

The Dialectic of Theodicy: A Hermeneutical Discourse Between Philosophical Logic and Biblical Systematic Theology- The Case of Hagar

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ABSTRACT

This article constructs a theological-dialectic hermeneutical discourse on theodicy, navigating the acute tension between philosophical rationalism and biblical systematic theology within the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. Utilizing the pandemic as a contemporary "wilderness of fate" (Dozeman, 1998), the study analyzes the traumatic affliction and systemic exploitation of vulnerable women through the hermeneutical lens of Hagar's narrative (Gen. 16). The discourse contrasts the philosophical quest for logical consistency, specifically addressing the "trilemma" of divine omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the existence of evil (Frame, 2011), with a systematic theological emphasis on divine solidarity and eschatological hope (Moltmann, 1974). The research employs a "Trialectic of the Wilderness" framework, synthesizing the Philosophical Pole (Ayer, 1936; Flew, 1950; Plantinga, 1974), the Systematic Pole (the Theology of the Cross), and the Sociological Pole (structural violence Galtung, 1969). By integrating the perspectives of African women theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001) and Isabel Apawo Phiri (2021), the study explores how faith communities transitioned into "networks of survival." The study concludes that while philosophy seeks to explain the causality of evil, biblical theology offers a redemptive framework through the revelation of El Roi—the "God who sees"—providing a mandate for social justice.

Keywords: Theodicy, Hagar Narrative, COVID-19, Structural Violence, El Roi, African Women's Theology, Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Navigating the Wilderness of Fate and the Shadow Pandemic

The global emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 catalysed a crisis that transcended the boundaries of public health, evolving into a profound socio-cultural and theological dilemma. While the world focused on the biological threat of the virus, a "shadow pandemic" of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) ensued. This included various cases that related to the role of the church and the legal system leading to the injustices that festered behind the closed doors of national lockdowns. In the Malawian context, the domestic sphere, traditionally conceptualized as a sanctuary, was transformed into a "wilderness of fate" (Dozeman, 1998), where isolation measures intended to preserve life paradoxically facilitated its violation. For the vulnerable, particularly women and children, the pandemic did not merely represent a medical hazard but a period of traumatic affliction characterized by physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation. As the World Health Organization [WHO] (2021) observed, the disruption of social and economic life created a vacuum in which perpetrators of violence could operate with near-total impunity.

This reality forces a critical re-examination of theodicy, the philosophical and theological attempt to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God with the undeniable reality of rampant evil and suffering (Frame, 2011). The quest for theodicy in this period is not a detached intellectual exercise; it is an existential

necessity for those whose lives have been upended by what Moltmann (1974) describes as the "ebbing of life". If God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, the pervasive suffering of the "quarantined" woman demands an answer: Why does the Divine remain seemingly silent while the vulnerable are crushed by both natural disasters (the virus) and moral evils (violence)?

This study seeks to address this tension by employing the biblical narrative of Hagar as a hermeneutical archetype. Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman cast into the wilderness of Beersheba, mirrors the contemporary experience of women in Malawi who face systemic "surrogacy" and exploitation. Like the modern victim of GBV, Hagar inhabited a space of isolation where her agency was stripped by those in power, Abraham and Sarah, representing the failure of traditional patriarchal "protection" structures (Trible, 1984; Williams, 1993). Furthermore, the introduction of the pandemic into the Malawian social fabric exacerbated existing vulnerabilities rooted in harmful cultural rituals and economic challenges as this is evidenced in the contextual case studies presented in this document through surveys and interviews done by the UN, World Bank, and NGOs. These created a unique "wilderness" where moral evil thrived under the guise of socio-economic necessity. By integrating Jürgen Moltmann's (1967) "Theology of Hope" and the concept of the "Crucified God," this research argues that God's presence is not found in the orchestration of suffering, but in His solidarity with the sufferer.

Research Objectives and Problem Statement

The central aim of this article is to analyse the intersection of theodicy and the pandemic experience. It posits that the suffering witnessed during COVID-19 was a product of "moral evil" engineered by human agents and natural disasters rather than a "divine decree". Through a systematic theological lens, the paper explores how the revelation of God as *El Roi*, the "God who sees" (Genesis 16:13), provides a foundation for resilience and a mandate for social justice in the wake of global trauma. By bridging the gap between philosophical logic and biblical systematic theology, this discourse seeks to offer a redemptive framework that validates the pain of the marginalized while pointing toward an eschatological hope.

While the dialectic approach traditionally pits the empirical rigors of logical positivism against the theoretical justification of theodicy, this binary proves insufficient for addressing the trilemma of evil as it is uniquely experienced by women in Malawi. Such a two-dimensional framework often obscures the structural violence embedded within patriarchal religious and social systems, where physical and psychological abuse are often exacerbated by geographic isolation and economic dependency. To move beyond this impasse, this study proposes a trialectic framework that synthesizes formal theory with an epistemology of the oppressed. By centering the hermeneutics of *El Roi*, the God who sees those whom systems overlook, and this research addresses a critical gap: how Malawian women reclaim spiritual and social agency in the face of systematic harm. Therefore, the central problem this article examines is how the intersection of traditional patriarchy and contemporary structural inequities continues to marginalize women's voices in Malawian theological and social discourses.

Definition of Terms

In order to enhance a smooth reading and navigation of the complex intersection of the technical terms inherent in philosophy, theology, and sociology utilized in this article, this study provides the following definitions that explains the technical terms used in this article.

- 1. Theodicy:** The word is derived from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dikē* (justice), theodicy is the attempt to defend the goodness and power of God in the face of the existence of evil and suffering (Leibniz, 1951). In this study, it asks why a loving God would allow the "shadow pandemic" of abuse and violence to occur during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- 2. Hermeneutics:** The theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical expressions (Thiselton, 2009). This study uses a "hermeneutic of visibility," focusing on how the story of Hagar helps us "interpret" and see the modern suffering of Malawian women today.

3. **The Trilemma (The Epicurean Paradox):** A logical puzzle that argues that three things cannot be true at the same time: 1) God is all-powerful, 2) God is all-good, and 3) Evil exists. If God were all-powerful, He *could* stop evil; if He were all-good, He *would* stop evil (Hick, 1966). The "philosophical pole" used in this study challenges believers to explain the presence of violence during the pandemic.
4. **Structural Violence:** This is a term that was coined by sociologist Johan Galtung, it refers to harm caused by social structures or institutions (like patriarchy, poverty, or legal systems) that prevent people from meeting their basic needs (Galtung, 1969). Used in this study, the term describes how the Malawian "lockdown" wasn't just a health measure but a structure that trapped women with abusers and cut off their economic survival.
5. **Dialectic / Trialectic:** As used in this study, a **Dialectic** is a method of argument where two opposing ideas (like logic vs. faith) are brought together to find a truth. A **Trialectic** adds a third element to the conversation (Soja, 1996). This study moves from a *dialectic* (Philosophy vs. Theology) to a *trialectic* by adding the "Sociological Pole" (the actual lived reality of women in Malawi).
6. **Epistemology of the Oppressed:** This phraseology defines the study of knowledge (epistemology) that is based on the idea that those who are marginalized or suffering have a unique and superior "view" of truth and justice compared to those in power (Freire, 1970). In this research article this approach values the "lament" and the "voice" some of the abused women in Rumphu or Machinga as a primary source of theological truth.
7. **Logical Positivism:** This term defines a philosophical movement that is associated with A.J. Ayer which claims that a statement is only "meaningful" if it can be proven true through logic or physical senses (Ayer, 1936). In this study, this term is used to challenge theologians, suggesting that saying "God is love" is meaningless if it cannot be proven while women are being exploited.
8. **El Roi (The God Who Sees):** This is a Hebrew name for God found in Genesis 16:13, coined by Hagar. It signifies a God who does not remain distant but actively observes and acknowledges the suffering of the marginalized (Williams, 1993). Used in this article, this term serves as the "Systematic Pole" of hope, suggesting that even in a lockdown, the victim is not invisible to the Divine.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study uses the Secondary Data Analysis or Qualitative Secondary Analysis (QSA); a "Desk Review and Document Analysis" (World Bank, 2021). This is due to the demands of Safety and Ethics that are prevalent in fields like gender-based violence (GBV). This is considered more ethical because it avoids re-traumatizing victims with new interviews (UN Women, 2020). This study treat these reports as its "participants." It utilized the UN Women Rapid Gender Assessment for Malawi conducted in 2020 (UN Women & World Bank, 2021). The justification for this choice was to gain a broader national perspective on COVID-19 lockdowns in Malawi that would be impossible to capture through limited personal interviews (UN Women, 2020). Telephone interviews were conducted by the UN Women and the World Bank in high-risk areas with large samples of over 2,400 Malawians. Thus, this study utilized reports on GBV in Malawi from policy reports, NGO documents, and news articles (Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2021). The following expanded methodology incorporates the hermeneutical framework utilized in this study.

Hermeneutical Approach: The Trialectic of the Wilderness

The study employs a multidisciplinary "theological dialectic hermeneutical discourse" to navigate the tension between philosophical rationalism and biblical systematic theology. This approach is structured through three primary layers. First, the biblical narrative of Hagar is used as a "hermeneutical archetype" to mirror the isolation and exploitation faced by Malawian women during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dozeman, 1998; Tribble, 1984). The discourse extends to other "texts of terror," including the narratives of Tamar (Genesis 38), Dinah (Genesis 34), and Sarah, to analyze the "wilderness of fate" as a socio-theological condition of the female body under patriarchal structures (Tribble, 1984). Secondly, central to the methodology is the revelation

of *El Roi* ("the God who sees"), which prioritizes divine solidarity and visibility over abstract rational causality (Williams, 1993). This framework validates the immediate reality of the victim's pain, countering "cheap" theological explanations that might justify suffering as a divine mystery.

Finally, the methodology culminates in a "Trialectic of the Wilderness," synthesizing three distinct poles such as (1), The Philosophical Pole (Logic): Using analytic logic to establish the rational possibility of God's existence despite evil (Plantinga, 1974). (2), The Systematic Pole (Hope): Asserting divine presence and solidarity with the sufferer through the "Theology of the Cross." (Moltmann, 1974). (3), The Sociological Pole (Reality): Identifying human-engineered "moral evils", such as structural violence and patriarchal dominance that construct the "wilderness" (Galtung, 1969).

Case Studies and Interviews Employed in the Research

The following case studies and interview highlights provide specific, first-hand accounts of gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation in Malawi during the COVID-19 lockdowns. These accounts come from reports and consultations conducted by United Nations agencies and international NGOs.

The Hotline Perspective: Interview with Nurse Alepher Matemba Banda

As a nurse at *Chipatala cha pa foni* (Health Centre by Phone), Alepher Matemba Banda was a frontline witness to the "Shadow Pandemic." In interviews with **UN Women**, she described the desperate nature of the calls received during the lockdown.

- **The Case:** Banda reported that while the hotline was intended for health advice, it became a lifeline for victims of violence who were physically trapped. She noted that many pregnant women and adolescent girls called not just about the virus, but out of fear of unplanned pregnancies due to the scarcity of family planning during lockdowns, and because of physical abuse at home.
- **Significance:** Her testimony highlights that the lockdown removed the "buffer" of public space, forcing victims to seek help through digital or telephonic means while in the presence of their abusers (UN Women, 2021).

Economic Exploitation: The Case of Sifati Mustafa (Machinga District)

In a detailed story captured by UN Women and the Spotlight Initiative, 17-year-old Sifati Mustafa shared her experience of being "sold" into marriage due to the pandemic's economic shock.

- **The Case:** When schools closed in March 2020, Sifati and her two sisters were living with their uncle. Due to the collapse of agricultural income and the burden of feeding the household during the lockdown, her uncle "married off" all three sisters to older men. Sifati stated, "My uncle found men and married us off... He felt he couldn't take care of all of us... It seems he collected some money from these men."

The Violation: This was a clear case of financial exploitation where young girls were treated as liquid assets to solve a family's pandemic-induced poverty. Sifati was eventually rescued through a "sweeping exercise" by the local Village Headman and the Police Victim Support Unit (UN Women & Spotlight Initiative, 2022).

Marital Abuse and Starvation: The Case of "Lucy" (Lilongwe)

In an interview conducted by **UNICEF Malawi**, a 16-year-old girl named Lucy from Khomani Village detailed the harrowing reality of "lockdown marriages."

- **The Case:** After schools closed, Lucy felt her dreams of becoming a nurse were "gutted." Believing schools would never reopen, she entered a marriage with a 19-year-old neighbor.

The Abuse: Lucy described the marriage as a site of extreme deprivation: "My husband beat me, I was starved, and the shame of begging... was too much." She eventually suffered a miscarriage before being

persuaded by a "mother group" (a local community support unit) to leave the marriage and return to school once the lockdown lifted (UNICEF Malawi, 2021).

Financial and Emotional Autonomy: The Case of Nelie Mhango (Rumphi)

Reported by ActionAid Malawi, the case of Nelie Mhango illustrates the intersection of gendered power dynamics and economic control.

- **The Case:** During the lockdown, Nelie's husband reportedly used the restricted movement and closure of local markets to exercise near-total financial control over her. He seized her earnings and subjected her to emotional abuse, leaving her unable to provide for their children.
- **The Resolution:** Nelie was interviewed as part of ActionAid's outreach to the Rumphi Women Forum. Her story was used to highlight how local women-led organizations were the primary actors providing "safe spaces" when government services were diverted to the COVID-19 medical response (ActionAid Malawi, 2021).

Institutional "Silence" and Local Rescue: The Village Headman Kwacha Interview

While not a victim, Village Headman Kwacha's testimony to UN Women provides a "special case" study on the breakdown of the rule of law.

- **The Case:** Kwacha described how, during the lockdown, traditional systems of "protection" were often the only thing standing between girls and exploitation. He admitted that many parents used the school closures as a cover to arrange marriages for their daughters.

The Intervention: He led a "door-to-door" campaign to identify girls who had "disappeared" into marriages during the lockdown, highlighting that the pandemic required a localized, almost militant approach to child protection because formal police units were often under-resourced or focused on enforcing lockdown curfews (Spotlight Initiative Malawi, 2021).

The Case of the Enforcement of Malawian Law during COVID-19 Lockdown

The enforcement of Malawian law during the COVID-19 "State of Disaster" created a paradoxical environment. While the legal framework for protection existed, the practical application of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) often faltered due to the prioritization of public health restrictions over judicial access. The following cases illustrate the intersection of legal mandates and the reality of enforcement during the lockdown.

The "De Facto" Suspension of Judicial Redress

During the height of the lockdown, the Malawian judiciary, like many government sectors, reduced operations to essential services only. For many women, "essential" was interpreted as criminal matters of state security rather than "private" domestic disputes.

The Case: In rural districts like Nsanje, women attempting to report violations under the PDVA found local police units understaffed or redirected to enforcing curfew and mask mandates.

Legal Conflict: While the PDVA mandates that police must assist a victim in obtaining an interim protection order, the physical closure of courts meant that these orders, the primary legal tool for removing an abuser from a home, were nearly impossible to secure (Women Lawyers Association of Malawi, 2021).

The Result: The law remained "on the books" but was functionally suspended for those in the most remote areas, leading to what legal scholars call a "justice gap" where health regulations effectively trapped victims in legally sanctioned isolation with their abusers (WLA, 2021).

The Conflict of the "State of Disaster" vs. Protection Orders

Malawi's Constitution and the Emergency Powers Act granted the government broad authority to restrict movement. This created a direct conflict with the rights of women to seek safety.

The Case: Narratives from the Women Lawyers Association (WLA) of Malawi highlighted cases where women fleeing domestic abuse were stopped by law enforcement for violating lockdown "stay-at-home" orders.

Legal Conflict: In some instances, law enforcement officers, lacking specific gender-sensitive training for the "State of Disaster," prioritized the enforcement of the Public Health Act over the PDVA. Victims were sometimes told to "return home" to maintain social distancing, effectively returning them to the scene of the crime (UNDP, 2021).

The Result: The legal intersection revealed a hierarchy of laws where public health was placed above individual protection from domestic terror.

Reporting Barriers: The Victim Support Unit (VSU) Failure

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act relies heavily on the Police Victim Support Units (VSUs) as the first point of entry.

The Case: During the pandemic, the VSU infrastructure saw a decline in physical reporting despite an increase in violence. Case studies from NGOs indicated that because public transport was restricted and expensive, the "cost" of reaching a VSU became a barrier to the law's enforcement (ActionAid Malawi, 2021).

Legal Conflict: The PDVA requires the State to provide "reasonable" assistance to victims. However, the State of Disaster did not provide a budget for mobile VSU units or digital reporting platforms, meaning the law failed to adapt to the new physical reality of the pandemic (ActionAid Malawi, 2021).

The Result: Enforcement became reactive rather than proactive, and the law only "reached" those who had the financial and physical means to break the lockdown to find it.

The Role of the Church: Countering "Toxic Theology" with a Theology of Life

A significant challenge during the lockdown was the rise of "prophetic" movements that claimed the virus was a divine punishment, which sometimes led to increased control over women. For the vulnerable women, this became "Toxic Theology". However, mainline denominations worked to provide a "Theology of Life," emphasizing that the body is a temple and that abuse is a sin, not a private family matter to be endured (Oduyoye, 2001). By reinterpreting "submission" in a way that prioritized the safety and dignity of the woman, the church provided a "theological sanctuary" that empowered women to reject abuse as a "cross" they were required to carry (Phiri, 2021).

Post-Pandemic Recovery after Lockdown

The case of the Post-Pandemic Recovery for "vulnerable women" after lockdown in Malawi was characterized by a slow and uneven transition. While the formal "lockdown" ended, the "economic scarring" remains, particularly for those who were pushed into survivalist strategies during the crisis. Research indicates that the transition into the post-lockdown economy has been defined by three major trends: the shift toward informal micro-entrepreneurship, the persistence of debt traps, and the role of "Village Savings and Loan Associations" (VSLAs).

For many women who lost access to cross-border trade or local markets during the lockdown, the post-pandemic recovery has involved a shift into the "informal economy" as a primary means of survival. Research done by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that women in Malawi were slower to return to pre-pandemic income levels than men. Many transitioned from organized market selling to "street hawking" or

small-scale processing of agricultural goods (ILO, 2022). The case is that women in the border districts (like Mwanza and Mulanje) who previously relied on informal cross-border trade with Mozambique or Zimbabwe found their capital depleted by the cost of living during the lockdown, forcing them to start from zero with higher-interest informal loans (ILO, 2022).

Also, the case of the persistence of "Debt Traps" and financial exploitation indicates a significant barrier to economic recovery transitioning to the accumulation of debt during the state of disaster. The reality on the ground was that during the lockdown, many vulnerable women turned to "Katapila" (informal moneylenders) to buy food. In the post-lockdown economy, these women resorted to using their current earnings to service high-interest debts rather than reinvesting in their businesses (ActionAid Malawi, 2022). The impact of such situation was that this led to a "feminization of poverty" where women are now working harder but remaining stagnant due to the financial exploitation that occurred when formal credit was unavailable (World Bank, 2021).

Moreover, there also developed the issue of the "Care Burden" and the Labor Market. This is indicated by the Post-pandemic research that highlighted that women's transition back into the labor market was hindered by an increased "care burden." This is due to the fact that the pandemic reinforced traditional gender roles. Even as the economy reopened, many women remained responsible for the care of the elderly and children who suffered health setbacks during the pandemic. This resulted into "unpaid care work" that limited the number of hours women could spend on income-generating activities, creating a "time poverty" that keeps them in a state of economic vulnerability compared to their male counterparts (UN Women, 2022).

Perhaps the relief for vulnerable women was on the Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) which was the engine of recovery. Research indicates that the most successful transition stories come from women who are members of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). According to CARE Malawi, the reality is that VSLAs provided a "social safety net" that the state could not. In the post-pandemic period, these groups were repurposed to provide "recovery grants" and low-interest capital for members to restart their businesses (CARE Malawi, 2022). For example in districts like Salima, women-led VSLAs pooled resources to buy agricultural inputs in bulk, allowing members to bypass the price hikes that followed the reopening of the economy (UNDP, 2021). At least with this VSLA program vulnerable women found a fountain of relief.

These are the first-hand accounts of case studies that impacted negatively upon vulnerable women during the COVID-19 lockdowns from the reports and consultations conducted by United Nations agencies, World Bank and international NGOs. It is in line with these cases that the three-pole analytical theoretical frame shall reflect on in the context of the dialectic of the theodicy and philosophical discourse.

The Philosophical Pole: The Trilemma of Rationality and Linguistic Challenges

The philosophical discourse on theodicy is traditionally anchored in the "Epicurean Paradox". *"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then comes evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"* (Frame, 2011, p. 282).

As Frame (2011) outlines, the logical problem of evil rests on three seemingly incompatible propositions: (1) God is all-powerful (Omnipotence), (2) God is all-good (Omnibenevolence), and (3) Evil exists. In the context of COVID-19, philosophy classifies the virus as a "Natural Evil" and the resulting gender-based violence (GBV) as a "Moral Evil". The philosophical defense often relies on the "Free Will Defense", positing that God permits moral evil to preserve human agency. However, for the Malawian woman trapped in a lockdown with an abuser, this rationalization feels hollow. It attempts to justify God at the expense of the victim's immediate reality, treating suffering as a secondary by-product of a logical system.

To further enrich the dialectical discourse, there is need to explore how the very language of "God" and "Evil" is scrutinized by thinkers like Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Wisdom, and how Alvin Plantinga attempts to restore the rational "permit" for belief amidst suffering. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cry of the sufferer often

meets the silence of the philosopher who asks if the word "God" has any verifiable reference in a world of "natural" and "moral" disasters as far as the Atheistic and non-cognitivism and silence is concerned.

The Atheistic Analytic Skepticism and the Challenge of Falsification: Non-Cognitivism and Silence

In his seminal essay *Theology and Falsification*, **Antony Flew (1950)** argued that theological utterances about God's goodness are often "death by a thousand qualifications." For Flew, if no amount of suffering (like a pandemic) can falsify the claim "God loves us," then the claim becomes cognitively meaningless. Thus, Flew hanged his Theology of Falsification on the earlier contextual background of the analytical tradition represented by A. J. Ayer (1936) and his logical positivists which introduces a devastating critique of theodicy. Ayer argued for the "Verification Principle," asserting that any statement that cannot be empirically verified is literally "nonsensical" or "emotionally expressive" rather than factually significant. From this perspective, the statement "God is good despite the pandemic" is not a true or false proposition; it is a "pseudo-proposition" because they cannot be empirically verified. Thus, for the Malawian woman facing violence, Ayer suggests that her theological laments are merely expressions of emotion (emotivism) rather than descriptions of a divine reality.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's suggests that religiously, the problem of theodicy arises when we treat the word "God" as if it were a scientific hypothesis. Wittgenstein (1953) famously noted, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". In the context of the "wilderness," a Wittgensteinian approach might argue that theodicy is an attempt to use language where it has no "hook" in the physical world, leading to a "mental cramp" when trying to explain why a good God allows a virus. Following Wittgenstein, D.Z. Phillips (1965, 1993) argued in *The Concept of Prayer* (1965) that religious language is a "language game." He suggested that theodicy often fails because it treats God as a moral agent among others, rather than understanding "God" as a limit-concept for human meaning.

John Wisdom (1944), used the "Parable of the Gardener" to illustrate the challenge of theodicy. He claimed that theodicy is less about facts and more about how individuals "map" their experiences. Accordingly, when two people look at a neglected garden (analogous to a pandemic-stricken world), one sees a gardener at work (Providence) and the other sees a chaotic wilderness (Atheism). Thus, Wisdom argues that the "gardener" (God) is invisible, intangible, and eludes every test. This mirrors the "shadow pandemic" of GBV; the believer sees God's hand in survival, while the critic sees only the absence of intervention. Wisdom suggests that theodicy is not about facts but about how we map our experiences. This creates a dialectic where the "wilderness of fate" is either a site of divine testing or evidence of divine non-existence.

The Rational Restoration: Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Alvin Plantinga (1974) successfully argued that the "Logical Problem of Evil" is a failure. He demonstrated that it is possible that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil, specifically, the creation of "Free Prevalent Creatures". Plantinga posits "Transworld Depravity," suggesting that even an omnipotent God cannot force creatures to freely do only good. Therefore, the moral evil of violence during COVID-19 is a consequence of human freedom, not a contradiction of divine power. Plantinga shifts the burden of proof back to the atheist: if it is even possible that God has a reason for the wilderness, then the theist is not being irrational.

Earlier on, John Hick (1957, 1966), in *Faith and Knowledge*, introduced the concept of "Eschatological Verification," arguing that while the "garden" of the world seems ambiguous now, the truth of God's character will be verified at the end of history. In line with similar interaction, Eleonore Stump (2012), in *Wandering in Darkness*, builds on the "soul-making" tradition, arguing that suffering can be a catalyst for a deeper, personal union with God through the "knowledge of persons" rather than just propositional logic.

The Biblical Systematic Pole: The Theology of the Cross

In contrast, systematic theology, particularly the "Theology of Hope", shifts the focus from defending God to identifying God within the suffering. Moltmann (1974) argues that a God who cannot suffer is a "deficient"

God. In the "Crucified God," theodicy finds its resolution not in a syllogism, but in the event of the Cross. Thus, within the theology of the cross, there is the divine participation. God does not sit outside the pandemic observing the trilemma; God enters the "wilderness" of the pandemic. In addition, within the theology of the cross, there is God's solidarity with the outcast. Thus, Systematic theology views the suffering of the marginalized not as a logical puzzle, but as a site of divine revelation. Moreover, within the theology of the cross, there is God's visibility. As Williams (1993) posits in her womanist reading of Hagar, God's response to the wilderness is "quality-of-life" survival and visibility.

Synthesis: Logic vs. Hope

The above philosophical pole creates a sharp dialectic with Wayne Grudem's (2020) Systematic Theology. While Ayer dismisses the talk of theodicy as nonsense, Grudem asserts it as the most profound truth of divine providence. While Wisdom sees an ambiguous garden, Hagar sees *El Roi*, a gardener who specifically intervenes at the "well of living water". While Plantinga provides a logical permit for God's existence, Moltmann (1974) provides a participatory presence in the cross. Consequently, the dialectic reveals that philosophy provides the boundaries of thought (logic and language), while systematic theology provides the content of hope. In the Malawian context, Plantinga's defense allows the believer to hold onto their faith rationally, while the critique of Ayer and Wittgenstein serves as a warning against "cheap" theological explanations that fail to respect the silence and gravity of the victim's pain.

The Hermeneutical Bridge: Hagar and the Hebrew *'Innāh*

The narrative of Hagar (Gen. 16) serves as the bridge. When Sarah treats Hagar harshly, the Hebrew text uses the verb *'innāh* (Gen 16:6), meaning to "afflict," "humiliate," or "oppress." **Exegesis of *'Innāh*:** This is the same root used in Exodus 1:11 to describe the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites. Sarah's treatment of Hagar is not a mere domestic spat; it is **structural affliction**. By using this term, the biblical text identifies Sarah as an oppressor and Hagar as a victim of systemic "surrogacy" (Williams, 1993). Thus, the dialectic meets its most acute tension in the narrative of Hagar (Genesis 16, 21). Here, the "Text of Terror" (Trible, 1984) serves as a bridge between philosophical questions of "Why?" and the systematic reality of "Where is God?" Hagar's encounter with God in the wilderness represents a Hermeneutic of Visibility. While philosophy might debate whether God "allowed" Sarah to abuse Hagar, the biblical narrative focuses on the fact that God saw the abuse and provided a well. For women in Malawi facing Gender-Based Violence, Abuse, exploitation and abandonment, the theodicy is found in Dozeman's (1998) "salvation history", the belief that God is present at the "ebbing of life".

The Sociological Pole: Structural Violence and the "Social Theodicy"

In order to be comprehensive and engaging, there is need to scale-up the above discourse with the contextual sociological pole. This perspective moves the discourse from abstract logic (Philosophy) and divine decrees (Systematic Theology) to the lived reality of power, structural inequality, and social suffering. Thus, in the Malawian context of COVID-19, the sociological context acts as the "ground" upon which the "wilderness of fate" is constructed. If philosophy asks if God is just, and theology asks if God is present, sociology asks how human structures create the conditions of "hell" on earth. This pole examines the pandemic not as a biological accident, but as a sociological event that exposed and amplified pre-existing systemic inequalities.

Structural Violence and the "Shadow Pandemic"

Sociologically, the suffering of women in Malawi during COVID-19 is an expression of Structural Violence. As pioneered by Johan Galtung (1969), this concept suggests that social institutions—economic, legal, and cultural—can injure or marginalize individuals as effectively as physical blows. Drawing on Steinberg's (1993) household economics, sociology views the "quarantine" as a reinforcement of patriarchal dominance. When the state ordered citizens to "stay home," it effectively locked victims into a space where the male "head" possessed total control over resources and physical movement.

Surrogacy, Exploitation, and the Sacred Canopy

Sociologically, Hagar's story is not just a biblical narrative but a study in Intersectionality. As Williams (1993) notes, Hagar's suffering was caused by the intersection of her status as a woman, a slave, and an ethnic "other" (Egyptian). During the pandemic, Malawian women faced a similar intersection: their gender, their poverty, and their lack of digital/legal access combined to make them "expendable" in the face of the virus.

Sociologist Peter Berger (1967) introduced the concept of Social Theodicy, arguing that religion functions as a "Sacred Canopy" that provides meaning to the chaos of suffering. When the pandemic struck, the "Sacred Canopy" in Malawi was strained. Sexual abuse, violence against women, marrying young daughters unfairly for financial relief during lockdown, legal challenges, challenges in victim support, including even punitive toxic theology, when these became vectors for COVID-19, the sociological "nomos" (order) collapsed into "anomie" (lawlessness). Sociology critically observes how theodicy is often used to legitimate suffering. If a woman is told her abuse is "the will of God" or "a test of faith" (a misapplication of Grudem's Providence), theodicy ceases to be a comfort and becomes a tool of social control that keeps the marginalized in their place.

The Dialectic of the "Wilderness": From Fate to Agency

The sociological pole creates a sharp tension with Alvin Plantinga's philosophical defense. While Plantinga focuses on the logic of free will, sociology focuses on the constraints of choice. A woman trapped in a rural Malawian village during lockdown does not have "free will" in a vacuum; her choices are constrained by the absence of police presence, the closure of markets, and the social stigma of reporting a husband. Sociologically, Hagar is a stateless person whose "wilderness" is the lack of a social safety net. In the Malawian context, the "wilderness" was the suspension of the rule of law during the pandemic, forcing women into "survivalist" strategies, such as enduring abuse for the sake of food for their children.

Expanded Feminine Dialectic: Bodies of Anguish and Divine Anomaly

To further expand the narrative of this dialectic, this section integrates a Comparative Biblical Hermeneutic, moving beyond Hagar to explore other "texts of terror" (Trible, 1984) and anomalies of suffering. By analyzing Tamar, Dinah, and the barrenness of Sarah, the dialectic examines how the "wilderness of fate" is not merely a physical place but a socio-theological condition of the female body under patriarchy. The "wilderness" experienced by Malawian women during COVID-19 finds deep resonance in the broader biblical tapestry of female suffering. When we move from Hagar to other figures like Tamar and Dinah, the dialectic between Philosophical Logic (Theodicy) and Sociological Power (Patriarchy) becomes even more acute.

Tamar: Deception, Justice, and the Affirmation of Righteousness

The narrative of Tamar (Genesis 38) serves as a profound sociological and theological anomaly within the "wilderness of fate." Tamar represents the woman pushed to the absolute margins of the patriarchal household. After the deaths of her husband's Er and Onan, she was denied her legal right to levirate marriage by her father-in-law, Judah, who feared the loss of his remaining son. In this "wilderness of abandonment," Tamar was reduced to a state of social non-existence, stripped of her security and identity.

Faced with systemic injustice, Tamar did not remain a silent victim. She employed a "strategy of the margins," using deception to secure her rights and her future. When Judah later discovered she was pregnant and ordered her to be burned for "prostitution," Tamar produced his own signet, cord, and staff, the symbols of his patriarchal authority, proving that he was the father. This leads to the critical turning point of the narrative, the affirmation from Judah. Upon realizing his own failure to uphold the law, Judah publicly declared, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah" (Genesis 38:26, NIV).

Theological and Philosophical Implications:

The Reversal of Moral Judgment: Philosophically, this challenges the rigid boundaries of "moral evil." While Tamar's actions involved deception (which traditional theodicy might categorize as sin), the biblical text, through Judah's affirmation, redefines her actions as an act of "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*). In the context

of structural violence, righteousness is not found in passive obedience to an unjust system, but in the active pursuit of justice and life.

Correction of the System: From the perspective of Alvin Plantinga's (1974) "Free Will Defense," Tamar's story demonstrates a human being exercising free will to correct a systemic failure. She forced the patriarchal structure to acknowledge its own "transworld depravity" and restore the balance of justice.

A Model for the "Shadow Pandemic": For Malawian women facing abandonment or the denial of resources during COVID-19, Tamar provides a biblical precedent for agency. Her story suggests that God's righteousness is often found in the survival strategies of the oppressed rather than the legalistic decrees of the powerful. Thus, in the final synthesis, the narrative of Tamar completes the "trialectic" by showing that: Philosophically, righteousness is contextual and tied to the restoration of justice. Systematically, God's providence works through the bold agency of the marginalized. Sociologically, the "household" is only sacred when it protects the vulnerable; when it fails, the "wilderness" becomes a site of necessary resistance. Therefore, Judah's admission, *"She is more righteous than I"*, serves as the ultimate biblical indictment of any theodicy that seeks to justify the status quo at the expense of the victim. It reinforces the EATWOT and Evangelical Feminist stance that God stands with the one who struggles for life in the midst of the "wilderness."

Dinah: The Silence of the Victim

The story of Dinah (Genesis 34) is a harrowing "text of terror" regarding GBV. After being violated by Shechem, Dinah remains entirely silent; her voice is swallowed by the violent "honor" of her brothers. As far as the systematic critique is concerned, Dinah represents the "shadow pandemic" in its purest form, violence that happens "in the land" while the patriarchal household debates honor rather than healing. As A.J. Ayer (1936) might argue, the "silence" of God in Dinah's narrative suggests a world where moral discourse is merely a mask for tribal violence. Yet, Dinah's silence demands a theodicy of lament, acknowledging that some wounds are so deep that only a "Crucified God" (Moltmann, 1974) can reach them.

Sarah's Barrenness: The Anomaly of the Divine Plan

Sarah remains barren "beyond biological possibilities" until old age, summoning paradigms of Philosophical "Natural Evil" and Wayne Grudem's "Divine Concurrence". The philosophical problem asks why an omnibenevolent God would delay a promise until it was humanly impossible. Systematic interpretation according to Grudem (2020) views this through Divine Concurrence—God sovereignly closed her womb to ensure the birth of Isaac would be recognized as supernatural. However, the sociological reality is that Sarah's "divine delay" led directly to the abuse of Hagar. This reveals a tragic loop: suffering that is not "theologically processed" often turns the victim into a perpetrator, as seen in complex Malawian households during the stress of COVID-19.

Wrapping the Discourse: EATWOT and Evangelical Feminist Praxis

This study integrates the voice of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and Evangelical Feminist Theology to connect abstract theodicy to the liberative praxis of the Global South. The dialectic between Western philosophical logic and Global North systematic theology finds its synthesis in EATWOT. For a Malawian context, theodicy must become a "theology of life" that responds to specific "wildernesses".

Eatwot and the Epistemology of the Oppressed

EATWOT argues that the starting point for theology is not the "Text" in isolation, but the "Context" of the poor and marginalized. In the "shadow pandemic," an EATWOT-inspired theodicy shifts the focus from the sovereignty of God to the liberation of the victim (the prophetic pole). Just as EATWOT sought to decolonize theology, an Evangelical Feminist approach decolonizes the "wilderness," refusing to accept the suffering of Hagar, Tamar, or the women of Malawi as a "divine mystery". Instead, it identifies such suffering as a socio-

theological scandal demanding resistance. In this framework, Hagar is the "mother of African theology", finding God not in the temple of the powerful, but at the "well" of survival.

Evangelical Feminist Theology: Redefining the "Will of God"

This theology provides a critical corrective to traditional readings of Wayne Grudem's (2020) providence. While Grudem emphasizes divine concurrence, Evangelical Feminists argue that God's "will" is always aligned with the flourishing of the human person. Mutual submission replaces patriarchal rule; the "moral evil" of GBV is a direct violation of the *Imago Dei*. A theodicy wrapped in this framework asserts that God is not "using" the abuse for a greater purpose; rather, God is protesting the abuse alongside the victim. Sarah's barrenness and Tamar's struggles are seen not as punishments but as narratives challenging the patriarchal definition of a woman's worth. God's intervention is seen as a subversion of social systems that measure women by reproductive utility.

Synthetic Approach to Create a Dialogical rather than a Hierarchical Discourse

To create a dialogical rather than a hierarchical discourse from the above theoretical analysis of the poles, the relationship between theology and philosophy must be reimagined as a "Trialectic of the Wilderness." In this framework, neither discipline acts as a "judge" over the other; instead, they function as distinct voices that provide boundaries, content, and grounding for the human experience of suffering.

Shift from Logical Defense to Existential Encounter

A hierarchical approach often uses philosophy to "justify" God (theodicy) or theology to "dismiss" logic. A dialogical approach uses the philosophical critique of A.J. Ayer and **Antony Flew** to prevent "cheap" theological explanations Antony Flew (1950; Ayer, 1936).

- **The Philosophical Voice:** Philosophy challenges the meaningfulness of theological claims during a pandemic, asking if the word "God" has any verifiable reference when the vulnerable are crushed (Ayer, 1936).
- **The Theological Response:** Rather than offering a syllogism to "win" the argument, theology responds with the "Crucified God" (Moltmann), who does not observe the logical trilemma from the outside but enters the "wilderness" of the pandemic in solidarity (Moltmann, 1974).
- **The Dialogue:** Logic provides the "gravity" and silence required to respect the victim's pain, while theology provides the "participatory presence" that allows the victim to endure.

The Interaction of Logical "Permit" and Structural Reality

In a dialogue, the "**Free Will Defense**" (Alvin Plantinga) is not used to silence the victim but to create a rational space where faith can coexist with the reality of evil.

- **The Philosophical Voice:** Plantinga argues that it is logically possible for an omnipotent God to have a reason for permitting moral evil (free will), shifting the burden of proof back to the skeptic (Plantinga, 1974).
- **The Sociological/Womanist Critique:** **Delores Williams** and **Johan Galtung** enter the dialogue to point out that "free will" does not exist in a vacuum. For a woman in a Malawian lockdown, her "choices" are constrained by the absence of police and the closure of markets (Williams, 1993; Galtung, 1969).
- **The Dialogue:** Philosophy provides the *possibility* of God's goodness, while the sociological reality (the "Sociological Pole") identifies the specific human-engineered "moral evils", such as patriarchy and economic surrogacy that must be dismantled.

This is the dialogical perspective of the study rather than the hierarchical discourse. It is through such a balanced hermeneutical nuance that the theoretical analysis of the poles' relationship between theology and philosophy must be reimagined as a "Trialectic of the Wilderness." It is through such hermeneutical harmony that this framework establishes that neither discipline acts as a "judge" over the other. They function as distinct voices that provide boundaries, content, and grounding for the human experience of suffering.

Hermeneutical Bridge: Visibility over Causality

The dialogue is finalized by moving the primary question from the philosophical "Why?" (causality) to the hermeneutical "Where is God?" (visibility).

- a. **The Biblical Voice (Hagar/Tamar):** The narratives of Hagar and Tamar serve as the bridge. While philosophy debates whether God "allowed" the abuse, the biblical systematic response focuses on the fact that God **saw** the abuse (*El Roi*) and provided a well for survival.
- b. **The Dialogue:** Philosophy ensures that belief remains rational, while a "Theology of Solidarity" (inspired by **EATWOT**) translates that presence into social action and justice.

Synthesis: Findings, Implications, and Conclusion

Synthesis: The Trialectic and Collective Wilderness

The discourse moves from a Dialectic to a Trialectic of the Wilderness. It engages the synthetic analysis of three poles: (1) The Philosophical Pole (The Logic). This provides the framework to argue that belief in God is still possible despite the "trilemma" according to Plantinga and Frame; (2), The Systematic Pole (The Hope). This asserts that God is sovereign but also suffers alongside the victim (Grudem, Moltmann), thus offering eschatological resolution; (3), The Sociological Pole (The Reality), This pole identifies human "evils" such as, patriarchy, economic surrogacy, and structural violence, that must be dismantled for theodicy to be more than a "Sacred Canopy".

By placing Hagar, Tamar, Dinah, and Sarah in conversation, the study establishes that suffering is systemic. The "wilderness" is created whenever a woman's body is treated as a surrogate, a tool for honor, or a biological failure. Hagar's observation of God as *El Roi* establishes the thread defining a God who sees (Hagar), vindicates (Tamar), and redeems the impossible (Sarah). This leads to a "Theology of Solidarity" where (1) philosophy allows the possibility of God's goodness, (2) Systematic Theology ensures God's presence, and (3) Evangelical Feminist Theology (EATWOT) translates presence into social action.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Findings: The study finds that COVID-19 functioned as a "revealer" of moral evil. The "wilderness of fate" is a human creation.

Social Theodicy Required: A "Social Theodicy" is required for the post-pandemic world, recognizing God as *El Roi* while acknowledging He sees through the community's eyes. If the community remains blind to GBV, it fails the "Divine Visibility" seen in Hagar's story.

Policy Implications: Theodicy must inform policy, recognizing "seeing" as a mandate for social justice. Social science and theology must collaborate to dismantle systems (patriarchy, surrogacy) that allow crises to be weapons of abuse.

FINAL CONCLUSION

The God Who Sees (El Roi) as a Mandate

The dialectic reveals that theodicy cannot remain purely philosophical without becoming indifferent, nor purely existential without becoming groundless. The "Theology of Suffering" during COVID-19 does not

provide a neat philosophical answer. Instead, it offers a dialectic of presence: God's justification is found in His refusal to remain in the "household" of the powerful, choosing instead to inhabit the "wilderness" of the quarantined. As Moltmann (1967) concludes, hope is the only adequate response to theodicy, a hope that trusts in the God who sees, hears, and redeems the "wilderness of fate". The quest for theodicy concludes that God is justified by His identification with the "Hagars" of the world. Like the "invisible gardener" of John Wisdom, God is recognized by the "fruits" of justice and the "wells of water" provided to those in the wilderness. This study summons us to a post-pandemic world where the "God who sees" becomes a reality through the "Community that acts".

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