

# IS GOD GUILTY OF FRAUD?

## *Chapter 6*

### War and Peace

A few years back, I was addressing a group of 44 Christian students at a well-known Christian college. These students were taking a class on how to share one's faith. After the regular teacher introduced me to the class, I began by passing out sheets of paper.

I reminded the students that I didn't know them, didn't know their handwriting, and would likely never see them again after that class. With that in mind, I wanted each one to write down the biggest *personal* faith issue she or he has, fold the paper, and come leave it in a box. The answers would be anonymous. It was important for me to see what challenged the faith of those who were so convicted that they had chosen to take a class on how to share their faith.

As I opened the 44 responses, well-over half were variations on one theme: If there is a good God, then why does he let bad things happen. As one student put it, "How can God allow a drug addict, impoverished, uneducated street vagrant to get pregnant and have a child?"

I relished the chance to examine the excellent questions raised by these students. It is akin to accusations against God that have been around for centuries. The God we proclaim as moral, true, and loving, seems to have a history that have many challenging whether God is truly who he says he is.

I can't cross-examine God on these issues. (And if I could, it wouldn't necessarily bear good fruit, as the Old Testament character Job found out.) But different views and answers have been produced over the centuries, and those ideas are ripe for cross-examination. Before doing so, I want to state the problem and its underpinnings as clearly as I can.

### THE PROBLEM

Before analyzing whether God is guilty of fraud by claiming to be kind, loving, patient, and forgiving, one critical basic fact should be exposed. Almost all people have a tendency, as noted in earlier chapters, to hold God to our conceptions of right and wrong. What we hold in high regard, we expect to find in God. What we think poorly of, we assume God should avoid.

That underpinning of thought bears itself out in considering this aspect of God in people seeking to hold God to one's own internal moral standards of right and wrong. In other words, whatever I think is right, I expect of God. Whatever I think is wrong, I disassociate from God.

For example, consider what happens when many people read God's instructions to Saul about the Amalekites:

Go strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey (1 Sam. 15:3).

Many people recoil in horror; perhaps most people recoil in horror!

This act of God seems offensive not only by the moral standards of most today, but also by the moral standards Jesus taught as the true morality of God. It is Jesus who taught:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn. 13:34-35).

Jesus also instructed Peter to put away his sword when Jesus was being wrongfully arrested (Jn 18:11). Three years before Peter's sword incident, it was Jesus who said,

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mt. 5:43-44).

Jesus also gave this admonition,

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Mt. 5:38-39).

These teachings of Jesus seem very contrary to the Old Testament instructions of God to the Israelites prior to invading the Promised Land:

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded (Dt. 20:16-17).

In summarizing the actions of Joshua and the Israelite army, Josh. 10:40 states,

So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the LORD God of Israel commanded.<sup>1</sup>

As scholars look at the writings in Joshua, some use the events to characterize God as “warrior God.”

This picture of God that is seemingly at odds with most people’s moral expectations of God and to the teachings of God in the New Testament (and other parts of the Old Testament) as a God of love, long-suffering and patient, seeking redemption rather than revenge. This becomes a problem for many. But it is not a new problem. This problem has concerned thoughtful scholars and students for millennia.

Before considering some answers, it is useful to cross-examine the opinions of others (“deconstruction”). This approach allows a fuller examination of the problem as well as the potential solutions – always with an eye toward keeping the ideas that make sense, while cautiously removing those that do not.

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

There are a number of proposed solutions to the issue of God seemingly portrayed in Scripture as at times, vengeful, a warrior, and an extremist who embraces punishments and consequences that seem to far outweigh the crime. Over the centuries, thought leaders have espoused theories. Protestant, Catholic, and Jew; conservative and liberal; ancient and contemporary, in almost every category of Biblical studies, scholars have offered approaches for resolving this seeming discrepancy in God.

Some approaches altered the Scriptural texts to remove offensive views, often described as differences between the Old and New Testaments (or change Gods, in the case of some). Others change the interpretation of Scripture to alleviate alleged inconsistencies between what is said of God and how people imagine God should be.

Some hold fast to Scripture, choosing instead to defend God’s behavior as reported. These theories varied widely: that God is complex and at times abusive; that God is God and not open to question; that God had just cause for his actions; that the ends justified the means; that God was acting for the greater good; or that

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<sup>1</sup> There must be caution about over-reading this passage as meaning that Joshua and the Israelites truly destroyed all people living in the Promised Land as opposed to all those engaged in battle. This is examined more closely later in this chapter.

God was acting in a different way at a different time along a chain of his progression in revealing himself.

As some of these views defend the actions of God, while others disassociate God from the described behaviors, I will first examine those views that disassociate God from the actions in question.

Three common ancient views embraced this disassociation:

- **Altering Scripture.**

The Bible we have today is the product of thousands of years of copying and writing – long before Guttenberg’s press of 1450. Over those millennia, scholars have worked hard to determine the precise reading of the autograph original texts of each biblical book. In other words, since our copy of Genesis, for example, dates over a thousand years from when the original was written, how do scholars figure out where copying errors were made?

Scholars have many tools for these challenges, and scholars can readily identify certain types of changes in the copies of the texts we have today. Easy changes include misspellings, transposed letters, copying the same line twice, copying the same line twice, *etc.* Another area where scholars identify changes from the original text involves scribes’ edits that were copied onto the texts after, or during their copying.

Scholars have readily identified areas where scribes made changes in the text as they copied various Old Testament books out of a concern for how those books portrayed God. Many of these scribes were making copies of Scripture from 400BC to about 100BC. They would modify the reading of Scripture when they thought the words might bring reproach upon the character or person of God.

For example, while the modern copy of the Hebrew text of 2 Samuel 12:9 asks,

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?

Many scholars believe the original text asked,

Why do you treat the LORD with contempt?

This perceived change was believed to have been made “to protect God from reproach...to avoid dishonor to God or to revered persons.”<sup>2</sup> That some scribes

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<sup>2</sup> McCarter, Peter Kyle, *Textual Criticism, Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress 1986) at 58-59. Changing one or more of the letters in the word is termed “*tiqqune soperim*” (Hebrew meaning “scribal corrections”). Scholars debate both the frequency and placement of

copying Scriptures between the Old and New Testament time period felt compelled to make subtle changes to protect God's reputation, is one of the earliest examples of disassociating God from something in Scripture deemed "below" God and his character or dignity.<sup>3</sup>

The approach indicates that for many, going back thousands of years, an approach to the problem of Scripture's portrayals of God that run contrary to the readers' values, is simply to disassociate God from the actions. In modern parlance, "He didn't really do that!"

A further example of re-writing Scripture is found in the non-biblical book of *Jubilees*. This book was written between 161 and 140BC.<sup>4</sup> This book attempts to retell many stories of the Bible as allegedly told to Moses while he was spending his 40 days on Mount Sinai before God.

In the Bible, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. In *Jubilees*, however, it is the master demon Mastema who has God test Abraham by asking for the sacrifice of Isaac (Jub. 17:16).<sup>5</sup> This is a clear move away from Scripture's claim simply that God came to Abraham asking for the sacrifice.

The idea that Scripture could not really mean what Scripture seems to be saying re-percolates in other approaches, as I will examine shortly.

- **Altering God.**

A second way that God was historically disassociated from the seemingly "ungodly" actions is fairly blunt: it was a "different God."

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these emendations. See the explanations in Wurthwein, Ernst, *The Text of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 1995) 2d ed. At 17ff.

<sup>3</sup> Among those passages generally agreed as amended by scribes, the text is altered minimally. See generally, Brotzman, Ellis, *Old Testament Textual Criticism, A Practical Introduction*, (Baker Academic 1994) at 117ff; Hayes, John, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Abingdon 1979) at 55.

<sup>4</sup> See the Introduction and Translations by O. S. Wintermute in Charlesworth, James H., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (Doubleday 1985) v. 2, at 44.

<sup>5</sup> "And Prince Mastema came and he said before God, "Behold, Abraham loves Isaac, his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything. Tell him to offer him (as) a burnt offering upon the altar. And you will see whether he will do this thing. And you will know whether he is faithful in everything in which you test him." (Jubilees 17:16).

One of the first major heresies confronted by the early church came from the teachings of Marcion. Marcion was born in Sinope, Asia Minor somewhere toward the end of the first or beginning of the second century. A wealthy ship owner and merchant, he moved to Rome around 135AD. Some early authorities indicate that Marcion's home church (where his father was bishop) had already expelled him for heresy or moral misdeeds. Arriving in Rome, Marcion became a major player in the Roman church donating a large sum of money. The Roman church eventually returned the money and also expelled Marcion for his heretical teachings and ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Marcion taught that the church wrongly used and supported the Old Testament. For Marcion, the God of the Old Testament was clearly different than the God of the New Testament and Jesus. Using Luke 5:36-38 (the parable of the wineskins) and Luke 6:43 ("no good tree bears bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit"), Marcion argued that Jesus' message was totally new and apart from Judaism and the Jewish scriptures.

Marcion wrote a listing of proofs that the Old Testament God was different from that of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> For example, The God of Genesis could not find Adam and Eve, having to call out, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9), whereas Jesus knew even the thoughts of man (Luke 5:22). A similar "proof" for Marcion was the God of the Old Testament saying, "an eye for an eye" (Ex. 21:24) where Jesus said, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Lk 6:29).

Marcion considered the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful and hateful God contrasted to the loving God of the New Testament. Similarly, the Old Testament God was centered on legal minded justice while the New Testament God and father of Jesus was merciful. The Old Testament God worked through his faulty creation; the New Testament God came into that creation to save mankind.

Marcion put together his own set of acceptable scriptures. Marcion's "Bible" or "canon" consisted of Luke, edited to his liking, and ten of Paul's letters again edited and explained by the peculiarities of Marcion's beliefs in introductions to the books. Marcion sought to distance the true teachings of Paul and Luke (and thereby of Jesus) from that of the other apostles. Marcion believed that Paul, Jesus, and Luke had supported his belief that the Old Testament god was a vengeful, hateful, harsh, and judgmental god distinct from the God of the New

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<sup>6</sup> Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, reportedly ran into Marcion in Asia Minor (or Rome, depending upon account). As Iranaeus reported the account, Marcion asked Polycarp, "Do you recognize me?" Polycarp responded, "I recognize you for the firstborn of Satan!" Iranaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, 3:4.

<sup>7</sup> This publication was called, *Antithesis*, and is lost. What we know of it today comes mainly from Tertullian's writings against Marcion from about 200 A.D.

Testament. Similarly, Judaism was a corrupt and wicked faith that promised an earthly Messiah to set up an earthly kingdom. That anticipated event was pre-empted by the loving God of the New Testament who sent Jesus (not a man, but an apparition!) to destroy the Old Testament and Judaism by revealing it for what it was.

When Marcion put together his scriptures, he used the gospel of Luke, and none of the other three. Even the gospel of Luke required revisions, however, so Marcion left off the first two chapters that linked Jesus to the Old Testament by birth and teaching. Similarly, Marcion left out the temptation narrative in Luke 4:1-3 because Jesus quotes Deuteronomy three times in response to Satan's temptations. Luke 4:16-30 where Jesus claims to fulfill the Old Testament was also booted from Marcion's bible. Paul's writings also suffered editing from the hand of Marcion. Much of Romans 9-11 was removed, as were the critical verses from Romans 3:21-4:25. In Galatians, Paul's usage of Abraham as an example of faith was excised.<sup>8</sup>

The effect of Marcion on the church was significant. He spread his heresy far and wide. (Tertullian would say he planted churches the way wasps do nests.) Marcionism grew so much that the movement lasted several hundred years. Not a small feat when you consider that it taught celibacy, so growth only occurred through conversion!

Of course, Marcion's solution to the difficult Scriptural portrayals of God are only as reliable as one's willingness to throw away most all of what the church and Judaism has recognized as Holy Writ.

- **Altering the way one reads Scripture.**

Rather than completely rejecting the Old Testament, many scholars, ancient and modern, read portions of the Old Testament as something different than the simple history some of those portions seem to convey. This approach is easily illustrated by considering both an ancient and a modern example.

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<sup>8</sup> Marcion taught an ethic that was very impressive. No doubt, many converts were won over to his system simply by his lifestyle. Again, there are impressive lifestyle examples found in heresies of orthodoxy today, but that does not change the issues of truth in belief and understanding. Marcion was celibate and required the same of his followers. He taught people that morality was important and urged people to live, denying the pleasures of this world and dedicating themselves to the next world. For more on Marcion and early church heresies see the Church history series under our website at [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com). The most thorough contemporary work on Marcion is Harnack, Adolf, *Marcion, The Gospel of the Alien God*, (Baker Books 1990).

### *Origen and the Alexandrian School: An Allegorical Reading*

In Alexandria, Egypt, a tradition of reading the Old Testament allegorically preceded even the Christian writers.<sup>9</sup> Similar allegorical approaches were a hallmark of the early seminary at Alexandria, home to many noteworthy early church figures including Clement of Alexandria (c.150 - 215) and Origen (c.185 – 250).

Origen worked hard to understand the unity of Scripture and of God as revealed in Scripture. In the face of Marcionism and other heresies in the early church, Origen believed that the one God was revealed in both the Testaments. He also thought that whomever could demonstrate the harmony and peace of the Old Testament with the New, was a “blessed peacemaker” as Jesus talked about on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>10</sup>

Toward that end, Origen believed that there were three possible levels for understanding Scripture. The most basic level was the literal one. Beyond that, however, Origen believed were the more profound and useful categories of moral interpretation and of allegorical interpretation. Here was where Origen frequently found his answers to the perplexing problems under examination.

A set of Origen’s sermons on Joshua are still in existence today. Reading his sermons shows that Origen understood the message of Joshua not in literal terms, but allegorical ones. The inhabitants of Canaan that Israel was to destroy were symbolic of humanity’s sin. When Joshua was instructed to fully and totally annihilate and destroy the local inhabitants, Origen understood the instruction to fully destroy the sin within people, whether that sin was old, or new, fully-grown or infantile. Origen added that not just the sin, but also all that went with the sin (symbolized by the livestock, *etc.*) was to be destroyed and devoted to God.

Origen taught that within people are the Canaanites, the Perizzites, and the Jebusites. Origen challenged his contemporaries to exert themselves, being vigilant and persevering, so that when all these breeds of vices have been forced to flee, “our land may rest from wars” at last,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria read Old Testament passages allegorically.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, Barbara, *The Fathers of the Church: Origen, Homilies on Joshua*, (Catholic University Press 2002) at 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, at 34.

Of course, Origen saw this allegory even more convincingly since “Joshua” as a name was the Hebrew version of the Greek name “Jesus.” As Joshua led the people to victory over the Canaanites, Jesus leads the believer to victory over sin.<sup>12</sup>

### *Seibert and the Historiography Approach*

Eric Seibert is a Professor of Old Testament at Messiah College, a private congregation associated with the Brethren church. One hallmark of the Brethren church is its stand for pacifism, even in the face of war.<sup>13</sup> Seibert grew up with pious convictions in that denomination, and it is not surprising that he found the Old Testament scriptures that show God ordering battle and war very troubling.

Seibert wrote a book he used as a text in teaching classes on this subject entitled, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*.<sup>14</sup> In the book, Seibert took a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to the problem that, like Origen, dismissed much of the literal meaning of the Old Testament passages in question, yet for an entirely different reason. While Origen was always concerned with every word, believing that all Scripture had a role of edifying the reader (even the most minute passage), and hence the Bible was word for word precisely what God intended, Seibert’s view diverged.

Seibert does not believe that the texts accurately convey history. Instead, he considers them part of a genre of literature that he and a number of other scholars term “ancient historiography.” After a rather superficial walk through some issues that he believes disproves the historical value of the biblical history books, he then explains the “type” of literature he believes is present:

Assuming that Old Testament narratives were written to preserve a record of what actually happened is a modern—not an ancient—historiographic assumption... Old Testament narrative represents a distinct literary genre that needs to be understood on its own terms.<sup>15</sup>

Seibert then offers several distinguishing hallmarks of his idea of “ancient historiography”:

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, at 26ff.

<sup>13</sup> Read more about the Brethren church and the Anabaptist movement from which it developed at the church history lessons on the class website referenced in footnote 8.

<sup>14</sup> Seibert, Eric, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*, (Fortress 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, at 105-106.

- The “narratives often reveal more about the Author’s timeframe than the stories.”<sup>16</sup> Seibert believes Joshua was written in the late 600’s BC, not in the real time of Joshua.
- “Old Testament narratives were more concerned with literary persuasion than with historical objectivity.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Seibert believes the authors “massaged” the facts to make their points, regardless of historical accuracy.
- “Old Testament narratives put words in people’s mouths.”<sup>18</sup> Seibert believes that when someone is said to have spoken something, the speech was not truly spoken. It was just a way of conveying a message important to the story.
- “Old Testament narratives view the world theologically.”<sup>19</sup> For this reason, the authors supposedly supply theological reasons for events regardless of whether the theological reason was valid. So when Scripture says, “God did or said xyz, one should not believe it as history, but merely a way to further a storyline.

I don’t subscribe to this view. While my objections are many, I will list only three, starting with the weakest and working to the strongest concerns:

- Seibert reminds me of many of my friends who went to graduate school and were taught this approach, but never spent the time trying to examine it on its own merits, opting instead to follow it as the popular notion. Now this is not a valid reason for my rejection of his opinions, but merely an observation of what might be true.<sup>20</sup> Suffice it to say it makes me suspicious and a more careful reader of how he justifies his conclusions.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, at 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, at 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> A proper examination would begin by identifying multiple extra-biblical examples of this narrative type. This identification should show the types to proceed from the same culture in the same time range for similar reasons. Then taking those examples, study to find the characteristics that both show it to be such “ancient historiography” and show how to make the determination. Seibert does reference Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet, most scholars recognize the ancients always understood those works as a fictional storyline (actually they were Greek poems!). This is true even though the *Iliad* used the background of the war with Troy as its basic storyline. Importantly, not even Seibert argues that the poems are cultural equivalents to the Hebrew narrative histories.

- Seibert does a thoroughly inadequate job of arguing that the accounts could not be historical in an accurate sense. A primary example is the two-page treatment of why the Joshua events are impossible according to the “archaeological evidence.” For example, referencing Jericho, Seibert fails to fairly parse through the evidence for truth in the Biblical narrative. Instead, Seibert merely quotes the cynics Israel Finkelstein and Silberman’s conclusion that Jericho was unoccupied at the time of the invasion of Canaan.<sup>21</sup>
- Most importantly, this approach by Seibert removes any historical validity from most of the Bible, save perhaps only that authenticated by extra-biblical evidence. Seibert wants the readers to embrace a “Christocentric Hermeneutic” by which he means, believe and understand that God is as revealed by Jesus. The problem here is that many will say that the New Testament narratives are “ancient historiography,” just as Seibert thinks of the Old Testament. At what point does one decide that history truly took place? Seibert tries to get there by urging his students to be “discerning readers,” but in my opinion, he fails to give real objective ways to decide what he believes is real (what Jesus said) versus what he believes was pushing an agenda (the Joshua narratives for example).

In conclusion, the modern scholar Seibert, and others in his school of thought, join the ancients in trying to disassociate God from the behavior ascribed to him in the Old Testament.

In contrast to these “disassociation approaches,” are approaches that seek to accept God’s behavior as set forth in the difficult passages:

- **God is complex and at times, abusive.**

Rabbi David Blumenthal, a professor of Judaic studies at Emory University, authored a book entitled, *Facing the Abusive God: A Theology of Protest*.<sup>22</sup> In the book, Blumenthal tries to understand how God could allow such travesties as the holocaust or the sexual abuse of a child. His conclusion is that sometimes God is abusive. Blumenthal writes,

*God is abusive, but not always.* God, as portrayed in our holy sources and as experienced by humans throughout the ages, acts, from time to

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, at 101-102.

<sup>22</sup> Blumenthal, David, *Facing the Abusive God: A Theology of Protest*, (Westminster/John Knox 1993).

time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term “abusive.” In this mode, God allows the innocent to suffer greatly. In this mode, God “caused” the holocaust, or allowed it to happen (emphasis in original).<sup>23</sup>

Having set this out, Blumenthal then chides God adding,

*Abusive behavior is abusive; it is inexcusable, in all circumstances* (emphasis in original).<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, in an earlier chapter where Blumenthal sets out six personal attributes of God, his list includes as number three, “*God is powerful but not perfect.*”<sup>25</sup>

Blumenthal has no trouble understanding or accepting the Old Testament passages that seem to disturb many in what they might indicate about God. For Blumenthal, they accurately reflect the idea that God is not perfect, has a temper, and sometimes does very abusive and inexcusable things.

This idea certainly runs counter to the idea contained in both the Old and New Testament that God is in fact perfect. Deuteronomy 32:4 reads,

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

Similarly, 2 Samuel 22:31 (and Psalm 18:30) reads,

This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

Jesus echoed this same conviction when he urged his disciples to seek perfection as their God and Heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48).

While one sympathizes with those who have endured the worst pains and travails, and while nothing can equal the pain of what transpired in the holocaust, save maybe those children who endure sexual abuse, it does not seem to resolve the issue of these passages in a way that is consistent with other teachings of Scripture.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* at 246.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* at 248.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* at 16.

- **God has divine immunity.**

In 2003, Zondervan published a book as part of their “Counterpart Series” that featured four different theologians advancing four different views on the issue of “God and Canaanite Genocide.”<sup>26</sup> One of the theologians is Professor Daniel Gard who teaches theology at Concordia Theological Seminary. Gard does a good job describing the “Divine Immunity” position:

Nothing evil can be attributed to God because God is in his very essence good... What appears to the human mind as “evil” acts of God are in fact not “evil” acts at all since they come from the Lord himself. There simply comes a point in which human reason must bow to the divine and recognize that his ways are truly not ours and his thoughts are truly above our own (cf. Isa. 55:8-9).<sup>27</sup>

This view accepts the actions of God but does not seek to judge them or hold them in any negative light. By definition, God’s actions are termed both right and righteous. His actions are simply accepted. A major criticism levied against this approach is that it “discourages certain kinds of questions and restricts honest inquiry about the character of God...[It] leaves little room for vigorous engagement with questions of divine justice and fairness.”<sup>28</sup>

- **God had just causes for his actions.**

Walter Kaiser joined with four other authors in compiling a book entitled, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*.<sup>29</sup> In the book, Kaiser addresses the questions of why God said, “Completely Destroy Them!”<sup>30</sup> Kaiser asserts that Scripture provides the reason, at least partially, for God’s actions:

God dedicated these things or persons to destruction because they violently and steadfastly impeded or opposed his work over a long period of time.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cowles, C. S., et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Zondervan 2003).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* at 55.

<sup>28</sup> Seibert at 73.

<sup>29</sup> Kaiser, Walter, et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, (IVP Academic 1996).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, at 206-207.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* at 206.

Kaiser points out the Genesis 15:13-16 passage where God says he will wait to lead the Israelites from Egypt until “the iniquity of the Amorites” is “complete.” Similarly, Kaiser points to Deuteronomy 9:5,

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

For Kaiser, the actions of God are consistent with the motive of cutting off a gangrenous limb:

This is not doing evil that good may come; it is removing the cancer that could infect all of society and eventually destroy the remaining good.<sup>32</sup>

While the explanations given by Kaiser resonate with other passages of Scripture, his explanation fails to consider (or at least fails to address) the instructed slaughter of infants and young children.

- **God’s actions were for the greater good.**

When Jesus was asked why Moses allowed divorce, if indeed divorce was not within God’s intention for marriage, Jesus responded,

Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce, but from the beginning it was not so (Mt. 19:8).

The concept Jesus conveyed was that God was, in a sense, making the best of a bad situation. Things were not going to be handled in the perfect way God would order, and so God set in place a procedure to minimize the harm from the sin.

In a similar manner, some understand the actions of God in destroying the Canaanites (and others) as something that, while not the best course, was the best course *under the circumstances*. An example of this reasoning is found in the writings of Gleason Archer, professor of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Archer writes that:

The baneful infection of degenerate idolatry and moral depravity had to be removed before Israel could safely settle down in these regions and set up a monotheistic, law-governed commonwealth as a testimony for the one true God. Much as we regret the terrible loss of life, we must

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* at 207.

remember that far greater mischief would have resulted if they had been permitted to live on in the midst of the Hebrew nation.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, as bad as it was, it could have been worse! Archer's analysis has some scriptural support from passages like Deuteronomy 20:16-18,

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction...that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.

The difficulty in Archer's approach, like the "just cause" approach of Kaiser, is that it fails to address the order to kill infants. Is one to believe that the one-week old infant growing up in a monotheistic Israel would lead the Israelites astray after idols?

Terrence Fretheim, an Old Testament Professor at Luther Seminary, takes a similar approach but with a different "greater good." Fretheim argues that even in violence, God is seeking to accomplish loving purposes. Writing in part in response to the violence of 9/11, and the assertion by perpetrators that God religiously justified it as a holy war, Fretheim distinguished God's actions of war and killing in the Old Testament:

God's *uses* of violence—and that phrasing is important—are associated with two basic purposes: judgment and salvation...God's use of violence, inevitable in a violent world, is intended to subvert human violence in order to bring creation along to a point where violence is no more.<sup>34</sup>

So, Fretheim argues that God uses violence to push the world closer to no violence—paying an ugly price today to eliminate ugliness tomorrow.

Seibert challenges Fretheim's approach as one that allows the ends to justify the means.<sup>35</sup> God can do something wrong, he asserts, in order to accomplish something right. This is not a totally fair critique, however, for the argument of Fretheim is that something wrong will be done either way. God's actions are to prevent the greater wrong, not to use a wrong to make a right.

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<sup>33</sup> Archer, Gleason, *An Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, (Zondervan 1982) at 158.

<sup>34</sup> Fretheim, Terrence, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word & World*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2004) at 22-25.

<sup>35</sup> Seibert at 80.

- **God’s actions are a part of his progressive revelation.**

Progressive revelation refers to the idea that over time, God revealed more and more of his nature and purposes as the cultures and understandings of people were able to process the fuller revelation. In Christ, this doctrine teaches, the revelation of God is made complete. (“Whoever has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father” – Jn. 14:9).

Tremper Longman, Old Testament Professor at Westmont College, wrote one of the four views in the Zondervan Counterpoints series discussed earlier. In his chapter, Longman sets out what might be fairly construed as “progressive revelation applied to divine warfare.” Longman writes of “five phases of holy war in the Bible”:

Phase 1: God Fights the Flesh-and-Blood Enemies of Israel.<sup>36</sup>

This was the type of military battle described in Joshua.

Phase 2: God Fights Israel.<sup>37</sup>

Longman explains that as Israel learned to live under covenant with God, they learned that failure to abide within that covenant brought judgment upon them, just as they had been God’s tools to bring judgment upon other nations and peoples. An example from Joshua is given in the defeat of Israel at the hands of Ai after Israel failed to fully obey God in dedicating all treasure from Jericho to the LORD (Josh. 7).

Phase 3: God Will Come in the Future as Warrior.<sup>38</sup>

This is seen as the note on which the Old Testament ends—God will not allow his people to be eternally in bondage. “One day God will come again and free them from their oppression.”<sup>39</sup>

Phase 4: Jesus Christ Fights the Spiritual Powers and Authorities.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cowles at 174-175.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* at 178.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* at 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

As Jesus arrives, the revelation progresses and the war is no longer fought on a flesh-and-blood level. It is a war against powers and forces that are met without conventional weapons. Jesus gives sight to the blind, heals the lame, cures the leprosy, gives hearing to the deaf, raises the dead, and preaches good news to the poor (Mt. 11:4-6). The violence of phase four comes in the opposite manner than one might expect. God does not wage war with physical violence on others. Rather, others use physical violence on God, which is then received as a military victory over the dark powers and forces!

The crucifixion of Jesus indicates a transition away from old physical war against the enemies of God in favor of a higher victory—a spiritual victory. So, Jesus teaches people to win by losing, that the first will be last and the last first (Mt. 20:15-17). He tells Peter to put up his sword knowing he could call legions of angels should he choose a physical fight (Mt 26:52-54).

Paul takes this concept and gives it further explanations in Ephesians 6:12-18,

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times.

This approach places the later ideas of the New Testament not as a contrary revelation of God, but a further more progressive revelation.

#### Phase 5: The Final Battle.<sup>41</sup>

The state of things after the sacrifice of Christ is not the final stage of revelation of God as warrior. The book of Revelation teaches in very vivid language that Christ will come back as holy warrior and will finally right all wrongs, leading into the next age when the beast and false prophet are thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur while their army is killed with the sword proceeding from the mouth of Christ (Rev. 19:11-21). While the exact meaning of this vision is yet to be seen and understood, we do note that the New Testament teaches that the current state

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* at 182.

of battle between right and wrong, will one day find its culmination in right winning and wrong being destroyed.

The progressive revelation view seems to avoid the question of why an all-powerful God acts in an apparently immoral way. It seems to explain *what* he is doing, but not *why*.

Before leaving this section examining the potential solutions to this problem of God and his behavior, one more solution must be considered. This is an extreme solution, but one that many have adopted:

- **There is no God**

Some are so bothered by the various ideas of there being an all-powerful God in a world where evil is allowed, that their solution is simply to deny that God exists. One time when I was lecturing through this apparent contradiction in God, I spent the first lecture setting out the problem and cross-examining the various responses, much as I have above. Afterward, a very intelligent and well-educated ivy-league doctor, said to me, “You set out my arguments very well. This is why I do not believe in God.” For this gentleman, there can be no God in light of the evil seen in the world.

The man’s concerns are valid. If there is an all-powerful God, and if that God is good and loving, then why would he allow evil? Furthermore, why would he *author* or instruct people in evil at times? The conclusion this man had drawn was that no such God could exist.

I believe this atheistic argument gets cross-examined from a number of areas. Many of my responses to it are built into my further ideas below, but my cross-examination of such a conclusion is worth a few notes now.

The person who walks from a belief in God over the issue of evil, fails to recognize one of the most important proofs of God: the recognition of evil. Humanity is hard-wired to a basic morality. This isn’t something that we inherited from natural selection, or if it is, we must grant that it is entirely arbitrary. A common idea of evil may help perpetuate the species, but without a God or some objective standard of right or wrong, such views are ultimately arbitrary.

Yet humanity knows right and wrong, at least in some matters, isn’t arbitrary. The sexual exploitation of a child is wrong. We know it to the fiber of our being. Anyone guilty of doing such a thing is guilty of a heinous crime worthy of severe punishment. Such a person is not simply “leaving by a different, yet fully acceptable, moral code. Much more can be said about this, and is found in other writings of mine, but with this little precursor to the discussion below, I pause now

to summarize the argument against God for fraud, before then offering my response.

### **SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT**

These viewpoints examined above are some of those expressed by authors and theologians, both ancient and modern. These arguments are not the only ones, and others espouse these arguments differently. However, they serve to give a flavor of what others assess when reading these difficult texts and as such, give background ideas and pitfalls in any solution that either convicts God or gives God a pass.

Rather than simply adhere to any specific idea espoused thus far, I would suggest a different defense of God and his reputation on this important matter.

### **RESPONSIVE CONSIDERATIONS**

Note that this section is not entitled “Solution.” When someone is being tried for fraud, or most anything else, the presumption is that the individual is innocent until proven guilty. Arguably that means that the lawyer doesn’t have to offer any explanation or any evidence, but the lawyer needs simply raise a doubt about the assertions of the prosecution.

Practically speaking, however, the lawyer is better served if she or he offers an alternative set of circumstances, explanations for the evidence, or justification for the actions. This doesn’t mean solving each aspect of the prosecutor’s case, but it does mean offering rationale explanations that deny the conclusion drawn by the prosecutor.

In that vein, I offer “constructive considerations,” rather than simply “the answer.” My approach draws heavily from my life as a lawyer. Lawyers are taught to approach learning and educating through the “Socratic method.” Named after Plato’s teacher Socrates, this method is used in law school education. Most every class is taught not by lecture, but by questions. The professor calls upon the student and grills her or him to both educate and train the future lawyer. Then as trial lawyers, we live in courts built off the same tool in a drive for truth. Witnesses are put on the stand, and the truth is determined through a question and answer process.

The key for a lawyer (or law professor) is to *ask the right questions*. It is too common for someone to ask questions that make assumptions that cloud the answer. Recently, someone suggested a speech topic for an upcoming lecture:

"The Bible or the Enlightenment: Which is the source of American Religious Liberty?"

Now that may be a valid question, or it may not be. It assumes that the answer is either the Bible or the enlightenment. What if the truth is a combination of the two rather than one or the other? For that matter, what if the truth is that neither is the source?

I would suggest that a similar improper first question is often phrased on the issue of God being inconsistent on matters of kindness and love versus harsh meanness:

Why would a loving, moral God use evil or allow evil to occur?

This question assumes a definition of evil and, to some degree, a definition of love. For many, asking this improper question is the same as saying:

If I were God, I would not allow things I don't like to happen.

To fairly consider this subject, one must begin by asking fair questions! My defense of God on this matter attacks the question, setting forward four areas of examination of constructive ideas on the problem of a good God who wars on evil, and sometimes what seems innocuous and not worthy of the designation "evil."

***What is evil?***

This is a fundamental question that lies at the heart of the problem. How one answers this question can determine much of one's understanding of the problem of God's existence and God's justice.<sup>42</sup> This was the concern of the college students I discussed in the beginning of this chapter. For many, there can be no God in light of the evil we see.

My core question to anyone with this view is always the same: What is evil? Evil must be more than pain or harm. For a doctor causes pain when he removes an organ that has cancer. Is the doctor doing evil? Not by most people's definition. So, should one define evil as "doing harm when compared to the good that comes from the action?" In other words, if the doctor does a better good by his deed than the measurable pain or harm, the deed moves from vice to virtue? That seems inadequate too for perhaps the surgery by the doctor does not work, in spite of the doctor's best efforts. Should one then say that the doctor did evil?

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<sup>42</sup> The theological term "theodicy" is often used to speak of explaining God in light of the existence of evil. This term comes from two Greek words, *theos* meaning "God" and *dike* meaning "justice."

For some, the answer lies in one's motive. For some, evil is doing harm without a superimposing motive of a worthy purpose. Of course, the question then becomes one of, "What is a worthy purpose?"

Further on the issue of defining evil, should one give different definitions depending upon the *kind* of evil? Does one rightly say that there is a "moral evil" as opposed to an "evil behavior?"

As a framework for answering "What is evil?" I would suggest there are alternative perspectives. One is to view and define evil based upon my conscience and observation. If I feel abortion is evil, it is. If I feel abortion is not evil, then it is not. Evil becomes a subjective term. Evil becomes, like beauty, something in the eye of the beholder. Of course, the immediate problem here is the fluid nature of evil. What was evil last night may not be this morning. What is evil to one is not evil to another. Evil as a concept is difficult to maintain consistently when it is simply subject to the conscience of the individual.

A second idea is to take the moral consensus of a society and make it the definition of evil. So rather than simply rely on the individual's conscience, evil gets its definition from community conscience. What do "most people" agree is right and wrong? Again, however, this definition still produces a subjective and inadequate answer. Mere mention of Nazi Germany and the holocaust points to the core problem: If a society deems it moral and ethical to gather all Jews together for a final solution of extermination, does it make it right? Can the community conscience trump that of my own conscience?

A third idea is to make evil the core historical values that have led to the development of mankind, as it exists in the modern cultural world. Again, though, this is a subjective definition that lacks the ability to give an adequate working definition. It is like the old issue of seeing a glass half empty or half full. Does one view the tragedies of Darfur, of the holocaust, of the Bolshevik Revolution, of American slavery, etc., as acceptable moral good since they were part of the shaping that gave definition to humanity and culture as it exists today?<sup>43</sup>

All of these ideas given so far carry a common denominator: they draw their definition from humanity (individually or collectively). In that regard they all also fall short of providing a solid objective working definition for evil (or for good for that matter).

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<sup>43</sup> Some might respond, "No, history has shown these tragedies as against the flow of core values." Yet an argument can be made that the negative experiences helped shape and define the responses and, as such, were an integral good part of the historical development of core values. These arguments can push both ways in an exchange that could continue *ad infinitum*.

The theist has a different option for defining evil and good. The theist can look outside of humanity for the definition and offer a truly objective (from a human's perspective) definition. Evil and good can be defined by appealing to the moral nature of God. "Good" is then defined as the actions and values of God; "evil" is the antithesis of good. What God does is deemed "good" and that which is contrary to God's morality is "evil."

This is not a novel perspective developed conveniently for this class. This concept was in the teaching of Christ. When the rich ruler approached Christ and called him "good teacher," Christ underscored a theistic view of "good" asking,

Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone (Lk. 18:19).

Paul certainly seems to indicate the same objective idea of good. It is the most sensible understanding of his claim that no one does a good deed, "not even one" (Rom. 3:12).

This is not simply a New Testament concept. Isaiah 64:5 reads,

You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways.

This passage equates one who "works righteousness" to one who remembers God's "ways." Goodness or righteousness derives its meaning as the ways or morals of God. Isaiah then contrasts righteousness and God's ways in the next verse with those of man whose "righteous deeds are like a polluted garment."

If one defines good as characteristic of God and distinguishes/defines evil as that which is contrary to God and his morality, then how does one process that feeling in one's gut that God is doing something "wrong" when God orders the killing of every "man and woman, child and infant"? I suggest it goes back to humanity's constant struggle to make God into a human image rather than seeking to understand God for who he is in his revelation.

Consider this fundamental truth in this world: everything dies. It is the factual reality of life. The "right and wrong" issue is, who makes the decision of when someone (or something) dies? Is death only "fair" when it happens randomly? But how can anything be deemed "random" if there is an all-powerful and good God? So should a good God prevent all death? Should people be allowed to age past the 80's, 90's, 100's? If so, should a good God keep the aged in a state of perpetual youth? Should we have 150-year-old men slam-dunking basketball in the NBA? Quickly one sees this is not the world as it exists. This won't work with humanity's DNA. This isn't a real-world possibility, as the world currently exists.

Death is not a pleasant idea for most, and it is a painful emotional amputation for the loved ones who survive the death of someone dear. Some would argue that anytime a loved one dies, there is an evil. I know that as my dear grandmother of 92 lay dying, many of us were still praying for her to have a few more good years (or even months or days). It hurt for her to pass, even after 92 incredible years on earth.

But the decision of her death was not a human one. We did not decide to “put her down” as one might a sick pet. By our faith, we understood her death was under the mighty hand of a loving God.

But if instead, death is a moral issue, an issue of evil, then to some degree, the decision of death is God’s, not just randomness or acts of a person. This does give God the right to determine when one dies and, as long as it is God’s determination, by definition deem it moral and right.

Importantly, there are times where death (or any evil) is a direct result of human choice. One person can choose to shoot and kill another. One can choose to drive drunk and hurt others. One can make choices that directly impact others. This is a cause and effect world, and people make real choices that cause real results.

Importantly, while it happens under the eyes of an Almighty God, it cannot be called “good.” One can read of Jesus weeping over the death of his friend Lazarus in John 11:35, and one can realize that the deplorable results of sin in this world leave God outraged. But over all of this that happens, the important thing one must recognize is that definitions of evil and good must derive from a source. The best source for defining these terms isn’t one’s gut. It is God.

The importance of this is emphasized as one realizes that people are always stuck in a moment. Humanity doesn’t not share God’s eternal view. Somehow in the midst of eternity as well as the space and time of earth God makes choices on death, and there is a certain arrogance to suggest that one knows better than God on this matter.

This is what makes the issue of war perplexing to many people. At what point is it proper for man to wage war and, consequently, to make the decision of when some people (even “collateral damage civilians”) will die. Aquinas went to great lengths to set out the “just causes” necessary for a leader to declare war. His reasoning was a process that analyzed the values of God in such a way as to determine whether such a war was God’s will. In other words, before man should ever take a life, whether in war, in self-defense, or in capital punishment, the question involves determining the will of God in that situation. Death is God’s jurisdiction, not man’s.

This approach on the death issue allows one to accept that God had every right as well as his own reasons to order the deaths of Canaanites or anyone else in the Old Testament, the New Testament, or today. For God to move someone from earth's temporal moments into eternity is part of his work and plan and can be accepted as such.

But what do we do about the suffering that occurs short of death? How does this objective view of good and evil fit into the suffering of a defenseless child at the hands of a sexual predator?

This issue does not fall into our question on the table! This issue gets dealt with in a later question. This first question is simply, what is evil? People of faith should properly answer that evil is that which God would not do, as opposed to good, which is what God would do.<sup>44</sup> The chore, then, is to determine the will of God in situations and, in doing so, determine what is good.

At one's disposal on such determinations are the revelation of Holy Scripture, as well as prayer, godly counsel, and Spiritual insight. As Paul explained,

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the *will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect* (Rom. 12:2).

The greatest resource on determining good and evil is the life of Christ. For in Christ is seen God manifest and dwelling in the form of man. One can see God's interaction with people from all walks of life. One sees God teaching his followers what to say, what to do, and how to understand and relate to God. Jesus taught that when seeing him, one was seeing the Father (Jn. 14:8-11).

Now if I take this definition of evil further into my questions, I now ask, why there is evil in a world made by God?

### ***Why is there evil in the world?***

I carry forward into this question the definition of evil as "that which is contrary to the nature and morality of God." Therefore, I am asking this question in a very specific light. I want to consider why there exists in this space and time, anything

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<sup>44</sup> From a human definition of evil as that which we detest or find harmful, one can certainly find God doing "evil." God brings righteous judgment upon sin, including the punishment of death. That may not seem "good" or "right" but as God does it, it should be deemed righteous. Isaiah the prophet uses this sense of the word "evil" writing of God, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity ["evil"]" (Isa. 45:7). This calamity/evil is distinct from true moral evil. It is the just recompense for sin.

contrary to God's will and morality. As God is all-powerful, how can anything exist that is not aligned with him?

The orthodox biblical answer is that humanity lives in a "fallen world" in travail and groaning for redemption. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve provides the contrast between how God wills creation and how people live creation. God created and everything was good. Within his creation, however, were free willed beings that could choose to live within God's morality or not. They could choose God or choose rebellion – good or evil.

One finds here that while facing the intellectual struggle of evil's genesis, one runs straight into the paradox of free will in the midst of an omnipotent God! (As if the examination was not already daunting enough). However, the fact is that God has set the world up in a way where man can freely choose. Adam and Eve could choose to eat or not to eat. Jerusalem could choose to honor and follow God or not ("O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you would not!*" Mt. 23:37).

As already set out, God is a reality who has definite morality in his existence. As such, to the extent there is something that God is, there is also something that he is not. In moral terms, if there is something about God we define as good, there is that which he is not we can define as evil. In Biblical terms, God is "light" and in him is no darkness (I Jn 1:5). God is "truth" (Jn 14:1); and that which is averse to God has nothing to do with truth but inhabits lies (Jn 8:43-45). God is "just," and his ways are ways of "justice" (Dt. 32:4); injustice is the opposite of righteousness (Jer. 22:13). God is "life" (Jn 14:1); while that which is not of God (immorality/sin) brings death (Rom. 6:23).

So, God created a world with a humanity able to choose between God's ways and ungodliness – between good and evil. Man chose the evil, and just as evil is outside of God's essence, so evil leads to its own consequences which are outside of God's essence. Evil choices brought evil conditions into the world.

David Birnbaum commented on the choice of man in Eden:

Thus, when man chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, he chose to accept the entire set of dynamics of the Tree of Knowledge, and he turned his back on the entire set of dynamics of the Tree of Life. It was actually man who determined his own "expulsion" from the Garden of Eden's bliss. It was man seeking the destiny of the Tree of Knowledge with all that the choice implies.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Birnbaum, David, *God and Evil: A Unified Theodicy/Theology/Philosophy*, (Ktav 1989) at 87.

This is now the world into which everyone is born and in which everyone exists. This is a world made by God but altered and sculpted by rebellion to God and his character, a world imbued with those things outside God. Rather than a world of good, of light, of truth, of justice, or of life, there is a world of evil, darkness, untruth, injustice and death.

I should add that the choice of rebellion and evil was not simply that of Adam and Eve. It is also the choice of people today. Paul made clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23), but it goes deeper than that. Man can, and occasionally does, choose to do awful acts of evil. Hitler’s holocaust was a horribly evil act. Sexual abuse is a horrible evil. Emotional abuse can destroy much of a person. These are not “creations of God;” these are not the “will of God;” these are atrocities and acts against God’s will done by free choosing humans. These are acts the believer laments and fights against.

Now while man’s choosing evil changes man, it does not change God. God is still good, light, just, etc. How this good God fits into the evil in the world is the appropriate next question.

### ***Where is God in the midst of the evil in this world?***

The magnificence of God is his presence in this world and in its pain while also existing beyond this world and moment. As discussed in the prior chapter, in theological terms, God is both immanent (holding together all aspects of space and time) and transcendent (lying beyond our limits of space and time). In Bono-speak, God is both in the moment, but not ***stuck*** in the moment.<sup>46</sup>

The atheist abandons the quest of finding God in the midst of evil, believing that the two cannot co-exist. The theist finds God working in and even through the evil of this world. That does not confuse this issue with one of God being responsible for evil. One must keep those questions separate.

God works through evil and suffering to develop character. Paul found that, “insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” developed the character of Christ in him (2 Cor. 12:10). The author of Hebrews explained Christ was fulfilled in his humanity as he garnered the experiences and fruit of obedience in suffering (Heb. 2:10; 5:8-9). Peter emphasized the blessings on those who suffer (1 Pet. 3:14ff).

Paul saw God not only working in his own life through suffering, but also in the lives of others. Certainly, this is the example of the cross, where all humanity

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<sup>46</sup> “Bono-speak” in the sense that I co-opt the phrase, “stuck in a moment” from the U2 song bearing that name.

gains profit even as God/Christ suffered from the evil of injustice. Paul adds that it is his experience as well when he gladly suffers with Christ “for the sake of the elect” (2 Tim. 2:1-11). Paul thought it of supreme importance to share in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:8-11).<sup>47</sup> He even thanked God for his suffering that resulted in benefit to the church (Col. 1:24).

The Psalmist found affliction worked in his life to bring about obedience and growth:

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word (Ps. 119:67).

James wrote of the transformational power of suffering and trials,

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

One of the lessons of Job is that God is able to work through the suffering and tragedies both to grow the individual and to work out God’s plan in the lives of his people.<sup>48</sup>

It is apparent from our reading of Old Testament texts that God uses death, military conquest, and suffering as tools for recompensing sin. In Zechariah 13:8-9, the prophet writes the declaration of the LORD,

I will...refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, “They are my people”; and they will say, “The Lord is my God.”

The imagery of heating the metals to a melting point for purification applied not simply to the individual but to the community of God as well.

I should add that as anyone considers God’s role in the midst of evil, they are not able to do so fully. Understanding God fully is far beyond human comprehension. One can know him truly, but not fully. Stuck in the moment, Paul says everyone

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<sup>47</sup> Church history is replete with examples of God using the believer’s suffering and even the martyr’s death as a testimony to grow the church. The lawyer turned theologian Tertullian wrote that: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (*Apologeticus*, Chapter 50).

<sup>48</sup> More careful examination of Job and God’s seemingly passive approval of suffering will come in the upcoming classes on that book.

sees “in a mirror dimly” as opposed to eternity where believers shall see clearly (1 Cor. 13:11-13). Still, one can say with confidence that God, who knows when a sparrow falls, knows humanity’s moments and travails (Mt. 10:28-30). He promises that problems will never be more than one can handle with his aid (1 Cor. 10:12-13), and that through each issue, nothing will separate his followers from his love (Rom. 8:35-39).

One vivid location of God in this world of suffering is found in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Through the incarnation, God definitively entered into space and time in human form, subjecting himself to human suffering and evil. The famous question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” really finds expression in the experiences of Jesus. Orthodoxy teaches that Jesus alone is the one man who lived a perfect life (i.e., lived as God himself would live). Jesus had no sin that would incur death, no errors that needed refinement and sculpting. Jesus existed in the very form of God and emptied himself taking the form of a man to deliver mankind from the penalty incurred in Eden and through lives of sin. Jesus suffered at the hands of a just God because justice demands vengeance (or punishment if we’d rather be milder in language).

If one is to find God acting “unfairly,” punishing the innocent, and raining death on the **undeserving**, one finds it only once in history—in the life of Christ. The key to that, however, is that the punishment was voluntary. As John wrote, “God so loved the world, he sent... (Jn. 3:16). Or as Paul wrote, Jesus so loved the world; he came (Phil. 2:8-10)!

Here at the cross of Christ one can see God’s dynamic usage of the harms and evil from the sin of the world. Under his hands sin and suffering brings forth the fruit of forgiveness, his will for the ultimate good of mankind.

### ***What is the future of evil?***

The crucifixion and resurrection signals the end of evil. Evil and the curses of the fall do not gradually go away. They are not made better and better as time goes on. They do not one day cross the line of morality into the zone of “goodness.” They are destined for death, the right and just result of sin. That which is not of God, is not of life.

Paul wrote about the Ephesians being “dead” in their trespasses, not sick or gravely ill (Eph. 2:1-3). Jesus did not say that one needed to improve for eternity, but he used the term of needing a new birth (Jn. 3:1-8). In this sense Paul wrote of Christ as the new Adam, the firstborn of a new creation (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15:45ff).

Not just people, but creation itself groans for the release from the bondage of sin’s curse.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Rom. 8:20-22).

Revelation shows Christ coming forth in warrior form to put the final deathblow to the forces of sin and its curses. Consider Revelation 19:11-16,

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

The promise of a new age where “the dwelling place of God is with man” and where “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3-4) is a place where,

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:5).

In that coming age, the Creator God will make “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). It is this assurance that brings Scripture to a close with John’s plea, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20).

## CONCLUSION

I do not suggest that all answers to all probing questions are or could be in this chapter. I am presenting core ideas for discussion and consideration, finding in them the roots that stop one from concluding that God is guilty of fraud for the actions that he instructs or that occur “under his watch.”

When considering the actions of God as set out in difficult Scriptures, one of the hardest things is being stuck in a moment and contemplating the deeds of an

eternal God. In doing so one must never lose sight that the struggle against evil and suffering is God's struggle as well. The story of the cross is the story of an historical intervention of God directly into human history to bring victory over the suffering and evil of man's sin.

The struggle for good is God's struggle for good. When one gives food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, when one tends to the sick, one is doing the work of God (Mt. 25:39-40).