

CHOICE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:11–20

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 30:11–20

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The Biblical Background

This is next to the last lesson in a thirteen-week series on the Book of Deuteronomy. We conclude with this lesson (the third part of Unit III, “Covenant Renewal”) our study of Moses’ third discourse contained in Deuteronomy 27:1–30:20. A review of the outline given the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 7 will he put this lesson into its proper context. The theme of this lesson, “Choice and Its Consequences,” focuses on Deuteronomy 30:19 as the key verse: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life.”

The affirmation that life and death, good or evil are related to human choices raises the issue of human freedom and human responsibility for sin and its consequences. As the background for the affirmation by Christians, in agreement with Moses, that people are responsible for the good and evil that befall them, a review the different Old Testament theologies about the origin of evil may prove helpful.

Four distinctive theologies about the origin of evil are encountered in the Old Testament.

I. God as the Source of Evil

In the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1–43), Yahweh is viewed as the source of life and death. The poet stated, “See

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now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand (32:39). This theme appears later in the writing of Deutero-Isaiah, where “life and death” are replaced by “good and evil.” Through the prophet, Yahweh asserts “I am Yahweh, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal [literally, *shalom*, meaning “peace, health, prosperity”] and I create woe [literal *ra’*, meaning “evil, sickness”], I am Yahweh, who does all these things” (Isaiah 45:6b–7).

According to this theology, human beings have little responsibility for the evil in their lives or in their world. Evil, death, and darkness must ultimately be attributed to God. These two texts quoted above probably reflect the theology of the postexilic period when Israel was exposed to Persian dualism during the days when Cyrus, king of Persia, was viewed as Yahweh’s anointed (Isa 45:1). Persian dualism would have asserted that there were two gods: a good god of light, life, and all that was good, and an evil god of darkness, death, and all that was evil. In response to such a dualistic view, Isaiah (i.e., Deutero-Isaiah during the sixth century B.C.) asserted without reservation his theology of absolute monotheism. There was only one God, and if there were need to attribute evil to the divine, then Yahweh, the one and only God, could handle such responsibility.

This theology was not articulated specifically to excuse human beings from their responsibility. It was designed to protect Israelite monotheism. Nevertheless, in time an idea of predestination developed, based in part upon these Scriptures. Before the birth of Jesus, a doctrine of predestination, which made God responsible for all evil, was stated by Jesus the son

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of Sirach in his book that became known as Ecclesiasticus (“The Church Book”). It is stated therein,

All men are from the ground,
and Adam was created of the dust.
In the fulness of his knowledge the Lord distinguished
them [i.e., men, human beings] and appointed their
different ways;
some of them he blessed and exalted,
and some of them he made holy and
brought near to himself;
but some of them he cursed and brought low,
and he turned them out of their place.
As clay in the hand of the potter—
for all his ways are as he pleases—
so men are in the hand of him who made them,
to give them as he decides.

—Ecclesiasticus 33:10–13

The theology espoused in this passage suggests that people have no options and need not make choices. Everything for good or evil, for life or death, for blessing or curse, for possession or dispossession has already been decreed by Yahweh. Nothing is really conditional; actions and their consequences have all been programmed and prepackaged by God.

This theology of the intertestamental period also has its support in one part of the covenant theology reiterated by Moses in his three speeches. The non-Israelite inhabitants of this world had no options or choices to make. They were “cursed and brought low” simply because they were not the offspring of Abraham. Consequently, they were unable to participate in the covenant of Yahweh with Israel. They and their offspring were destined to a that life without God

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(Ephesians 2:12), permitted only to worship the sun, moon, and stars, or the like (Deuteronomy 4:19; Micah 4:5; see also the Resources for June 28). [page 54] This was viewed as their fate, about which they could do absolutely nothing. It was understood to be the structure of reality itself, as decreed by the Creator.

II. The “Sons of God” as the Source of Evil

It is not surprising that some Israelites were reluctant to ascribe the origin of evil to God. In Genesis 6:1–7, another theology about the origin of evil is offered. There the story is told of how suprahuman, extraterrestrial creatures, the heavenly “sons of God,” were attracted to human women and fathered children by them. This action resulted in God’s displeasure with people, as stated, “My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3). This story holds both God and human beings as innocent in initiating evil. Human beings were victims of evil that originated elsewhere.

The biblical story does not address itself to the punishment of the disobedient “sons of God” who abandoned their heavenly estate because of lust. Extrabiblical works now found in the Pseudepigrapha,¹ such as the Book of Enoch, enlarged upon this story and filled out a plot about a conspiracy of the “fallen angels” to spread evil on earth and how God punished them by destroying their illegitimate offspring and casting them into the dark abyss. These stories are still as popular

1 . See R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913, reprinted 1973).

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today as they were in the intertestamental period.

In the Qumran community that produced the famed Dead Sea Scrolls the theologies cited here (as *I* and *II* above) were combined. For these people God was responsible for evil even though human beings were the victims of the prince of darkness. They believed:

All that is and ever was comes from a God of knowledge. Before things came into existence He determined the plan of them. . . . Nothing can be changed . . . this God created man to rule the world and appointed for him two spirits. . . . They are the spirits of truth and perversity. The origin of truth lies in the Fountain of Light and that of perversity in the Well-spring of Darkness. All who practice righteousness are under the domination of the Prince of Light . . . all who practice perversity are under the domination of the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness. . . . It is God who created these spirits of light and darkness and made them the basis of every act, the [instigators] of every deed, and the directors of every thought.²

III. "Satan" as the Source of Evil

The idea that Satan was the source or cause of evil is not an Old Testament idea. The references to Satan in Job 1:6–2:6 and Zechariah 3:1 actually depict a "satan"-figure among the angels of Yahweh whose function was to test people to determine the degree of their faithfulness and goodness. In these two passages, "satan" is a common noun preceded by the definite article "the." It was not a proper name or title, even

2. Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 43–44; cited from the *Manual of Discipline*, column 3.

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though English translations treat it as such. The best commentary on the satan-figure in the Old Testament is Numbers 22:22–32, which deals with the angel of Yahweh who encountered Balaam and Balaam’s ass. There the verb “satan” was used in the Hebrew text to indicate the function of the angel of Yahweh. It states, “But God’s anger was kindled because he [Balaam] went; and the angel of Yahweh took his stand in the way *to satan* him” (RSV, “as his adversary,” v. 22). This verb is repeated in verse 32 (RSV, “to withstand”). Balaam and his ass recognized this angel who “sataned” him to be Yahweh’s true messenger. The “satan”-figure was an adversary-for-good who functioned like a prosecuting attorney.

The theology that transformed the adversary into the agent or source of evil was the creation of the intertestamental theologians (noted above under item *II*). It was an idea unknown to Moses.

Popular religion that still likes to assert, “The devil made me do it!” is indebted to the intertestamental literature and the story in Genesis 6:1–7. The satan narratives of the Old Testament do not support such an idea.

IV. Earthly Creatures as the Source of Evil

Not every biblical theologian was willing to make God or heavenly creatures solely responsible for evil. Some were certain that human beings were responsible. The theological tradition behind the story of the garden of Eden (Genesis 3) was one that viewed the origin of evil as being earthly, the responsibility of earthly creatures and animated beings, namely, Adam, Eve, and the wisest of the beasts of the field, the serpent. This story is so well known that it need not be

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repeated here. However, one point may need clarification, namely, in the Genesis account the serpent is not equated with Satan or the devil. That identification was not made until the first century B.C., where in the Wisdom of Solomon (2:24) it is stated, “But through the devil’s envy death entered the world,” an obvious reference to Genesis 3. But in Genesis 3, the serpent is just a serpent. In the ancient Near East the serpent was the symbol of wisdom, health, and immortality. As such, the serpent was the most likely creature who could assert with some credibility, “you will not die!” (Genesis 3:4). The major point to be noted in the context of this lesson is that human beings made choices in the garden of Eden, and they had to live with the consequences of their choices. Adam and Eve sought to escape responsibility for their decisions and actions; but there was no escape from accountability. This is the theological framework in which Moses addressed the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land.

God was responsible for evil to the degree that God gave human beings freedom, the freedom to choose life or death, good or evil. One could not cop out by appealing to the affirmation “God made me do it!” or “The devil made me do it!” Jesus the son of Sirach, who, as noted above, favored a kind of predestination (Ecclesiasticus 33:10–13), was compelled to include in his wisdom traditions a classical statement on human responsibility. He recorded,

Do not say,

“Because of the Lord I left the right way”;
for he will not do what he hates.

Do not say,

“It was he who led me astray”;
for he has no need of a sinful man.

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The Lord hates all abominations,
and they are not loved by those who fear him.
It was he who created man in the beginning,
and he left him in the power of his own inclination.
If you will, you can keep the commandments.
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
He has not commanded any one to be ungodly.
and he has not given any one permission to sin.
—Ecclesiasticus 15:11–15

This theology obviously has its roots in the covenant theology of Deuteronomy, particularly in the statement that serves as the key verse for this lesson, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse: therefore choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:19). It is the same theology found on the lips of Joshua when he gathered the tribes of Israel to Shechem for the renewal of the covenant. He stated,

Now therefore fear Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt., and serve Yahweh. And if you be willing to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods whom your fathers served . . . or the gods of the Amorites . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.

—Joshua 24:14:14–15

This is the same theology articulated by Jeremiah when he appealed to the citizens of the besieged city of Jerusalem (around 586 B.C.) to surrender so that they might live instead of die if the Babylonians had to fight and capture Jerusalem. He stated, “Thus says Yahweh: ‘Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. He who stays in this city shall die by the sword . . . but he who goes out and surrenders

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. . . shall live and shall have his life as a prize of war” (21:8–9).

The witness of Moses, Joshua, and Jeremiah—almost word for word—was the same: life and death, good and evil depended entirely on the decisions and choices that the people made for themselves. Nothing was programmed and pre-packaged. Israelites, like other people, were only destined (1) to decide, (2) to choose, and (3) to live with the consequences of their choices.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 30:11—“For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you”

This verse picks up the narrative that had ended at Deuteronomy 29:29. The narrative was interrupted by 30:1–10. In 29:29 it was noted, “The secret things belong to Yahweh our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever. . . .” Following this acknowledgment that some things pertaining to Yahweh are incomprehensible (see Psalm 139:6) Moses made the point that the revealed Law and commandments were not part of the inaccessible secrets of heaven or earth (compare Isaiah 45:17). The commandments of God for Israel were only as far away as the human heart and the human mouth, which is to say that they were reasonable, rational, and understandable. It must be remembered that in the Semitic idiom the heart was the seat of reason, not the seat of emotions or passion. The commandments were to be in the mouth, which is to say that they were to be remembered, recalled, and recited.

Deuteronomy 30:19—“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life . . .”

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The appeal to heaven and earth to serve as witnesses reflects the way in which physical objects or forces were personalized or personified in ancient Near Eastern thought. Sometimes the objects were small, as was the case of the pile of stones when the Mizpah covenant was entered into by Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:44–49). Other times the objects were as large as the heavens and the earth. It was this view that heaven and earth were personal that permitted them to be worshiped by the non-Israelites (Deuteronomy 4:19; Micah 4:51). Even the prophets who affirmed a rigid monotheism and renounced the worship of the sun, moon, and stars could still appeal to them in a personal way. For example, Jeremiah 2:12 reads, “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says Yahweh.” By the time of the prophets, such an appeal to heaven or earth was simply a literary device. This literary device occurs also in the first discourse of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:26.

Applying the Lesson to Life

It is possible for a person to deny his or her own moral responsibility and to proof-text that denial with biblical theologies that make God or the devil responsible for the human predicament. Applying this lesson about human responsibility to the Christian life would preclude our making such a mistake. Christians, like ancient Israelites, are required to make choices. The choices that God would have us make are those that lead to life. Ezekiel repeated the message of Moses when he stated. “Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me [Yahweh], and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says Yahweh God: so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:31–32).