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Does God take Responsibility for Evil Events in the OT?

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1. Points of Departure

For more than sixty years now I have been studying the Bible, because the sudden demise of the Nazi regime in 1945 left me in a hollow, meaningless and shattered world. I realized that I needed desperately a new orientation for my life. And I found it in the newly

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established youth-group of my home congregation. The Bible became my guide, and – in accordance with YMCA spirituality of the time, shared by the parish leaders – this happened in quite an evangelical way. We sought the immediate revelation of God in every passage of Scriptures. We used the “Herrnhuter Losungen” (Daily Watchwords), random-picked biblical verses for every day, as direct divine *omina*. And we defended ardently the unmistakable truth of all inspired words of our biblical forbears. When I finished my secondary school in 1952 I decided to dedicate my life to the study of the Bible and become a protestant pastor. Over the decades, since then, my estimation of the Scriptures as Christian orientation kept growing. But diving ever more deeply into the history of Biblical traditions, the gradual emergence of Biblical literature, the richness of inter-religious ties and cross-fertilizations from ancient to modern times, I learned to value the importance of interpretation of the old Biblical witnesses. After all, God does not want us simply to repeat what our ancestors in faith were doing and saying, but expects from us to look soberly at our own, contemporary worlds which changed so drastically since antiquity, and to take a stand to-day for His or Her continuing love to mankind endangered by self-made catastrophes. This is to say: The Christian Gospel which liberates humans to become truly humane beings to the liking and order of the Creator in a just and peaceful world has to be proclaimed into the high-tech and low-just world of today.

One particular insight, long debated in theology and philosophy, has helped me to face the challenges of Biblical interpretation: it is the relativity and precariousness of all our doing and thinking. Human capacities to know things, and to deal with things and persons, are severely restricted by time and space of our transient existence, as well as by the incapacity of our brains in themselves to even vaguely ascertain the completeness of being, the fullness of truth, the essence of God. We all fall short of absolute knowledge, and by a very long shot. The ancient dictum “*finitum non est capax infiniti*” (“the finite is not able to realize the infinite”) cherished very much by Johannes Calvin, really gives us an important clue. Because of our enormous own finitude all we know and all we say is precarious, transitory, and at best a “barren vessel” containing some truth. And philosophy as well as linguistics and many other sciences tell us quite distinctly, that

the simple reality around us really is not at our disposal at all. We receive impressions through our senses and do construct our personal and collective environments, including our creeds and value-systems, to serve as habitable material and spiritual worlds we want to live comfortably in. In our times, more and more people, especially younger ones, fall into the trap of living in virtual worlds of the internet, thus losing contact to any reality of their proper environments. So, theologians should be aware of the fact, that everything on this earth, including the best theories of science, the deepest spiritual and theological insights, the loftiest treatises on ethical behaviour, the heartiest dialogues and conversations, everything is limited to space, time, particular context and special situations which pass away and change in the course of time. We are never imagining directly and completely objects, reality, events, or even God. Our responses to the outward forces are hampered by our finite minds and concepts. Consequently, we never should claim to state the full, objective truth like: “God wants us to do this or that”, “God is benign, wrathful ...”, but always at least in our thinking put in front of any affirmation: “According to my short-lived experience and fragmentary knowledge ...”. In addition, we should know: God adapted to our finitude: “God’s universal Word does speak only in the vernacular” (Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga).

2. God and the Evil: The Question

Granted the above stated basics are tenable I like to formulate the problem we are dealing with when asking for God’s responsibility in evil phenomena on this earth. Clearly, we cannot affirm anything like “God is taking responsibility ...” in absolute terms. We are no private secretaries in heaven, keeping God’s order books or other accounts. “Nobody has ever seen God ...” (John 1:18; I John 4:12). Unable to state absolute truths I can only re-formulate the question like this: “Are there any Biblical witnesses who think in terms of God’s responsibility for the evils in the world?” “What are their motivations, in which life-situations and cultural contexts do Biblical writers make God responsible?” “Are there other models of theological thinking visible in the Bible when it comes to pin-point causes of evil events which make people suffer?” “What are the perimeters of the discussions about evil, to begin with?” Of course, the matter is serious enough, holding all mankind and all religions in its sway. Various

models of interpretation have been applied to this grave problem: Where does evil come from? Does God tolerate it or even cause it? How does bad luck, pain, suffering relate to human deeds on the one hand and to the justice of God on the other? Main lines of trying to solve these issues (without ever leading to a satisfactory end) include the following hypotheses: Evil is the consequence of human misbehaviour. Evil is arbitrarily poured out by God. Evil is the work of God's enemy, be it demons or an anti-deity.

The Old Testament, to which I am limiting myself for the most part, is not uniform in its answers. They are numerous, revolving around the three basic patters listed above. And the issue, at times, is hotly debated among Old Testament writers and figures. There remain serious doubts in the Hebrew Scriptures about what could be the right answer. Ultimately, some writers even seem to admit, that the problem of Evil and its justification is too hard to solve for small human brains and biographies. The best we can do is to go through different layers of Biblical tradition to verify, how they are dealing with this vexing question of the origins and legitimations of evil. At the end, we have to try to give our own answer, as best as we can, knowing full well that it will be a provisional one only.

Of course, we have to try to narrow down a little bit the concept of "evil" which, at times, is so indefinite in our discussions. Perhaps there is some common ground assuming that "Evil" normally means all kinds of conditions and events, deeds and actions, which impede the happiness, well-being, and peaceful life of people. Unfortunately, there is a dangerous ambivalence to the term. What can be very evil for one person or group may be fortunate for others, possibly the opponents. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolokowski commented Israel's hymn of victory at the Sea of Reeds: "What did the Egyptians say at that moment?" Here we get into another big uncertainty with our investigation. Let us assume, that Yahweh is supposed to be mostly favourable to Israel (sometimes this is definitely not the case), and that in consequence the "Evil" is, as a rule, looked upon in the OT from the Israelite side. But let us see. At least every now and then we have to take into account, I am sure, the "other" people who suffer evil interventions. The little Book of Jonah, for instance sympathizes with the Assyrian city of Niniveh much to the disgust of the prophet himself.

3. Pentateuchal and Narrative Traditions

Biblical scholarship has newly discovered, during two centuries of intense studies, the unbelievable richness of traditions contained in the Pentateuch alone. Generations of believers audibly manifest their conceptions of God, man and world, a multi-voiced choir of diverse experiences with the divine, all couched in the mental patters of their own time and environment. Very grossly we may distinguish between several main layers of accumulated witnesses in regard to God's relation to evil in this world.

The Primeval History (Gen 1-11) predominantly considers human beings to be responsible for every wrong on this earth – with one significant exception and some second thoughts on traditional interpretation patterns. Humans construct the Tower of Babylon (Gen 11:1-9), obviously because they want to overthrow God's heavenly government and take over themselves the destinies of this world. (Is this not a picture of modern man, his untamed greed for absolute power, is it?). The bitter consequences – dispersion of mankind, linguistic fragmentation, endless warfare – apparently are well-deserved. God seems to be completely innocent, an impartial judge of human misbehaviour. The same seems to be true for the personal conflict between Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16). A deadly envy in regard to his divinely privileged brother cooks up in Cain, and he kills him. Again, the story suggests that the exclusive responsibility is with the murderer, and God, with full right, decrees his sentence of banishing the culprit from his home. But why this unusual leniency? The full force of the law would require the death penalty against Cain (Exod 21:12, Deut 19:11-12 etc). Instead, the murderer becomes a cultic hero in far-away foreign countries (Gen 4:17-22), and his heritage of uncontrolled, revengeful temper can bear fruit seventy-sevenfold (Gen 4:23-24). A very similar tendency comes to the fore in Gen 3, the story of disobedient Adam and Eve, which has been taken as the epitome of human sin by most Jewish and Christian exegetes, worthy of capital punishment (cf. Gen 2:17). But again, just like in the case of Cain, God does not punish according to the letter of his previous announcement. Instead, according to the narrator, the first couple is ousted from the paradise, sent into the wild and unpleasant world, burdened by hardships of a strenuous life, yet protected and cared for by God himself, hence living in continuous presence of the

Lord (Gen 3:14-24). Thus, in all three instances mentioned above, the full responsibility for all the evil which is falling upon culpable men and women clearly is attributed to the wrongdoers. But below the surface there are basic questions looming large: Human beings seem to be created that way as they actually behave and lead their lives. They apparently cannot help becoming human if not by aspiring to ultimate knowledge, dominance over their brothers, ruler-ship over the whole universe. Does not God Himself create them in His own likeness, gifted with dominion over earth and animals? Is “knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5) not an essential quality of being human? Is the human role on this earth not that of a semi-divine governor over creation (cf. Psalm 8)? Considering these underlying reflections in the extremely sensitive Primeval History (Gen 1-11) we may say, that – in the minds of the transmitters of the stories – God shares in the responsibility of human suffering from evil, because, in ultimate analysis, it was He Himself who made humans the way they are.

The blatant exception of the stories of guilt and punishment in the first segment of the book of Genesis is, of course, the story of the Flood (Gen 6-9). A very cryptic, mythical narration, completely unverifiable in our system of thinking, is the cause for the big destruction affecting all the earth without discrimination (Gen 6:1-7). This is the “Greatest Assumable Catastrophe” in the minds of the ancients as well as every thinking person until this day. Strangely enough, although humankind at the beginning is blamed exclusively for this annihilation of being, at the end of the story God concedes that this severest punishment, wholesale destruction, really is inadequate and improper: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth ...” (Gen 8:21). Here God assumes responsibility for an exaggerated, irate action totally inappropriate for dealing with His creation. He promises never again fall into an insensitive action like it, thus giving an “eternal” guaranty for the planet’s existence. Of course, as we know, later biblical witnesses did not agree with this concept of God’s rule; they (especially in the apocalyptic vein) continued to propagate the complete destruction of the world in many variants (cf. only Isa 24:1-6; Zech 14; Mk 13; Rev 20).

Turning to the Patriarch’s stories (and that of their wives and children) we notice immediately: Their hardships, especially in

Palestine, are considered due to their lowly social status; they are strangers in the Promised Land. This in itself seems to be taken as natural living condition, not an ordained or deserved evil. In all their pursuits and mishaps God is on their sides, without asking questions in regard to their moral standards; this applies, e.g., to Abraham in his conflicts with foreign rulers (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18, cf. 26:7-11: a threefold variation of the same narrational motif) or Jacob in relation even to his own brother Esau (Gen 27:1-40) as well to his father-in-law, Laban (Gen 30:25-43). God, in fact, is ready to back up all kinds of intrigues of his elected ones, sometimes inflicting severe sanctions against their foes. This means: God eagerly takes on – in the conceptualizations of the narrators and transmitters of these traditions – full responsibility for discomfort of the other side, be they justified or not. He is a partisan of the ones he elected. And even if the chosen one temporarily has to suffer great setbacks, fearing for his life, getting close to death, like Joseph, God does help him out in most wonderful ways. The evil, to be borne by God's favourite sons, apparently serves an educational purpose. Thus, Joseph is to be cured by his youthful haughtiness in order to become a decent person. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good", he tells his rueful brothers (Gen 50:20). The evil done to him as well as to those who persecuted him is all considered wholesome to Joseph's family and Israel at large. – This trait of tradition, that God stays in absolute command, administering good and evil on behalf of his people is heightened in the subsequent Exodus-traditions. Israel first enjoys the protection of the Pharaohs, then the people of God is reduced to slavery in Egypt. The narrators of this national epos do not blame the Israelites for this evil of enslavement. It solely grows out of the Pharaoh's anxieties and lust for power (Exod 1:9-10; 5:1-9 etc.). God responds with all harshness and without any remorse. Terrible plagues befall the Egyptians (Exod 5-12), evils which must have been in the minds of ancient Near Eastern peoples for a long time. The narrators and their audiences really relish in the prolonged battle between Pharaoh and God (by mediation of Moses and Aaron). What is irritating to our understanding is the frequent assertion of the transmitters that God himself "hardened" the heart of Pharaoh (e.g. Exod 7:3; 9:12; 10:27), so that the king would not give in or, at times, would reverse his concessions again, with ever more evil

consequences for the Egyptian population. Like a modern dictator, the Egyptian king does not hesitate to sacrifice his whole nation in order to maintain unflinchingly his own position of power. He, in fact, becomes guilty of mass-murder. But isn't it also God himself who compels him to be so die-hard? How much of the responsibility, therefore, is God's of this terrible situation? After all, does not God himself want to be glorified ("The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD ..." (Exod 7:5) in the same manner as Pharaoh, regardless of who may perish in the course of events? The old narrators do see it this way. They lived in a world and within theological horizons of old, where power and victory counted more than human lives. Consequently, they draw out this drama of Israel's liberation from slavery to the most bitter end, the slaughter of all first-borns in Egypt (Exod 12), the most gruesome evil people at that time could think of. Triumphantly, the deed of God has been recounted over thousands of years now (cf. Exod 13:14-15; Ps 105:36; 136:10). And no memorials have been erected in commemoration of the killed infants. The concept of "evil" is a very ambiguous one. In the OT the evil of the plagues in Egypt serves the Israelites and the glory of God who performed the dreadful massacres, barely covered by an executioner, the "angel" of destruction (cf. Exod 12:12, 23, 29). The killing of the infants is topped, afterwards, by the annihilation of the Egyptian army (Exod 14-15). The Israelites "see the dead bodies on the shore", and they "fear the LORD, and believe in him" (cf. Exod 14:31). And they celebrate this "salvation" with hymns of victory (Exod 15:1-19, 21). From the perspective of the narrator this evil is a wonderful happening, something to be thankful for to God.

The "historical" books of the Hebrew Scriptures, from Joshua to 2 Kings, may have constituted a separate collection of tales once. They certainly are not homogeneous, but unite quite different stories from different locals and times, and with different outlooks on our problem of the evil, which may or may not fall into the responsibility of God himself. Some sections interpret cruel destinies of people as completely triggered by own misdeeds. Thus Abner kills Asahel and falls prey to the bloody revenge of Joab, the older brother of Asahel (2 Sam 2:17-23; 3:22-27). This is a completely secular account of retaliation, without the least reference to God. Some more stories are taking this exclusively human stand. Jotham's parable of the trees

metaphorically demonstrates human greed for power (Judg 9:7-15). Absalom, in a dramatic account of his rebellion against his father David, loses out because of David's shrewdness, and is killed (2 Sam 15-19), much to the distress of his father. The sufferings of all participants in these and similar plots are self-inflicted, God is not mentioned. In contrast, there are highly theological accounts of failure, verdict, and punishment. One prime example is 1 Sam 15:10-33, Saul's deviation from the right paths of God. Literary scrutiny of the relevant, theological parts of the so-called "Deuteronomistic History" (the final redaction of those Hebrew Books from Joshua to 2 Kings)³ prove that (perhaps from a 6th/5th century B.C. perspective) the pre-exilic past within this school of thought was judged according to a very typical pattern. Mainly the Israelite/Judean monarchs from Saul to Josiah, and, before them but differently, the so-called Judges have been guilty of apostasy from the only, universal God of Israel, Yahweh. There is a cliché of a "good" king, which seems to be taken from Deut 17:14-20 or a similar regulation. The king is supposed to be a scholar of Torah who must not lead with women, nor finances, nor military strategies, and, of course, guarantee obedience to Scriptures among all of his subjects. In the light of these religious requirements most kings are judged to have been inadequate. Only a few get the stamp: "right in the sight of the LORD" (cf. 2 Kings 18:3; 22:2). Furthermore: The history of Israel from the Judges to the last king Zedekiah is a continuous up and down of worshipping Yahweh and forgetting His laws, a sequence of being loyal to and turning away from the only God, being castigated, returning to Him, forgetting Torah again etc. That means, the Deuteronomist, from retrospect, designs Israel's history as an almost continuous decline of true faith which out of necessity leads toward the defeat before the Babylonians and the exile. The centuries before that catastrophe are constructed to explain the severe punishment by God. Even Josiah (640-609 B.C.), the most virtuous and faithful believer in Yahweh (as he is portrayed), who desperately tries to reform the religious system, cannot stop the wrath of God any more, because his predecessors had accumulated too much guilt. Yahweh saw himself compelled to give

³ The first and classical analysis is from Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, 2nd. Ed. Tübingen: Niemeyer 1957 (translated by B.W. Anderson, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSuppl 15, Sheffield: ISOT-Press 1981).

up his people and extinguish their state (2 Kings 22-23, especially 23:24-27).⁴ Now, what about the evil which overcame Judah after Josia, and whom may we recognize that has been responsible for it?

The Babylonian exile no doubt was and is considered the greatest evil for the Jewish people before the Holocaust. Its repercussions within the Hebrew Scriptures are very strong, and they continued afterwards, e.g. in Rabbinic and Christian writings. The term “Babylonian Captivity” became a popular saying, implying a wide range of sentiments: suffering and yearning for home in foreign lands (cf. Psalm 137), being collectively guilty (cf. Luther’s description of the contemporary church as existing in “Babylonian Captivity”), having to bear strong outside pressures by big powers (cf. Rev 14:8; 18).⁵ What about, then, our questions raised above? Most Biblical witnesses in the line of the Deuteronomistic Historian emphasize the deep guilt of Israel or her kings which led to the implementation of God’s longstanding prophetic warnings (cf. only Jer 7:25; 25:4; 26:5).⁶ Deportation to Babylonia and living in misery, homesickness and lamenting the loss of land, king, and temple are deep, traumatic violations. But God is completely right in sending this bitterest evil (cf. Psalm 106; Neh 9). There also seems to have been much concordance among biblical witnesses, that the heaviest blow against Judah did not mean the end of Israel, but offered the chances for a new beginning: “Comfort, O comfort my people ... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” (Isa 40:2). The evil, ordained by Yahweh himself over Judah, has been extremely burdensome (“twofold punishment” – is this a

⁴ Some recent studies on the Deuteronomistic Historians: Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History* (London: T&T Clark 2005); Lester L. Grabbe (ed), *Good Kings and Bad Kings, Library of Hebrew Bible: Old Testament Studies 393* (London: T&T Clark 2005), Markus Witte (ed), *Die deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerke* (BZAW 365, Berlin: de Gruyter 2006), Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, *The Time, Place, and Purpose of the Deuteronomistic History* (Brown Judaic Studies 347, Providence: Brown Judaic Studies 2006), David T. Lamb, *Righteous Jehu and His Evil Heirs* (Oxford: University Press 2007).

⁵ Babylon was, of course, the symbol of a big metropolis, centre of the world. As such, it became hated and despised by many subjugated and oppressed people. The name of a “whore” (cf. Rev 17) is a cliché also used of other big cities in Western Christian cultures, cf. Ulrike Sals, *Die Biographie der “Hure Babylon”* (FAT 2. Reihe 6, Tübingen: Mohr 2004).

⁶ There are few dissenting voices at this point in the OT. If Psalm 44 should belong into the 6th/5th century B.C. then it would be a strong counter-testimony, protesting the innocence of Israel, cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, FOTL XIV*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988, under Ps 44.

critical remark over against God?) ends at the beginning of the Persian period,⁷ and opens up great opportunities for re-organisation, free exercise of one's religion, and also, presumably, chances for a prosperous life.

4. Prophetic Opposition

The corpus of prophetic writings in the OT is somewhat independent from Torah and “former prophets”, as the “historical” books are called in Jewish tradition. On the other hand, there are many ties between Torah and Prophets.⁸ The whole of prophetic tradition is quite a complex collection of many literary genres and lively voices, many of which protested against existing conditions within the community of faith. Others tried to comfort the people in situations of dire need and catastrophes. Both strands of tradition deal with the evil, both assume, as a rule, that Israel herself was guilty of deviations from the will of Yahweh, either in the field of social justice, cultic performance, or moral conduct. The evil, befalling the members of the congregation of Israel, consequently, is to be considered as the punishment of an irate deity who wants to bring back its apostate children. Sometimes, however, the prophetic voices have the ring of final verdicts because Yahweh is believed to have left any covenant relationship with his chosen people once and for all (cf. Hos 1-3). Comforting prophets, on the other hand, who may be liars (cf. Jer 28) and therefore have to be evaluated carefully, sometimes preach the unbelievable mercy of God (cf. Isa 40-55). They understand, as it were, all the sufferings of Israel to be entirely justified as rightful punishments which in ultimate analysis were meant as pedagogical measures of a benign and caring God.

As is to be expected, though, there are many deviations within the prophetic traditions from this traditional pattern of understanding evil. I can present only a few selected examples, showing how the witnesses of old really wrestled with the problem of the bad things in this world. Amos says at one point: “Does disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Am 3:6). This short sentence seems to heap

⁷ Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Israel in der Perserzeit*, *Biblische Enzyklopädie* (8, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2005).

⁸ A fine purview of this second part of the Hebrew Canon is Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (2. ed., Louisville: Westminster 1996).

all responsibility directly and unflinchingly for any kind of calamity on God, just like some proverbial sayings do (cf. Prov 16:4) or storytellers think (cf. the “evil” spirit from God: Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14-16, 23). In all these cases, the testimonies of old seem to simply take as natural the fact that God administers good and evil on everybody, including his followers. And humans have to accept this without demanding explanations. Who, however, asks for justification of evil happenings is Job throughout the book named for him (see below). The prophet who comes closest to Job is Jeremiah. He vehemently resists not only the initial call of Yahweh (Jer 1:4-10) but continues fighting over his own bad luck and frustrated life, see his so-called “confessions”: Jer 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18. They are psalm-like complaints which sometimes accuse God directly of treachery and mistreatment. Thus, these texts in fact (like some in the Book of Job) attribute undeserved and unprovoked evil, in bitter rebuke, to Yahweh.

Still another variant of dealing with the evil experiences of one’s own group of people, namely Israel, are represented in the Songs of the Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah (Isa 41:8-16; 42:1-9; 44:1-5; 49:7-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). These passages, too, have been much debated in Old Testament scholarship, and they have received quite different interpretations. One of the basic problems is: Who is this mysterious, anonymous “Servant of Yahweh”? An unknown prophet? The people of Israel as a whole? An early martyr for the sake of Torah? Be it as it may: Those who transmitted and used the poems about the Servant at first were struck and puzzled by his miserable life and death (cf. Isa 53:4b: “... we accounted him stricken, struck down by God ...”). Only in hindsight they realized: “... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” (Isa 53:5). Here the evil suffered by faithful ones acquires an expiatory and vicarious significance, a notion which was taken up happily by later Christians to interpret Jesus’ death on the cross (cf. Mt 8:17; 1 Pet 2:22-25). – There are many more passages in the prophetic canon which needed to be discussed: Suffice it to point out a general tendency in this part of the Bible. The redactors of these books as a rule added indictments to other nations to the prophetic words, indicating that God would take action against people who had

maltreated Israel at some time in history (cf. Am 1:3-2:3; Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32). Evil, caused by enemies of Israel, goes to their account and will be persecuted by the God of the universe, although Yahweh may have used the foreign powers to execute his verdicts against his people.

5. The Battle of the Psalmists

The Psalter offers at least a similar multi-layered picture in dealing with responsibilities for all sorts of wickedness in this world and Gods possible involvement with it. Even within determined genres of psalms⁹ the opinions about the substance, range of evil and the deliverance from it are split or they differ from case to case. Thus the precarious validity of human theological notions is blatant, and it is acknowledged in the Psalter itself. Individual complaints, which ask for salvation in great, mostly deadly distress (often grave illness) some times expose the full innocence of the supplicant (cf. Psalms 7; 17; 26), asking God to terminate the unjustified suffering of the client. At other instances, they confess the guilt of the sufferer, accepting God's correct verdict, asking for mercy and rehabilitation (cf. Psalm 38; 51). God's involvement with the evil apportioned to the miserable therefore may differ considerably. The psalms indicate more or less cautiously how far they think God's involvement is going. There are always hostile agents, be they human or demoniac ones, in the background, according to the ancient believers. They may be responsible for the wrongs experienced, you never could be completely sure (cf. the beastly demons in Psalms 22:13, 14, 17; 59:7, 15; 91:5-6). But in specific situations God is blamed bluntly to be the sole cause of the evil which has troubled the supplicant. And he does not confess any own guilt. "You have put me in the depths of the Pit You have caused my companions to shun me ..." (Ps 88:6, 7). "Why do you cast me off?" (v. 14). This very feature of blaming Yahweh directly is still stronger in some communal complaints (which are quite similar, otherwise, to the individual ones): "All this comes upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your

⁹ Cf. Joachim Begrich and Hermann Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (translated by James D. Nogalski), Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1998; Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols. Philadelphia: Abingdon 1962; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 2 vols., FOTL XIV and XV, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988 and 2001.

covenant. ... yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness.” (Ps 44:17, 19). “Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” (v. 22). Of course, also on the communal level of supplication there are confessions of own guilt and petitions for mercy (cf. Psalm 106; Neh 9). We realize: The psalms of complaint, be they individual or collective prayers, do not use nor teach doctrines of evil, forgiveness, retaliation, or the respective qualities of God to deal with all these human affairs. The Bible as a whole does not have steadfast dogmas like we design in our little brains. Rather, the texts speak out of and into different situations of suffering and supplication. Careful scrutiny of ones own records, memories, and deeds will help us to determine God’s and our own involvement in the bad situations which do beset us.

Other genres of psalms also deal with the problems of guilt and atonement, evil and overcoming evil, and a broad range of related theological items. Noteworthy, among more examples, are the psalms which focus on social injustice, caused by “wicked” people (some exegetes, like Sigmund Mowinckel, identified the “evil-doers” with “sorcerers”¹⁰), and God is called upon as the one fiercely opposed to their evil machinations (cf. Psalms 9/10; 37; 73; 109); therefore he may be reckoned as completely siding with the community of faith, excluding the aggressors. The same is true in a different way with historical retrospectives, like Psalm 78; Deut 32; Ezra 9:6-15; Dan 9:4-19 etc. Confession of the sins of the forefathers abound, and petition for forgiveness sets the tone: The evil is on the side of the people, they can only hope for the longanimity and forbearance of their God, who detests all wickedness. Then there are psalms which lament the transience of human life, without giving clear, concrete reasons for this state of affairs (human deviation from God’s precepts?), thus in Psalms 14; 39; 49; 90. Human nature in general is sometimes blamed for the death-bound, but were humans really meant to live eternally? What does the concept “eternal” mean to say, anyway, in the Old Testament? Still other psalms strongly refer to the Torah as the sole orientation for Jewish believers (Psalm 1; 19; 119).

¹⁰ Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien* vol. I/II, (1921, reprint Amsterdam: Schippers 1966); cf. Othmar Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1969).

The dangers of going amiss from the rules of Torah is vividly portrayed. If anyone does drift away, he or she has to repent. God acts as the immaculate judge.

We learn: The Psalter contains a great variety of theological opinions, it may be the greatest and most colourful presentation in the whole Bible. There are texts which talk rather neutrally of the evil which does exist in this world, and its different agents. God, on the other hand, may be involved gradually or totally in making the evil function among people, while they, for their own part, also may be involved in various degrees with the ongoing malignity. One thing is clear in all instances: Evil has to be combated with the help of God. According to the ancient visions of the world the “war against evil” could include cursing the wicked forces or exterminating them by divine violence (cf. Psalms 18; 31; 52; 74; 94; 109; 137). We have to rethink the parameters of evil and its networks, and who is responsible for what. A democratic and rational society will evaluate things differently than our ancient forbears. In this way we will find mechanical and structural reasons for much of the evil besetting our world today. In consequence, the roles of humans, living conditions, technical developments, medical and psychic knowledge etc. have to be newly appreciated before we come to the questions to what extent God, the creator and sustainer of this world, is involved in this or that machination of evil.

6. Job and His “Friends”

The third part of the Hebrew Canon, called “Writings”, besides the Book of Psalms contains various collections of wisdom literature. The Book of Job, the “righteous sufferer” does have a special importance for our subject. Three layers of this great poetic work, ranging high in world literature (also in line with ancient Mesopotamian compositions showing similar interests) should be discussed separately and in conjunction.

We have a short narrative introduction (Job 1-2) taken up at the very end of the book (Job 42:10-17) providing the setting for the drama of Job’s dialoguing with several “friends” (Job 3-27; 32-37; chapters 28-31 are loosely filled into the rounds of debate) and receiving God’s answers (Job 38-42:9). The narrative frame visualized a perfectly pious man in the East who really lives up to the standards of God’s will. His fate, however, is determined in a

heavenly council of “sons of God”, “heavenly beings”, “angels of world government” or whoever these figures are. “Satan”, the one who advocates disturbances in God’s reign (but he is not the anti-god of later world views) challenges God’s praise of the pious man Job. His argument is: Any person which is blessed by wealth, children, and health as Job abundantly is, does not have the least difficulty to adhere to God fearing conduct. As soon, however, as the blessings cease, he will fall into disrespect and turn away from the straight path. To cut it short: God and Satan enter into a bet on this very experiment: Will Job sustain his piety and perfect behaviour under the impact of severe losses, afflictions and taunts? In other words: God permits Satan to thoroughly test a paragon of spiritual and ethical life by heaping on him some of the worst evils ancient minds could think of (Job 1:6-12). Like under laboratory conditions Job is submitted to brutal trials: the loss of his property, his children, his health (Job 1:13-2:8). Evil arbitrarily poured over an innocent man, just for the fun of it? Is this the gist of life that we are subject to divine and satanic trials borne out of a betting-game between superior powers? Job, in the narrative part, really resists all the pressures to cancel his loyalty over against God, even the severe taunts of his own wife (Job 2:9-10). Jumping over all the dialogical parts of the book Job, for the narrator, is then immediately rehabilitated, his fortunes are restored (Job 42:10-17). This paradigm of the innocent sufferer, in effect, does not at all doubt the divine testing (like that one brought about Abraham, Gen 22:1-19). Humans have to resist the evil onslaughts and will be restored to perfect happiness for their immaculate virtues.

The other two parts of the Book of Job take a different stance. In the dialogue Job protests passionately that he is really innocent. He accuses God to act like a despot ignoring all the rules of justice and decency only because he has the power to do so. Top affirmations against God are e.g. Job 9:1-24; 10:1-22; 19:1-22. God, in the eyes of utterly enraged Job, is the sole responsible for the ills he is suffering. And what is worse: God wantonly breaks all the rules he himself has set up for this earth. The “friends” who talk to him are prototypes of knowledgeable theologians eager to prove the righteousness of God and the hidden faults of the irate sufferer. In vain, they cannot convince Job. – In this impasse the third layer of texts tries out a solution which seems rather ambiguous. God demonstrates to Job the

astounding dimensions of creation asking him to compare his minute problems with the universal essence. In fact, Job recognizes, according to this specific way of reasoning, that he is wrong and he confesses his ignorance and guilt (Job 42:1-6). The stunning appendix to this “solution” however tells us: Theological reasoning of how justice and righteousness of God fit together with the evil in this world, in other words: the traditional balancing of doing the good, of clinging to the rules, and well-being, and of God’s eternal and unwavering rectitude, are not tenable, either (Job 42:7-9). Here we are, in a permanent dilemma. The “friends”, these traditional dogmatists, are wrong and need the intercession of Job, the rebel who had accused God.

7. Proverbs and Kohelet

The Book of Proverbs all by itself indicates that it is composed of varying collections of sayings, most of which probably have been quite popular at one or the other period. The collections, on their part, are representing in themselves many voices and opinions, also in regard to the evil in the world. Just to give a few examples: The first collection (Prov 1-9) focuses on personified Wisdom, whose counsel – mediated partly by father and mother – should be followed closely. To ignore prudent life-style and to fall prone to the seductions of foolishness is to ruin one’s life. That means, evil is man-made, therefore it is avoidable, if only good reason and common-sense will work. God, in effect, has nothing to do with the well-being of people; they are responsible on their own. As some scholars have put it: Much of wisdom literature in the Bible as well as in the Ancient Near East presupposes a closed system of self-realizing spheres or powers of good and bad. Who chooses to do the good will automatically live in the realm of positive energies, who acts wickedly will be destroyed by the adverse forces he nurtured himself. – A special segment within the Book is Proverbs 22:17-24:22, because there is an ancient Egyptian collection, the Sayings of Amenemope, with partly identical affirmations and admonitions. The Egyptian prototype seems to have been used most of all for the education of officials of the state. Perhaps it has been adapted for similar purposes by old Israelite court or temple authorities. The circle of life is still narrower here than in Prov 1-9. But the outlook is about the same: Do well in your job and you will thrive! For the rest of the Book of Proverbs (Prov. 10:1-

22:16; 24:23-31:31) we still find various subheadings indicating originally independent collections. Yet, the contents of the sayings remain more or less in the same moulds. The authors and transmitters of the texts observed closely, how human life is going on in all its flowing, movements and counter-movements, eddies and tides. They actually try to make sense of the irregularities of social actions, and they discover small pieces of coherence, often contradicted by other observations. Apparently in later stadiums of redaction a good number of Yahweh-sayings were added, thus indicating God's participation in every-day affairs. In this manner, those loose collections offer an amazingly deep insight into human behaviour, and a thorough understanding of the contradictory interpretation of reality. Each individual saying thus is a diamond in itself, and does not necessarily agree with any of the other ones. Only very few examples for various interpretations of evil must suffice: Prov 10:3 declares poverty a consequence of "wickedness", because Yahweh is "thwarting" the evildoer, while the next verse accuses "laziness" to be the cause for misery (Prov 10:4). In another saying both, the rich and the poor one are simply there, created by God, without discriminating reasons for their existence (Prov 22:2). Still in another place, the poor is rated higher than the liar (Prov 19:22), and yet more sayings seem to take the side of impoverished, who is exploited by the rich one (Prov 22:7) and beloved by God (Prov 14:31; 17:5). Finally, there are admonitions to defend the needy (Prov 31:8-9) or give them alcohol to forget their misery (Prov 31:6-7). Wickedness and foolishness, hot temper and dishonesty, drunkenness, greed, and laziness are the great evils in the Proverbs. The world is at it is. Evil is part of human nature. Therefore the only means to deal with these bad traits of human character is to describe how they lead into disaster. And perhaps to call for a good education of young people (cf. Prov 19:18; 30:17).

Quohelet (Ecclesiastes) has a different character altogether. While there are some wise sayings as well concerning living conditions and behaviour of human beings the overall tone of the book is quite sceptical. All things humans are striving for are lost endeavours, "vanity upon vanities" (Eccl 1:2). Everything acquired or achieved is just futile (Eccl 2:1-11) What remains after death? Nothing! (Eccl 2:14-16). Be a person good or bad, what makes the

difference? Both will die and be forgotten (Eccl 8:14; 9:1-6). The immediate presence alone with its chances and joys, and all the good gifts of God, is real and good to embrace (Eccl 5:18-20; 8:15; 11:9). Now, what does this theological attitude say to us? The writers and users of Quohélet must have lived in a quite sobering and frustrating time and environment. We notice how much they are determined by their context: judging most of life's experiences as invalid because of lack of sustainability. Evil is temporary, just like goodness is. In fact, Quohélet is the only testimony of old within the Hebrew Bible who remains completely indifferent about the many questions around good and evil. But his stance on these issues is a very important part of the Bible, because there are many contemporary readers who are able to identify themselves with his thinking.

8. Apocalyptic Antagonisms

Apocalyptic thoughts came up late in the Old Testament period, probably provoked by Persian theology, bent on a final destruction of evil at the end of history. Israel's prophets sure had alerted to a "day of Yahweh", which would avenge trespasses of the people and their leaders (cf. the Book of Zephaniah and other prophetic utterances). Later apocalypticism, however, is much more universal in scope. All nations are to be judged, a whole new world is to be created. Beginnings of this type of world-view are showing up in the Old Testament (cf. Isa 65:17; 24-27; Zech 1-8; 14; Dan 2; 7. The New Testament Book of Revelation presupposes already many more Jewish extra-canonical apocalyptic writings). What is at stake in these visions and speculations about the final end of humanity, and a glorious appearance of a divine reign of perfect justice? First of all, the basic verdict underlying apocalyptic thinking is devastating: It contradicts the judgement of Gen 1 at creation: "good", and "very good" (the ultimate grade in v. 31). For apocalyptists the world they lived in was irreparably corrupt; like an old decrepit building it had to be torn down and restructured from scratch. Who was to be blamed for the failure of this world? Most ancient writers would certainly point to humankind which had mismanaged the world and run it down (cf. Gen 6:1-7). Second: Apocalyptists strongly believe in a clear-cut separation of good and evil. Not all human systems of thinking or ethical paradigms do provide this fundamental tool for painting the final scenario. Although old Israelite concepts did hardly offer that

binary dichotomy, in post-exilic times it was at hand. Third: The final destruction of the world mostly is hinted at in rather vague terms. The literary genres often used are visions and dreams. We, of course, are very interested to know, how the evil – according to the ancient understanding – would be exterminated in the last judgment. Fourth: The New World to come would be constructed to the exclusion of wickedness. Our minds certainly not by a long stretch can imagine, what this new construction could mean. How to keep out neatly that which is counterproductive to life, goodness, righteousness? Speculations in many parts of the Bible are manifold and quite at odds with what we are able to comprehend as possible, desirable, or likely. Lions eat straw (Isa 11:7)? The Torah inscribed into the hearts (Jer 31:33)? A new heart and spirit from God (Ezek 11:19)? No laments any more, minimum age 100 years (Isa 65:19-20; cf. Zech 8:4-5)? Jerusalem the centre of the world (Isa 2:1-4; 4:2-6; 65:17-25; 66:5-14; Zech 14:1-11)? Kingdom of God (Dan 2:44), under the administration of the “holy ones of the Most High” (Dan 7:27)? All these solutions remain in the shadows of a future not yet realized. God, evidently, takes responsibility for everything happening in this dramatic final epoch of history. He and his Messias, and/or his armies are leading the battle and the reconstruction of everything New.

9. Taking a Stand Today

We certainly have to learn from the Bible: There are no everlasting dogmatic statements about God and man in the Bible, neither about good and evil. Instead, we are offered a broad spectrum of different endeavours to recognize and testify to God. This plurality of contextually conditioned, therefore provisional concepts is quite important for us. It tells us a good number of possible ways to grasp also the meaning of “evil” in the Bible and today, as well as the relationship which may exist between God and deficiency of our world. Our own knowledge and experience, of course, has to enter this reflection. In terms of the “evil” we may state: It is pluri-form, personal and impersonal, structural and auto-dynamic. In any case, it is hard to define unilaterally. The origin of the “evil” forces and beings has always been quite a matter of debate. If we do not believe in an independent existence of an anti-power (and Hebrew Scriptures certainly do not suggest this view) we have to assume that “evil” is grounded either in a general deficiency of the existing world or in

integral positive dimensions which turn counterproductive. Last, not least: God today has to be more amply understood in the light of the reality we perceive. God may be thought of in personal terms, because we are experiencing the Divine in personal relationships. God also is, I am sure, at work in all known structures and conditions, including the scientifically conceived reality. Humans and God, I suggest, today are co-responsible for the developments on our planet and its closest neighbourhood. Beyond our solar system, for the time being, there is no human responsibility possible.

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