffering support the obligation for daily prayer?
3 How are Islamic teachings on suffering and adversity reflected in the religious rituals of Islam? Give examples from two rituals.
4 In one page, summarise what the Qur’an and sunna of the Prophet say about suffering and adversity and how this relates to each of the five pillars of faith of Islam.
Judaism

Like evil and love, suffering is accepted as a part of the human condition in Judaism's sacred writings:

> Just as one praises God for the good that comes to him, so he must praise Him for the bad.

*Berachot* 48b.

The most obvious suffering that each person must face is the reality of death:

> What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?

*Psalm* 89:48.

An issue surrounding death under Jewish Law is the ritual impurity of the dead body:

> He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days.

*Numbers* 19:11.

Added to this, no work is allowed on the *Shabbat*. In the typical style of Talmudic discourse, there is considerable discussion about how the Jew is to deal with the difficult issue of suffering and death on the *Shabbat*:

> And all occurrences of danger to human life suspend [the laws of] the Sabbath. If debris falls on someone and it is doubtful whether or not the person is there, or whether the person is alive or dead ... one should open the heap of debris [even on the Sabbath]. If one finds the person alive, one should remove the debris. If the person is dead, leave the person there [until after the Sabbath].


Even in bioethical dilemmas such as determining the ethics of organ transplantation, modern Jewish rabbinical authorities will refer to the teachings of the Torah (in the broad sense) to justify their position. For example, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel acknowledges brain death as the criteria for death for the purposes transplantation. It does so based on *pikuah nefesh*, which speaks of the *mitzvah* of intervening to save the life of another, even at personal risk.

The greatest suffering of the Jews in modern times was the experience of the Holocaust (1939–45). Some modern Jewish writers have seen the Holocaust as the suffering of the righteous as atonement for the sins of the wicked:

> Agonies wash away all the sins of man.

*Berachot* 5a.
Sacred writings and stories

Others have rejected this reading of the Holocaust. Some scholars understand that as God’s people suffered, so indeed did God suffer:

Then the Lord said, ‘I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings.’

Exodus 3:7.

... Living in pain just as the Israelites were living in pain.

Midrash Shemot Rabba 2:5.

When a man suffers, to what expression does the Divine Presence give utterance? My head is heavy, my arm is heavy! If the Holy One, blessed be He, is thus grieved over the blood of the wicked, how much more so over the blood of the righteous that is shed?

Hagiga 15b.

1. List the values that are contained within the sacred writings quoted in this section.
2. Summarise Jewish beliefs about suffering, supporting these with quotations from Judaism’s sacred writings.
3. How are Jewish teachings on suffering reflected in Jewish religious rituals? Give examples from two rituals.
4. Explain the difference between the two ‘readings’ of the Holocaust.
5. What similarities and what differences do you note in the style of writing in the selection of Jewish sacred writings quoted in this section?
6. Do you think that it is legitimate to apply lessons of the Jewish sages, written in very different times, to modern situations? Why/Why not?