

THE RISE OF PHARAOH AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract

Several answers to the problem of evil have been given by philosophers and theologians, most of which dwell on such matters as free-will and the soul-building effects of adversity. At the highest levels of abstraction, these defenses have a 'greater-good' structure: evil and suffering, presently allowed by God, yield 'pros' that outweigh the former as 'cons.' Likewise, the biblical writers trace the occurrence of evil and suffering back to the transcendent sovereignty of God and, from there, to a greater good served by the rise of evil. One such text is the Exodus narrative, which sees the deliverance of Israel in the light of Yahweh's purpose of self-revelation.

The problem of evil (POE) arises from Christian theology because the latter makes the following claims about God:

1. God is all-knowing.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. God is morally-perfect.
4. God created everything.

We also would affirm on the basis of experience—to say nothing of vast exegetical evidence—a fifth claim which seems to stand in tension with the first four:

5. There is evil.

Wicked people arise, gain power over others, and then mistreat them. From petty rudeness to outright violence, our world offers a minefield of injury and grief caused by 'moral evil,' the evil resulting from misbehavior. But it also confronts us with natural calamities: around the corner and around the world, disease, accidents, storms, and earthquakes

lie in wait. Whole villages disappear beneath mudslides. Entire islands vanish under waves. Most of us will die in pain—some more, some less. But we know the awful truth and ignore it when we can: we too will get old, and it will not be easy. Perhaps, then, claim (5) contradicts (1) through (4), understood as a set of essential claims. Opponents of classical theism, defined by the affirmation of (1) through (5), argue that there is no ‘perhaps’ about it: one of them must go, if theism is to survive.

The *prima facie* contradiction can be uncovered in straightforward terms. If (1) is true, God would know about our suffering and how to cope with it. If (2) is true, he could do whatever it takes to banish suffering from our world. If (3) is true, he would desire to rid the world of evil and suffering; and if (4) is true, no excuse for the world’s suffering can surface from the idea that dark, raw materials are cramping God’s creative style. If he made everything, he established each thing’s tendency—for better or worse—in the act of *ex nihilo* creation. No Christian would be silly enough to deny (5). Therefore, we have the problem of evil, the most difficult challenge to orthodox theism. How can we possibly behold the world’s rapes and murders, its cancers and catastrophes, and say about it all, “This too must occur,” if that is what we must say?

At this point, readers of Scripture will remind us that none of these things would happen now if Adam and Eve had not rebelled against God. Sin has landed us in pain. We are the ones to blame. God reckoned the guilt of Adam to our account, and we suffer and die now in consequence, just as he also promises to count the righteousness of Christ—his vicarious suffering and perfect obedience—in our favor, if we trust him to do so (cf. Genesis 3 and Romans 5, *passim*). These theological claims must play a central role in any response to the POE, because they constitute a “buffer zone” between God and sin and, therefore, between God and evil. He is not the proximal or efficient cause of wrongdoing and thus of the latter’s judicial consequences—we are, first Adam and Eve, then all of their fallen descendants. We sin and suffer for a simple reason. We like it. We desire independence from God and get what we ask for. If we cannot say this much, we have no gospel to preach either.

Nevertheless, these responses address the problem only halfway. We must press on because (1) through (4) imply an attribute of God that the biblical writers also proclaim with gusto, though it undercuts some views of what our moral accountability implies. To wit: God rules always, everywhere, over all things, without exception. The skeptic wonders how God’s sovereignty in this sense leaves room for morally significant action (and so do we, though we presuppose that some harmonization is possible). But if we choose not to cherry-pick our doctrines from

Scripture but embrace the latter ‘as is,’ we find that God ultimately determines all that occurs, whatever proximal causes may operate. One can efficiently make this argument by working backward from the extreme cases to ordinary examples. That is, if the biblical writers tell us that God somehow ordains both wicked acts and insignificant events, nothing would prevent them (and therefore us) from saying that his sovereignty comprehends all events of whatever kind; and they do say as much.

Consider the case of evil acts. If God can ordain *them* and still be morally perfect, he can ordain anything.¹ The story of Joseph in Egypt provides a fine example, given its contrast between the wickedness of his brothers and his own sense of God’s hand upon him. The brothers first plot to kill him but then sell him into slavery (Gen 37.12-36). This event brings much pain on Joseph, 90% of which would have gone unrecorded; but he finally concludes that God has a purpose in his captivity: it was to save lives (Gen 45.5,8). In Joshua, the Northern Kings waged war against Israel, no doubt displeasing their God; yet the text credits Yahweh with inciting the pagans to fight (Josh 11.20). He can ordain the disobedience of sons to slay them (1 Samuel 2.25) and “raise up evil” against David’s house (2 Samuel 12.11). Yahweh even “incites” David to order a census (2 Samuel 24.1), though David will confess this act as his own sin (2 Samuel 24.10). Job ascribes the giving and taking in his life to the Lord’s sovereignty, even though the latter entailed both natural and moral evil (Job 1.21). Amos certainly has no difficulty tracing the evil that falls on a city back to God’s sovereign choice: “. . . if a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?” (Amos 3.6). The same message appears in Isaiah 45.7, where Yahweh causes peace and “creates calamity,” the latter being plausibly assumed to include both evil acts and natural disasters. The same principle applies to inconsequential events—just run-of-the-mill happenings: in Proverbs 16.33, God determines the landing of dice.

The NT evidence for God’s sovereignty over evil is equally compelling. A striking example would be the handing over of Jesus to be crucified. Peter condemns the act but covers it with God’s redemptive plan (Acts 2.23). Jesus himself asserts the exhaustive rule God, especially when the saints endure trial and sinners reject the gospel. In Matthew 10.16-39 (cf. Luke 12.6-7), Jesus guarantees that his disciples will suffer for the gospel. Discipleship forces one to choose sides. Yet he assures them with the doctrine of God’s exhaustive reign: “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the

¹ On God’s ordaining of evil acts, cf. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Leicester: IVP, 1994), pp. 322-327.

ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows” (Mt 10.29-31). Not even persecution will land on them apart from the Father’s will. In John 6.65, Jesus accounts for the departure of many ‘disciples’ (not the Twelve) with reference to God’s sovereignty: “no one can come to me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” The Father is displeased by their rejection of the Son; but in doing so, they have not slipped from his grasp. Finally, one considers the case of Revelation 6.10-11, where the martyred saints ask, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood?” To this question, they receive the reply, “and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.” The jarring fact here is that God decides how many saints will die for their faith, not the pagans who kill them.

We discover, therefore, that appeals to the activity of free agents can only take us so far, grateful though we may be for that sort of progress. We do not wish to argue that God just *does evil*, full stop; and to that degree, the free-will defense (= FWD) has an apologetic role to play.² Yet we cannot ignore the witness of scripture to God’s “ultimacy” with respect to the evil that men do.³ Somehow, he remains firmly in charge of all that occurs, and thus the FWD is incomplete. Most challenging for the FWD is the picture of heaven drawn for us in such places as the Revelation, where two conditions obtain: (a) the saints are all there, glorifying God and enjoying him in morally-significant ways, and (b) they do so without the slightest chance of falling again. But (b) could not happen for eternity apart from God’s meticulous providence. He has to guarantee that we never sin by changing *us* somehow; and now comes the inevitable question. What would have prevented God from instantiating heavenly conditions from the start? The promise of glory implies that God could have actualized a world in which all people freely do only what pleases him. Why, therefore, did his plan include salvation history as we know it? The FWD insulates God from the charge of doing evil, but it does not answer this follow-up question. Why does God’s plan include the doing of evil when, from one perspective, it need not have done so? The biblical writers actually answer this question, subject to certain qualifications. First, they do not answer the question theoretically, as if to put philosophers of religion wholly at ease. We get

² The strongest offering of the free-will defense has been given by Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

³ The term “ultimacy” is D. A. Carson’s. Cf. *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002 (1994)), p. 201.

from scripture at high-altitude, a macroscopic answer which will not help us to know just why Smith is allowed to violate Jones or why either of them gets cancer. Secondly, the biblical writers' answer will rest upon basic intuitions that are themselves undefended. In this regard, they are not unique: everyone has their theoretical stopping-points. We have ours, and they have theirs, the alternative being an infinite regress of explanations—just one after another, as the joke goes, “all the way down.” The plausibility of their answer, therefore, will not take the form of examining the premises that lead to their foundational assumptions, now treated as conclusions. Rather, we will have to consider whether these assumptions are consistent with their entire worldview, essentially whether they can live with the result of stopping where they have, both theoretically and practically.

Consider, then, the story of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery, which actually begins back in Genesis 15. In this chapter, Yahweh vows that Abraham will become the father of many nations and that he will inherit the Holy Land.⁴ But the Lord's promise has a dark side, just as the ones given by Jesus often do. In v. 13, God says to Abraham, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.” Yahweh does not merely happen to know—because he is God—that these events will occur: he plans for them. This conclusion follows in light of v. 14, where he tells Abraham, “But I will judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.” He could cut the years short at any point, but he chooses this extraordinarily long season of pain—about double the entire history of the United States. Likewise, he would have to determine that such events occur, lest his foreknowledge of them be defeasible by the actions of indifferently free agents.⁵ Why would he do such a thing? The Exodus narrative outlines an answer to this question, subject to the qualifications noted above.

The story of the Exodus begins formally in the book of that name, where much evil and suffering is referred to in compact form. The Pharaoh fears the Hebrews because of their tremendous numbers and

⁴ At this point in the narrative, the patriarch is not called ‘Abraham’ but ‘Abram.’ I have used the familiar name as a convenience only.

⁵ An agent has ‘indifferent’ liberty just in case for any action *A* that he happens to perform, no prior conditions obtained which prevented him from doing *non-A*. It seems to be clear enough that if the Pharaoh of Egypt had this kind of freedom, Yahweh could not be certain, 400 years in advance, that he would enslave the Hebrews. The whole plan could have been sidetracked by one indifferently free act—say, that Pharaoh chooses to run, and not walk, down the stairs of his palace one day, with Humpty Dumpty consequences following.

responds with greater oppression. The Egyptians increase their slaves' workloads, while restricting their materials, and even attempt to depopulate them through infanticide. Because Moses does not describe their suffering in detail, we have to fill in the story of their suffering with educated guesses, but one can safely reconstruct the questions that would have been asked by the Hebrews at that time. If this God loves us, why on earth would he let this evil man come to power and rule over us? Why should we suffer in this way? And even if we must endure some pain, why 400 years' worth? What keeps Yahweh from striking the Pharaoh dead right now? It is no stretch to imagine that some Egyptians, to say nothing of the Hebrews, would have asked confused forms of these same questions, minus particular knowledge of God's nature and abilities. But the suffering continues, year after year, generation after generation, to the point where hope itself becomes ridiculous and cruel. One solitary human being has so much power to wound; yet he reclines in his palace, vaguely happy and well-fed.

Even now, our world is filled with suffering caused by strongmen pursuing utopian causes, the latter cited to justify each stripe and gunshot. With arms they kill, and with pens they impoverish. Garden variety wickedness occurs right next door, out of sight, around the corner, beneath the surface—never precisely repeated, never fully detected. And God lets it happen, against his own moral will. Indeed, if we understand the scriptures correctly, his own plan works these events in, both the evil itself and the human indifference which chooses not to know and therefore not to act. So we ask the same kinds of questions that were raised above. Why would God not only endure, *but even ordain*, events which offend his moral perfection? At several points in the Exodus narrative, Yahweh gives something like an answer, though it may not be one to please every critic.

In chapter 5, Moses reaches a breaking point in his relationship with Yahweh. He has gone before the Pharaoh and repeated Yahweh's demand, "Let My son go that he may serve Me" (4.23, cf. 5.1). God had warned Moses not to anticipate success in changing the Pharaoh's mind. Moses will fail because, as Yahweh says, "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (4.21). Nevertheless, when the Pharaoh responds with greater offenses, Moses complains to God: "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all" (5.23). This complaint prompts Yahweh to disclose his final objective, the entire point of it all. Chapter 6 begins with an overview of what God has promised to do for the Hebrews: "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he will let them go, and under compulsion he will drive them

out of his land” (v. 1). And what purpose will this serve, i.e., other than to rescue them from conditions that he could have prevented?

Verses 2-7 reveal the answer. Even the patriarchs knew God as ‘El Shaddai,’ an omnipotent deity who makes extraordinary promises and keeps them; but they did not know him as ‘Yahweh,’ the Savior-King of the Exodus, who rescued them from slavery with signs and wonders that no one could have imagined.⁶ This aspect of his nature is new to one and all, and the Exodus event will reveal it (vv. 6-7):

Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.’

When Yahweh rescues his people from slavery, they will encounter him personally as the God who hears their cry, remembers his covenant, and saves them for himself. Without the Exodus event, including the slavery leading up to it, this dimension of Yahweh’s nature would have gone undisclosed. Accordingly, Israel’s suffering serves the greater good of their God’s self-revelation: the latter could not happen without the former.

A similar inference can be drawn from the statements made by Yahweh in 9.1-17. Moses delivers the message to Pharaoh once more; and again, the prophet tells him that he has no choice but to surrender. If he does not, Egypt’s livestock will die. Indeed, they will die in a way that emphasizes both (a) Yahweh’s unchallengeable power over nature and (b) his sovereign election of Israel as his own people. Moses tells the Pharaoh that the Lord will “put a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt,” and he sets a “definite time” when the disaster will strike. Only the God of Israel would have this kind of control over natural forces—viz., regarding the boundaries of destruction and the latter’s temporal beginning and end. In this sense, the starting and stopping of nature’s forces against Egypt repeat in microcosm Yahweh’s command-control over the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1-2. When the last of Egypt’s firstborn has died (12.30-32), all questions

⁶ Much debate has occurred regarding the meaning of God’s name ‘YHWH,’ none of which can be treated here. Perhaps even that much should not be assumed, viz., that the name is readily definable along the lines of ‘Isaac’ or ‘Daniel.’ If one ventures a guess, however, some connection would have to exist between God’s name and the particular role that he will now assume as Israel’s Savior-King.

as to the sovereignty of Israel's God have been answered by the clockwork annihilation of Pharaoh's kingdom.⁷ It also goes without saying that Yahweh's choice of Israel stands out in this drama—the death of some and the life of others—as it did also in his precise control over light and darkness in Exodus 10.21-29 (cf. Genesis 1.5, 14-18).

In the largest sense, therefore, these events occur because Yahweh intends to reveal himself—his power, goodness, and sovereign choice of Israel—to a particular people. He will call them as his priestly kingdom, and these events show them what sort of God they serve. As Exodus 9 indicates, Yahweh has even “hardened Pharaoh's heart” (v. 12), so that he would refuse to yield; and in so doing, this king opens the door for Yahweh to show “that there is no one like (him) in all the earth” (v. 14). Likewise, in Exodus 10.1-2, we see that these terrible events, both the slavery of Israel and the destruction of Egypt, have occurred, as Yahweh says,

. . . that I may perform these signs of Mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.

The purpose, at the end of the day, is that the people of Israel can reflect with awe and humility on the relationship that they have with this God and, in so doing, have a basis for undivided loyalty to him (cf. the Decalogues, noting especially the progression from self-revelatory indicative, “I am the Lord your God, etc.,” to the central imperative, “You shall have no other gods before me”).

Accordingly, one notes that the theodicy emerging from our study of Exodus has a ‘greater good’ structure.⁸ Bad things happen, first to Israel, then to Egypt; but they happen for the sake of something more valuable than anyone's abstracted painlessness: to know who our God is, not simply because he tells us, but especially because he shows us through concrete actions that we can understand. Of course, this argument rests on a foundational assumption, the truth of which one just ‘sees’ or else not. That is, Israel's experiential knowledge of Yahweh *as Savior*, the one who rescues them from slavery, is worth all of that destruction and

⁷ As an analogy, one thinks of Muhammad Ali's announcing the exact round that his opponents would fall: if he can finish off his opponent in any particular round, he can do it in any round. He is fully in control.

⁸ Cf. various strategies considered by Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 123-165 and John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), pp. 135-141.

suffering. The argument offers no direct response to the critic who protests, “I don’t care how marvelous your God is; knowing him has too high a price tag.” One can, however, advance the discussion by asking a simple, follow-up question. If such a God exists, and if we might come to know and serve him, what else *could be* the highest good? Would such a God have anything better to offer us than a relationship with him, founded on displays of his immeasurable goodness toward us? Can that goodness be properly understood while his justice and wrath remain obscure? The answers given by Exodus are ‘Nothing,’ ‘No,’ and ‘No,’ respectively. Perhaps one dislikes the answers, but the writers of scripture do not equivocate.

Although our study concentrates on the Exodus narrative, one might observe that the Apostle Paul gives precisely this interpretation of the Exodus event, with special emphasis on the rise of Pharaoh. The larger case to be made in Romans 9 is that God’s word never fails. We should never think, Paul implies, that God’s sovereign will is ever compromised by sinners. The Apostle concedes and laments that Israel has just now rejected the Messiah Jesus; but he accounts for this fact in a way that preserves God’s absolute reign. The latter has made promises to Israel, but his promises refer to the elect among Abraham’s children, not to every person who is related to Abraham by blood (vv. 6-7). Similarly, just as God chose to bless Isaac rather than Ishmael, he also elected Jacob for blessing and not Esau (vv. 10-13). We do not know why God did this, though Paul flatly denies the explanation that rationalists favor, viz., that Jacob had done something—or, at any rate, that he would do something down the road—that sets him above his twin brother. On the contrary, God’s antecedent choice accounts for subsequent differences between them, crooked as Jacob himself turns out to be in various ways; and this fact invites the rhetorical question: “There is no injustice with God, is there?” (v. 14). We might answer ‘yes,’ based on egalitarian impulses, as though God were obliged to give to all what he gives to any. But Paul himself invites us to consider our options carefully. In vv. 15-16, he quotes Exodus 33.9, “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,’” as if to argue that totalitarian fairness from God would prevent his showing mercy toward anyone, Jew or Gentile. In v. 17, the Apostle adds a second rationale, this one resting on Yahweh’s own words from Exodus. To the Pharaoh, he says, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” Some people are chosen by God, and some are not. Without this doctrine, we are left with the inelegance that God has failed to accomplish his own sovereign will. But at what point does his sovereign will line up with his moral will, the end for which all history transpires? The essence of Paul

removes all doubt in Romans 9.22-23. God's final aim is to demonstrate both his power and wrath against sin (v. 22) and also to manifest "the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory" (v. 23). The highest good, to which all others must bow, is God's own purpose of knowing and being known by those whom he would save.

This essay is being written three weeks before the general elections in the United States. Some churches are now within days of calling a senior pastor. Leaders are seizing power and being chosen all over our nation and across the world. And in many cases, the results will not be favorable. Our country might elect for a president a man who is regarded by many of his opponents as evil, to say nothing of being merely wrong on the issues. He might do a generation's worth of damage, each month of his tenure including some new outrage—a series long enough to let the earliest ones be forgotten. Churches will call selfish egotists to lead them, though they mean to do otherwise. They will be unfeeling corporate men, loaded with gimmicks and devoid of grace. It will be too late, then. Six years, four years, or two: it all depends on the office. So we ask once more, why would God schedule their arrival? Why would he raise *them* up, as he raises up anyone who leads? If we may apply the lesson of Exodus across the board, we get this answer. God will make himself known to us; and if we have the faith to see how this result could follow from a present crisis, we would not want it any other way, notwithstanding the patience needed and the pain endured.