Die Wurzel allen Übels

Vorstellungen über die Herkunft des Bösen
und Schlechten in der Philosophie und Religion
des 1.–4. Jahrhunderts.

Ratio Religionis Studien III

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The Origin and the Status of Evil According to the Hebrew Bible

Thomas Römer

"Evil" within a Polytheistic Worldview

Within the framework of a polytheistic worldview, where the fate of the universe hinges on the actions of a multitude of deities, evil and suffering can easily be attributed to malicious deities or demons. Man has to try to appease them, or he seeks to protect himself from them by means of talismans or other objects. In a polytheistic worldview, it is perfectly acceptable that the gods are unpredictable and that their actions towards humans can be calamitous, even if they are not guilty of any wrongdoing before the gods. In the different Mesopotamian versions of the Flood story, for instance, the Flood is brought about by the assembly of gods, either completely at random or for very minor reasons (noise caused by humans). Before the outbreak of the Flood, a "good" god appears, Ea/Enki, who is a friend of mankind and manages to save the human race. The reconciliation between the gods who had caused evil and man is reached through a sacrifice.

The biblical narration of the Flood (or rather, the biblical narrations, given that Gen 6–9 constitutes a compilation of two different versions) exhibits some interesting modifications.[1] To begin with, the authors give an ethical reason for the coming of the Flood: YHWH realizes that the "wickedness" (evil) of humankind had become "great on the earth" (כִּי רַבָּה רעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ, Gen 6:5), or that, according to the second version: "all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth" (Gen 6:12). The second

[1] See for instance E. Noort, The Stories of the Great Flood. Notes on Gen 6:5–9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East, in: F.G. Martinez/G.P. Luttikhuizen (edd.), Interpretations of the Flood, Leiden et al. 1998, 1–38; M. Witte, Die biblische Urgeschichte. Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1,1–11,26, BZAW 265, Berlin/New York 1998; T. Römer, Au commencement, la Mésopotamie?, Notre Histoire 192 (2001), 22–26.

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major modification consists in the fact that in the biblical versions, YHWH plays both roles: he is the God who decides to destroy humankind, and he is the God who helps Noah to save humankind from destruction, together with his family. These changes illustrate very well the problem of evil within a religious conception which, from the Persian period, has sought to affirm the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the biblical God, who is no longer only the God of Israel, but the (only) God of all humankind and who thus has to be interrelated somehow with evil.

Before we start looking at the different ways of dealing with the problem of evil within a "monotheistic" discourse, let us note that the Hebrew Bible has, in fact, conserved certain traces of the traditional polytheistic perspective. Some ancient psalms seem to affirm that YHWH has, indeed, no power over Sheol (hell).[2] In the Bible, the word *she'ol* is used as a proper name and might denote a deity or a personification of hell – similar to the term *môt*, which in Hebrew means "death" and in Ugarit designated the god who reigns over the kingdom of the dead.[3] The god of the kingdom of the dead was imagined to be powerful and terrifying and capable of preventing the other gods from interfering in his reign. In Ugarit, Baal, the weather god, is for some time defeated by Mot, the god of death, who puts him in his prison. Baal dies during the drought period and manages to free himself from Death (Mot) when the rains start to fall, thanks to the joint intervention of Anat, his mistress, and the goddess of the sun.[4] The author of Ps 30 draws on the idea that YHWH cannot intervene in the kingdom of the dead, begging him for recovery from an illness, and insisting that when dead, he will no longer be able to praise God. Here, the illness is perceived as an antechamber of death. The author of Ps 6 makes use of a similar argument: "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?" (Ps 6:5). Clearly, in these texts Sheol appears as an

[2] The etymology of the term "sheol" is unclear. It is attested for the first time outside the corpus of biblical writings, in a text from Elephantine dating from the 1st millennium BCE ("your bones will not go down to *she'ol*," CIS II, 145). It is often associated with the root *sha'al* (demand) and thought to be the place where one can interrogate the dead. Another thesis suggests that it carries a Semitic root designating the desert.

[3] G.D. EBERHARDT, Die Gottesferne der Unterwelt in der JHWH-Religion, in: A.-J. BERLEJUNG/B. JANOWSKI (edd.), Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt. Theologische, religionsgeschichtliche, archäologische und ikonographische Aspekte, Tübingen 2009, 373–395; J.-D. MACCHI, Perspectives sur l'au-delà et sur la mort dans le monde judéo-israélite ancien, BCPE(G) 62 (2010), 5–30.

[4] For an English translation see J.C. DE MOOR, An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit, Nisaba 16, Leiden et al. 1987, for an interpretation Idem., The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic myth of Ba'lu According to the Version of Ilimilku, AOAT 16, Kevelaer, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1971.

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autonomous reality that is not the creation of YHWH and stands beyond his powers. Isaiah 28[5] speaks of the members of the aristocracy of Jerusalem who are tempted to form an alliance with Sheol, a deity they consider to be more powerful than the God of Israel: "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us" (v. 15).

More recent texts, however, state that it is YHWH who makes people descend into the pit, but he also has the power to save them from it (1 Sam 2:6). Consequently, it is YHWH who sends illnesses and other kinds of suffering upon humankind. It is then necessary to explain the reasons for such evil.

The Theory of Retribution

The Book of Psalms opens with a description of the "ideal man": "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread … They are like trees planted by streams of water … In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away … for YHWH watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps 1:1,3,4,6). This description brings into play two sorts of human beings: those who succeed in everything because they comply with the divine will (Ps 1:2), and the "others," the sinners and the wicked. This opposition between the "righteous" and the "wicked" or evil (רְשָׁעִים) can be found in various psalms which insist that God is with the righteous while he punishes the wicked: "Do not let the slanderer be established in the land; let evil speedily hunt down the violent! … Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence" (Ps 140:12–14). This separation of human beings into two categories allows to deal rationally with evil, as it stems from man's irresponsible conduct. This concept has its roots in the wisdom tradition of Israel as it is reflected, above all, in the Book of Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs speaks in favor of a worldview and conviction that was shared by all wise men of the ancient Near East, namely that the universe is not the battlefield of hazard, but the creation of God, and that it is ruled by a cosmic order established by God.[6] The wise man is regarded as a responsible man whose conduct respects and reflects the order of the universe. Such conduct guarantees a life full of harmony and prosperity.

[5] T. Römer, Jugement et salut en Esaïe 28, Positions luthériennes 43 (1995), 55–62.

[6] H.H. Schmid, Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit, BZAW 101, Berlin 1966; A. de Pury, Sagesse et révélation dans l'Ancien Testament, RThPh 27 (1977), 1–50.

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Whoever acts unreasonably and irresponsibly, on the other hand, brings about an imbalance of the creational order and will have to face disastrous consequences. This cosmic order which the wise man tries to adapt himself to is called *ma'at* in Egypt, and it is comparable to the concept of *tsedeqah* in Israel. The *tsadik* is a person who wishes to live in harmony with the order of the world and of society, and with God who guarantees this order. The sapiential worldview is highly optimistic, as it is based on the idea that by observing and learning, the wise man can understand the rules of the universe.

Some texts pertaining to the wisdom tradition have generalized these observations to form a type of doctrine. In Proverbs 10–15, for instance, which undoubtedly constituted primitively an independent collection, this dogmatization is clearly reflected. In these chapters, we find several sentences which contrast two types of humans and the fate which awaits them: the wise are contrasted with the unreasonable, the righteous with the wicked. Thus, a clear dualism is developed. God gives happiness and a good life to the righteous, while the wicked will have to face misfortune and suffering. The dogma of retribution grew so strong that some did not hesitate to re-write history. According to the Book of Kings, Manasseh was the worst of all monarchs (2 Kgs 21:2–9) who ruled over Judah, and his reign was the longest of all, lasting 55 years (2 Kgs 21:1). To the author of the book of Chronicles, this idea seems to have been unbearable, as Manasseh should have been punished by God for all his evil actions. In order to explain the 55 years of his reign, the author tells us that, when he first came to power, Manasseh converted to YHWH, and that because of this conversion God prolonged his reign (2 Chr 33:11–13). For the author of Chronicles, this explanation must have been absolutely necessary for the understanding of Manasseh's long reign, because in his worldview, any king who could reign for so long had to belong to the side of the "righteous".

The idea of retribution seems to make God and the world comprehensible. This concept is by no means limited to the Old Testament period, but it is clearly reflected in the New Testament as well. According to the gospel of John, the disciples ask Jesus, when seeing a blind man, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

Nevertheless, the two concepts of the origin of evil that we have mentioned so far (caused by hostile gods; punishment for wrong behavior) both have their limits. Particularly from the 6th century BCE, the different political and economical upheavals, which hit Judah, provoked a new kind of reflection on evil, which can be observed in numerous texts stemming from the Persian era. This is true particularly in contexts where the God of Israel is characterized as being the only God, creator of heaven and earth.

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Can the only, almighty God be the origin of evil? And if so, how can he be the God who wants well-being and prosperity for all of his creation? Or possibly God did not want evil, but in that case, how can he be the sovereign, almighty God?

The Priestly Attitude to the Question of Evil

The first chapter of the Bible contains a creation story which was written by a group of priests (P) at the beginning of the Persian era (late 6th/early 5th centuries BCE): "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void (*tohu wa bohu*) and darkness covered the face of the deep (*tehom*) …" (Gen 1:1–2). This text does not narrate a *creatio ex nihilo*, as it can later be found in Judaism and Christianity. Quite the contrary, it emphasizes the fact that God did not create the darkness, symbol of evil, nor the *tehom*, i.e., the waters symbolizing chaos and darkness (that may allude to the sea serpent Tiamat who Marduk, according to the epic *Enuma Elish*, has to kill before creating the world and humankind). In Genesis 1, *elohim* integrates these things in his creation by transforming them (pushing back the waters and brightening up the darkness), but darkness and chaos are not "good" (on the first day of creation, only the light is characterized as "good"; Gen 1:4).[7] The first chapter of Genesis thus shows a tendency to separate evil from the creation of God. This idea is intensified in the priestly version of the Flood story. P effectively distinguishes between an ideal creation (which is "very good", as God's final appreciation in Gen 1:31 confirms) and the present, post-Flood creation which in some way constitutes a "compromise", taking into account the violence of man. According to Genesis 1, man and the animals are created as vegetarians (1:29–30), while in the new order God allows the consumption of animal meat and thus installs the legitimization of a sacrificial cult (9:3–4). At the end of the Flood story, we find a twofold reflection on evil. Firstly, God states that "the inclination of the human heart is evil (*ra'*) from youth" (8:21). This remark clearly raises the question of whether and to what extent man is responsible for evil. According to biblical anthropology, man is created "free" and thus has the possibility to turn to evil; hence the exhortation at the end of the Pentateuch (in Deut 30:15ff.) to choose the good and life and not the evil and death.

[7] A. DE PURY, Le chant de la creation. L'homme et l'univers selon le récit de Genèse 1, Aubonne 1986.

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After the Flood, YHWH establishes a covenant with humanity and the whole of creation, symbolized by the rainbow: “I have set my bow in the clouds” (Gen 9:13). The iconography of the ancient Near East reveals the meaning of this declaration, which picks up on the traditional motifs of a threatening God and of water monsters representing the chaos, which menaces the world.[8] When the Flood subsides, YHWH engages himself to constantly repel evil which, should it erupt, would threaten the entire creation. Thus, what the priestly authors integrate here is the polytheistic heritage of the fight between the “good gods” and those deities symbolizing or provoking evil. What the first chapters of Genesis present is not an abstract theory on the origin of evil. According to Genesis 1, *elohim* has transformed evil by partially integrating it in his creation. The Flood story emphasizes the fragility of this creation and God’s steady commitment to fight evil.

The “Autonomy” of Evil in the Book of Job

The priestly authors of the beginning of Genesis undoubtedly lived at the same time as the author who wrote the first version of the Book of Job in the Persian era.[9] This text does not cease to pose the question of the origin of evil and suffering. The poetic core[10] of the book confronts Job with the thinking of his friends who believe that God is responsible for all evil. In their opinion, all forms of evil can be explained, as being either divine punishment or a means of probation. Job’s friends represent international wisdom, and they are convinced that Job’s suffering is the result of divine sanction for a hidden sin. Thus, they exhort Job to recognize his wrong-

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[8] E. ZENGER, Gottes Bogen in den Wolken. Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie der priesterschriftlichen Urgeschichte, SBS 112, Stuttgart 1983.

[9] Cf. E.A. KNAUF, Hiobs Heimat, WdO 19 (1988), 65–83.

[10] For theories on the formation of the book, see, among others, J. VAN OORSCHOT, Gott als Grenze. Eine literar- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Gottesreden des Hiobbuches, BZAW 170, Berlin/New York 1987; H.-P. MÜLLER, Das Hiobproblem, EdF 84, Darmstadt ^{2}1988; W.A.M. BEUKEN (ed.), The Book of Job, BETL 114, Leuven 1994; W.-D. SYRIG, Hiob und sein Anwalt. Die Prosatexte des Hiobbuches und ihre Rolle in seiner Redaktions- und Rezeptionsgeschichte, BZAW 336, Berlin/New York 2004. Traditionally scholars have attributed the prose narration and the poetic core of the book to two different authors. But it may well be the case that the author of Job 3–40* already framed his text by the narrative about Job’s suffering and rehabilitation, see also T. RÖMER, Le livre de Job dans la recherche exegétique actuelle, in: S. TERRIEN (Hg.), Job, CAT XIII, Genève ^{2}2005, 7–11.

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doing, to dedicate himself to God's benevolence, and to repent. In their view, Job's task is to accept his suffering as something he deserves.

It is difficult to detect a development in the discussion between Job and his friends, with the exception of one aspect pertaining to Job's position. His friends speak in favor of a comprehensible, "logical" world, which he can no longer accept. It is important to emphasize one aspect, which is often neglected by commentators. Initially, Job shares with his friends the idea of divine retribution. For this reason, he cries out to his friends: "Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong" (6:24). He considers himself to be innocent and righteous and is thus not ready to accept his destiny as something he has deserved. Like his friends, Job aims to understand the reasons for his situation. But differently from them, he is convinced that God's aggressiveness and malignity cause his suffering. Therefore he does not hesitate to accuse God of unrighteous behavior: "You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me" (30:21). And by revolting against God, Job realizes that there is no divinely guaranteed connection between cause and effect: "The wicked are spared in the day of calamity, and are rescued in the day of wrath" (21:30). Seeing no other possibility to understand the evil that is happening to him, Job challenges God and virtually aims to put him on trial.

In the version in which the Book of Job has been transmitted to us, God's response is long in coming. A later redactor inserted the speeches of a certain Elihu between Job's last speech and YHWH's theophany (Job 32–37). Elihu is characterized as belonging to a generation younger than the one of Job and his friends. In his speeches, he criticizes both Job's position and the one put forward by his friends. Elihu does not speak to Job directly but refers to him in the third person. What is presented to us here is no longer a dialogue, but a literary polemic aimed to explain the suffering of a righteous person as a pedagogical means used by God who "delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity" (cf. 36:15). This insertion shows that the later redactor must have wanted to clarify the message and lay the ground for God's response yet to come. He possibly did that because the divine response itself may seem rather obscure and has, in fact, caused numerous exegetical difficulties. For once, God seems to quite blatantly disregard the question, which he does not reply to directly. Instead, he asks Job questions in return, contenting himself with self-praise as we find it, e.g., in the hymnal psalms which praise the glory of God the Creator. We can also observe that this "response" is undertaken in two separate speeches (38:1–40:2; 40:6–41:26), and this structure is quite likely the result of an intervention by one or more redactors.

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In the *first divine speech*, the ironic questions addressed to Job make him seem too ignorant to be able to judge God and his world ("Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" 38:4; "Have you entered into the springs of the sea …?" 38:16, etc.). The second part of the first speech (38:39–39:30) contains a form of bestiary in which God characterizes himself as being the master of all animals. In his outstanding study, O. Keel[11] has suggested an interpretation of Job 39 based on Ancient Near East iconography. As he points out, the author of Job uses the very common motif of the "master of animals" – a motif that has at its center the figure of a hero, a god or a king, taming two or more animals. The majority of the animals mentioned in the divine speech here commonly feature in such representations: mountain goats, deer, oxen, ostriches, etc. The image of the domination of wild animals serves to express the universal supremacy of a king or of the God whom the king serves.[12] By taking up this motif in Job 39, the author underlines, first of all, the supremacy of God who does not have to answer to man. At the same time, the animals tamed by the "master of animals" may symbolize evil forces hostile to man as well as a chaotic world. After God's first speech, Job declares that in the future he will keep silent. Still, God intervenes a second time.

The *second divine speech* introduces two beasts named Behemoth and Leviathan. These names have often been translated as "hippopotamus" and "crocodile," which has obliterated their mythological connotations. Some exegetes believe that the two beasts represent Seth, the Egyptian god of evil,[13] who, according to the myths, is defeated by Horus.[14] A Canaanite connotation, however, seems to be more persuasive, given that Leviathan is mentioned in the texts of Ugarit (*Lotan*), where he appears as one of several manifestations of aquatic chaos which Baal must fight against. In the Book of Job, Leviathan (who becomes the "dragon" in the Greek translation) is the primordial monster *par excellence*. Thus, the second divine speech confronts Job with a God who has to constantly fight against forces of chaos. Certainly, God has created the world (as the first speech reaffirms), and he is almighty, but the victory over chaos is never definite, and God constantly has to defy it. The second divine speech concedes a

[11] O. KEEL, Dieu répond à Job. Job 38–41, translated from German by F. SMYTH, LD Commentaires 2, Paris 1993.

[12] Jer 27:6 uses the motif of the domination of wild animals to characterize the absolute power that YHWH will give to the Babylonian king: "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him."

[13] Seth is however a more ambiguous god, since he himself defeats the serpent Anubis in order to guarantee the daily course of the Sun.

[14] Especially O. KEEL, Job (see below).

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certain status to the forces of chaos and gives evil some form of independence in relation to God.

But is Job convinced after hearing this second speech? His response to the second divine intervention (42:1–6) poses numerous philological and exegetical questions. The NRSV translates the last part of his answer as follows: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes," while a more literal translation might say "I have lost all interest and I regret (or: I have changed my mind about) the dust and the ashes."[15] This might mean that Job has given up the quest of a comprehensible God and that he regrets the signs of his mourning.

In a certain sense, the author of the Book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes; probably written at the end of the 3rd century BCE) radicalizes this position by stating that man cannot understand the actions of God: "then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out" (8:17). Despite arguing from a monotheistic perspective, Qoheleth, when insisting on God's arbitrariness, takes up a concept of polytheistic religions that easily accept deities who act arbitrarily.

But let us look at the Book of Job again. Differently from the divine speeches analyzed above, which concede evil a certain amount of autonomy, the narrative frame of the book presents a different solution to the problem of evil and suffering.

Towards a Dualist worldview

The author of the dialogues (or a later redactor) has framed the narrative core with a (traditional?) story in which Job appears as the prototype of a righteous man who endures the tests that his God puts him to, even if these are completely incomprehensible to him (Job 1–2; 42:7–17). Job resembles Abraham in the narration of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22). In a first version of this narrative frame, however, there was not yet any mention of "Satan". Evil was sent directly from God. In fact, it is quite obvious that the verses bringing God and Satan face to face were added at a later stage. One can easily read the narrative frame without the scenes about the heavenly court, and even more so because the suffix pronouns of 1:13 ("*his* sons and daughters") cannot possibly refer to the Satan or YHWH mentioned in the preceding verse (1:12: "Satan went out from the presence of YHWH"); they

[15] See for such a translation F. CRÜSEMANN, Hiob und Kohelet, in: R. ALBERTZ (ed.), Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments. FS C. Westermann, Göttingen 1980, 373–393.

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instead correlate with 1:5 ("This is what Job always did"), and this shows that the scene of the heavenly court in 1:6–12 is a an insert that was added later to the original story. It is also important to note that the epilogue does not contain any mention of a bet between God and Satan, while it proceeds directly to settling the score between YHWH and Job's friends. The later integration of the figure of Satan in the narrative of Job can thus be understood as an attempt to detach evil from God and "personify" it.

Satan and Evil in the Hebrew Bible

The autonomy of evil in relation to God is affirmed in several approaches of postexilic Judaism, particularly in the character of Satan.[16] The noun *Satan* can be translated as "aggressor" or "opponent." The term primarily denotes a human opponent, but from the 6th century BCE, "Satan" becomes the name given to the provocative agent of the heavenly court. In order to illustrate the power and supremacy of God, the biblical authors drew on royal imagery, presenting God as the great (Persian) king surrounded by his ministers and advisors. Adding Satan to this court permits naming something or someone "responsible" for evil. In the prologue to the Book of Job, as we read it today, Job's suffering is described as resulting from a bet between God and the *Satan*. The latter, despite being the one who incites God to send evil to Job, is clearly inferior to God, given that he is unable to do anything without divine permission. However, God is no longer the direct cause for Job's calamities. The same tendency to autonomize evil can be noticed in the version proposed in the Book of Chronicles of a narrative stemming from the Book of Samuel in which a census conducted by David provokes divine punishment. The first narrative of 2 Samuel 24 opens as follows: "Again *the anger of the YHWH* was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them." Here, it is God himself whose influences David to undertake a census; and this action causes the deaths of thousands of people. The author of Chronicles, however, who retells this story, has significantly changed the opening. The story opens in 1 Chronicles 21:1: "*Satan* stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel." It is difficult to determine whether Satan is understood as being God's negative opponent or some kind of hypostasy of

[16] P.L. DAY, An Adversary in Heaven. Satan in the Hebrew Bible, HSM 42, Atlanta/Ga 1988; M. GÖRG, Der „Satan" – der „Vollstrecker" Gottes, BN 82 (1996), 9–12; D.E. GERSHENSON, The Name Satan, ZAW 114 (2002), 443–445; F. KREUZER, Der Antagonist. Der Satan in der Hebräischen Bibel – eine bekannte Größe?, Bib. 86 (2005), 536–544.

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divine anger.[17] The emphasis on Satan as the protagonist of evil introduces, nevertheless, a tendency towards a dualism where evil appears to be virtually as powerful as God the Creator of good. This vision does not, however, exist in the Hebrew Bible. It makes itself felt more and more in certain tendencies of Judaism in Hellenistic and Roman times and becomes very popular in Christianity.[18]

YHWH, Creator of Evil?

We have seen that the Hebrew Bible concedes a certain amount of autonomy to evil, yet it does not develop a fully dualist theological system. However, in the Persian era, such systems did exist, namely in Mazdaism which seems to have been, at least after Darius, the favorite religion of the Achaemenid emperors. Today, our knowledge of Mazdaism and its "reformer" Zoroaster remains extremely fragmentary.[19] It is rather clear, though, that in this religion, the great god Ahura Mazda, who is exclusively the god of good, is in conflict with Ahura Mainyu, the spirit of evil, who acts, in a certain sense, as the master of the *daeva*, "demons". Even if we have no direct evidence for the influence of zoroastrism on the nascent Judaism, one can easily imagine that to some Jewish intellectuals, a dualistic concept seemed highly attractive, as it avoids establishing any connection between YHWH and evil.[20] On the other hand, it entails the downside of having to admit, beside the god of good, a god who represents the evil side.

On the other hand, a text in the collection Isa 40–55, the so-called Second Isaiah[21], asserts that YHWH is responsible for the good and the bad things:

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[17] For a discussion of the different explanations given for this text see R.E. STOKES, The Devil Made David Do It… Or Did He? The Nature, Identity, and Literary Origins of the Satan in 1 Chronicles 21:1, JBL 128 (2009), 91–106.

[18] See for instance the dualism affirmed by the community of Qumran, which expected an eschatological fight between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness." Similarly, the "popular religion" at the time of Jesus knew a complex demonology.

[19] M. STAUSBERG, On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism, Numen 55 (2008), 561–600.

[20] T. RÖMER, Tendances dualistes dans quelques écrits bibliques de l'époque perse, Trans 23 (2002), 45–58.

[21] The first edition of Isa 40–55 was done in the early Persian period. The book was then added to Isa 1–39 and underwent further redactions, see R.G. KRATZ, Kyros im Deuterosaja-Buch. Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Entstehung und Theologie von Jes 40–55, FAT 1, Tübingen 1991; J. VAN OORSCHOT, Von Babel zum Zion. Eine

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"I am YHWH, and there is no other; besides me no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am YHWH, and there is no other.

I form light (יוֹצֵר אוֹר) and I create darkness (וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ),
I do peace (עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם) and I create evil (וּבוֹרֵא רָע),
I am YHWH and I do all these things" (45:5–7).

This oracle is linked with the institution of Cyrus as YHWH's messiah through whom he will make known to the whole world that he is the "only" god. There is some discussion about the meaning of שָׁלוֹם and רָע. Does it refer to the fact that YHWH is responsible not only for peace but also for war and defeats? This would be a continuation of a common ("deuteronomistic") ideology according to which YHWH provokes cataclysms in order to punish his people.[22] The mention of Cyrus, who is presented as the tool through which YHWH will bring peace and restoration to Israel, would fit with such a historical understanding of *ra'* and *shalom*. On the other hand, the parallel with the creation of "light" and "darkness" suggests a more general meaning: YHWH is responsible also for the evil, or the chaos in the world. "Shalom" would then mean something like *ma'at* the order of the world, and *ra'*, the chaos. The Isaiah manuscript from Qumran has replaced *shalom* by *tov*, making YHWH the creator of good and evil. A similar affirmation also occurs in the prologue to Job, where Job responds to his wife: "Should we receive what is good (הַטּוֹב) from the deity (הָאֱלֹהִים), and not also receive what is evil (הָרָע)?" (Job 2:10; see also Thr 3,38). Isa 45:5–7 and Job 2 would then reflect an attempt to make YHWH also responsible for the chaos and the evil. Qoheleth, two centuries later, follows the same line of thought when advising his readers: "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them" (7:14). Thus, Qoheleth underlines the absolute transcendence of a God who becomes inaccessible and incomprehensible to man, as we have seen above. The statements in Second Isaiah and Ecclesiastes constitute two extreme affirmations within the biblical corpus. It is difficult to decide whether Isa 45 is a reaction towards the priestly creation

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literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung, BZAW 206, Berlin/New York 1993; R. ALBERTZ, Darius in Place of Cyrus. The First Edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1–52:12) in 521 BCE, JSOT 27 (2003), 371–383.

[22] The deuteronomistic redactors of the book of Kings explain the collapse of Samaria in 722 BCE and the fall of Judah in 587 BCE as YHWH's punishment for the disobedience of the kings and the people.

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account in Gen 1, which affirms that darkness and chaos are not created, or whether Gen 1 is a statement against Isa 45.[23]

The position of Isa 45 and related texts radicalize a concept, which is expressed in certain psalms, namely that God is the cause for the suffering of the pious and righteous.

The Question of Evil in the Psalms of Lament

Psalm 88 is a typical example of biblical lament: "For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves … Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me" (vv. 4–8, 17).

This psalm introduces an individual who is "finished", feeling abandoned and close to death. The Psalmist has no other explanation for his calamities (he might be stricken with an illness due to which he has been rejected by his community) than to assume that they must come from God[24]. But at the same time, he expresses his hope that the God who has caused all those troubles will be capable of changing the situation: "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?" (v. 11). Several psalms of lament invoke similarly god against god, thus laying the basis for Martin Luther's theory on the *deus absconditus*, the mysterious and remote God who the believer still must turn to in his distress.[25]

[23] For this option see M. ALBANI, Der eine Gott und die himmlischen Heerscharen. Zur Begründung des Monotheismus bei Deuterojesaja im Horizont der Astralisierung des Gottesverständnisses im Alten Orient, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 1, Leipzig 2000 and M. LEUENBERGER, Ich bin Jhwh und keiner sonst. Der exklusive Monotheismus des Kyros-Orakels Jes 45,1–7, SBS 224, Stuttgart 2010.

[24] W. GROSS, Gott als Feind des einzelnen? Psalm 88, Studien zur Priesterschrift und zu alttestamentlichen Gottesbildern, SBAB.AT 30, Stuttgart 1999, 159–171; C. ZIEGERT, „Mein Auge verschmachtet vor Elend“. Zu Kontext und Struktur von Psalm 88, BZ 54 (2010), 73–82.

[25] C. DE VOS, Klage als Gotteslob aus der Tiefe. Der Mensch vor Gott in den individuellen Klagepsalmen, FAT II/11, Tübingen 2005.

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Short Conclusion

The Hebrew Bible has never systematized its discourse on evil. Roughly speaking, three major concepts can be distinguished: (1) the priestly concept and that of the authors who wrote the dialogues in the Book of Job, which attributes a certain form of autonomy to evil without explaining its origins; (2) the concept brought forward by the redactor of the narrative frame in the Book of Job, the author of the Book of Chronicles, and in some other texts, which all sketch a tendency towards a dualist vision even if "Satan" is never an equipollent enemy of God in the Hebrew Bible; (3) the affirmation that YHWH is the cause of evil, as expressed in the oracle in Deutero-Isaiah (45:5–7), which clearly states that YHWH created evil. The idea that YHWH is the cause of evil draws on the doctrine of retribution according to which, however, every form of evil sent by YHWH can be "logically" explained. Contrary to that, Qoheleth affirms that evil does indeed from God, but that man cannot understand the reasons for it.

These different biblical approaches laid the groundwork for attitudes and positions, which have, in different forms and different ways, accompanied the history of theology and philosophy until today.

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