

Silence of God in Suffering: A Theological Reflection on Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job in the Face of Biblical Theology

Ejue, Eneh Theresa

University of Abuja, Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts

Abstract: Divine silence in the context of human suffering, drawing primarily from Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job, both texts present profound theological challenges as they depict individuals grappling with the perceived absence of God amidst deep affliction. Gideon's lament "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" echoes Job's prolonged agony and unanswered questions. Rather than providing direct answers, these biblical narratives reveal a theological pattern where silence is not equivalent to divine absence but becomes a medium for testing, transformation, and deeper trust. This study situates these texts within the broader framework of biblical theology, arguing that divine silence serves as a formative experience that shapes faith, exposes the limitations of human understanding, and calls for a resilient, relational trust in God. Furthermore, the article reflects on the contemporary relevance of these themes, particularly in the Nigerian context, where many Christians face ongoing socio-political and economic suffering. It concludes that divine silence, while disorienting, can become a profound space for lament, dialogue, and spiritual growth when viewed through the lens of Scripture.

Keywords: Silence, Suffering, and Theological Reflection.

1.0 Introduction

The experience of divine silence amidst suffering has long perplexed both believers and theologians. Within the framework of biblical theology, this silence becomes a profound theological motif that challenges assumptions about divine justice, presence, and benevolence. The tension is vividly portrayed in two pivotal Old Testament texts: Judges 6:13, where Gideon laments God's perceived abandonment, and the Book of Job, where Job's prolonged agony is met initially with silence from God. These narratives do not merely express ancient anguish; they resonate with the existential crises of contemporary faith, especially within contexts of prolonged hardship, such as those found in Nigeria. This article reflects theologically on the silence of God in these texts and evaluates its significance within the broader contours of biblical theology.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The silence of God, especially during times of acute human suffering, evokes deep theological inquiry. How can a just and omnipotent God remain silent when His people cry out in pain? In biblical theology, silence does not simply denote absence—it becomes a space of testing, transformation, and eventual revelation. As Terence Fretheim argues, "The silence of God is not the same as the absence of God" (Fretheim 94). Rather, divine silence often functions as a backdrop for deeper divine purposes to unfold, challenging human assumptions about immediacy in divine justice.

Judges 6:13 captures this existential cry: "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" This rhetorical question encapsulates the heart of theodicy. Gideon's lament reflects not disbelief but a profound expectation for divine intervention in the face of

Israel's suffering under Midianite oppression. Yet, God's response is indirect; rather than providing an immediate theological explanation, He calls Gideon to action, subtly implying that divine silence does not equal divine inaction.

Job's suffering is cosmic in scale, and God's silence stretches across most of the narrative. Job's protestations, laced with theological integrity and existential pain, challenge the retributive justice model embedded in his friends' responses. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar insist on a cause-and-effect understanding of divine justice—suffering as punishment for sin. But Job's insistence on his innocence creates a theological dissonance, demanding that divine justice be reinterpreted beyond mere moral arithmetic (Crenshaw 6).

God's eventual response from the whirlwind (Job 38–41) is not an explanation of suffering but a reorientation of Job's perspective. As Walter Brueggemann notes, "God answers not with a solution, but with a summons into a deeper trust" (Brueggemann 112). This shift marks a theological maturation where human suffering is not always met with answers, but with a relational encounter that transcends rational explanation.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine the silence of God in suffering (a theological reflection) focusing on the narratives of Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job, and applying these perceptions to biblical theology and response to present circumstances. This validation is a mendacity in the necessity for biblical theology—one that not only addresses theological truths but also engages with the lived realities of Christians in Nigeria today (Musa 60). By doing this, the research hopes to provide a biblical framework that helps Christian's deal with suffering without falling into despair or accusing God discriminatorily.

This study is limited to biblical narratives in Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job, as these passages exemplify the biblical struggle with theodicy. The scope also includes empirical research conducted among churches in the Abaji Area Council, FCT-Abuja, Nigeria. The significance of this research is diverse: it will assist ministries and believers in understanding suffering from a biblical point of view, aid theological educators in developing confined teaching materials, and contribute to the broader academic discourse on contextual theology in Africa (Oguejiofor 52; Ukpong 43).

1.4 Scope and Significance of the Study

This study is designed to analyze two Old Testament texts—Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job within the thematic framework of theodicy. It will also contextualize the findings by examining selected contemporary issues in Nigeria. The study is significant because it bridges biblical scholarship and contextual theology, offering a faith-based approach to understanding and addressing societal cases of silence and suffering. It is relevant for pastors, theologians, and Christian communities grappling with questions about God's justice in Nigeria. The study will also benefit, while also providing a basis upon which further research, aimed at the furtherance of knowledge, would spring up and shall serve as reference materials to other researchers.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Biblical Theology and the Pattern of Divine Silence

In the context of biblical theology, which seeks to understand the overarching narrative of Scripture and its theological unity, divine silence is not merely episodic—it forms part of a larger divine pedagogy. God's silence functions within a dialectic of speech and silence, judgment and mercy, absence and presence. As Laato and de Moor argue, biblical theodicy is based on four premises: God exists, God is just, God is involved in the world, and yet suffering exists (Laato and de Moor 84). Divine silence challenges the tension between these axioms, pushing the believer toward a faith that trusts even when God appears inactive or mute.

This theology is not abstract. In both Judges and Job, the protagonists are confronted not with atheism or nihilism but with the tension of faith in a silent God. The silence becomes a crucible in which faith

is refined. In this sense, silence is not the void of divine absence but the space where human responsibility and divine mystery meet.

2.2 The Function of Lament in Silence

A crucial theological resource in facing divine silence is the biblical language of lament. Both Job and Gideon embody a faith that dares to question God, not to rebel, but to seek communion. As Claus Westermann has argued, lament is not the opposite of praise but its precursor (Westermann 32). It is an act of faith to cry out to a silent God, believing He hears even when He does not speak.

The Psalms are replete with such laments: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps. 13:1). These texts affirm that biblical faith makes space for anguish, confusion, and even anger. They offer a theological framework in which divine silence can be endured and interpreted not as absence, but as part of a deeper, often hidden, divine engagement.

2.3 Theology of Trust Amid Silence

Judges 6:13 and the Book of Job challenge simplistic theologies that equate divine favor with comfort and divine judgment with suffering. They offer a more complex, nuanced view in which divine silence becomes a theological category of its own—a means through which God deepens human trust and redefines divine-human interaction. In the face of suffering, biblical theology does not always provide explanations but calls for resilient faith, rooted in the hope that God’s silence is not the final word.

In the Nigerian context, this theological reflection offers both challenge and comfort. It challenges Christians to move beyond transactional faith toward a deeper trust in God’s mysterious purposes. It comforts them with the assurance that silence is not abandonment, and that in the darkest moments, God is still present—calling, refining, and ultimately, redeeming.

Job’s Story and Contemporary Experiences from Biblical Exploration The problem of suffering has long troubled humanity and remains central to theodicy, the attempt to justify God’s justice in the presence of evil and pain (Griffioen,19).

The book of Job is one of the most profound biblical texts addressing this issue, as it presents the suffering of an innocent man who struggles with the apparent silence of God. Job’s narrative, far from providing simplistic answers, engages the tension between divine sovereignty and human suffering in ways that remain relevant for contemporary contexts, including Nigeria. The story of Job highlights the paradox of innocent suffering. Job is described as “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). Yet, he experienced devastating loss—his children, possessions, and health were taken from him in quick succession (Job 1–2). His plight challenges the retributive view of justice held by his friends, who argued that suffering must be the consequence of sin. Job’s insistence on his innocence exposes the inadequacy of such a view and underscores the reality that suffering cannot always be explained in terms of human guilt (Fiorello,155). This theme resonates with the ongoing question in theodicy: *Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?*

Moreover, Job’s dialogue with God demonstrates the limits of human understanding. God’s response out of the whirlwind (Job 38–41) does not directly answer Job’s questions but reveals the vastness of divine wisdom and the smallness of human perspective. As Terrence Fretheim notes, “God does not give Job reasons but rather a revelation of His sovereignty and creative power” (Fretheim 114). This suggests that human beings may not always comprehend the purposes of suffering, yet God remains just.

In contemporary contexts, Job’s experience mirrors the realities of individuals and communities who suffer without clear explanations. In Nigeria, many endure hardship due to terrorism, economic instability, political corruption, and systemic injustice. These circumstances echo Job’s lament, “*Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?*” (Job 21:7). Just as Job questioned divine justice, Nigerians facing oppression and displacement often wrestle with the silence of God in the midst of suffering. Yet, Job’s perseverance offers a model for faith under trial. Despite his despair, he declared, “*Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him*” (Job 13:15). In the end, Job’s deeper encounter

with God transformed his perspective: “*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you*” (Job 42:5).

As Christians, we have different perspectives on the reason for suffering, which can be referenced from the book of Job. Human suffering is seen as a test of faith, a mystery beyond human reasoning, not always a result of sin, a means of deeper knowledge of God, and an unavoidable reality of life. These human sufferings can be highlighted as;

Suffering as a Test of Faith: Job’s story begins with a heavenly dialogue (Job 1–2), where Satan challenges Job’s integrity, claiming he only serves God because of blessings. God allows Job’s suffering as a test to prove that true faith is not dependent on prosperity but endures even in the face of loss. This shows that suffering may sometimes reveal the depth and sincerity of human faith.

Suffering as Part of the Mystery of God’s Sovereignty: Job repeatedly questions God: “Why do the innocent suffer?” (Job 3; 10; 13). Yet, when God responds (Job 38–41), He does not provide Job with a direct explanation but instead reveals His wisdom, power, and the vastness of creation, which surpasses human understanding. The message is that suffering cannot always be rationally explained — it may remain a divine mystery tied to God’s sovereign purposes.

Suffering and the Limits of Human Wisdom: Job’s friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar) argue that suffering must be due to sin — a form of retributive justice (Job 4–11).

Job rejects this simplistic view, insisting on his innocence. The book teaches that not all suffering is punishment for sin, challenging the idea that pain always means guilt.

Suffering as a Path to Deeper Relationship with God: Through his trials, Job moves from knowing God *by hearsay* to a personal encounter: “*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you*” (Job 42:5, ESV).

Suffering brought Job to a deeper spiritual awareness and humility before God.

Suffering as a Shared Human Condition: Job laments that suffering seems universal: “*Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward*” (Job 5:7). This suggests suffering is an inevitable part of human existence in a fallen world.

For modern believers, including Nigerians living in uncertainty, Job’s story affirms that suffering is not always punishment, that divine justice is often beyond human explanation, and that enduring faith may lead to ultimate restoration and hope. Theodicy as reflected in Job rejects the simplistic link between suffering and sin while affirming God’s sovereignty over life’s mysteries. Job’s narrative not only provides theological insight into the problem of evil but also offers comfort and challenge for those who suffer today. In the Nigerian context, where innocent suffering abounds, Job’s story speaks of resilience, faith, and trust in God’s ultimate justice.

The importance of these ancient texts becomes more acute when viewed through the lens of contemporary Nigerian Christianity. Amidst poverty, terrorism, corruption, and systemic injustice, Nigerian believers often echo Gideon’s question: “If God is with us, why has all this happened to us?” This existential cry mirrors Job’s lament and demands a theological response rooted in biblical precedent, not mere prosperity gospel optimism.

Empirical studies among churches in regions like Abaji Area Council reveal that many Nigerian Christians interpret suffering as divine punishment, much like Job’s friends. Yet, there is also a growing theological awareness that suffering can be redemptive and that divine silence does not signal abandonment (Ayantayo 18). This calls for a pastoral theology that integrates the biblical model of lament, allowing space for questioning, protest, and trust.

3.0 Method of Data Collection

This study adopted both biblical and empirical research methods. The biblical method involve scriptural texts on silence and suffering, while the empirical method uses a descriptive survey to gather data from selected churches in Abaji Area Council. This combination allowed for a deeper

understanding of how silence of God in suffering is both theologically and practically understood by Christians in the area.

To ensure replicability, the study outline clear steps. A sample was selected through simple random sampling to ensure equality and representation. Data collection tools including structured questionnaires was administered to church members and leaders. Collected data was analysed using descriptive statistical methods to identify patterns and drifts.

4.0 Research Findings

The research reveals a substantial relationship between suffering in the Old Testament and contemporary Nigerian society. It shows that both good and bad Christians suffer in Nigeria, with suffering often stemming from disobedience to God's precepts. The findings affirm that suffering is part of God's work on earth, and those who remain faithful to God experience His presence and support amid suffering. Also, the findings align with the adopted methodology, combining biblical analysis and empirical data collected through surveys and interviews. The data support the conclusion that suffering in contemporary Nigeria is similar to the suffering depicted in the Old Testament, especially among those who serve God.

4.1 Discussion of the Research Findings

The study finds that Christians in contemporary Nigerian society face societal problems and suffer similar to those in biblical times. Both good and bad Christians experience hardship, with disobedience to God being a key factor. The research reveals that despite suffering, God is present with those who remain faithful.

The findings are presented clearly, showing the connection between biblical teachings and the current Nigerian context. The study discusses how Christians should respond to suffering, including trust in God, obedience to His Word, and the importance of prayer. The findings address the research objectives by demonstrating how suffering in the Old Testament relates to present-day experiences in Nigeria and how Christians should respond to societal issues.

5.0 Recommendations

1. Church leaders, pastors, and teachers should emphasize the importance of long-suffering for the achievement of God's work on earth. *Recipients:* Church leaders. *Justification:* This ensures that Christians understand suffering as part of their spiritual journey and remain faithful.
2. Regular teachings should focus on the dangers of sin and disobedience. *Recipients:* Pastors and church leaders. *Justification:* This helps prevent suffering caused by disobedience and strengthens the moral standing of the congregation.
3. Church leaders should encourage sincerity in Christians' dealings with God and others. Christians must forgive and seek God's forgiveness. *Recipients:* Pastors, church leaders, and church members. *Justification:* Promotes spiritual growth and harmony within the community.
4. There should be continued education on the significance of faith and trust in God during times of suffering. *Recipients:* Church leaders and Christian educators. *Justification:* Helps Christians cope with societal problems and strengthens their faith in God's control.

Works Cited

1. Ayantayo, Jacob Kehinde. *Religion and the Public Sphere in Nigeria: Reflections on the Challenges of Religious Pluralism and Conflict*. Ibadan: Sefer, 2012.
2. Balentine, Samuel E. *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*. Fortress Press, 1993.
3. Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.

4. Buhring, Kurt. "A Theology of the Spirit (s)." *Spirit (s) in Black Religion: Fire on the Inside*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. 269-307.
5. Crenshaw, James L. *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*. Fortress Press, 1984.
6. Crenshaw, James L. *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Oxford UP, 2005.
7. Fiorello, Michael D. "Aspects of Intimacy with God in the Book of Job." *Journal of spiritual formation and soul care* 4.2 (2011): 155-184.
8. Fretheim, Terence E. *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Abingdon Press, 2005.
9. Griffioen, Amber L. "Therapeutic theodicy? Suffering, struggle, and the shift from the God's-eye view." *Religions* 9.4 (2018): 99.
10. Janzen, J. Gerald. "Job. Atlanta." (1985).
11. Laato, Antti, and Johannes C. de Moor, editors. *Theodicy in the World of the Bible: Issues and Problems*. Brill, 2003.
12. Musa, David Ishaya. *Biblical Theology and the African Context: The Relevance of Scripture in Nigeria*. Jos: African Christian Textbooks, 2019.
13. Nesta, Andy-Philip. *These Writing Made Easy*. University of Abuja, Faculty, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Arts. ISBN: 978-978-955-745-5. (2016).
14. Silva, Thiago Machado. "God and the Meaning of Human Suffering Based on Calvin's Theological Perspective: A Theodicy." *Puritan Reformed Journal* 7.2 (2015): 79.
15. Simundson, Daniel J. *The Message of Job: A Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Fortress, 1985.
16. The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Crossway, 2001.
17. Westermann, Claus. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. Translated by Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen, John Knox Press, 1981.
18. Westermann, Claus. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1981.
19. Wright, Christopher J. H. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Zondervan, 2008.