

# The Biblical Nature of Evil

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Genesis 2:16-17 reads,

*And the LORD God warned the man, saying, "You may certainly eat from any tree in the garden; however should you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you will surely become mortal and subject to death."*

Contra the conventional interpretation of this verse, the fruit of the "tree of knowledge" was not forbidden. Indeed, the Hebrew text is unambiguous in that the phrase, *מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגָּן* (*mik·kol eytz-hag·gan*) means "from {all, every, or each} tree of the garden". God could have said something along the lines of "... all trees except the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge". But He did not. The fruit was not forbidden, but there were dire consequences should the primordial couple choose to eat of it.

Why is this important? Because the story of Adam and Eve is not about disobedience. It is about the consequences that arise from God's gift of the free will. In Eden, the protagonists are presented with two choices: an immortal life of utopian, benign existence or a mortal life of tribulation and triumph and heartache and joy. The great Fredrick Douglas tells us why Adam and Eve chose the latter:

*"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but there must be a struggle."*

God reveals in this story that a rich, full and meaningful life cannot be realized without a struggle with which to content and overcome. When every want is satisfied, all is taken for granted. Where evil is absent, there can be no virtue. For Adam and Eve, hope was non-existent. There can be no hope in a world where risk and reward are non-existent. In Utopia where one's every desire is granted, hope for something better is superfluous. It is the presence of struggle and pain that give hope its meaning. The choice confronting Adam and Eve was easy.

But there is still more to this story. Beginning with this verse God reveals the answer to the fundamental question – what is the nature of evil? When this story originated, the prevailing

pagan conception was that evil was personified in one or more of their many gods. In their view nature was viewed as a moral agent and when man suffered, nature was to blame. Thus, pagan worship centered, in large part, on mollifying nature by offering a sufficiently large and earnest sacrifice. To the pagans, accepting responsibility for their actions was not contemplated because human misery arose from the acts of capricious gods not free will and therefore was not something that could be dealt with by mortals.



In this story, God elevates evil from the natural realm of the pagan to the metaphysical, moral realm of the human conscience. The story of Adam and Eve reveals that consequences, both good and bad result from God's gift of free will. As was well understood by Walt Kelly's Pogo, to fight against evil is to struggle with ourselves.

To conclude, the Bible does not portray the primordial couple as disobedient. Nor is their suffering portrayed as a punishment. Such a view would echo the pagan concept of suffering as the deliberate act of a vengeful god<sup>1</sup>. Instead, mankind is portrayed as capable of rationale choice. Mankind, in all the Bible is challenged to contend with the consequences of the exercise of their own free will. Adam and Eve knew full well what would happen should they ignore God's warning. Still they rejected the banality of utopia and chose a fully human life of consequence.

Now, go and study

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<sup>1</sup> God certainly punishes those who violate His will. But in this story, Adam and Eve do not violate any of God's injunctions. They simply make a profoundly consequential choice.