

Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

May/June 2001

Issue Number 64

THE HEBREW LAMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

BY BOB DEWAAY

"Therefore, I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Have I sinned? What have I done to Thee, O watcher of men? Why hast Thou set me as Thy target, So that I am a burden to myself?" (Job 7:11,20)

"How long, O Lord, will I call for help, And Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, 'Violence!' Yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore, justice comes out perverted." (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

The Hebrew people were not bashful about voicing their complaints to the Lord about the problem of evil and suffering. Their laments about evil make up a large body of literature in the Bible which includes Job (parts of it), Habakkuk, many lament Psalms, Lamentations, and much of Jeremiah. The Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical authors to write this material so that all subsequent generations of people could learn from people of faith who suffered in past ages. What we shall explore in this essay is, "What did they learn?" Since there is so much inspired Scripture that asks hard questions about why God allows evil and suffering, should we not start with this material when seeking answers about the problem of evil?

A few months ago I was reading an editorial in our local paper by a Christian educator who was writing a book on the problem of evil. In the editorial he mentioned three theistic defenses that address this issue: the openness of God, the free will defense, and the soul-building defense. The openness idea is that God does not know the future choices of free moral agents, so He cannot be blamed for failing to anticipate the evil they do. The free will defense says that God knows the consequences of giving humans free will, but has decided it is worth giving it because without free will we would be unable to truly love God. The soul-building defense says that God allows

evil for a greater good in the lives of His people. The author of the editorial was writing a book to promote the free will defense.

Reading the editorial, I had this thought: why do we consult philosophical speculation first when we address this issue?¹ In so doing, we act as if the Bible were silent on it. Since we have a very large body of material in the Bible, in which real people voice their complaints to God about evil in the world, should not we start there in our search for answers? In some cases, God Himself speaks to the issue. One cannot find a higher authority or hope for better answers than the ones God gives. So I decided to restudy various laments in the Bible and categorize their answers to the problem of evil. Let us see where this approach leads us.

JOB'S COMPLAINT

Job complained bitterly to God about his horrible suffering. His "comforters" told him it was his own fault, but Job did not accept their conclusions. Job, however, had no other viable explanation and longed for a chance to present his case before God Himself. He got his opportunity as described in Job chapters 38 - 42. Though this section is very long, the answers can be summarized by category. Most of the responses are a series of rhetorical questions God asks Job which Job could not answer (Job 38:5 - 39:30 and 40:9 - 41:34). The

first question shows the basic issue in all the questions: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4). Seen from the perspective of God's position as Almighty Creator, Job's complaints are impertinent and insolent. God as Creator has knowledge, power, sovereignty, and wisdom beyond all human reasoning. Job could not hope to answer a single one of the dozens of questions. God's power and wisdom are evident in creation and man's finiteness is such that he lacks understanding and knowledge. Thus, man is dependent on God for what He knows. For man to question God is the height of folly.

There is an interlude in the rhetorical questions in Job 40:1-8 that is very important in understanding the message of the Book of Job. God asks, "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it" (Job 40:2). The point is that no one can possibly reprove God, so no man can give an adequate answer. Job gets the point and responds: "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add no more" (Job 40:4,5). God however, is not done with His questions. He says, "Now gird up your loins like a man; I will ask you, and you instruct Me. Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:7,8). This last question is crucial. Will a man condemn God to justify himself? This is the watershed issue as far as the Bible is concerned. Are we willing to accept God's self-revelation through the Scriptures and love and trust Him on His terms, or shall we demand a "god" who conforms to our own ideas?

An example of this tendency is, Harold Kushner, a famous author who wrote the book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." In a televised debate with Norman Geisler, Rabbi Kushner argued that God wants to solve the problem of evil but lacks the power to do so.² When we contemplate the

existence of evil in a theistic universe, we are tempted to allow speculation to take precedence over revelation. Dare we deny certain aspects of God's character that are clearly taught in Scripture so that we have a more pleasing answer to the problem of evil?

Will man condemn God to justify himself? He will surely try. God further asks Job, *"Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine."* (Job 41:11). The whole creation belongs to God and He can rule His own universe as He sees fit. He owes man nothing! He reserves the right to dispose of all that is His according to His good pleasure.

After hearing more about God's power over all of creation, Job replies: *"I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted."* (Job 42:2). This section of Job is key to understanding the answer it gives to the problem of evil. The context indicates that what Job says in verses 2-6 is pleasing to God. For example, right after Job speaks and says, *"Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes"* (Job 42:6), God commends Job. Therefore the writer of Job is indicating that his response in Job 42:2-6 is correct. God says to Job's comforters, *"You have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has"* (Job 42:7b). This is, I believe, a reference to what Job had just said.

The key things that Job said were that God had all power — *"Thou canst do all things"* — and that God was fully able to execute His plans — *"no purpose of Thine can be thwarted."* This is very telling. Since the "open view" that denies God's exhaustive foreknowledge assumes that many of God's purposes are continually thwarted by unforeseen choices of moral agents.

The "free will" approach also holds that there is a something important that God cannot do, and that is to create a universe in which free moral agents freely love Him without also risking the possibility of evil. They hold that God foresees that men will do evil, but that He decided it was worth it in order to have free agents who could love Him. In some sense, they also see God's purposes being thwarted. Interestingly, in the whole discussion that arises in the Book of Job, the only ones committed to the free will idea were Job's comforters, who claimed that Job had chosen to sin and was being punished

for it. In all the verses where God Himself speaks, He never said that free will caused the problems in Job's life. In fact, the prologue of Job indicates that God gave Satan permission to ruin Job's life and that Job was blameless. This whole scenario shows God's purposes, not some commitment to "free will."³

Much of what happened to Job cannot be explained by the existence of free will. For example, whose "free will" was involved in boils all over Job's body? Job did not have these boils until God gave Satan permission to touch his body. This is reminiscent of a passage in John:

"And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him'" (John 9:2,3). Granted, this explanation does not sit very well with most contemporary thinkers. They imagine that it is cruel for God to allow a man to suffer blindness all those years so that He could heal him later. Perhaps they think it a small thing that subsequently the man came to faith in Christ (John 9:38). We can ask the man when we get to heaven if he thought those previous years of blindness were worth it. God saw fit to allow something in Job's life that He would later heal him of, for a greater good.

The Book of Job concludes with God's restoration of Job's fortunes. He allowed all that happened, not just for Job to learn more about God's sovereign power and purposes, but for all future readers of the Bible to learn, as well. It amazes me that the answers in the Book of Job are so rarely considered when the problem of evil is discussed by Christians. We should allow the salient Biblical material to inform our understanding of these matters.

HABAKKUK'S QUESTIONS

Habakkuk is a unique prophet in that his book does not contain preaching to others, but is a record of His own problems with understanding God's ways. Habakkuk struggled with the problem of evil. His first question has to do with why God allowed evil leadership in Israel:

How long, O Lord, will I call for help, And Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, "Violence!" Yet Thou

dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore, justice comes out perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

This is a good description of the problem of evil, one that in various forms has been repeated throughout human history. Notice the phrase *"how long."* This phrase is found many times in the Bible in Hebrew laments.⁴ Its form carries with it a clue to the Biblical perspective on the problem of evil: there is a time limitation to it. There will be a time when God will deal decisively with all forms of evil. This was not questioned. What was questioned was how long it would be before this happens.

Habakkuk could not bear, he felt, to watch anymore as the powerful in Israel oppressed the righteous. He wondered when God would bring deserved punishment to the wicked in Israel. God's answer shocked Habakkuk because it clearly was not what he wanted to hear. God was going to use the even more wicked Chaldeans to judge Israel. God would send a ruthless and godless people to solve the problem that Habakkuk was complaining about. Here is what God said to Habakkuk: *"Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days — You would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs"* (Habakkuk 1:5,6).

This was **not** what Habakkuk wanted to hear! Far from an answer, this was even more troubling. He said, *"Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, And Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?"* (Habakkuk 1:13). The Chaldeans were even more evil than the apostate Jews. This seemed to Habakkuk an even greater contradiction. How can a righteous God raise up evil people to bring about His justice? So he continued his complaint and asked God for an

answer: “Why hast Thou made men like the fish of the sea, Like creeping things without a ruler over them? The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, Drag them away with their net, And gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore, they rejoice and are glad.” (**Habakkuk 1:14,15**). He was saying, we are no more than fish to be caught for the food for the wicked Chaldeans and thus make them happy! Far from being a satisfying answer to his first question, this answer raised even more questions.

Habakkuk, assuming he would be reproved by God (**Habakkuk 2:1**), awaited God’s answer. Interestingly, the answer he received will later be quoted by Paul in **Romans 1:17**, and much later read by Martin Luther who was inspired by it to spark the Reformation. Habakkuk’s sorrows and laments were not to be without fruit. The answer he received was: “For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith” (**Habakkuk 2:3,4**). There is not only a time issue as discussed earlier, but an attitude issue as well. The vision is that of God bringing to pass all His saving purposes, truly ruling in righteousness through Messiah. The purpose of Israel was to carry forward the promise given to Abraham that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (**Genesis 12:3**). This would happen in God’s “appointed” time. God has his purpose for Israel and it will not fail, wicked Chaldeans notwithstanding. God will bring about justice in His own time and way.

The attitude issue concerns pride or faith. The proud one will not accept that God has an appointed time but will look to take action in his own way. The righteous person, on the other hand, shall live by faith. Habakkuk is to faithfully wait for God and put his trust in God who keeps His promises. God’s purposes shall prevail and the righteous one will trust God no matter how much present evil must be endured.

The rest of the book of Habakkuk concerns the calamity that will befall the wicked, warnings against idolatry, promises that God will fully reveal His glory throughout the earth, and then a prayer of Habakkuk. There are a couple of key passages that show the prophet’s

hope. One is **Habakkuk 2:14**: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, As the waters cover the sea.” This shows the content of the vision that is appointed (verse 3). This is also that for which the righteous wait in faith (verse 4).

Habakkuk does not take all this in a fatalistic way, but prays fervently for God’s purposes: “Lord, I have heard the report about Thee and I fear. O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy” (**Habakkuk 3:2**). Habakkuk’s prayer shows that He accepted God’s answer even though it was not the one he wanted to hear. This is our need in our day. Will we accept God’s answer to our rightfully felt distress over the evil around us, or will we only accept answers that play well in our secular culture?

Habakkuk did not at all like the answer he received, but he accepted it as from the Lord. That he struggled with the answer is seen in this verse: “I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, And in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us” (**Habakkuk 3:16**). He had to wait for his own people to be destroyed by the Chaldeans because God had raised them up to do so. Habakkuk’s final response however, shows the dignity, beauty, and grace of the Hebrew lament. Though brutally honest in their questions and distresses, the Hebrew prophets were anchored in a firm understanding of God’s greatness and His love. Habakkuk concludes:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail, And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, And makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments. (**Habakkuk 3:17-19**)*

Habakkuk’s lament turns into a song about God’s goodness to be sung in Israel. What is remarkable is that this

was the case even as he waited for the inevitable “day of distress.” He never doubts that God is, indeed, the God of his salvation.

Like Job, Habakkuk gained a deeper faith in God through his deep sorrows and personal experience with horrible evil. As with Job, the answer that God gave had to do with His purposes. He was the one raising up the invaders who would punish the apostate leaders of Israel, and His ultimate answer was to come at His appointed time. In the meanwhile, His people are to live by faith. Let us consider this in relationship to the current answers proposed for the problem of evil. Did God tell Habakkuk, “I have to let the wicked leaders in Israel and the wicked Chaldeans have their free will; otherwise, no one could love Me”? It is hard to force the free will solution into the text. It is also hard to see how “free will” would give the hope that the whole world would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God (**2:14**). The answers had to do with time — not now but later — and attitude — faith rather than pride. The “openness” view is even less tenable. In Habakkuk, God predicts what will happen. He knows very well the future course of human history.

LAMENT PSALMS

The lament Psalms echo similar themes and propose the same answers. The first lament, **Psalms 13**, asks “how long” concerning the oppression of the wicked. Its ending is similar to Habakkuk: “But I have trusted in Thy lovingkindness; My heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation. I will sing to the Lord, Because He has dealt bountifully with me” (**Psalms 13: 5,6**). The Hebrew writers of Scripture asked the hard questions and complained bitterly to the Lord about the evil that afflicted them. But they ultimately did not doubt God’s character. In fact, it was their confidence in His righteous character that fueled their laments. It was the fact that He was all-powerful and righteous that created the seeming incongruity with their experiences.

For example, if they, like Rabbi Kushner, truly thought that God **could not** do anything about the situation, they would hardly have been so upset that He **did not**. Their knowledge that God could easily change everything if He so willed underlies the thinking in

all these laments. They do not interact with anything that resembles the modern theories that suppose that God has to do things this way because of some inherent limitation in His abilities or nature. These Biblical writers had an unwavering belief that God could change their situation immediately if it was His purpose to do so. The "how long" underscores this faith. There is no time issue with an impossibility.

Psalm 94 is a lament Psalm that cries out for God to judge the earth and vindicate the faith of the afflicted who are trusting in God. The psalmist writes, "*How long shall the wicked, O Lord, How long shall the wicked exult?*" (**Psalm 94:3**). Again, we see the "how long" motif. The tension is between God's righteous character, His position as Judge of the Earth, and the apparent impunity with which the wicked sin. They are quoted: "*Lord does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob pay heed*" (verse 7). The psalmist also mentions God's knowledge of human thoughts: "*The Lord knows the thoughts of man, That they are a mere breath*" (verse 11). This is not the first time human finiteness has come up in lament literature! Job emphasized the limitations of human knowledge and power compared to God's infinitely wise and powerful nature.

The next two verses contain key Biblical themes in the context of evil and suffering: "*Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chasten, O Lord, And dost teach out of Thy law; That Thou mayest grant him relief from the days of adversity, Until a pit is dug for the wicked*" (**Psalm 94:12,13**). The righteous are disciplined and taught from God's word. As they pine under the sorrows of moral and calamitous evil, they, like Job, learn about God's ways and are changed for the better by the process. There is also the issue of the future. Now, we are chastened and taught; later the wicked are judged. Other lament Psalms, such as **Psalm 73**, complain of the fact that **now** the wicked are prosperous and happy (**Psalm 73:3-9**), yet joy and hope came to the psalmist when the future was contemplated (**Psalm 73:17,18**). Likewise, **Psalm 94** looks to a future condition when God makes things right (**verses 14,15,23**).

There is one more concept in **Psalm 94** that is in keeping with other Biblical laments. That is a firm confidence in the righteous character of God. The

psalmist wrote, "*If I should say, 'My foot has slipped,' Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, will hold me up*" (**Psalm 94:18**). This is the same idea as **Psalm 13:5**. Knowing God's grace, love, and kind intentions toward us preserves our faith in the day of distress. God will not allow the evil in this world to ultimately destroy the faith of His godly ones who have been redeemed.

CONCLUSION

We have found consistent themes in this brief survey of Hebrew laments: belief in God's total sovereignty, faithful trust, and human finiteness. God's total sovereignty over all things provided the reason for lamenting in the first place. They knew that God had all power and had no doubt that He **could** change the situation. That He had not done so caused them to cry out, "How long?" However, this same belief in God's sovereign rulership of His own creation provided future hope. God would one day judge the wicked, vindicate His faithful ones, and cause the whole earth to be filled with the knowledge of His glory. Those theories that seek to lessen the tension between theistic belief and the reality of evil by attempting to diminish God's power, knowledge, or sovereign rulership unwittingly undermine future hope that so characterize the Hebrew lament.

Another key theme is faithful trust. Job, Habakkuk, and the Psalmists made expressions of hope and trust in the midst of their sorrow over evil and suffering. These expressions are commended to us as exemplary. They provide a rich heritage for all people of faith who suffer throughout the ages. Job vowed to serve God though He slay him, and Habakkuk chose to exult in the Lord though the land be devastated. The lament Psalms characteristically ended with praises to God. The book of Lamentations itself, filled with bitter laments, says: "*This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Thy faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I have hope in Him'*" (**Lamentations 3:21-24**). All believers who suffer until the very end of the age can find encouragement by this example. It is not naive to trust in God's lovingkindness and compassion when suffering

horribly; it is placing one's hope in the only One who can truly give us reason for hope. If we doubted God's character, our faith would be undermined.

A final theme that characterizes the lament is that of human finiteness. We do not know enough to instruct God about how He ought to rule His universe. Job was taught that lesson very strongly. In the face of our limitations, lack of power, and lack of knowledge, we have to acknowledge that only God could possibly turn all this evil into something that eventually will bring glory to Himself and the greater good for His people. The Scriptures tell us that He will.

Therefore, the "soul building" defense best fits the Biblical lament. The Biblical authors, even when pierced through with life's sorrows, proclaimed, "I have trusted in thy lovingkindness." Somehow, "I have trusted in myself or my free will" does not give the same hope.

END NOTES

1. I am not disparaging philosophy *per se*. Jonathan Krohnfeldt, who has a B.A. in philosophy, has contributed an article to this issue of CIC that shows how logical and philosophical distinctions help us understand Biblical issues. I am suggesting that philosophy that does not interact with or take into consideration the preponderance of the pertinent Biblical material is often very misleading. I commend Jonathan's article to you and hope that you take the time to read it carefully. It will help you understand a very important concept that is essential to this discussion.
2. *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* (Dr. Norman Geisler, Rabbi Harold Kushner), The John Ankerberg Show, 1985, video tape. Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, P.O. Box 8977, Chattanooga, TN 37414.
3. Interestingly, God said that He was responsible for what happened to Job: "*And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to ruin him without cause.'*" (**Job 2:3**)
4. The phrase is addressed to God in lament for example in Psalm 6:3; 13:1,2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 89:46; and 94:3.

CAN GOD BE MORALLY GUILTY?

BY JONATHAN KROHNFELDT

Summary: Through the examination of underlying assumptions and concepts, the following article will challenge the arguments concluding that because God has created and sustains a world that contains or is evil, this necessarily makes Him guilty of a moral evil, if not evil Himself. The following analysis, by distinguishing between the concepts of **responsible for** and **guilty of**, will argue that guilt does not arise from mere causal connection, but rather, from violation of a particular moral standard. Further, it will argue that all moral standards have a particular **scope**; that is, they are applicable to a certain set of people. As such, God can perform a certain action, yet *is not* guilty of moral evil; while man, in performing the same action, *is* guilty of a moral evil. This stems from God being without and man within the **scope** of the moral standard in question.

Consider the following general argument regarding God and evil:

If God is responsible for creating and sustaining the world, and if evil exists in the world, then God is in some way responsible for this evil. And if God is in some way responsible for this evil, then God is in some way guilty of evil.

This type of God-is-Guilty (GIG)¹ argument has been expressed in various forms by theist and atheist alike. Of course this does not make the two parties bedfellows. For though they may shake hands over its basic conclusion, they disagree sharply over the ultimate end to which it can be carried. In the hands of the theist, its ultimate end is to demonstrate the need for a freewill-based theodicy², or defense of God. This type of theodicy shifts the burden of guilt implied in GIG from God to man: God is not responsible for the evil in the world because man, through exercise of his won freewill in rebellion against God, is the cause of evil.

For the atheist, the final end of GIG is to form the ground for denying the existence of God, or at least casting serious doubt on the traditional Christian concept of God. According to this reasoning, if God is supposedly good, yet has willfully and knowingly created a world in which such horrendous evil exists, then this good God either does not exist or is so morally repugnant that He is unworthy of worship.

Any warm-hearted person will certainly find this last objection of the atheist not only reasonable, but also tremendously visceral. Sympathy comes easily; for at the gut level the connection between God and evil seems all too clear. In fact, many would consider any analytical response to it horrendously cold and heartless, completely disconnected with the real issue. I fully appreciate such sentiments and likewise feel the thrust of GIG, both intellectually and emotionally. Nonetheless, we must resist the urge to immediately give ground in its face, or worse, lie down in defeat. If any progress is to be made with this argument, we *must* endure a moment of cool analysis. Only then is it seen that GIG's total strength, like that of a chain, lies in its parts. And by chipping away at these essential parts, the total strength of it weakens, and real advancement against it is made.

The key parts of the argument to be considered in our analysis are the concepts of responsible for, guilty of, and moral scope. The first two concepts are explicit, easily seen in GIG: "If God is *responsible for* creating . . . then He is *guilty of* . . ." The last concept of moral scope is, however, very implicit and will be addressed last. Though the conceptual distinctions made in this article are subtle, one should not consider them mere philosophical trivialities. For they probe the very root of the GIG-argument, uncovering distinctions and concepts so fundamental that any attempt to address the issue of God and the existence of evil would prove deficient without them.

RESPONSIBLE FOR

Consider for a moment the following three statements: (1) God is responsible for creating and sustaining of the world; (2) A bus driver is responsible for the safety of his passengers; (3) John Wilkes

Booth is responsible for the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. We see first that all these statements share the form: someone *is responsible for* something. Further, the common element *is responsible for* in utilizing the concept **responsible for**, associates various *explicit* content: God and world, bus driver and passengers, Booth and Lincoln.. In the midst of this obvious content we must not miss the important *implicit* content contained in **responsible for**. In the first statement, for example, **responsible for** seems to speak merely of causality - God is the creating and sustaining cause of the world. But in (2), though certainly dealing with causation, it has a subtle yet certain moral sense about it - the bus driver must not only drive, but is expected or morally obligated to do it in such a way so as to not endanger his passengers. Statement (3), along with expressing a causal relationship, is also packed with the same subtle yet definite moral content - Mr. Booth is not only the cause behind the discharge of the firearm, but is also guilty of murder. Now, as said, these moral subtleties are *implicit*. That is, it is not directly said that the bus driver is morally obligated to drive safely or that Mr. Booth committed murder, yet these ideas are nonetheless there. And we recognize it.

We readily see that these three statements, in using the concept **responsible for**, are a testimony to the subtleties of language: we say something without saying it, and understand the unsaid with unconscious ease. It is a type of intuitive ability possessed by humans. Only by stepping back and asking, "Ok, so what's going on in these statements?" do the various and subtle relationships, assumptions, and implications stand out that were theretofore hidden and unconsciously understood. Now in this "stepping back" I believe not only is the implicit content of **responsible for** uncovered, but the very essence, the fundamental root of this concept is as well. This fundamental and binding root is that of Causality.

Whenever responsible for is used, whether in the three examples above or elsewhere, it carries with it the basic idea that a certain person, agent or state of affairs produces or causes a certain effect or result; there is a causal relation. For example, at core of the

bus-driver statement is the idea that the driver is to *act* or *be the cause* behind the bus driving and the passengers' safety. In the case of Mr. Booth, underlying the moral subtleties is the basic fact that he was the guy behind the gun. He caused the trigger to be pulled that in turn set off a chain of events (ignition of gun powder, propelling of bullet, and so on) that led to the death of Lincoln. This root idea of causation in **responsible for** lays exposed in the statement about God and the world. For by saying that God is responsible for creating the world, we mean that God somehow brought the world into existence; He is the creating-cause behind it all. Thus, in all these instances and those like them, the essence of **responsible for** is mere causality: a certain thing (a person, material state, etc.) produced a certain effect or result. Any other subtleties involving expectation, or that one should act in such-and-such a way, begins pulling in ideas from another conceptual sphere, and thereby raising the issue beyond bare causality. This other sphere, as we will see, is the concept guilty of.

THE CAUSAL TREE

We have seen that causality forms the root of responsible for. But we have also seen that certain instances of causality have other subtleties about them. That is, in asking what is the difference between the questions, "What is responsible for the buzzing for doorbell?" and "Who is responsible for shooting Abraham Lincoln?", we see that the latter possesses a moral quality or implication that the former lacks. Therefore, in certain cases of causality, like that of the shooting of Lincoln, we must not only decide issues of who-or-what-did it, but also the moral rightness or wrongness of what was done. In contrast, the former question regarding the doorbell and its buzzing can be addressed with reference to mere physical causes; the whole of the relationship simply being causality.

As the causal root of **responsible for** grows, it branches out over two different territories. It will either stay true to its root, overshadowing ground that deals solely with causality (doorbells buzzing, water freezing, toast landing butter side down) or venture over new

territory, overshadowing ground that deals with causality *and* morality (the assassination of Lincoln, abortion, theft). Therefore, all the happenings in the world, though always sharing the common root of causation, will either branch out into amoral territory – a ground of mere causality – or branch out into moral territory, thereby bringing to causality new issues of rightness or wrongness. This is crucial to understand. For this is the essence of the distinction between moral judgments and amoral judgments.

With regard to the exact territory encompassed by morality, we naturally find wide disagreement. Some deny any divine standards, claiming that all moral ground is parceled solely by man with his self-constructed norms: "Here are moral bounds that I think are correct, but only as I see it of course." Therefore, if they admit any moral standards at all, these will be viewed as mere social opinion or constructs. Such moral territory being fenced only by bit of wire, easily changed with the times. Others however, like the common theist or the Christian specifically, deems the territory traced out by man with his chicken-wire opinions a wholly inadequate moral boundary. For the Christian, true morality is the territory bounded by an unyielding wall, deeply set on bedrock by the hand of God.

In summary then, the entire world (i.e. all created things) stands like an immense tree-like structure on the border between the territories of amorality (mere causation) and morality (causation *plus* questions of rightness or wrongness). The trunk and branches of this tree are all the causal relationships that compose the world, whether they involve matter, mind, spirit, thoughts, emotions, intentions, or whatever. As these world-branches develop, they push out and overshadow certain territory, territory that is either moral or amoral.

GUILTY OF

So then, not all causal relationships necessarily involve morality. It is only as these causal relationships branch out over moral regions (divinely or humanly defined) do questions of moral rightness or moral wrongness arise. In fact, we find that many causal relationships can look quite similar, yet be very contrary

as to their morality. For example, I can proceed to fell a tree with an axe, thereby killing or ceasing its biological function, and not fear moral examination. But to fell a man with that same axe, that is something quite different. The killing of his bio-functions immediately raises a question of murder and of guilt. Therefore, though bearing an external causal-similarity (felling an organism and ceasing its bio-functions), these incidents find themselves branching over quite different territory: The tree-chopping over amoral territory, and the man-chopping well within the regions of morality. The reasons for this of course begin with the nature of the elements involved (tree vs. man), and then involve the territory into which they reach (amoral vs. moral).

Considering morality in its rudimentary sense, we see that it deals with standards of conduct. It defines the boundaries that enable one to scrutinize actions for their "rightness" or "wrongness." And it is there, within the territory of morality, or more precisely, when we encounter a violation of a standard therein, that we find the concept guilty of. For if we consider a statement using **guilty of**, it suggests that a violation of some type of moral standard has taken place. For example, if we say, "Rupert is guilty of leaving the milk out," we are not merely pointing out inaction on his part. Rather, we are saying that Rupert, in leaving the milk out, has violated a household norm. This is also another excellent example of implicit content. Or consider again the case of John Wilkes Booth. We say, "He is guilty of murdering Lincoln," and by doing so mean he has unjustly killed someone. He violated some form of the "Thou shall not murder" command.

Thus far we have seen that the concepts responsible for and guilty of though they share the common root of causality, the latter has additional features. It involves morality and violation of standards therein. So though the two concepts are related, this subtle but crucial distinction between them must be retained. If it is not, we will see that our insight into the issue of God and the existence of evil is stymied. Now, before bringing all that has been said to bear on the issue of God and evil, there is the one final implicit concept to be

addressed, that of moral scope. In many ways this is probably more important *and* more volatile than the other two concepts dealt with above. I say "important" for it addresses directly the morality of God's actions versus those of man. I say "volatile" because it involves affirming a form of relativism, a topic that certainly raises eyebrows and ire. As such, I ask for patience from the reader during the analysis of this last point.

I am sure that most if not all would agree that moral standards have certain objects to which they apply. That is, these standards have a certain scope. For example, civic laws (codified morals or standards) regarding property tax have within their moral scope property-taxed citizens. If you lack property, you fall outside the scope of that law. It has no direct bearing on you. Ordinances requiring a dog owner to leash his dog do not require him to leash his children, for the children are not dogs. If they were however, and he walked them in public, he would be obligated to leash them. Or we may say that civic laws in general have citizens as their objects. If you are citizen, those civic laws bind you. You are within their scope. This is essential in understanding the rudiments of morality, especially for the Christian. For the moral scope concept applies directly to God's Law.

In considering the Law, we see first that it consists of ten discreet, divinely given commands, ranging from prohibiting worship other gods to forbidding of murder. Secondly, like the example of civic laws, these Ten Commandments also possess a scope. One may have heretofore passed over this fact, but it is nonetheless there. A re-reading of the Ten Commandments with this question of scope in mind quickly reveals to whom they apply - Mankind. That is, man is the only creature from whom obedience is expected regarding these commands. When Christ asked a lawyer, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" The lawyer's answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:26-28; cf. Matthew 22: 37-93). This, Christ said, was correct. Therefore, the Law, in its

totality, reveals two basic things: what is required of man in his relationship to God, and what is required of man in his relationship to his fellow man. These Ten Commandments are given to and have bearing on man; he alone is within the Law's scope. And as these commands are relative to man alone, it is possible that at least one entity exists to which these commands have no reference or scope. In that case, such an entity would be wholly exempt not only from obedience to these commands and but also punishment for violations of these commands. But this is not a mere possibility, for there is actually one such entity - God. As will be seen, the implications of this are tremendous.

We now come to the application of these observations to the problem of evil and God creating and sustaining the world. Returning to GIG, we see that God is said to be the creating and sustaining cause of the world. With this the theist or Christian surely cannot disagree. Therefore we must rightly affirm that God is responsible for the existence of the world. However, in citing "the world" as God's production, we must recognize *all* that "the world-tree" encompasses. Not only does it include all the objects and activity around us and in the universe, but also the morality of them. For as we have seen, some activity may be amoral; while other activity, because of the existence and scope of divine commands, take on a moral character. So by affirming God's creating and sustaining action, we also tacitly affirm that He is in some way responsible for the good and the evil in the world.

How so? Remember, at its root, responsible for is mere causality. Therefore, if God is causally sustaining the world - upholding all things - then He is causally sustaining - responsible for - the evil in the world. This is the driving fact behind the Free-Will defense: God may have initially created the world and even continues to sustain it, but it is man and his freedom that causes the evil in the world. But it should now be clear that this type of answer misses an essential point. In attributing the cause of evil to man, it passes over its own affirmation that God is the root cause of the world, the creator, the sustainer. The Free-Will

defense is still exposed to the objection, "So why doesn't God stop all the evil in the world? If He upholds it all, He can drop it all." Reading between the lines, this objection essentially says, "If God were compassionate in any way, or loving, He would stop all this wickedness;" the natural implication being "God is evil," or at least less than good if He sustains such an evil world, regardless of man's freely chosen evil.

Even if one denies that God sustains the world, simply affirming his creation of it, this still will not do. For just as one can trace the bullet that penetrated the head of Abraham Lincoln through a chain of events back to John Wilkes Booth, so too the causal chain of events leading to the present world can be traced back to God. In fact, the weight of this causal-chain between the creating-God and the created-world is so theologically uncomfortable that some people, in order to alleviate the pressure, have undertaken some drastic measures. One such endeavor is the Openness-of-God position. Attempting to vindicate God, it denies to him foreknowledge of the free acts of free moral agents. Whatever else this and similar positions claim, they are essentially a plea of ignorance on behalf of God regarding the evil consequences growing from his initial creation of the world.³ Yet oddly enough even those who make this denial still cannot deny that the Scriptures clearly affirm that God sustains the world; thus throwing them right back into the jaws of the objection, "Why doesn't God just stop the evil in the world?"

At this point, the connection between God and evil may appear insoluble. It seems that if in any way we hold to the basic truths about God and his relationship to the world, we are driven into concession with GIG's conclusion - that God is guilty of evil. But as we will see, the force of this argument stems from the subtle confusion of the two key concepts, responsible for and guilty of. It is a confusion that not only drives the GIG-argument but also helps perpetuate the felt need for Freewill and Openness-of-God type defenses. Therefore, before conceding, let us examine the final step in the GIG-argument and pull in the observations regarding moral scope.

After showing the causal connec-

tion between God and a world pocked with evil, GIG claims that such a connection necessarily involves guilt on God's part. That is, if this causal connection is real, God is guilty in some way of (an) evil. For He, like Booth et al., participated in an action that, taken as a whole, is a moral evil. However, if my above analysis is accurate, the vital connection required at this point between causal responsibility and moral guilt is totally interrupted. **For not all causality involves morality.** In order for guilt to even be possible on the part of God or man, an event or action must first fall within the boundaries some moral standard, not mere causality. It is then and only then that we can inquire into the "rightness" or "wrongness" of that action. Establishing a causal connection is not enough. And after defining the moral territory within which those actions fall, we must further establish that wrong action exists. Then and only then can we speak about violation of moral standards and resulting guilt. Thus, with regard to the rightness or wrongness of God's activity, we must first ask, "What moral standard or territory if any do God's actions enter?" This moves us directly to the implications of moral scope.

First, recognize that GIG does involve some moral standard. It is unsaid, but very much there. Otherwise the objectors would not have that sense of wrongdoing or evil regarding God. Indeed, does not *all* moral repugnancy involve some assumption of, "It should not be the case that..."? But if this is the case, what moral standards are assumed in charging God with guilt in GIG? I can only imagine that they are those affirmed in some way or another by all men: "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," and so forth (Exodus 20: 1-17). Or it is at least the fundamental Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." However, if my points have been clear thus far, the concept of moral scope should now shine bright in ones mind. If the objection tacitly relies on God's Law, the highest moral standard to which one could appeal, it must face the sobering realization that it is *man alone* that lies within the scope of this standard. As such, these moral prescriptions relate to and are binding on man

and man alone; God does not in any way fall within its jurisdiction. The only reference to God in these standards is with regard to man's duty *to God*, not *vice versa*. God is in a real way "Above the Law." Therefore, as God stands outside of the Law's scope, He cannot possibly be exposed to charges of guilt. He cannot be guilty of murder, stealing, or adultery.

The brute and unnerving fact is that God by nature enjoys prerogatives that are forbidden to his creatures: "The Lord kills and makes alive" (1 Samuel 2:6) without question of guilt; He affirms unabashedly, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). Indeed, the very concepts of murder, stealing, and so forth cannot possibly apply to him. How can He murder when all breath of life belongs to him? How can He steal or covet when from him are all things, and the whole earth and all that it contains are said to be his (Romans 11:36; Psalm 24:1)? From the fact that He is the creator, all things finding their origin and being in him, He possesses an unqualified right over all that is. In stark contrast, man, being created by and dependent on God, does not have an absolute right over the earth or his fellow creatures. His authority, like a servant's over his master's household, is derived and thus limited. Man being thus limited in rights and authority, God has put a law over man, a moral boundary within which man must walk. Hence, the prohibition of murder, stealing, coveting, and so forth applies rightly and solely to man.

Conclusion

Let us now pull together all that has been said. It can be rightly affirmed that God is Responsible For the world and all that is in it. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things," and "in Him all things hold together" being upheld "by the word of His power" (Romans 11:36; Colossians 1:16,17; Hebrews 1:3), for "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). He is the cause, be it mediate or immediate, of all things. But we cannot thereby conclude that if evil exists in the world God is guilty of evil; for guilty of applies only to infrac-

tions of moral standards; standards that exist within the territory of morality. Therefore, to raise the charge of guilt, one *must* show which moral standards have God within their scope. Without this last and crucial step, God is forever beyond man's moral scrutiny, and any attempt to charge God with evil will fail, being wholly misplaced.

We have seen that with regard to the issue of God and the existence of evil, an important and fundamental distinction must be made between the concepts of responsible for and guilty of. From this distinction clarity emerges that, if walked in, can assist us in productive discussion of God and evil. Amidst this essential distinction rose the subtle concept of moral scope with perhaps the most important implications for the issues of God, man, the world, and the existence of evil. For by grasping this final concept, and working within the clarity provided above, we will begin to have a deeper understanding of God's unique existence and relationship to the world.

End Notes

¹ GIG, when used through out the article, stands for "the God-is-guilty argument." Not simply "God is guilty"

² Theodicy is literally a justification of God. They attempt to show the compatibility of the existence of God and the existence of evil.

³ Personally, I find this a strange move. For the plea of ignorance does not remove guilt, as Leviticus 5:17 and Luke 12:47-48 clearly show. In fact, this is an excellent example of the consequences that may arise when conflating the concepts responsible for and guilty of.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Critical Issues Commentary
copyright © 2001