Defending God

Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil

JAMES L. CRENSHAW

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2005

Contents

Introduction, 3

PART I. Spreading the Blame Around

1. The Atheistic Answer: Abandoning the Quest, 25
2. Alternative Gods: Falling Back on a Convenient Worldview, 45
3. A Demon at Work: Letting Benevolence Slip, 55

PART II. Redefining God

4. Limited Power and Knowledge: Accentuating Human Freedom, 75
5. Split Personality: Reconciling Justice with Mercy, 87
6. A Disciplinary Procedure: Stimulating Growth in Virtue, 99
7. Punishment for Sin: Blaming the Victim, 117

PART III. Shifting to the Human Scene

8. Suffering as Atonement: Making the Most of a Bad Thing, 135
9. Justice Deferred: Banking on Life beyond the Grave, 149

10. Mystery: Appealing to Human Ignorance, 165

11. Disinterested Righteousness: Questioning the Problem, 177

Conclusion, 191

Notes, 197

Select Bibliography, 251

Scripture Index, 265

Person Index, 271

Subject Index, 273

Introduction

How can you say that the glass is half full when I can clearly see that it is half empty?

—Popular saying

In Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, the generosity of the female shop owner threatens to impoverish her, necessitating a stern male presence to secure the tiny shop from bankruptcy. The woman's compassion toward needy customers—and greedy ones as well—eventually depletes the store's entire stock, whereas the man's severity puts the business back in the black. Readers do not have to endorse Brecht's identification of the qualities of justice and mercy as male and female, respectively, to appreciate his dramatization of the near impossibility of keeping them in harmonious relationship.

Every civilized society endeavors to honor these competing demands to treat individuals justly and to act mercifully toward those in need. And when this desideratum is projected on the heavens, as the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach insisted was true of religion, God (or the gods) is expected to present a perfect balance.[1] Yet each quality, by its very nature, violates the other. Strict justice requires that I get what I deserve, no more and no less. Mercy allows my just deserts to be set aside, my transgressions overlooked or forgiven. How can the deity perfectly embody both?

In the Bible the classic text that expresses the tension between

justice and mercy within God is Exod 34:6–7, which has the deity proclaim the various divine attributes to Moses:

> YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious,
> slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love
>   and faithfulness,
> keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
> forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin,
> yet by no means clearing the guilty,
> but visiting the iniquity of the parents
>   upon the children
>   and the children's children,
> to the third and fourth generation.[2]

By virtue of the initial position and the number of attributes related to compassion, the emphasis of this early confession seems to fall on mercy. One could argue, however, that the larger context and the lingering repercussions of the final attribute—an exacting punishment for every offense—shift the emphasis to the side of justice. The struggle to balance these qualities of justice and mercy in describing God's interaction with a covenanted people permeates much of the Bible—indeed, exposing a conflict within the soul of Israel. This book tells the story of that difficult struggle.

Opposing Views of Reality

We begin by considering two psalms that highlight the sharp differences in Israel's descriptions of the deity's conduct, differences that reflect the dissonance within the covenant people's understanding—and experience—of reality itself.

Divine Benevolence: Psalm 104

> Bless YHWH, O my soul.
>   YHWH my God, you are exceedingly great.
> You are clothed in honor and majesty.
> He is the one wrapping himself in light as a garment,
>   spreading out the heavens as a tent,
>   laying the beams of his chambers in the waters,
>   making clouds his chariot,

riding on the wings of the wind,
making the winds messengers,
fire and flame his ministers. (Ps 104:1–4)

Psalm 104 is a hymn of exuberant praise, a relative anomaly within the Psalter, where complaint rises to YHWH far more often than praise.[3] We see in this psalm a reflection of the author's deep embeddedness in the larger cultural environment, particularly Egyptian ways of thinking—again, a relative anomaly. The psalm shares with the Egyptian Hymn to the Aten[4] an exhilaration over the beauty of the universe and an appreciation for the order of nature that approaches Leibniz's frequently parodied formulation, "the best of all possible worlds."

The author of Psalm 104 looks beyond the tiny space occupied by humans. His[5] sweeping survey extends to all creatures and, more importantly, to their creator. Indeed, his sole point in mentioning a variety of animals and their thumb-endowed rival is to laud divine benevolence and wisdom. The graphic depiction of YHWH combines imagery from the worship of Baal, the Canaanite deity of the storm ("the rider of the clouds"),[6] and solar worship, widespread in the ancient Near East ("clothed in light," "messengers of fire").[7]

Readers who are familiar with ancient stories of creation from Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia may be surprised by the near absence in Psalm 104 of the myth of a cosmic battle between the creator and personified chaos.[8] Israelites were certainly aware of this way of describing the establishment of the viable order that is essential to human existence and a national state, as is abundantly evident in other biblical texts (Ps 89:10–11; Isa 25:6–8, 27:1, 45:5–7, 51:9–16; Job 38:8–11, 40:25–32). In any event, the transformation of the monster Leviathan into a playful creature of the sea (v 26) and the comment about restricting the ravenous appetite of the sea's waves (vv 6–9) fit smoothly into the mythic tradition. The muted language about the sea can easily be understood as a faint echo of the old story of the flood.

Just as the priestly story of creation in Gen 1:1–2:4a speaks of a creator's sense of satisfaction—indeed, pride—over the result of divine speech ("Let there be"), Ps 104:13 has the earth mirror that contentment. All creatures who live on this good earth enjoy its bounty: water for quenching thirst, food for assuaging hunger, places of refuge for resting securely. Although the psalmist acknowledges the predatory action of lions during the night, the consequence of this behavior is construed as divine gift. Birds sing in the branches of trees and build their nests there, wild goats leap on the sides of mountains, rabbits hide among the rocks, and all of these creatures measure their actions by the divine markers of time: sun and moon, day and night.

In two ways the psalm singles out human beings: first, to concede that they do not live by bread alone, if that is what the reference to happiness implies; second, to acknowledge that, unlike other animals, they must imitate YHWH in transforming a fixed state into something more beneficial—seed into grain and grain into bread.[9] In this brief vignette (vv 14–15), three foods are mentioned: wine for happiness, oil for a luminous countenance, and bread for strength.[10]

If the psalmist has stood open-mouthed while observing the ordered creation within easy reach, he seems almost overwhelmed at the thought of the marvelous array of underwater creatures far below passing ships. Small wonder that this section begins with an exclamation of praise for YHWH's wisdom (v 24), a point that eases somewhat the angst aroused by utter dependence on YHWH's sustaining care and the sober reminder of finitude in v 29: "Take back their breath and they die; to dust they return." The suggestion that the deity may hide his face and take back the breath of life elicits no utterance of protest. Death may come, but life persists as YHWH continues to renew creation.

Such a litany of praise has as its primary purpose to foster in YHWH a strong inclination to rejoice in a finely tuned universe. Here we come upon an audacious concept: *imitatio dei* has given rise to the idea of God's imitation of a human being, the psalmist functioning as an example for the deity. The summons to praise YHWH serves that end, for Israel's God was thought to be enthroned on praises (Ps 22:4). In this context of spontaneous praise, however, the first half of the final verse sounds a note of discord. Suddenly there arises an urgent request for the extirpation of the wicked, who naturally do not belong in the idyllic world just described. The poet refuses to speculate about the manner in which these evil ones have surfaced or to blame YHWH for their disturbing presence. True, they are an annoyance, but their activity in no way negates what has gone before. Their removal is conveniently placed in the capable hands of the creator. No more need be said, save a final "Bless YHWH, O my soul. Praise YHWH!"

A kindred feeling of adoration for the solar deity fills the Egyptian Hymn to the Aten:

> Splendid you rise in heaven's lightland,
> O living Aten, creator of life! . . .
> You fill every land with your beauty.
> You are beauteous, great, radiant,
> High over every land;
> Your rays embrace the lands . . .

Though one sees you, your strides are unseen . . .
Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland . . .
The entire land sets out to work,
All beasts browse on their herbs;
Trees, herbs are sprouting,
Birds fly from their nests . . .
Ships fare north, fare south as well,
Roads lie open when you rise;
The fish in the river dart before you,
Your rays are in the midst of the sea . . .
When the chick in the egg speaks in the shell
you give him breath within to sustain him . . .
O sole God beside whom there is none! . . .
All peoples . . . you supply their needs . . .
You set every man in his place,
You supply their needs;
Everyone has his food,
His lifetime is counted. . . .

Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*

Here we find an aesthetic appreciation for the beauty that unfolds everywhere as the sun emerges each morning but also a warm testimonial to an indwelling by the deity, a felt presence within the heart. The cognitive dimension is not excluded, for the poet looks upon the god as a mentor giving instruction in the divine ways. Nor is the mysterious dimension of reality overlooked, here illustrated by a fetus in the womb and a chick in its shell, each growing beyond human ken and in due time emerging from its place of gestation. The observant poet makes sociological and anthropological distinctions, noting that the creator has given life to different ethnic groups and languages.

The deep piety that infuses this Egyptian hymn is little diminished by the use to which it was originally put: royal worship. In time, the poem came to be recited by a courtier in the ruler's behalf, but even then the sentiment was probably widely felt among the pharaoh's subjects. Like Psalm 104, the Hymn to the Aten views the universe through a lens of sheer adoration. The creator has prepared a well-ordered place for all living creatures, one that makes life both possible and pleasant. In such a world, the proper human response is wonder and praise. Anything short of that marks one as an ingrate.

Divine Betrayal: Psalm 77

We turn now to another psalm, 77, and to one verse in particular:

> I think of God, and I moan;
> I meditate, and my spirit faints. (Ps 77:4)[11]

The contrast between this expression of intense agony at the very thought of God and Psalm 104's exuberant praise could hardly be sharper. What makes the difference? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the mournful sentiment in context.

The first thing to note is the topic being brought to God's attention in this prayerful lament: a perceived sense of divine betrayal. Echoes of Exod 34:6–7 resound in the second of four brief stanzas (vv 5–10).[12] The psalmist poses a fundamental question about YHWH's trustworthiness, which has come under close scrutiny because of present circumstances.

That interrogative stance is bold and unrelenting, as one query after another emphasizes the gaping disparity between divine promises and reality here and now. The psalmist inquires about the fragility of God's memory and the permanence of divine affections. Instead of experiencing God's steadfast love and compassion, he can think only of having been rejected and forgotten. More importantly, he wonders how long this rejection will last. A single conclusion presses itself on the poet: "And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed' " (v 11).

Deep reflection on the divine attributes has brought nothing but distress in this instance. Cognitive dissonance has suddenly arisen in the absence of convincing proof that a cherished creed corresponds to reality. The psalmist feels trapped, caught in the hiatus between times of old and the immediate present. He cannot forget, something YHWH appears ready to do. Worse still, the troubled poet believes that God prevents sleep, permanently propping his eyelids open (v 5). Counting sheep will bring no rest for this troubled soul.

Such a radical change in the deity would elicit little surprise if the poet had betrayed YHWH, but this has not happened. His prayer is pure or, at the very least, has been carefully examined. Moreover, that prayer is both sincere and constant, according to his testimony in the first stanza (vv 2–4). The syntax suggests something approaching inarticulate groaning, a true match for the content. If praying without ceasing counts in the heavenly domain, the psalmist has earned a positive hearing. Still, no comfort arrives for the dejected worshiper.

The poet has left no clues that would assist in solving the mystery that

triggered his distress. Had he done so, the usefulness of the psalm in public worship would have been seriously impaired. Its present form invites other Israelites to join in the prayer for relief regardless of the specific occasion for religious doubt. The possibilities are limitless: sickness, drought, invasion by enemies, humiliation, bereavement, and so on—anything that renders an individual vulnerable. The poet, in his precarious situation, believed that God would bring comfort as promised in revered tradition. But instead of the expected comfort, more grief has arrived, and the injustice of his suffering has issued in a variant of the most poignant cry of all: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Sadly, the psalmist is bathed in neither justice nor mercy.

Like virtually all laments in the book of Psalms, this one does not end on such a dismal note. Somehow the psalmist climbs out of the pit and thanks God for delivering him from Sheol's clutches. The third stanza (vv 11–16) reflects on YHWH's wonders, echoing the appellative used by the mysterious angel when appearing to Samson's mother and father (Judg 13:18).[13] This epithet, "one who does wonders," becomes a fixture in hymnic praise of YHWH. Stanza four (vv 17–21) combines the myth of the conflict between a creator deity and chaos with the story of the exodus, which was also furnished with elaborate mythic features. A single statement stands out—"yet your footprints were unseen" (v 20b)—recalling an observation in the Hymn to the Aten that the solar deity's strides were invisible to the naked eye.[14]

The structure of this psalm—two stanzas that describe the poet's agony followed by two stanzas that extol YHWH for gracious activity in history and in nature—accentuates its complex narrative style.[15] The initial stanza consists entirely of a self-referential account; this reporting of the poet's deepest feelings continues in stanza 2 except for the introductory accusation hurled at God ("You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak," v 5). Direct address returns in the last two stanzas, which weave together narrative and prayer, third person and second, resulting in an intricate verbal tapestry that traces the contours of the psalmist's soul.[16]

The hymnic resolution of the poet's disquiet is not without ambiguity. First, the appeal to YHWH's wondrous feats succeeds only by comparison with alternative gods, who, although unmentioned, lurk in the shadows. In contrast to them, YHWH works wonders; the signal event, the freeing of slaves from bondage in Egypt, attests to the deity's greatness and holiness.[17] Second, the majestic display of meteorological might seems remote from what is required at the moment: comfort in the form of fidelity to creedal assurances. The final verse, which refers to YHWH's leadership of a flock, assisted by Moses and

Aaron, is often thought to be a later addition to provide this need.[18] The verse occupies a wholly different semantic realm than the description of storms and earthquakes that precedes.[19]

Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof,* the psalmist has difficulty comprehending God's conduct but goes directly to the source of the problem, speaking *to* the troubler of Israel, not just about him. The biblical poet is caught in the tension that arises from deferred justice. His pain is exacerbated by memory, which must struggle to come to grips with events that have become inflated through repeated telling. His experience resembles that of Gideon, the warrior-judge, who exclaims when greeted by an angel with the assurance that YHWH is with him: "But sir, if YHWH is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not YHWH bring us up from Egypt?' But now YHWH has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian" (Judg 6:13).

Ceremonial celebrations of a deity's uniqueness and mighty acts function like a two-edged sword, cutting both ways. People who have experienced what they understand to be a miracle naturally tell that story, which takes on larger dimensions with each telling. In this way they demonstrate true devotion; they cannot be faulted, for love often exaggerates, and through the eyes of love, the statement may even be perceived as true. When caught up in rhetorical flourish, prophets such as the great exilic poet who composed Isaiah 40–55 often make extreme promises that cannot possibly accord with reality: "I will open streams on the hillside and fountains in the middle of valleys; I will transform the desert into ponds, the parched land into springs" (Isa 41:18). When such expectations are taken with a degree of literalness, the resulting anguish is neither surprising nor easily expunged.[20]

The psalmist has given intellectual assent to the divine attributes as heralded in Exod 34:6–7. Now his world has begun to founder because present circumstances belie such a description of the one at the helm. Frantically, the poet begins to search—the text does not specify the object of this investigation—and he goes directly to the vocabulary of compassion. Instead of loving-kindness, favor, grace extending for generations, he contemplates being spurned by YHWH, who has closed the portals of blessing.

At issue here is change. God has shown a different face from that lovingly painted in the old creed. The benevolent smile, dominant in that portrait, has been replaced by a forbidding frown. This is the age-old dilemma. What have I done to deserve such harsh treatment? The psalmist wastes little time on such a self-centered response.[21] Instead, he proceeds to the problem without delay. God has changed for some unknown reason. That much is certain. What is not known concerns him most. How long will this new countenance prevail?

The poignancy of the psalm is deepened by contrasting emotions: voiced complaints and inarticulate moans, sleepless agitation and anguished silence, accusatory questions and self-reproach. Such display of human emotion fails to move the deity to pity. God remains in hiding,[22] even when the poet reaffirms traditional belief. In light of the penetrating questions about YHWH's constancy, one wonders how much comfort can be found in singing hymns that either contradict reality or have little if any relevance to the problem that is bringing so much pain.

Modern readers can readily sympathize with the psalmist, for religious people place considerable value on stability. They cherish traditions, which link the past with the present—and, they fervently hope, the future. Change, in any form, is purchased at a high price. Yet however disconcerting change in liturgy or praxis in general may be, theological innovation is even more vexing, as we saw with the furor over the death of God in the 1960s. The modern controversies over issues such as historical criticism and creationism suggest that believers across the millennia, when faced with a perceived threat to cherished tenets, are much the same. The psalmist has committed himself to tradition as passed along by those he trusts. Now he discovers the inadequacy of the teaching that has shaped his view of YHWH. He can either reject the tradition or reaffirm it in the face of all available evidence. He chooses the latter.

Perhaps an analogy with twentieth-century theology will enable modern readers to grasp the depth of the poet's consternation. During the nineteenth century and the first decade and a half of the twentieth, three fundamental assumptions came to define the religious scene in Germany and, through the influence of German theologians, the United States. The first assumption, belief in progress, arose from discoveries in science, geology, and anthropology, all of which seemed to suggest that European society was advancing toward establishing God's kingdom on earth. The second assumption, optimism, joined forces with this philosophy of history that celebrated human intellectual and moral achievement, seemingly so obvious when Europe was compared with "primitive" societies. The third assumption, continuity, elevated human beings to a position just below God, with whom they managed direct contact through music, art, and poetry. This classic liberalism came crashing down as a result of two world wars and the Holocaust,[23] leaving a void that was soon filled by two opposing views: a reaffirmation of evangelical themes that came to be known as neo-orthodoxy and the rise of militant atheism, at least in language.

The collapse of worldviews produces a crisis of confidence,[24] placing enormous strain on the sustaining power of memory. How can memory continue to nurture the faith and praxis of a religious community when the things that

replenish it cease? Like a well that runs dry when the water table falls, memory no longer sustains when its connection with truth—which alone can nurture it—fails.

In certain circumstances, memory actually acts in a negative manner to exacerbate inner turmoil. The psalmist's perplexity increases precisely because he recalls former days when God's smile brought peace. A vivid recollection of a harmonious relationship with YHWH forces the psalmist to consider a radically new understanding of the divine character, an understanding that entails an element of betrayal.[25]

What intrigues me most about this psalm is the thought that meditating on God can cause extreme anguish, like the dark night of the soul experienced by St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics. Many modern readers share this anguish as a result of zealots' egregious conduct but, regrettably, do not share the mystics' deep trust in God's benevolence. For good reason, a lively debate rages on the subject of religion's inherent worth: has religion done more harm to the human race than good? Almost everyone can cite a litany of woes inflicted on innocents by religious zealots, agreeing with Blaise Pascal that "men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as they do from religious conviction." This excess arises, of course, from the belief that the conduct is pleasing to God. Christianity's hands have been bloodied through the centuries by the "holy" oppression of witches, Jews, gays, heretics, and victims of religious wars. Other religions have their own list of shames—which are better left to their consciences.

It stands to reason that evildoers would extract precious little comfort from thinking about God, for after all they persist in flouting directives for living that entail both gratitude and compassion. They might be expected to laugh in the face of an irrelevant concept or to scorn the prospect of judgment if they even took the time to nod toward a deity. Similarly, atheists would hardly experience chagrin when letting the mind entertain thoughts about a nonbeing, except possibly to become angry over human stupidity, as they might consider theism to be an example. This psalm deals with neither evildoers nor atheists, however. Instead, it treats the innermost reasoning of a person who claims to love YHWH passionately but thinks of that ardor as unreciprocated.[26] This unexpected turn is what makes Psalm 77 so troubling.

A Hermeneutical Dilemma

What contributes to the way an individual looks at the world? Confucius was not far off in locating the answer within the sensory perception itself. Two people may observe the same objects but view them as entirely different, de-

pending on the experiences that have formed their individual outlooks on life. This is particularly apparent when dealing with abstractions like justice and mercy. As in the case of pain, levels of tolerance vary with respect to what may be considered an injustice. Moreover, differing levels of altruism predispose individuals to resist injustice or not and to blame others or self, even if that other is sublime. Dire circumstances at the present moment, therefore, do not always explain one's interpretation of reality. The sum total of past experience, hidden to all but the one involved, shapes what is imagined, spoken, and written.

This concession places readers squarely in a hermeneutical dilemma over which a bitter controversy swirls today: To what extent can one move from text to historical reconstruction?[27] I concur with those who see every text as a fictive construction, the product of imagination. The degree to which what is written corresponds to observable phenomena varies with each written work. Readers are seduced into the world of the imagination by the text's credibility. What takes place in the act of reading? Do we learn more about ourselves than the subject in the text? This fundamental question takes on added significance when we consider rhetorical devices like irony and fantasy. Evolving reading strategies that take cognizance of a given text's polyvalence, its multiple meanings, show much promise, although no single one currently enjoys wide favor. The interpretive approach in the present volume relies heavily on "close reading"[28] but incorporates features of newer forms of literary theory as well.

The preceding interpretation of these two psalms is the result of straight reading, a voluntary suspension of disbelief. This approach may be the most natural, but if we ask questions different from those posed thus far, a more disturbing picture emerges. Less generous readers—or less gullible ones—may be inclined to suspect the poets of manipulation, originally of the deity, but eventually of the human audience as well. The author of Psalm 104 may have been creating a fantasy world, seeking to bolster trust when societal chaos threatened the status quo that had brought him both prestige and wealth. Viewed suspiciously, the composer of Psalm 77 may have been a rogue, presenting an innocent demeanor in an attempt to use the deity for personal gain. By shifting responsibility for the failed relationship from himself to YHWH, this poet sought to avoid popular scorn. Such readings, which imply irony at the very least, and fantasy as well, rely on utilitarian assumptions about the texts.

According to this latter approach to the psalms, the high point of Psalm 104, the hymn about the orderly universe, comes when the presence of the wicked makes a mockery of everything that has gone before. The astute reader

knows that evildoers wreak such havoc as to negate all the benefits that accrue from a finely tuned universe. The psalm derives its power from silence and understatement; the wicked make such a clamor that nothing more need be said, particularly when an allusion to death hovers in the immediate background. Similarly, Psalm 77 reaches its height of irony when extolling an inactive deity as one who works wonders and conceding that no one can discern any trace of God's presence during the mythic battle with the seas. Readers who have never known a providential deity—a performer of mighty deeds in their behalf—may find the two hymnic fragments wholly unrealistic, just as those beset on every side by rapacious villains may consider the sunny portrait of divinely instituted harmony an insult to their intelligence.

In this latter reading, the psalmist who complains because the familiar patron deity has suddenly presented a hostile or an indifferent face is guilty of a kind of entitlement thinking. He reasons that virtue on his part entitles him to special treatment from the deity, who has become indebted to the worshiper. The rule of justice, he thinks, requires YHWH to reward a life of morality. Each psalmist considers the deity derelict in administering justice, for the wicked thrive in both environments, ordered and chaotic.

On either reading of the two psalms, a concern for divine justice looms large, as does a longing for the deity to show mercy to the downtrodden. Basking in an extraordinary display of divine benevolence, the initial psalmist invokes God to add a healthy dose of justice for evildoers—or, beset by the wicked, he ridicules the Pollyannas of his day who choose not to see rampant wrongdoing. The author of the second psalm appeals to a pure heart as the basis for YHWH's coming in justice, or he seeks to conceal his own duplicity while praising the deity for manifold deliverances, all the while hoping to benefit from God's mercy.

The qualities of justice and mercy run through the Bible like a red thread. They are intricately woven into the various literary forms that enliven its pages from beginning to end. Because of their significance, they have been attributed to the Israelite God—with painful consequences. Indeed, the unanticipated results of attempting to define the deity with abstract qualities continue to this day.

The Problem

The struggle to comprehend how a supposedly benevolent deity could allow injustice to flourish on earth has taxed the human intellect at least since the beginning of recorded history.[29] The existence of a just and merciful deity

should, it seems, preclude evil and suffering, at least horrendous evil and innocent suffering.[30] Belief in God thus requires a convincing explanation for the problem of evil.

The effort to deny evil is just as futile as the effort to deny death.[31] Evil insists on making its unwelcome appearance, bringing in its wake suffering and death. These three basic entities—evil, suffering, and death—are tightly interwoven. The myth of the fall in Genesis 3 brings them into close connection,[32] as does human finitude itself, for creatures of flesh and blood are by nature subject to pain and eventual decay.

Evil is manifested in at least three forms: moral evil, natural evil, and religious evil. Perhaps the simplest definition of moral evil is "doing harm without a redeeming purpose." The qualification "without a redeeming purpose" is necessary, for it takes into consideration instances where temporary harm is done with the goal of bringing healing, as in surgical procedures. Whereas moral evil operates on the horizontal plane, involving fellow human beings, the other two forms of evil, natural and religious, play out in the vertical dimension. Natural evil consists of such things as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, plagues, and genetic flaws—phenomena attributable to nature or God alone. Although powerless to suppress this form of evil, humans can make it worse through foolish decisions (such as building tall structures over a seismic fault) or unwise choices (such as entering procreative relationships that will pass along genetic flaws).

The third form of evil, more difficult to recognize because of its beguiling features, involves the relationship between individuals and God. Religious evil resides in an inner disposition that has the capacity to pervert authentic response to the holy. Such perversion may take the form of idolatry, which implies worship directed away from God to a pale reflection of the Ultimate. Deceit and pride play major roles in this form of evil. Precisely because of its hidden character, it may do grievous injury to humans who are misled by its apparent goodness. Religious evil is all the more pernicious because it thrives in the human imagination. When unchecked, for whatever cause, it stretches a cloak of secrecy over the heavens, presuming indifference, remoteness, or blindness on the part of God.

Each manifestation of evil achieves its sharpest focus in suffering,[33] which, like prosperity, confronts individuals with a test. The experience of undeserved suffering shapes character—a point the Apostle Paul makes in Rom 5:3–5—disclosing hidden flaws in some and unknown strengths in a few. Its potential for good notwithstanding, such suffering presents a particular challenge for people who believe in a loving creator. Unjust suffering raises serious questions about a deity who is assumed to embody both justice and mercy.

There is another aspect of suffering, however, a divine aspect, that perhaps hints at an answer. The high view of God in Judaism and Christianity generates a daring concept: divine pathos.[34] The biblical God, capable of strong feelings, both positive and negative, understands human suffering firsthand, through his own experience. God himself suffers. Moreover, the deity's suffering is a direct by-product of divine choice—a decision to become involved in the human experiment. Thus suffering, while profoundly human, is rooted in divine mystery.

The Responses

In the ancient world, the mystery of suffering evoked various responses among those who struggled to understand it: suffering was viewed as retributive, disciplinary, revelational, probative, illusory, transitory, or simply incomprehensible.[35] The varying sources of these concepts—jurisprudence, the family, the cult, metallurgy—to mention only the first four, indicate the scope of the problem and the near universal awareness of the existential struggle. First, jurisprudence: the demand for punishment that matches the crime underlies the idea of retribution, a court-enforced measure-for-measure exaction from offenders. Second, the family: parental wielding of the cane, which associates suffering with unpleasant but necessary reinforcement for learning, provides the model for discipline. Third, the cult: religious ritual and liturgical narration draw their extraordinarily evocative power from the assumption that both language and action to some degree reveal the mystery of divine will. Fourth, metallurgy: ore that is extracted from the depths of the earth at enormous risk is subjected to a refining process that separates pure metal from worthless dross. The activity of these courageous risk takers furnishes a useful perspective on a very different cavern, one equally dark and cold, in contrast to the bright fires that are associated with the refining process itself.

The undeniable presence of evil in the world necessitates different responses, depending on whether the universe is considered to be an accident or the product of intentionality. Belief that the vast planetary expanse owes its origin to a creator, together with the conviction that this transcendent being is favorably disposed toward all of creation, becomes problematic when confronted with evil in its various forms. The question asked by Epicurus (c. 300 BCE) expresses the dilemma succinctly: "Whence evil—if there be a God?" A conception of this divine source of life as all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-benevolent encounters difficulty in the face of evil. The presence of evil appears to require dropping at least one of the three attributes. If God lacks full knowl-

edge, neither unlimited power nor a gracious disposition can exclude evil. Absent full power, neither good intentions nor complete knowledge can guarantee a perfect world. The lack of divine goodness opens the door for evil, rendering omniscience and omnipotence irrelevant to humans, except as oppressive awareness.[36]

The need to defend God's justice—that is, to produce a theodicy[37]—varies with individuals. For some, inequities suffered by the innocent constitute the sole justification for questioning the deity's performance at the helm. This variant of the battle cry raised by theologians of liberation, "preferential option for the poor,"[38] points to a generosity of spirit that transcends self-serving dispositions. The differing thresholds at which individuals perceive theodicy as a philosophical problem require an infinitely more complex explanation than is found in simply questioning the faith of those compelled to raise the issue. For some people, at least, theodicy constitutes "a weak link in the chain of a religious approach to life."[39]

Theodicy is also a hierarchical issue, its urgency mounting with each child's pain and reaching a climax with occurrences of mass atrocity. The Bible attends to both of these, although for obvious reasons it focuses on the collapse of the Davidic empire at the hands of Babylonian soldiers and the concomitant burning of the divine dwelling place in Jerusalem. For the earliest Christians, the question from Psalm 22 placed on Jesus' lips—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—expressed genuine puzzlement about the consequences of faithful obedience, the concern that gave rise to the psalm in the first place. The Apostle Paul shifted the emphasis by asking about the implications of election by God, of primary importance to a religious entity that considered itself newly chosen and grafted to the original vine, Israel. Confidence in a future resurrection empowered Paul to move beyond the psalmist's concern to ask about divine intention itself.

No single issue, however profound, exhausts the pressure points of theodicy in the Scriptures.[40] These explosive concerns include, among others, undeserved suffering, chaotic events that fail to demonstrate divine control, natural calamities, the prosperity of the wicked, anticipated eternal punishment, apparent divine malice, and intellectual bafflement. Such variety suggests that the issues are not peculiar to any single group within society. They command attention from prophet, priest, sage, apocalyptist, and ordinary citizen alike. They appear in prose and poetry, dialogue and monologue, prayer and harangue, oracle and inquiry.

The Approach

What is the best way to approach the study of biblical theodicies? Here, too, we face opposing viewpoints: diachronic and synchronic readings. The utility of tracing the development of different responses to perceived divine injustice has been brilliantly demonstrated, in the case of ancient Egyptian texts, by Antonio Loprieno. He notes a tendency "from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period to gradually shift the focus of theodicean discourse from the cosmic and political aspects of a dichotomy between good and evil ultimately rooted in the very act of divine creation to the problems of the individual experience of evil measured against the background of proper religious behaviour."[41] Such a diachronic approach requires reasonably accurate dating of texts, something lacking in biblical studies because of the accumulation of tradition over decades and centuries.

In studying biblical literature, the synchronic approach therefore seems more promising than its rival, inasmuch as it maps the many different responses to the problem of theodicy over the years, yet without hazarding an evolutionary timeline for their emergence. When the responses are set within a historical continuum with a calamity of almost cosmic proportions—the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE—as its center, we can conjecture the resulting cognitive dissonance among the populace and its leaders. Beyond that singular event, we can assume that the period of extreme persecution of the Judeans by Antiochus around 170 BCE and later Roman atrocities, especially in 70 CE, contributed to the emergence of new ways of dealing with theodicy. Attention to this historical reality will prevent an overemphasis on the individual, as opposed to sociological interests.

The typology that undergirds the following discussion is derived from biblical texts rather than speculative theology or philosophy, despite much overlap among the three areas of analysis. Literature on the problem of evil is extensive, but a comprehensive study of biblical theodicies has yet to appear. The recent monumental volume *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*[42] is a rich repository that in many specifics will supplement the contribution of this volume.

I propose to trace the biblical evidence of the search for a convincing response to the problem of evil and God's perceived injustice. I divide the exploration into three parts: "Spreading the Blame Around," "Redefining God," and "Shifting to the Human Scene." The unifying theme is the abiding tension between justice and mercy, evident in a biblical confession, Exod 34:6–7, and in a well-known midrash that has Abraham remark to God: "If you want a

world you will not have justice; if it is justice you want, then there will be no world."[43]

Chapter 1, "The Atheistic Answer: Abandoning the Quest," examines a little-used response in the biblical world with its host of deities. The closest approximation to atheism, which modern interpreters call "practical atheism," crops up in a few psalms and is attributed to the fool's unarticulated thoughts. Similar views, proclaimed in a mocking context, have come to rest most unexpectedly in Prov 30:1–14, but safely placed in the mouth of a foreigner.

Chapter 2, "Alternative Gods: Falling Back on a Convenient Worldview," focuses on a single psalm, the eighty-second. It looks at the polytheistic environment's influence on the biblical poet, who concedes the existence of rival deities to Israel's God but accuses them of being derelict in their responsibility to administer justice among nations other than Israel and Judah. Because of this failure, the deities are condemned by God to die, a sentence that carries a degree of irony, for God, too, has neglected his charge. Nevertheless, this psalm marks a truly revolutionary concept: the death of the gods.

Chapter 3, "A Demon at Work: Letting Benevolence Slip," already begins a redefinition of God but places the emphasis on a lesser subject, Satan. The late emergence of this figure, despite interesting antecedent role players, lifts the onus from God's shoulders only slightly, for God has ultimate control over Satan. Later fascination with this figure and its increasing power to introduce evil offers an important lens through which to view the postbiblical Jewish and early Christian temptation to find a convenient scapegoat to which to transfer guilt. A positive feature of such speculation about an inferior heavenly being is the anticipation of its subjection or eradication, which keeps eschatology at the forefront of discussion.

Chapter 4, "Limited Power and Knowledge: Accentuating Human Freedom," continues the redefinition of God, emphasizing now the deity's self-limitation for the sake of human freedom. This way of salvaging divine honor may come at the expense of men and women, who now bear ultimate responsibility for their own suffering, but at least it recognizes that they are not automatons. Possessing freedom of choice, they bring upon themselves a full range of evil consequences of wrongful decisions, which the deity neither knows in advance nor controls. The self-imposed circumscription of divine power and knowledge endows human beings with dignity.

Chapter 5, "Split Personality: Reconciling Justice with Mercy," concentrates on biblical texts in which the deity is described as conflicted precisely because of an inner desire to retain a balance between strict justice and gracious mercy. Because God takes evil seriously, wrath wells up and strains to be let loose on

the wicked, but, the prophet Ezekiel insists, YHWH does not desire the death of sinners. Torn between wrath and forgiveness, the deity seeks a means of allowing the latter to prevail.

Chapter 6, "A Disciplinary Procedure: Stimulating Growth in Virtue," attends to the significant body of sacred literature that depicts God as a parent or teacher who must apply the stick to the backs of lazy or unruly children for their own good. From the disciplinary perspective, a little adversity is a good thing because it brings strength of character. This approach to evil found a champion in Irenaeus, an early Christian theologian, and continues in modern process theology. Such soul-building with an eschatological component turns evil into a catalyst for something positive: growth in moral and spiritual discernment.

Chapter 7, "Punishment for Sin: Blaming the Victim," deals with the most widespread explanation for evil, one that when pressed too far brings extreme distress. The book of Job illustrates the downside of this approach to the problem: a tendency to consider anyone in dire straits a sinner on whom just punishment has fallen. Israelite historiography applies this principle to the twin histories of Israel and Judah, thereby imputing to divine intention a dubious account of sin and retribution.

Chapter 8, "Suffering as Atonement: Making the Most of a Bad Thing," shifts the attention from God to humans and suggests that the righteous might redeem evil by the supreme gift of love. The unjust death of a prophetic servant, reported in Isa 52:13–53:12, is construed as so pleasing to God that it actually results in forgiveness for others. The idea of substitution, borrowed from ritual, takes center stage in the Passion Narrative and in Pauline thought.

Chapter 9, "Justice Deferred: Banking on Life beyond the Grave," traces the second revolutionary concept in the Bible, the death of death—that is, belief in the resurrection of the righteous. From early beginnings in legend concerning Enoch and Elijah, who were "taken by God," to similar language about devout people like the unknown author of Psalm 73, this conviction that exceptionally good people belong with God was broadened, especially in the face of martyrdom brought on during the Maccabean revolt in 165 BCE. Confident that heaven awaits faithful servants of God, pious people put up with evil as a temporary burden.

Chapter 10, "Mystery: Appealing to Human Ignorance," follows the trail of biblical sentiment about the dark veil that conceals the divine realm from human scrutiny, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes. This response to evil has two sides: one with respect to the divine essence, another pertaining to the nature of the human intellect. From the divine side, God's hiddenness derives primarily from the intentional hiding of his face as a result of human dis-

obedience. This idea becomes especially prominent in intertestamental and rabbinic literature. From the human side, God cannot be fully known because the human mind can only know the observable world and from that, by analogy, make educated guesses about the divine realm.

Chapter 11, "Disinterested Righteousness: Questioning the Problem," asks whether the biblical search for a viable theodicy is a result of anthropocentricity. It does so from two directions. First, the possibility is raised that the biblical depiction of God as a literary construct shares the same limitations of human knowledge discussed in chapter 10. If so, then the postbiblical reification of this depiction has resulted in false attributions that represent human projections, with dreadful consequences. Second, the book of Job provides a clue for responding to what is perceived to be divine injustice. The author of this ancient text invites readers to serve God without thought of reward because God has already given them the greatest gift of all, life. For this reason, God owes them nothing, and everything comes as grace. In short, the conflict within God between justice and mercy has been resolved in favor of compassion, and the proper human response is disinterested righteousness in which, like God, we embody forgiveness.