Saadiah on Divine Grace and Human Suffering

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In his Commentary on Job, Saadiah asks why it is that God afflicts His creatures. In response, he specifies three purposes of divinely imposed affliction, all of which are to be viewed as manifestations of God’s love for His creatures and His care and concern for their interests:

1. discipline and instruction (ta’dib watafa’him) to set them on the right path,
2. punishment (waqubah) that serves as purgation (tambid) of sin, and
3. trial and testing (balwah usamihna) that will yield future reward.

In Emunot ve-Deot, Saadiah narrows the scope of his question, asking not why human beings generally are made to suffer but specifically

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1 This is Saadiah's Kitāb-l-ta‘ālīl. In English it appears as The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job by Saadiah ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi, trans. Lenn Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

2 According to Israel Efros, Studies in Medieval Jewish Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 99, there are for Saadiah two causes for suffering, penalty and love. Yet surely love is the reason for all forms of suffering, including penalty. As Saadiah says: "...although it is a punishment, its object is that of grace, for it deters the transgressor from repeating his offenses and purifies him of those already committed" (CJ, 125).

3 Saadiah understands trial not in the rabbinic sense of refining and discipline, but rather in the sense of a test which, when one successfully endures it, proves one’s unshakable faith. For the rabbinic view, see, e.g. Gen. Rab. 44: 1; also Tanchuma, Tazar'ia, Sec. 5.

4 This is the book’s Hebrew title roughly as it appears in Judah ibn Tibbon, trans. Sefer ha-Emunot veha-De'ot (1186; Constantinople, 1562). The original Arabic title of the book is Kitab al-'Amanat wa'l-Tashadat. The book
why righteous human beings are. To answer this question, Saadiah selects, in *Emunot ve-Deot*, two of the three reasons found in the *Commentary on Job*, namely, punishment and trial. As punishment, the suffering of righteous individuals in this world purges the sins that constitute the minority of their deeds and enables them to enter the world-to-come free of sin and deserving of full reward. Clearly, the notion that the righteous are punished for the minority of their deeds that are sins entails that the righteous are not completely righteous. Indeed, Saadiah defines the righteous as those whose good deeds merely exceed their bad (*ED V*: 2, 209).

Trial and future compensation is a second reason for the suffering of the righteous. In the case of trial, however, one who is made to suffer for this reason must more than scrape by with his good deeds just barely exceeding his bad. For, according to Saadiah, the righteous person who is subjected to trial must be someone who God knows can endure (*ED V*: 3). Indeed, in the Introduction to the *Commentary on Job*, only in the case of the trial-purpose for suffering is the sufferer explicitly called an "upright servant." We may note that since such suffering is justified only by the reward the sufferer is destined to receive and is not deserved, it would surely be unjust for God to inflict it on one who will fail to forbear. We see, then, that, for Saadiah, whereas punishment applies to both the barely righteous and the very righteous, trial applies only to the very righteous, those with respect to whom God can be assured that they can withstand the trial. Of the three reasons for suffering cited in the *Commentary on Job*, the sole reason omitted in *Emunot ve-Deot* is that of discipline for the sake of instruction. It is likely that from Saadiah’s point of view, whereas the righteous may sin, the righteous hardly require instruction in right and wrong; they surely must know what is expected of them if their good deeds exceed their bad.


5 *Cf.*, 125.