

What Does  
the Bible  
Say About... ?

## **Good and Evil**

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# Good and Evil

Michael Patella, OSB

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## Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about GOOD AND EVIL.”



## Introduction

One day, when I was about five years old, my sister and I were chasing butterflies in the backyard as our mother was hanging the laundry. At a certain point, my sister grasped one wing of the little creature and called out in delight, “Mommy, look! I caught one!” The frustrated butterfly was rapidly flapping its remaining, free wing, trying to flee. My mother dropped the clothes pins and ran over, “No, no! Let it go! You’re causing it to suffer!,” as she pried my sister’s small fingers away. My mother then gave us both a little lecture on why it is always wrong to inflict pain or suffering on any living thing. Her words have stayed with me since that moment, and I count it as my first lesson in the difference between good and evil.

Good and evil: Where do they come from? As early as six months of age, or as soon as they are able to move on their own, infants learn from their parents what is good and what is bad. By five they become aware that all living plants and animals die. Shortly thereafter, they can realize that sentient creatures, such as their pet cats and dogs, feel pain just as they themselves feel pain. Upon reaching the age of reason, these same children are able to distinguish the difference between pain and suffering, and at that moment, they make an existential leap, for suffering, though associated with pain, goes much deeper. Questions become more profound, usually leading to inquiry about

life and death, and from that inquiry, every other question related to human existence comes into play. What in life can we call good, or hold as bad? Furthermore, are good and evil independent entities outside the human person, or are they also something deeply existential? The biblical narrative enters at this juncture.

Such a topic as good and evil in the Bible might lead some to think that there will be ready answers to complex questions. It is not as simple as that, however. In fact, often deciphering good and evil may lead to more questions with no ready answers at all. On the other hand, it would be a serious mistake to think that defining good and evil in the Bible is an exercise in relativism, for it most surely is not. If we are dealing with complex questions, and we are doing just that, then the answers are equally complex, as complex as life itself.

### Certitude or Faith?

A tendency among many is to see the Bible as containing the definitive answers to any question, particularly if the questions regard human behavior. The Bible, however, is not a rule book or even a how-to book. It is a book establishing a living relationship with the Lord God. Just as all the biblical stories recount a people's growth in faith, we must interpret those stories in a way that increases our faith. Concisely, we should not look for statements of certitude in the Bible. Doing so will leave us very disappointed, for

certitude and faith are not synonyms, though many think they are. Addressing questions of good and evil through the eyes of faith will deepen our dependence on the Lord and the Holy Spirit, whereas certitude will keep that relationship at a distance.

## Our Human Context

From the beginning of time, the whole human race has had to face the question: Is there life after death, which is perceived as good, or are we all ultimately doomed to annihilation, which is perceived as bad? It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly all moral choices rest on this question. Archaeological evidence suggests that even the Neanderthals could not escape asking it. Humankind's different cultures and civilizations have had their own way of answering it. Yet, despite the variety of responses, it would not be too great a generalization to say that for nearly everyone in every time and in every place, the worst experience of evil has always had suffering and death as its endpoint, as it's an inescapable conclusion. Any hope for good, peace, joy, and life remained a hope without any guarantees, and one always threatened by evil.

These questions, because they are questions on the human condition, also find their way into the Bible. For believers, the Bible is where human reflection meets divine revelation, and thus the Bible exists both inside human history and simultaneously beyond it. This fact determines

the language, idiom, and themes of biblical stories and literature. We must be careful, however. Understanding the Bible involves more than knowing its component parts of language, vocabulary, genre, and the like. It requires the ability to accept the fact that no matter how much we know, there is still more to know.

### Divine Mystery

As God's revelation of Godself to humankind, Sacred Scripture gives us a glimpse into the mystery of God's divine being. In this case, "mystery" does not signify something to be resolved, as in a mystery novel. Rather, it describes the life we enter as well as the experience of entering that life whenever we open the pages of the Bible. As part of the divine mystery, therefore, we should not expect facile answers in distinguishing the difference between good and evil. To approach the Bible as if it were solely a guide to right living will not yield very much, and the little it does provide will never be sufficient for a life in Christ, which is the goal of every Christian.

In broad strokes, then, issues of good and evil as found in the Bible will be both clear and opaque. On one level, to ensure our actions are life-giving, the Bible should be easy enough to follow. On another level, discerning what "life-giving" really means and the kind of action it demands can be a very complicated endeavor. Answering these questions and any others associated with them takes an interplay of

prayer, experience, and serious thought, and we will often find ourselves wrestling with them just as Jacob wrestled with an angel (Genesis 32:22–32). Nonetheless, we can acknowledge at the outset that the purpose of our relationship with God is to have abundant life (John 10:10). Anything contributing to that abundance is life-giving and therefore good, and anything that limits or detracts from it is death-dealing and therefore evil. My hope is that this point becomes clearer as one continues reading. Ultimately, we are all under the realm of divine love, and in discussing good and evil in the Bible, we are seeking ways to reflect that love and increase it.

In this book, I present the explanation of good and evil in the Bible along thematic lines that deal with questions or issues we may have today. In many cases, the issue has historical roots reaching down to some of the basic questions of human existence. All existential questions are religious ones, and therefore they surface within biblical revelation.

The following eight chapters deal with various topics or questions often associated with good and evil: How Did We Get into This Mess? Back to the Garden; Do We Follow the Rules or Not? Violence for Good?; Discerning Good and Evil: A View from the Prophets; How Social Responsibility Leads to the Kingdom of God; Does Suffering Come from Evil?; Good Friends and Evil Enemies; and What's Love Got to Do with It? These chapters do not exhaust the topic, and they certainly do not reach any conclusive statement on good and evil. If anything, they will generate more ques-

tions. My hope is that these questions themselves will lead one to a deeper inquiry into our relationship with God, and as such, issues of good and evil in the Bible will make clearer the unfathomable depths of God's love and goodness.

# Chapter One

## How Did We Get into This Mess? Back to the Garden

“In the beginning...” (Genesis 1:1) is a quotation familiar to many people. Not only does it give a point of definition to the moment of creation, but it also raises heaps of questions about human existence. In the introduction, I explain that in the Bible, things that are life-giving are good, while those that are death-dealing are bad or evil. I also caution that we might not always have the complete picture that would enable us to define what is life-giving and death-dealing. The ultimate messiness of human life and the intertwining of good and evil, in fact, go back to the garden. The Genesis story helps us to set up some markers or standards, which we can use to come to a clearer idea of what constitutes ultimate good and ultimate evil.

We can all probably remember the first time we heard the story of Adam and Eve. As a first-grader, I could certainly understand how stealing a piece of fruit from what I thought was God’s orchard could be a serious transgression. I had done something similar with cherries in the neighbor’s yard and had gotten into deep trouble because of it. In the end, I learned a valuable lesson about stealing,

obedience, and respect for others. Yet, with Adam and Eve, I suppose that most people today feel as I did then: It is a bit excessive on God's part to punish humankind eternally for the feckless deed of two persons no one had ever met.

While in the development of the Christian tradition, the scene in the garden lies at the core of the doctrine of original sin, there are also other ways to look at it, all biblically based. In this chapter, I would like to investigate this story more deeply so that we can come to an understanding of good and evil that is both true to the tradition and to human anthropology.

## Genesis: The Mythic History

In discussing Adam and Eve in Genesis, defining its genre is a good place to start. The phrase, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," opens a passage that gives a day-by-day account of the formation of the heavens and earth, that is, the whole universe (1:1–2:3). It is a marvelous story, and yet, it must be said in unequivocal terms that those holding this creation story literally true and insisting that the whole universe and sequence in which the various parts of creation take their shape actually occurred as written here are off to a very bad start. In fact, they are missing the whole point of the account. The Genesis creation story is not a scientific explanation on the origins of the universe. It is a religious narrative about good and evil within human existence, which is expressed as a



literary myth. The term *myth* does not mean that it is false; rather, it means that seeking the truth lies beyond empirical and factual details. A *myth* is a story filled with profound truth but couched in creative language and imagery. What, then, can it tell us?

The structure is helpful in answering the question. If readers look carefully, they will see two, separate stories blended together as if they are a single account. Immediately following the seventh day of rest (Genesis 2:3), a second rendition of creation surfaces and runs to the end of the chapter (2:4–25). Scholars attribute the reason for the two to the hand of the Genesis writer. The first story, with its emphasis on order and categories (1:1–2:3), reflects one literary source. The author presents this piece as a preamble for the second story narrating the creation of human beings in relationship to their creator, the Lord God (2:4–25), another source.

Such literary details indicate that the purpose of the creation stories is not to tell us *how* the universe came into being, but rather to tell us *why* it did so, explaining through symbolic language an existential reality. In this case, the reality is the goodness of God and the goodness of all God's creatures. This double account did not arise as an invented, isolated story, however. Research shows that the whole mythic history in Genesis (1:1–11:26) counters the violent and bloody stories of those lands surrounding ancient Israel, particularly the Mesopotamian epics, and the differences between them sharpen the focus on the goodness of God.

In the *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian epic poem from the late second millennium BC, the heavens and the earth come about after a ferocious battle between two gods, Marduk and Tiamat. Marduk wins, and divides Tiamat's body in two. One half becomes the heavens, and the other half becomes the earth; humans are seen as maggots arising from Tiamat's corpse.

Turning to the opening two verses in Genesis, we read, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (1:1–2). When placed alongside the *Enuma Elish* saga, we see a striking difference between the two. First, there is no battle between gods. There is only one God, and this God creates both the heavens and the earth. Creation happens when God speaks. The first thing emanating from God's act is light, and "the light was good" (1:4). From that moment, whatever God creates and oversees also is *good* (1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25); it is a constant refrain, quite unlike anything in *Enuma Elish*.

If goodness is the outcome of God's free act of creation, the writer wants us to know that what exists before God's unsolicited movement is, in Hebrew, *tohu wa bohu*, that is, not only emptiness and formlessness, but also confusion and unreality. It is not necessarily death; it is an indescribable form of non-existence, which is *not good*. We know it is not good, because judging from the whole thrust of biblical revelation that constantly moves from non-existence to existence, and from death to life, anything that eschews

life and its possibility is not good. Throughout the Bible, therefore, anything that is ultimately death-dealing—as opposed to something that may only appear to lack all possibility of life—leads to *tohu wa bohu*.

With God's goodness thus established, the Genesis writer begins the second creation story (2:4), and in it describes the cooperative relationship between God and humankind. Again, a comparison with the *Enuma Elish* is helpful for tracing the benevolent movement of God's creative act. For example, at one point in the Mesopotamian myth, the gods create human beings as slaves to relieve a class of gods of servile labor. In Genesis, however, God forms humankind to till a garden which they will inhabit in peace and harmony with all the animals God also has created.

The writer at first describes humankind as sexually undifferentiated through a clever use of language. The Lord God forms the human being from the "dust of the ground" (2:7); in Hebrew, *ha 'adam* from the *ha 'adamah*, respectively. The Lord then breathes life into the human being's nostrils. The Lord places the human being in the garden of Eden while the text calls attention to two plantings: "the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9). Further on, the Lord God commands that though everything in the garden is at the human's disposal, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is off limits. The Lord even warns, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (2:17). The role these two trees play in the narrative, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,

becomes more evident after the human being is differentiated as male and female.

Despite all the creatures the Lord has placed in the garden and the human's superior role in the relationship with them, signaled by the human ability to name the animals, the human being is solitary and lonely without an equal. Only after the Lord removes the rib from *ha 'adam*, do female and male come into being on equal, uninhibited terms (2:22–23), a point confirmed by their being unashamed of their nakedness (2:25).

Immediately, the serpent enters the scene. There is nothing in the Genesis text linking the serpent to Satan or the devil—that connection does not surface until the Book of Revelation—yet the story underscores that the snake is the craftiest among all the wild animals, and it is never portrayed as anything but evil throughout the Bible. The way Genesis describes the transgression and the effects that flow therefrom demonstrate that it is a gross misperception to conclude that the woman has less moral fiber than the man, because she listens to the serpent. As equals, the two are in this scene together.

The Lord had commanded the human being not to eat of the tree of good and evil, for doing so will bring death (2:17). The serpent disabuses that idea, and in fact, when the woman eats it, she does not die (3:6). The serpent does say, however, that upon eating it, “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). To know “good” and its opposite, “evil,” is also to know every-