PSALM 44: WHEN GOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SUFFERING

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ABSTRACT

To be human is to experience suffering. Suffering impacts people on all levels of society. The question is: Why do humans suffer? It seems that at one level Israel believed that they ought not to suffer. They believed that if they stayed faithful to the covenant with God, then suffering should not happen. If they transgressed then suffering was to be expected. Deuteronomistic covenant theology and retribution theory reinforced this worldview. Yet, in Psalm 44, a different picture emerges. Israel celebrates the glorious deeds of salvation that God accomplished on their behalf. He delivered them through his mighty hand and brought them into the land of promise. Their current situation stands in sharp contrast to their past. To make matters worse, they suffer, not because they transgressed, but because God has rejected them. They are innocent, and God is to blame for their suffering. As such, Psalm 44 offers a protest against Deuteronomistic covenant theology and retribution theory, and places the blame squarely on God's shoulders.

INTRODUCTION

To be human is to experience suffering. No one, despite the claims made by proponents of so-called "prosperity theology",[1] is exempt from suffering. Day after day we are confronted in the media by the most horrific stories of human pain and suffering, sometimes due to cruel and vicious acts of nature, sometimes due to horrible deeds perpetrated by humans. Suffering impacts people on all levels of society: rich and poor, young and old, the powerful as well as the powerless, the guilty and the innocent. The suffering of the innocent especially fills one with feelings of helplessness.

This immediately brings the theodicy question into focus. Why do human beings suffer? Why doesn't God stop the abuse that happens every day all over the world? How can one believe in a good God when confronted with so much evil? To make matters worse, what is one to do when God is responsible for the

[1] Adherents of prosperity theology hold to the idea that suffering and poverty should never be attributed to God, but to sin and the devil. They proclaim that through faith believers can obtain anything they want, including health, wealth, or any form of personal success. The popular books of authors such as Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and Creflo Dollar can be read in this regard.

suffering? In the words of Barbara Leung Lai (2007:419): "How can one embrace a seemingly abusive God?"

Wilson (2002:690) argues that at one level it seems that Israel believed that the righteous ought not to suffer. This idea can be traced back to the wisdom traditions of Israel. This wisdom viewpoint held to a philosophy of life that believed that God created the world with a divinely instituted order; they believed that it was possible for humans to observe and comprehend this order; they believed that it was expected that humans should live in harmony with this order; they believed that those who were obedient to God's order were righteous and would be blessed, while those who were disobedient to God's order were unrighteous and would be punished. This last principle is of course the principle of retribution (cf. Loader 1986:103; 1987:44).

A second reason why Israel believed that the faithful should not suffer derives from the covenant relationship between God and his people. According to Deuteronomy 28 Israel would be blessed if they obeyed the commands of the Torah and maintain loyalty to Yahweh alone. Consequently the covenant community would be blessed and experience prosperity, while disobedience would result in cursing and oppression (Wilson 2002:690-691).

The worldview that ensued from these two ways of thinking held that the righteous would prosper, while the unrighteous would perish. This simplistic worldview held fast to retribution theory (cf. Ps 1). Life was viewed in extremely naïve and one-dimensional terms: live wisely, obey the commandments and prosperity will follow. However, it became increasingly clear to some observers that life did not always turn out this way. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are the prime examples of this protest against conventional wisdom thinking.

Job pointedly disputes whether all suffering can be attributed to sin and unfaithfulness. Although Job's friends repeatedly tried to convince him that he should only confess his sin in order to be restored to his former position of wealth and blessing, Job held fast to his confession that he was innocent. The prologue of Job informs the reader that the righteous Job was the victim of a very malicious and capricious God, who gambled with the life of one of his own. As will be seen, this makes Psalm 44 very Jobean in character. In Job, an individual suffered needlessly at the hands of his God, while Psalm 44 places the blame for

the nation's suffering at God's door.

Grogan (2008:335-341) argues rightly that the Psalter provides a realistic doctrine of suffering. He then continues to discuss four instances of suffering in the psalms. Firstly, "it is assumed that sin merits punishment and therefore suffering" (2008:335). This is the presupposition common to the problem of the suffering of the righteous and the apparent prosperity of the wicked. The poet of Psalm 73 for example receives a new perspective on this issue when he goes into God's house and realizes the answer to the problem is to be found in the contrasting destinies of the righteous and the wicked (Ps 73:13-26). Sin deserves punishment and will receive it at the appropriate time (2008:336).

Secondly, "much suffering is due to the sins of others" (2008:336). The psalmists suffered greatly at the hands of others. This suffering can take various forms, e.g., social and physical suffering in Psalm 22; the suffering of the poor and needy due to corrupt legal processes (cf. Pss 35:10, 37:14); sometimes it was the consequence of pure hatred (Ps 69:4); and sometimes it was the result of the arrogance and pride of the wicked (Ps 10:2-6; 2008:336-337).

Thirdly, "much suffering is due to the personal sins of the sufferer" (2008:338). The psalmists often acknowledged that their suffering was the consequence of their own sinfulness. The penitential psalms of individuals (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143) as well as the communal confessions of sin (Pss 79, 80, 85) testify to this (2008:338-339).

Lastly, Grogan argues that "some psalms of suffering give no indication of personal sin in the sufferer" (2008:339). Sometimes the poet experiences suffering despite his devotion to God. Then, he often faces the schemes of evildoers (cf. Ps 26:9-10). As God's servant, he can look to God when pursued by enemies (Ps 143:3-4; cf. Grogan 2008:339-341). This last category seems to me not to be different from the second category that Grogan mentions.

None of these options, however, allow for the problem I wish to address in this article. As will be seen, the psalmist pleads "not guilty" to any wrongdoing and desertion of the covenant. This is similar to Grogan's fourth category. The major difference is that Psalm 44 portrays God as being responsible for the suffering that the righteous endure. Although enemies play a role in what the righteous endure, God is ultimately the culprit and is at times to be blamed for

suffering in this world. Psalm 44 is thus part of the tradition that protests against a simplistic adherence to retribution theory. The psalm offers a different solution to the problem of suffering: blaming God. This is the issue I wish to address in this article – when God is responsible for suffering.

STRUCTURE, *GATTUNG*, *SITZ IM LEBEN*, DATING

STRUCTURE

The psalm can be divided into the following stanzas: The first stanza consists of verses 2-9 and refers to the past and focuses on Gods deeds of salvation on behalf of his people. He is the one who has broken the power of the nations and given his people victory and peace. He provided a land for them to live in. Israel did not gain possession of the land through their own might and power, but through God's strength and grace. God receives praise for his past deeds of salvation. The second stanza (verses 10-17) comprises the lament of the psalmist. God gets the blame for the people's experience of suffering. The poet underlines the fact that God's people stand completely vulnerable and defenceless before their enemies. God has rejected and humbled them; they are disgraced and shamed; and God is responsible for their suffering and pain. In the third stanza (verses 18-23) the people plead "not guilty". They deny that they have transgressed the covenant relationship with God. They have not strayed from Him, yet He rejected them. Their faithfulness and God's unfaithfulness stand in sharp contrast. In stanza 4 (verses 24-27), the people petition God to once more act on their behalf. God is accused of being asleep; therefore he has to wake up and redeem his people from their suffering, suffering for which He is responsible.

GATTUNG, *SITZ IM LEBEN*, DATING

There is no doubt that Psalm 44 should be characterized as a communal psalm of lament. It contains all the typical elements of psalms of lament.[2] In the introduction I already referred to the fact that the psalm should also be read as a protest against retribution theory. This means that the psalm can perhaps be

[2] Cf. DeClaisse-Walford (2007:748-751) for a discussion of how the elements of invocation, complaint, petition, expression of trust and promise to praise fit into the structure and language of the psalm.

typified as a communal lament with strong wisdom elements interwoven as integral parts of a protest. Regarding the *Sitz im Leben* and the dating of the psalm, there is, however, no consensus amongst scholars. Van Uchelen (1977:22; cf. also Human 1998:578) has indicated that the various possibilities range from the time of the Judges to the time of the Maccabees. Leupold (1969:344) argues for the time of David and even maintains that 2 Samuel 8:13-14 could be the historical background for the psalm. This is however pure conjecture; the psalm itself provides no support for his viewpoint. Anderson (1981:337) mentions two possibilities: the time after the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. or during the time of Hezekiah, in 715-687 B.C. when Sennacherib threatened Jerusalem (2 Kings 18-19). There is yet again nothing in the psalm that confirms either of these options.

Coetzee (1986:141) offers probably the best solution by dating the psalm to post-exilic times, due to the innocent suffering in the psalm as well as the change in thinking regarding the covenant relationship reflected in the psalm. The strong wisdom elements of protest also suggest a post-exilic date. It is, however, near impossible to provide the exact historical background and date for the composition of the psalm. The psalm contains features that can be applicable to various situations in the history of Israel, where they have been oppressed by enemies. Whatever the exact historical situation for the psalm might be, it had continuing relevance for any circumstances where Israel suffered. Gerstenberger (1988:185-186) is therefore correct when he argues that it is much more important to understand the sociological and cultic setting of the psalm.

The heading of the psalm confirms that it functioned in the cult. It was probably utilized and re-interpreted in any concrete situation where Israel suffered, and where their suffering was not aligned with their theology. We are listening to a Jewish community at worship in Psalm 44. This community is probably worshipping in post-exilic times (cf. Gerstenberger 1988:185-186). The purpose of the psalm was to strengthen the Jewish community, who in post-exilic times felt themselves abandoned by a silent God. God had rejected them, He had shamed them, and their existence, both spiritual and physical, was at stake. The covenant God, who was supposed to act on their behalf, was to blame for their suffering; their theology and their experience stood in conflict. Therefore they called on God, they accused Him but still they entreated Him for salvation.

ANALYSIS OF PSALM 44

STANZA 1 (VERSES 2-9)

Verses 2-4 refer to the events of the exodus and Israel's entrance into the promised land (cf. Ex 15:7; Jos 3:10; Pss 78:54-55, 80:9-10, 105:44, 111:6, 135:10-12). God first gave the promise of the land to Abraham, long before Israel existed as a nation. The narrative of the Pentateuch makes it clear that the land was Israel's destiny, because God ordained it to be so. The land was a gift from God, given because Israel was intended to be God's people. Psalm 44 reinforces this idea. God drove out the other nations; He crushed them on behalf of his people. Israel did not take possession of the promised land through the strength of their military prowess, but by the power of God's hand, because He loved them (cf. Dt 4:37-38, 7:7-8, 9:4-6). Verse 3 contrasts God's actions on behalf of his people with his deeds against their enemies. He drove the nations out, but planted his people; He crushed the enemies, but Israel flourished.

Verse 4 provides a description of how the victory was accomplished, first negatively then positively. It did not happen through Israel's military might, but through God's might and power. His presence enabled them to be victorious over their enemies. The expression "the light of his face" (אוֹר פָּנֶיךָ) as image of victory also occurs in Psalms 4:7, 31:17 and 89:16. The right hand of God is symbolic of his power (cf. Ex 15:6, 12; Lam 2:3). These verses also refer to the tradition of the holy war. God Himself is partaking in the war, and Israel's enemies become his enemies. God is portrayed as a warrior, fighting on behalf of his people.

This reference to the past links directly with Israel's current need. The purpose thereof is to create faith and trust for their present crisis. God has shown Himself to be capable of bringing his promises to fulfilment. Israel could therefore expect God to do the same in their current situation. Their hope for the present and the future is grounded in their past.

Verses 5-9 celebrate the victories that God has brought about in the past. He is Israel's king; He is Israel's God. The poet thus emphasizes the personal relationship in existence between God and his people. They belong to Him, they are his possession, they live in covenant relationship with Him, and therefore they could expect that He would be there for them in any situation of need. Verse

6 is parallel to verse 3. God is celebrated in both verses as the one who gives victory, with verse 3 referring to the past, and verse 6 to the expectation of the present. Verses 7 and 8 correspond with verse 4. The powerlessness of human weaponry is again contrasted with God's power and might to deliver his people. The bow (v. 7) was usually made of wood or horn, while swords (v. 7) were generally made of bronze or iron. The bow and the sword were regarded as the usual weapons (cf. Gn 48:22), while the sword in Hebrew idiom was also used as symbol of war (cf. Jr 14:15, 24:10; Ezek 7:15, 33:6; cf. Anderson 1981:340).[3] The stanza concludes with a doxology (v. 9) that affirms that Israel would offer their praise to God for what He has done for them. They will indeed boast in Him, and not in their own abilities, because He won the victory.

STANZA 2 (VERSES 10-17)

In shrill contrast[4] to the first stanza, the second stanza focuses on God's rejection of his people.[5] This is a theme that often occurs in the psalms (cf. Pss 22:2, 39:9, 43:2, 69:10-13, 71:11, 74:1, 79:4, 89:39-46, 108:12; cf. also Jdg 6:13; Is 2:6, 49:14). The use of the second person singular verbal forms in verses 10-15 is striking yet tragic: it is God who has rejected his own. This stands in sharp contrast with the uses of the second person singular verbal forms in the first stanza. There, God ("You") acted on behalf of his people and against the enemies; here, God acts against his people. Instead of saving his people from the enemy, God has now become the major foe who empowers the enemies (cf. Rom-Shiloni 2008:687). Verses 11-15 all begin with a verb with the letter ת as initial letter, creating an alliteration which accentuates God's actions against his people. The verb זָנַחְתָּ in verse 10 contains the idea of God actively pushing his people away, repudiating or discarding them (cf. Goldingay 2007:42).

God's rejection is experienced in different ways. He no longer goes out with

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[3] For a comprehensive discussion of weapons of war in ancient Israel, cf. King & Stager (2001:224-230).

[4] For a comprehensive discussion of the contrasts in Psalm 44, cf. Human (1998:574-577).

[5] Cf. Leung Lai (2007:426) who refers to this portrayal of God as abusiveness. Rom-Shiloni (2008:685) rightly points out that Psalm 44 is one of very few communal laments where the responsibility for the destruction of God's people is put on God, while the role of human enemies is secondary.

the armies of Israel resulting in their defeat in war (vv. 10-11). He gives them up to be devoured like sheep, which is a picture of doom (cf. Jr 12:3; Zech 11:4, 7). They would become like sheep that died in the open country, whose carcasses were eaten by scavenging animals and birds (cf. Pss 74:14, 79:2; Jr 7:33, 16:4, 19:7, cf. Goldingay 2007:43). He scatters them among the nations (v. 12). Goldingay (2007:43) aptly writes that this is not just a matter of defeat in war, but it indicates massacre and exile. A consequence of such a massacre would have been that they would be deported to be slaves in a foreign land. War slavery was common throughout the history of Mesopotamia (cf. Matthews & Benjamin 1993:199-202). God sells them for a pittance, without gaining anything from the sale (v. 13). It is as if He couldn't get rid of them quickly enough, not holding out for a fair price (cf. Eaton 2003:184); they were apparently not valuable in the eyes of God. Amos 2:6 speaks of the ungodly selling the righteous for silver and for a pair of sandals. At least they got something of worth from their unrighteous practices. Yet, God gains nothing from selling his people; He apparently doesn't care enough.[6] He makes them a reproach to their neighbours, the scorn and an object of ridicule to those around them (v. 14). He makes them a byword amongst the nations (v. 15), which was considered to be a major threat (cf. Dt 28:38; Jer 24:9). מָשָׁל indicates what happens when you trust in a God who cannot deliver, or if you think that God is with you when He is not (Goldingay 2007:44). People who see this shake their heads, indicating that Israel has become the laughingstock of the nations; the expression also suggests horror (cf. Jr 18:16, cf. Goldingay 2007:44). In verses 16 and 17 there is a change from the second person singular to the first person singular, indicating the complete identification of the poet with his people. Because of God's rejection, the poet, along with his people, is covered with disgrace and shame (v. 16) as the enemies, bent on revenge, taunt, revile and reproach them (v. 17). The fact that God has now turned against his people resulted in the enemies being triumphant. Instead of the enemies being put to shame, as was the case in the first stanza, God's people are now put to shame.

It is incomprehensible to the people that God, their covenant God, acts

[6] Goldingay's (2007:43) metaphor is extremely descriptive: "They have been put on eBay for a few cents, with no reserve".

contrary to what He has done in the past. Instead of delivering them from their enemies, He is the one who delivers them into the hands of the enemy. He is responsible for everything that has happened to them; He carries the blame for their shame, for their pain; He is liable for their suffering. The people accuse God of being unjust and unfair. This accusation should be understood as the unburdening of a people who feel that God has forsaken and betrayed them, people who feel that everything they believed in and trusted in has been shattered, that everything around them has turned into darkness. These are the words of a people who experience God as their enemy. Goldingay (1978:63) aptly describes it as a "hostility which assails … most vehemently the person of God".

Rogerson (2010:144-145; cf. also Goldingay 2006:78-80) rightly points out that there appears to be a dark side to God, a side that puzzles and makes us uncomfortable because it doesn't conform to the image humans have of God. God is sometimes, as is the case here, associated with evil, in the sense that He allows certain calamities to happen to afflict the world, and his people particularly. He asserts that as difficult as these portrayals of God might be for the life of faith, it may well be an essential part of the God-human relationship. Without this dark side to God's character He might become a tool in a one-sided relationship.

STANZA 3 (VERSES 18-23)

The idea that God is responsible for their suffering is reinforced in stanza 3 with the not guilty plea of the poet. The not guilty plea is a theme that occurs elsewhere in the psalms as well (cf. Pss 7:4-6, 17:3-4, 26:4-6; 59:4-5). The psalmist claims that the people have not been unfaithful to the covenant, nor have they forgotten God, nor have they gone astray by following other gods. In verse 18 the psalmist claims that they have not been unfaithful in their hearts or their steps. This indicates their faithfulness both in their inner person and their outer activity (Goldingay 2007:45).

This claim makes God's conduct all the more incomprehensible. If they had sinned and served other gods (which they had done on numerous occasions) then God's behaviour would have been justified. Usually in psalms of communal lament that is the case. Yahweh is characteristically presumed to be responsible

for the suffering of the community because of their disobedience (cf. Pss 74:1, 79:5, 80:5, 89:39). But here they are innocent of wrongdoing; therefore they blame God for their suffering. This not guilty plea stands in sharp contrast to the usual blessing/curse scheme of Deuteronomistic covenant theology.[7] According to Deuteronomy 28 Israel could expect blessings to follow their faithfulness to the covenant, and curses to follow their unfaithfulness. Here the opposite happens: despite their faithfulness, they suffered. They did their part, yet God did not. Their devotion to God is repaid by their becoming a haunt for jackals, a place of complete desolation no longer fit for human abode, indicating total ruin (Goldingay 2007:46).

This claim is also a complete rejection of traditional wisdom thinking and offers, like Job, a mighty protest that the faithful do not always suffer due to sin. This stanza, combined with the previous one, underlines the Jobean character of Psalm 44. Job also suffered at the hands of a God who acted in a completely different manner from what was expected of Him. Just like Job protested that his suffering was not the consequence of sin, the poet offers this protest that Israel were innocent of any wrongdoing. They even go as far as protesting that if there was any guilt on their part, God would have known about it, because He knows the deepest secrets of the heart.

This disparity between their theology and their experience lead to a crisis of faith. The psalm does not really offer a solution to this crisis. The tension between God's unfaithfulness and the people's faithfulness is palpable. This tension increases through the poet's claim that their suffering was for God's sake (עָלֶיךָ – v. 23). Bratcher & Rayburn (1991:417; cf. also Eaton 2003:185) understand this to mean that the people suffered because of their devotion to God. They suffered because they belonged to God. They were martyrs for his

[7] In the words of Hossfeld & Zenger: "Mit dieser >>Unschuldungsbeteuerung<< bricht der Psalm das Psalm das traditionelle Segen-Fluch-Schema der dtr Bundestheologie auf und stösst so zu einer vertrieften Sicht der Bundesgemeinschaft zwischen Israel und seinem Gott vor: Das Festhalten am Gottesbund bewahrt nicht vor Katastrophen und vor Leiden, im gegenteil!" (1993:277). Cf. also Rom-Shiloni (2008:690-693) who argues that Psalm 44 stands explicitly against Deuteronomic conventions and also prophetic texts such as Jeremiah 2:32, 18:13-17 that put the blame for Israel's suffering on their having forgotten God's covenant. In Psalm 44 their suffering is due to God having rejected them.

sake. Grogan (2008:98) argues for the same, even going as far as to suggest that the Old Testament here anticipates the teachings of Jesus about bearing the cross for his sake (Lk 9:23). Obviously, Grogan is reading a New Testament idea back into the Old Testament. None of these suggestions provide a solution to the problem. Nothing else in the psalm points in this direction. It is quite clear that they did not suffer due to their devotion, but because God, seemingly without reason, abandoned them. Coetzee (1988:6) has argued convincingly that the expression functions to convince God that He should deliver them from their current suffering. They urge God to intervene, because, they claim, their suffering was for his sake. Suffering for "your sake" appeals to God's covenant love. Although God has pushed them away, they still petition Him. The expression should finally be understood as a demanding cry for help, even containing an element of accusation. Thus עָלֶיךָ further highlights the blame they place on God that He is responsible for their suffering.

STANZA 4 (VERSES 24-27)

Israel does not accept God's actions against them stoically. After blaming Him for their suffering in stanza 2, and protesting their innocence in stanza 3, in stanza 4 they accuse Him of sleeping. This places God in the same category as gods such as Baal, whose prophets were mocked by Elijah at Mount Carmel, when he accused Baal of sleeping (cf. 1 Ki 18:27). Yet Psalm 121:4 declares that God never sleeps! This is a striking example of what Brueggemann (1997:317) calls Israel's cross-examination of God. Israel's testimony about God was that he never sleeps nor slumbers (Ps 121:4). However, here they put God on the stand and provide counter testimony that in fact He is like the other gods, who sometimes sleep.

The poet is confronted with the horrible experience of God's silence. The question "Why do you sleep?" is not a quest for information, but a rhetorical question accusing God that he is acting differently from what He is supposed to do. It is a desperate cry of God's people, born from deep despair and pain. God has abandoned them, God is responsible for their suffering, yet God is the one called upon to intervene. They call upon God, although God is against them. He is responsible for their suffering, yet He is also the only one who can turn the circumstances around and give new life.

In v. 27 the poet states that God's love (חֶסֶד) is the motivating factor for his deeds of deliverance (cf. also Pss 6:5, 25:7, 107:20, 136; 2 Chr 20:21-22). Here it is not only the attribute of love that is being referred to, but acts of love on behalf of Israel. God's love and faithfulness to his covenant will result in deeds of salvation. His love is not static, but ensues in acts of deliverance. Because He has shown his love in the past, Israel trusts that, although it seems He has forgotten them, He will rise up once more to fight for them. Against God, they still cling to God. Although the covenant God is acting contrary to what they expected of Him, his covenant love still is their only hope for redemption.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Psalm 44 combines elements of celebration, lament, accusation, protest, and petition. The psalm begins with a joyful exuberance with Israel remembering the majestic deeds of God on their behalf. He saved them, he brought them into the land of promise, He went out with their armies, He defeated their enemies, and He acted as He was supposed to as their covenant partner. Israel can only praise Him for his mighty deeds on their behalf.

This jubilant tone does not prepare the reader for the discord heard in the second stanza. Israel is under attack. This is nothing new, for they have often been besieged by enemies. Fortunately they have a covenant partner, who has proven himself to fight on their behalf. Yet … this little word is pregnant with raw emotion and bewilderment. Yet, You, oh God, the God who delivers is now the God who rejects, who scatters, who sells, who shames. God's deliverance has turned into rejection. Israel's voice of praise has turned into words of accusation, words of blame. Their joyful exuberance has changed into a mighty protest. They suffer, and it is God's fault. He is responsible. They did nothing wrong. They protest their innocence. They did not go astray. They did not serve other gods. They were faithful, in their hearts and in their daily walk. Psalm 44 claims unequivocally that, at times, God is to blame when the righteous suffer. This claim stands in contrast to Deuteronomistic covenant theology, and it objects to a simplistic view of retribution theory. This claim also provides an image of God that is highly disturbing, an image that touches on God's dark side. What does

one do when God is to blame? How do the afflicted react when God, the faithful covenant partner, proves to be liable for the suffering they endure? Do they just accept it and bear it? Psalm 44 provides an alternative. They protest, they blame, they accuse, they lament, they petition. They protest against God, they blame and accuse God, yet they also petition this guilty God, this blameable God to wake up and once more turn his face favourably towards them, and to redeem them.

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