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The New Testament Concept of Evil

THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL often has presented a stumbling block to belief in Christ or in God's love for humanity. The purpose of this article is to examine how the New Testament conceives of the origin and continuing existence of evil in a world created by a loving and redeeming God. Also to be considered is how the church relates to this evil according to the New Testament.

To begin, it is necessary that one distinguish between the two types of evil encountered in the Bible. One type might be referred to as natural evil or non-personal evil. This includes such things as fires, floods, epidemics, earthquakes, and other types of naturally-occurring phenomena that bring tragedy to the human family. The second form of evil is moral or personal evil. This kind of evil includes war, murder, genocide, rape, and other actions carried out by morally responsible agents that inflict disaster on the human family.

Before examining the New Testament concept of evil, we need to look at the precedents that influenced the concept. The Old Testament is the logical beginning point. In the Old Testament both natural and moral evil are considered. In the area of natural evil God is depicted as allowing evil to exist in the

The Jewish philosophy regarding evil began searching for answers when God allowed the Israelites to suffer defeat and deportation. When the Northern Kingdom was annihilated by the Assyrians the Judahite historians chalked it up to the wickedness of Samaria's leadership. However, when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem the theologians were in a quandary to explain why Yahweh would allow this "evil" thing to come on them. They apparently found a convenient answer in the eastern religions that had representative gods for good and evil. They attributed the defeat to the god of evil.

On a bas-relief from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh captives from Lachish are led into exile.

Lesson reference: CUS: John 8:44; 13:2
L&W: Mark 1:32,34,39; 3:15; 6:13,33; 8:33



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Above: God worked against personal, moral evil at Sodom and Gomorrah by allowing a natural evil (volcanic eruption) to destroy the cities. Many interpreters believe the cities were located near the southern end of the Dead Sea, where now there is nothing but desert and salt flats. **Opposite top:** In their philosophy regarding evil the New Testament writers were influenced by many factors, including the religions of the Persians. This gold earring from the Achaemenian era uses some of the eastern religious themes in its design and portrayed images. **Opposite below:** From the Hellenistic culture evolved the belief in a number of evil personifications, including the evil eye. This mosaic of the eye was uncovered in Antioch of Pisidia. It is believed to date from the second century AD.

OPPOSITE TOP: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/BOSTON (324/25)

world. In some places there is even language that would seem to make God directly responsible for natural evil. On balance, however, evil is seen to be present by God's permission.

Similarly, moral evil exists in the world by God's permissive will, not by His direct intent. God obviously allowed the serpent to tempt Eve but did not Himself precipitate the action. In the Old Testament sin and its resulting evil are presented as the result of human choices, not God's design.

Why then does God permit evil? The Old Testament indicates that God has chosen not to disclose this information to us. Yet, it should be noted that God always is pictured by the Old Testament as being in control of evil. When evil goes too far in the eyes of God, He deals directly with it (as with Sodom and Gomorrah). God also is seen in the Old Testament as using one form of evil to punish other evil (i.e., the Babylonian Exile). Further, God can use evil to accomplish His own purposes. For example, God took the evil that Joseph's brothers directed toward him and used that to

save the family during the later time of famine (Gen. 50:20).

In the development of Old Testament theology, the association of God with evil diminishes as the love and goodness of God is better understood. At the same time a more complete understanding of the existence of a powerful figure (Satan) devoted to evil grows. Satan is presented directly in only four passages in the Old Testament (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; Zech. 3:1-2; and 1 Chron. 21:1). The last passage is most instructive. In a parallel passage, 2 Samuel 24:1, God incited the evil that the Chronicler saw Satan as directing.

During and after the Exile the Jews were exposed to other emphases that influenced both Old Testament and New Testament concepts of evil. Namely, the Jews came into contact with Zoroastrian ideas, including a formalized, dualistic concept of the universe in which there were competing good and evil deities. It is very likely that this exposure aided the development of ideas about Satan and his demonic cohorts. The presence of a strong emphasis on demonology in post-Exilic Judaism certainly is indicative of this influence.

This dualistic concept of the universe was reinforced by Jewish exposure to Hellenistic ideas during the post-Exilic period. One sees the full-fledged results of this emphasis in the New Testament era. It should be noted, however, that Jewish interest in these areas preceded the Exile, and Judaism never developed a full-blown dualism as was characteristic of Zoroastrianism. It is difficult to determine exactly how much influence was exerted on Jewish thinking. Jew-

ish scholars might have arrived at mature concepts of Satan and demonology without these influences. Yet, it is interesting to note that these influences came in conjunction with Jewish exposure to other religious sources.

The New Testament concept of evil begins with some of the same ideas about evil as the Old Testament but reflects the mature ideas of the later Old Testament augmented by ideas developed in the intertestamental period. The categories of natural and moral evil still are valid for the New Testament. However, where there is a progressive disassociation of God and evil in the Old Testament, there is absolutely no intimation in the New Testament that God has created or condones evil. In fact, the New Testament, reflecting later theological developments, goes out of its way to separate God from the presence of evil in the world. Evil still is seen as being present by God's permissive will and God is presented as controlling evil, but He is not the author of evil.

In the New Testament the presence of evil in the world is associated closely with the presence and reality of a being who is evil personified, the devil or Satan. He is referred to literally as the "evil one" (Matt. 13:19; 1 John 3:12, NIV). Satan controls or leads a group of lesser spiritual entities devoted to evil and known to us as demons. These demons aid Satan in the promotion of evil in the world and exercise similar powers.

Satan is represented as entering the lives of people to incite their evil deeds and lusts. In Matthew 16:23 (NIV) Jesus spoke to Simon and said, "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus saw Satan acting through the words of Simon to thwart His mission. Similarly, in John 13:27 (NIV) one reads that "as soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him."

Besides enticing men to evil deeds, Satan also desires to prevent the spread of the gospel. He shuts people's hearts and ears to the message of God (Mark 4:15). He acted to prevent Paul's return to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:18). He is a continuous opponent to the light brought by Jesus Christ, although he may disguise himself as an angel of light to accomplish that task (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan's chief tools to promote evil in people are lies and temptations. He even tempted Christ to turn to evil and forsake the Father (Matt. 4:3-11).

Satan also is presented in Scripture as the author of evil in a more direct way. He is pictured as an evil spirit who brings about bodily pains and afflictions. Luke 13:16 records the healing of a woman whose body had been tormented by Satan for eighteen years. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul instructs the church to hand over a sinner to the hands of Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

While it is tempting to blame the devil for every aspect of evil that we encounter, we must realize that human beings also are a source of evil. The New Testament connects humans and evil at the point of sin. Sin is universal (Rom. 3:23). Therefore all of humanity has some contact with and responsibility for evil. It has been



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Above: Jesus likened the presence of evil in the world to the tares that grow amidst the wheat. Both are allowed to remain until the harvest, which He compared to the judgment at the end of the age. **Opposite top:** The god Dionysius (also known as Bacchus) was the embodiment of immorality in ancient Greece and Italy. Devotees engaged in mystery worship and regularly held *bacchanalia* [back-ah-NAY-lee-ah], cultic orgies. They became so bad that they led to a crime wave the Roman senate had to repress in 186 BC. **Opposite bottom:** Herakles was the greatest hero and fighter of evil in the Greek mythologies. This votive relief to him dates from the fourth century BC. It was found at Piraeus, Athens' port city.

OPPOSITE TOP: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/KELSEY MUSEUM/ANN ARBOR (386/17-17A)

noted that "all sin is evil" although not all forms of evil are sin.¹ Sin normally is associated with moral evil.

Not only is sin universal in humankind, but it also is totally corrupting. Sometimes the term "depravity" is used to describe this corruption. Strong has written that, with sin, our "bent toward God" has been replaced with "a fearful bent toward evil" so that there is within us the "presence of manifold tendencies to evil."²

In the New Testament this "bent" toward evil is expressed as the product of the human heart. Matthew 15:19 (NIV) reminds us that "out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Thus, evil is something that we can be tempted to do, but it also is a part of who we are as sinners.

Invariably, that which is within people manifests itself in evil deeds. Even Christians have to struggle with the lingering effects of this deep-rooted tendency toward evil that is within us. In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul described his own struggle at this point. In verse 19 he wrote, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (NIV).

Because people are sinners and God has permitted evil to exist in the world in which we live, the New Testament recognizes that suffering will be a part of our existence. The usual outcome of evil, especially that created by sin, is suffering. In the Old Testament one of the chief questions asked of God was why bad things happen to good people. In the New Testament that question is modified in the light of Jesus' example.

Christ suffered because of the sins of humankind and the attendant evils of that sin. The church of the New Testament, recognizing the pervasiveness of sin, realized that suffering was a part of its existence. Paul asserted that in the church's suffering it was continuing Christ's struggle against evil (Col. 1:24).

Suffering also comes to the church because of the confrontation with evil that comes in the spread of the gospel. The work of Christ runs counter to the desires of Satan and his cohorts. Thus, Satan opposes the evangelization of the world by bringing evil in the form of suffering against the church. Jesus prayed to the Father, "I have given them your words and the world has hated them."

Evil, then, will bring suffering to the church. Believers are encouraged to resist evil and patiently endure its attendant suffering. Christ told His followers not to return evil for evil. Instead, we are to return good for evil. In this way we persevere in the face of evil without calling forth more evil in the world. Patient endurance of the results of evil in the world leads a Christian toward perfection

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(Jas. 1:2-4).

Even though the New Testament affirms the reality of evil and the need for Christians to persevere under it, there is a strong assurance that evil will not plague believers always. Rather, it is understood that evil exists now only by God's permission so that His redemptive plan can be accomplished. God has not yet consummated His judgment of evil so that some who still are committed to evil might be brought to Christ (see the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matt. 13:24-30).

The believer is called on to patiently endure the results of evil in the world, but this in no way implies that evil is victorious in the world. The New Testament affirms with the Old Testament that God is sovereign over evil and Satan, the leader of evil (Rom. 8:38-39). Romans 8:28 asserts that God works through and even with evil circumstances to accomplish His will. The New Testament affirms that nothing about evil ever will thwart the accomplishment of God's will. He is sovereign over evil.

The New Testament sees a definite struggle between Jesus as God's Son and the power of evil. There is a continual confrontation between Christ and the powers of evil. In that struggle, Christ always is triumphant. The death of Christ on the cross, besides being an act of substitutionary atonement, also is seen in the New Testament as the climactic encounter between Christ and the forces of evil (Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8). By His resurrection, Christ leaves evil defeated and helpless before Him.

Because of the triumph of Christ over evil, the believer also has a victory over evil. This might seem paradoxical in light of what has been said about the patient enduring of suffering by believers. Yet, in the perseverance of believers in the face of evil, they demonstrate that they have overcome evil and the evil one by their faith in Christ (1 John 2:13-14).

The New Testament also affirms that in the second coming of Christ and the final judgment of God evil will be judged. The evil one will be cast into the lake of fire along with all those who have clung to evil and not come to Christ. Evil then will be removed from redeemed humanity (Rev. 20:7-15).

Thus, the New Testament takes evil seriously. It is real, and the suffering that results from it is real. It exists by God's permissive will. Yet, God is sovereign over evil. Through Christ evil and the evil one have been defeated and cast down. Although evil in the present continues to afflict humankind, evil is not part of the ultimate future of the believer. ○

1. William T. Brunner, *Children of the Devil* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1966), p. 8.
2. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), p. 637.

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