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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a case study to respond to the problem of evil. The paper employs the example of the Canaanite conquest and argues that, contrary to popular attacks against the character of God, this event in scripture actually demonstrates His goodness. It is an example of a time when God delayed His response to the evil perpetrated by the Canaanites as well as His liberation of the Israelites from Egypt because doing so resulted in a greater moral good than would an earlier intervention. In so doing, it examines an issue frequently cited as problematic for Christians and uses it as an apologetic for the goodness of God.

Keywords

Goodness of God, Canaanite Conquest, Problem of Evil

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Introduction

Recently, it has become essential for Christians to make thoughtful responses to criticisms of the character of God, specifically His goodness. The goodness of God has been questioned in what is traditionally known as the problem of evil.¹ An interesting parallel can be seen in other areas of apologetic debate, such as whether the Old Testament condones genocide. This can be conceived of as a historical problem of evil, where the question of whether God has historically commanded evil actions is asked.² This paper will examine the charges against God's character and then provide a more accurate definition of what it means to claim that God is perfectly good. Finally, it will be important to take a historical approach to this issue. It is possible to look at the biblical text to present a case study demonstrating that God's perfect goodness is compatible with His delayed intervention to stop evil and suffering. In so doing, it will show that goodness is one attribute that God possesses that works with His other attributes such as justice and mercy.³ It is the contention of this paper that the attribute of God's goodness is misunderstood in modern society, and this misunderstanding has led to a variety of issues to which Christians must now respond. By reevaluating the definition of good, Christians can adequately respond to these challenges to Christianity, specifically the challenge of the existence evil.

God's Goodness and the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is traditionally asserted in two ways. The first, traditionally put forward by Hume and Mackie, is called the logical problem of evil. It attempts to argue that evil is logically incompatible with a God who is all good, all knowing, and all-powerful. The basic argument is that a God, who is perfectly good, would always stop acts of evil because He would always know of them in advance, and He would always have the power to intervene and prevent them; therefore, He must intervene and stop these acts. From there, it argues that evil acts still occur; therefore, the existence of God cannot be logically

¹ John S Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004) 18-26, 215-223.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. (New York: Harper One, 2017) 28-47.

³Matthew Flannagan and Paul Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide." in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*. eds., Steve B. Cowen and Terry L. Wilder, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2013), 297-333.

supported.⁴ The evidential argument by Rowe similarly claims that God's existence is incompatible with gratuitous evil. Gratuitous evil means pointless evil or an evil that, if it were stopped, would not result in worse evil or the lessening of a greater good that would otherwise have resulted. Rowe argues that, in this specific case, God, if He exists and is good, must act to stop this type of evil.⁵

This paper will argue that these are not logically sound arguments. This is because these arguments rely on a faulty definition in their premise. When critics state that God is good, they are using a different understanding of goodness than the one used by classical theists, specifically the definition used by Christian theists. For this reason, the arguments fail on the grounds that the basic assumption of their premises is incorrect. The argument, most famously made by C.S. Lewis, will be the focal point of this paper followed by a biblical case study practically demonstrating his argument.⁶

The Importance of the Biblical Concept of God's Goodness

When those wishing to debate the existence of God use His attributes in their arguments, it is essential that they use the attributes in a way consistent with the theological system against which they are arguing. To misuse them or apply them in a way that traditional theological systems do not use them sets up a false argument and prevents productive dialogue.⁷ As Feinberg explains, "Since each theology has its own views of omnipotence, benevolence, and evil there isn't just one theological/philosophical problem of evil that attacks all theologies in the same way... what this means is that not everyone holds to the same account of God and evil."⁸ Because this is the case, it is necessary for Christians to demonstrate that the way goodness is being used in critics' arguments is not the same definition of goodness that describes the Christian God. If they can do this, then these problems, while logically valid, will not be sound in discussions of

⁴ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 18-26, 215-217.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-26, 275-223.

⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-47.

⁷ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 21-27

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

their theology because the premise will be based on a faulty definition.⁹ As Tozer states:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God... We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God... That our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us. Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our credal statements are of little consequence.¹⁰

This statement is true for those who wish to deny the Christian God's existence as well. If they are denying His existence based on a faulty understanding of His characteristics, then they are doing both themselves and their adherents a disservice. The Christian God must be proved or disproved based on a genuine understanding of whether His attributes, as outlined in traditional Christian understanding, are compatible with the existence of evil and suffering. Only then can a decision be made about the likelihood of His existence. To argue against anything else is to deny something that people were not arguing for in the first place.¹¹

C.S. Lewis's Discussion of the Goodness of God

Notable proponents of the problem of evil, Mackie and Hume, argue that evil is completely incompatible with the existence of a God that is perfectly good as well as omniscient and omnipotent. Rowe's argument about gratuitous evils also makes this assumption; because, if the allowance of a particular evil had an immediately understandable purpose or greater good that resulted, it would not be gratuitous.¹² Lewis, in response to these criticisms, argues that, because God is infinitely wiser than human beings, it is possible that His views on good and evil would be different from those of human beings, although they would not be so different as to make understanding morality impossible. For this reason, people should reevaluate their definition of goodness in order to make sure that it is in

⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-47.

¹⁰ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1963) 1-2.

¹¹ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 21-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18-26, 215-223

agreement with what God actually considers to be good. Lewis argues that what human beings tend to want more is a kind God but not necessarily a good one, the distinction being that a kind God would be more focused on the temporal happiness and pleasure of His creatures but would not necessarily insist on greater good if it caused temporary displeasure.¹³ The desire for God to allow for immediate gratification to take precedence over the greater good of the person would seemingly contradict Paul's assertion in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. Lewis goes on to say that what people want is more a "grandfather in heaven" and not a "father in heaven".¹⁴ Lewis explains that this seems, at first, to be a good world and one that he would want to live in, but, because this is not the world he experiences, he must conclude that his idea of goodness and love must be corrected to be in line with God's.¹⁵

He then explains the reason for this difference. While human beings would be happy, they would be lacking. There would be no corrective for wrong behavior or recognition of a need for repentance. There would be no growth of character. The good that can only result from times of hardship and suffering would not manifest. In other words, God would be kind but not displaying the deepest form of love toward His creation because He would be content to allow them to miss the greater good in order that they may merely settle for being happy.¹⁶ Lewis states,

It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness... He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.¹⁷

¹³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-34

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

Consequently, the view of God's goodness must be a maximally good one, and, if that is the case, His first concern may not be peoples' immediate comfort or pleasure.¹⁸

The Goodness of God and the Canaanite Conquest: A Case Study

Currently, one of the most popular lines of argumentation against Christianity is that God, as He is described in the Old Testament, acts in immoral ways.¹⁹ Many Christians too struggle with God's commands in the conquest accounts.²⁰ Seibert argues that Christians cannot defend the conquest narrative as historical, because to do so would irreparably damage the character of God. He argues that the text, as written, must be seen as a genocide.²¹ While the conquest is typically viewed as an issue for those dealing with historical apologetics, it can be envisaged as a historical problem of evil. In other words, do God's past actions, as described in scripture, morally invalidate Him? It will be important to recognize that God's goodness is central to this issue, and the principles ascertained about this attribute can then be applied to the more traditional problem of evil. This argument is also important because much of the typical response to the traditional problem of evil focuses on philosophical hypotheses of how God should and might act in certain situations. A case study of this nature examines the biblical claim of how God has previously acted in order to demonstrate something of His nature and how He responds to issues of evil and suffering.²²

Too often, the conquest account is an issue, which Christians approach from a defensive position, feeling that they must defend God's actions. This paper will not focus on every apologetic argument defending the narrative, only those relevant to the greater question of how the theist may defend God's goodness when responding to the problem of evil. This paper both defends the conquest account and applies the conquest narrative offensively, arguing that, at the heart

¹⁸ Ibid., 28-47.

¹⁹ Flanagan and Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide.," 297-333.

²⁰ Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009) 169-182.

²¹ Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 96-98.

²² Flanagan and Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide.," 297-333.

of the account, it demonstrates flattering characteristics of God. These include His patience, mercy, omniscience, and justice.²³

The Bible makes clear that the Canaanites were a wicked people and catalogues their flagrant and shocking sins against God (Leviticus 18). Many of these sins, including child sacrifice, were horrific and led to the suffering of others (Leviticus 18: 3, 21). Yet, God allowed it to continue for five hundred years. The natural question to ask is why God allowed this to happen. Surely, it would have been possible for God to intervene sooner or to bring the Israelites into the land early. This would have prevented much of the suffering the Israelites faced as well.

Wright provides a reason for this: God allowed time for the Canaanites to repent. He explains that when the Canaanites' sin reached its zenith, God did intervene, but, until then, He allowed the evil to transpire in order to give the Canaanites adequate time to make the choice to either repent or reject Him.²⁴ This principle is demonstrated in Genesis 15:16 when God is discussing the future punishment of the Amorites. Moses eventually fought against the Amorites in Deuteronomy 31, and Joshua too waged war against them in Joshua 10:6-10. When God spoke to Abraham, He explained that He has not yet punished them because their "evil had not reached its full measure" (Gen15:16). Earlier in Genesis 15:13, the connection is made between the timing of the liberation of Israel from Egypt and their taking back land from the Amorites. This demonstrates that the goodness of God is intertwined with His patience and mercy. Nothing necessitated that He spare any of them. God cares about the spiritual state of the one committing a sinful act just as He cares for the person facing inflicted persecution. Sometimes, He demonstrates restraint for the greater good of allowing the possibility of repentance.²⁵

However, this does not mean that God will never act, as demonstrated in the Canaanite conquest, God does respond to the evil committed by the Canaanites. Among the evils recorded in Leviticus 18, are sexual immorality and child sacrifice. They were also condemned for their idolatry, and, in scripture, God made clear that He commanded the Israelites to destroy all remnants of the worship practices of the Canaanites, so that Israel would not be tempted to adopt their practices (Deut 12:1-5). Often, critics such as Raymond Bradley assert that God's command, that all of the Canaanites be killed, is a command for genocide.

²³ Ibid., 297-333.

²⁴ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflection on Tough Questions of the Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 92-97.

²⁵ Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 92-97.

However, this is an incorrect interpretation of what was commanded. God is commanding the Israelites to wage war against a select group of people in a certain time in history for the purpose of moral correction. He will no longer allow the Canaanites to continue in their atrocities.²⁶

The moral component is imperative to this argument, as Wright explains. When the Israelites sinned against God, He also gave them sufficient time to repent. He eventually exacts justice for their sins by allowing the Babylonians and the Assyrians to conquer them (Amos 7: 15-17, Jer 25:1-14).²⁷ This reiterates Lewis's argument that God's love and goodness do not merely entail that He wishes happiness for His creatures. He also must act in order to correct their behavior when necessary.²⁸

The implication of the account is that God knows that, from that point on, the Canaanites will not repent nor will any following generation. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus's teachings indicate that, in His omniscience, God knows the hearts of nations, and whether future circumstances will lead to their repentance. Jesus uses the examples of the judgements of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom as examples when warning of future judgements against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. In each instance, God knows when and if there is no longer the possibility of repentance, and His actions in response are just (Matt 11:20-24). In this way, God's command regarding the Canaanites can be understood as a merciful act, as God will not allow the continuation of a line of people, who by necessity, will be eternally separated from Him.²⁹ This then is an example of God's justice and goodness being inexorably related to one another. Vitale explains that justice is essential to goodness. Only God can perfectly exact justice, and He would not be good if He did not care about injustices exacted or faced by His image bearers. The view of God as someone who can allow evil to go unjudged actually makes Him an accessory to injustice. This is not the picture that scripture presents.³⁰

²⁶ Flannagan and Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide.," 97-300.

²⁷ Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 92-97.

²⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 32-43.

²⁹ Lee Strobel. *The Case for Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000) Audio Book.

³⁰ Jo Vitale, "Racism, Sexism, Genocide: Is this the God of the Bible?" Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. April 27, 2017. Accessed August 5, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSt2Hu8nGro>

Finally, the Canaanite conquest is an example of how God's omniscience and goodness work together to recognize that a greater good can and should result from suffering. The question could easily be asked; why did God have to wait so long to bring about this justice? Why could He have not acted a hundred years earlier? The question is answered as the Bible makes definitively clear that there were people who indeed repented. These people, most notably Rahab, were spared. This demonstrates once again that God was concerned about the repentance of the Canaanite people.³¹ Furthermore, God's omniscience is demonstrated by the important role that Rahab would play in the history of the nation of Israel and also in salvation history. She is in the genealogy of David and Christ (Matt 1:1-16). While at the time, her personal conversion may have seemed very insignificant, it actually was vitally important to God's plan to make salvation available to everyone. If He intervened at any other time, her opportunity to convert is lost. This demonstrates a greater good that would have been lost had God acted differently.

While the conquest account does not answer all questions pertaining to the problem of evil, it is an important case study demonstrating that, in many instances, God's understanding of intervening in a situation entails greatly different understanding than the human perspective.³² It also highlights Lewis's argument that God's goodness does not simply mean He is interested in the comfort of people because, in some cases, this would be a lesser good.³³ In this case, it would have been a lesser good to deny the Canaanites the opportunity to repent, and it would also have been a lesser good to not exact justice when the time was right. It certainly would have been a lesser good for all people if Rahab had not been incorporated into Israel. This picture can only be fully understood from God's perspective.³⁴ For this reason, this is an example of the existence of evil that is not logically incompatible with the existence of God. This is also an example of something, which would have seemed to many people at the time, to be gratuitous evil, and yet from God's understanding, there was a moral reason for allowing events to unfold in the manner that they did.³⁵ This may not fully answer the problem of evil, but it should cause skeptics, who advance these

³¹ Flannagan and Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide.", 310-313.

³² Ibid., 297-333.

³³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-47.

³⁴ Flannagan and Copan, "Does the Bible Condone Genocide.", 297-333.

³⁵ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 18-26, 215-223

arguments, to pause and recognize that their initial premise lacks veracity because their initial premise is based on a faulty definition of God's goodness.³⁶ Because they cannot see from God's vantage point, they do not have grounds to be certain in their argumentation.³⁷ It provides doubt as to the soundness of their arguments because the premises are based on a faulty understanding of God's goodness.³⁸

God's Goodness Should Not Be Divorced from His Other Attributes

The problem of evil presented by skeptics in the discussion above isolates three of God's attributes to the exclusion of others.³⁹ This is incompatible with the Christian concept of God, which the scenario presented above attempts to rebut. God holds all of His attributes in maximal perfection, and they do not contradict one another. For this reason, His goodness cannot be divorced from justice or mercy because to do so actually changes the definition of goodness being attributed to God. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how God's attributes work together in order to define them.⁴⁰ By focusing on only three attributes, skeptics who advance the problem of evil do not account for other attributes, which might require a merciful God to defer punishment or would require a just God to bring about the destruction of an entire wicked community.⁴¹ For God, not to do these things would lessen His maximal goodness.⁴² Lewis writes in his chapter on God's goodness,

You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the 'Lord of terrible aspect' is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way...but the consuming fire himself, the love that made the worlds, persistent as the artists love for his work and despotic as a man's love for his dog, provident and venerable as a father's love

³⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-47.

³⁷ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli. *Pocket Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 48-50.

³⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-47.

³⁹ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 18-26, 215-223.

⁴⁰ Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 101-108, 117-124, and 134-148.

⁴¹ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 18-26, 215-223.

⁴² Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 101-108, 117-124, and 134-148.

for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.⁴³

This may not be the definition against which the atheist wishes to argue, but it is the only one Christianity provides, and therefore, they must respond to it.⁴⁴

How Is Goodness Defined?

A brief segue must be made to point out one final defect with the atheists' use of the word good in their argument. Simply stated, where does the standard of good come from? It is used in their arguments in an objective way. If God is good, then they would expect Him to act in a certain way and fulfill certain duties. They then argue, in essence, that, by not eradicating evil, He falls short of this standard and must not exist.⁴⁵ The question then is, from where does this standard come? Without this standard, the word good is undefined or at least poorly defined because it is left to each person to fill in what they desire good to be, and, for some, this is radically different.⁴⁶ Baggett and Walls state, "Before the problem of evil can get off the ground, moreover, the atheologist needs a robust moral theory to sustain a principled commitment to the moral premise. Naturalists who are relativists, subjectivists, or nihilists are obviously in no position to believe such a premise. No, an effective case requires a sturdy commitment to moral objectivity and realism."⁴⁷ Lewis echoes this argument and explains that it is only by first having an understanding of what good is that evil can then be recognized. However, in order to have an objective standard by which evil can be recognized, there must be a moral standard giver, who is in a position of authority to truly impose this standard. In other words, there must be a God.⁴⁸

⁴³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 18-26, 215-223.

⁴⁶ David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls. *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011) 156-158.

⁴⁷ Baggett and Walls. *Good God*, 157.

⁴⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. (London, England: Fontana Book, 1956) 38-39.

Conclusion

The logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil are not logically sound. This is because their definition of goodness, on which one of their premises rests, is faulty. Lewis proposes this argument, explaining that what most people really mean by goodness is a tolerant kindness. This is not the definition that Christianity provides, and for this reason, until the definition of maximal goodness is sufficiently addressed, atheist arguments will fail to respond to the Christian claim. The historical evidence further clarifies the definition of an all-good God, which must also include the complex and interdependent nature of God's other attributes, as demonstrated in the case study of the Canaanite conquest. Consequently, it is possible for God's existence to be compatible with the existence of evil, even the existence of seemingly gratuitous evils.

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