

Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence

Excerpts selected by Rabbi Darren Kleinberg

The basic idea of this book can perhaps be most readily communicated through a contrast with the problem of evil as it has been classically formulated by theologians and philosophers: If God is the sole author of all that is and he is good, how can there be evil in the world? Or, to put the question in terms a bit closer to the ancient Hebraic idiom, that is, in terms of justice: If God is omnipotent, and benevolent, why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper? *xv*

I worked the expression “omnipotence” into my subtitle in part to encourage the thought that omnipotence was not being eliminated but redefined in ways more appropriate to the Hebrew Bible...The operative dichotomy, thus, is not that between limitation and omnipotence, but that which lies between omnipotence as a static attribute and omnipotence as a dramatic enactment. *xvi*

...the theology of omnipotence as a dramatic enactment allows people to *fault* God for the persistence of evil (including, on occasion, human evil) and to goad him into reactivating his primal omnipotence, which is never relinquished but often agonizingly, catastrophically dormant. One might call this latter position a theology of omnipotence *in potential*, omnipotence recollected from the cosmogonic past and expected in the eschatological future but only affirmed in faith in the disordered present. *xvi*

Why reality should be this way – why God does not simply exercise his sovereign will so as to reactivate his omnipotence and establish perfect justice – remains a crucial question in the philosophy of religion. *xvi*

...the overwhelming tendency of biblical writers as they confront undeserved evil is not to *explain* it away but to call upon God to *blast* it away. *xvii*

No biblical text comes closer to the classical formulation of the problem of evil than Jeremiah 12:1-3...

1 You will be in the right, O Lord, if I make claim against you,
Yet I shall present charges against you:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why are the workers of treachery at ease?
2 You have planted them, and they have taken root,
They spread, even bear fruit,
You are present in their mouths,
But far from their thoughts.
3 Yet you, Lord, have noted and observed me;
You have tested my heart, and found it with you.
Drive them out like sheep to the slaughter,
Prepare them for the day of slaying!

The question is familiar: “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” The answer, however...is nothing like those rationalizations proposed by the philosophers: “Drive them out like sheep to

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the slaughter.” The answer to the question of the suffering of the innocent is a renewal of activity on the part of the God of justice...the question is not an intellectual exercise but rather a taunt intended to goad the just God into action after a long quiescence. It is more like liturgy than philosophy. *xvii-xviii*

What the sufferer wants is not an explanation but a prescription, something that he can *do* to reactivate God after this painful quiescence or to augment the benevolent side of God at the expense of his malevolence, converting fury into favor. *xvii*

...God’s deliverance of his loyal worshippers is deemed neither unlikely nor inevitable. *xix*

...the ringing affirmation of God’s power to save...is not a static truism, but a quasiliturgical act: its sole content is a point of crisis in the engaged religious life. It is a confession of faith in the face of imminent destruction. To abstract the affirmation from the God-Israel relationship and to convert it into a timeless and universal truth of philosophy is not to translate it but to traduce it. *xix*

Among those who study the Hebrew Bible theologically, it has long been agreed that the God of Israel is better understood in relational than in classical philosophical terms. *xxi*

What in Israel’s experience gives them the perception that YHWH is as inactive as a dying and rising god between his death and resurrection? Psalm 44 suggests that Israel’s experience of their own undeserved suffering – suffering even unto death – could lead them to believe that God is not dead, to be sure, but close to it; for example, dangerously, irresponsibly asleep:

18 All this has come upon us,
Yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to Your covenant.

...

23 It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long,
That we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

24 Rouse Yourself; Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Awaken, do not reject us forever!

25 Why do you hide Your face,
Ignoring our affliction and distress?

26 We lie prostrate in the dust;
our body clings to the ground.

27 Arise and help us,
redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness. *xxii*

The worshipping community does not burst into song because they have suddenly recalled the uniform, uninterrupted truth that God is in control. Rather, their excitement is owing to the perception that he is at last about to redeem them as befits his faithfulness. The possibility of an interruption in his faithfulness is indeed troubling, and I repeat that I have ventured no

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explanation for it. I might add that I find it especially odd that scholars who lived through the years of the Holocaust and other unspeakable horrors of our century should have imagined that the Hebrew Bible consistently upheld a doctrine of God's uniform, uninterrupted kingship, in spite of ample textual evidence to the contrary. *xxiii*

Biblical monotheism is *not* radical, for it refuses to attribute value to everything that exists. Some things exist that ought not to, and these deserve to be blasted from the world. Not everything that exists in nature is good or conforms to God's highest intentions. Some of what is, is not yet good. *xxiv*

That he has created them does not entail that they are good and should endure forever, but rather that they are under his control and thus unable to resist him when he reactivates his omnipotence. *xxiv*

...three intellectual tendencies [] have historically led scholars away from a proper understanding of creation in the Hebrew Bible and related literature: the residue of the static Aristotelian concept of deity as perfect, unchanging being; the uncritical tendency to affirm the constancy of divine action; and the conversion of biblical creation theology into an affirmation of the goodness of whatever is...the overall effect of these three ways of thinking has been to trivialize creation by denying the creator a worthy opponent. *xxv*

...liturgy in the broad sense of the word was thought to mediate between the chaotic present and the ordered past and future, or, if you prefer spatial to temporal language, between this disordered world and the ordered ideal world...liturgy realizes and extends creation thought human reenactment of cosmogonic events, such as the divine repose on the seventh day or the process of distinction making and boundary maintenance. Liturgy also realizes and renews creation by reactivating the slumbering benevolent elements in the Godhead through such things as genuine repentance, the cries and the taunts of the lament, or the offering of sweet-smelling sacrifices which in the J account of Noah's flood, for example, move YHWH to vow never again to turn the world back to chaos...a prime desideratum today is an appreciation of the *theurgic* character of religious acts in the Hebrew Bible, the way these affect God and move him from one stance to another. *xxvi*

By liturgy, I mean not only prayer and sacrifice, but also the observance of purity laws, the performance of covenant stipulations in general, and much else. Only as the dignity and efficaciousness of these things are recognized can the true role of humanity in the ordering of the world in the Hebrew Bible be appreciated. That recognition is much aided by serious study of the theology of the commandments in rabbinic Judaism and especially in Qabbalah, where observance contributes, as it were, to healing the catastrophic rifts within God himself. *xxvi*

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39 Yet You have rejected, spurned,
And become enraged at Your anointed.
40 You have repudiated the covenant with Your servant;
You have dragged his dignity in the dust.
...
50 O Lord, where is your steadfast love of old
which you swore to David in your faithfulness? (Ps. 89)

The absence of the omnipotent and cosmocratic deity is not accepted as final, nor his primordial world-ordering deeds as confined to the vanished past. Present experience, which seems to confirm these propositions, is not seen as absolute. Rather, it is seen as a mysterious interruption in the divine life, an interruption that the supplications of the worshipping community may yet bring to an end. The failure of God is openly acknowledged: no smug faith here, no flight into an other-worldly ideal. But God is also *reproached* for his failure, told that it is neither inevitable nor excusable: no limited God here, no God stymied by invincible evil, no faithless resignation before the relentlessness of circumstance. It is between the Scylla of simplistic faith and Charybdis of stoic resignation that the lament runs its perilous course. 25

The God to whom this theology bears witness is not the one who continually acts in history, but one whose acts are clustered either in the primordial past or in the eschatological future, or both, that is, the God who will reactivate his mighty deeds and close the horrific parenthesis that is ordinary history. This is not the divine warrior of the classical theology of recital, nor is it the *dues otiosus* [idle god] whose prime is past and who has surrendered to younger, more virile members of the pantheon. Rather, YHWH in this theology is a deity who can still be aroused, who can still respond to the anguished cry of his cultic community to effect together a new victory. When this subtle, dialectical theology came into being is probably impossible to reconstruct. It is likely to have some to the fore whenever the disjunction of the old rhetoric of recital and the harshness of contemporary experience became too great to repress. In any event, by the time of the exile of the sixth century B.C.E., it was surely among the major components of the spiritual life of Israel, and it has been so ever since, even into the post-Holocaust era. 50