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Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence (Book Review)

Gary Shahinian

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formed herself for elegant audiences, attended and graduated from the best finishing school, and learned her manners well. She was a child of luxury and good breeding, a devotee of art. One might say she wasn't trained to work.

There may well be better histories of the Pella settlement. Leonora Scholte's *A Stranger in a Strange Land* is really the story of the very aristocratic Mareah Krantz Scholte, whose fate fell, romantically, with a man with a vision for a new Amsterdam where his people could worship God freely. It was rather unfortunate, but Mareah Scholte was out of her element on pioneer Pella's mud streets, just as her dress and music proved alien to the people her husband loved and served. She lived for fine

Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence, Jon D. Levenson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). 182 pp. \$18.95. Reviewed by Gary Shahinian, Visiting Lecturer in Philosophy.

Those who read the title of this book and expect to uncover a penetrating analysis of the problem of evil in the understanding of Judaism will be sorely disappointed. The author, Jon Levenson, professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School, gives us instead an interpretation of the way that Yahweh relates to the chaotic malevolent forces at work in the world, based on an exegesis of a few key passages in the Old Testament and a comparison of other ancient Near Eastern sacred writings. Levenson attempts to demonstrate from the exegesis of these Hebrew texts, rooted as they are in older religious documents of neighboring peoples, that the prevailing view of the divine *creatio ex nihilo*, promoted by both Jewish and Christian theologians throughout history, is mistaken, as it fails to take seriously into account the actualities behind the rich mythological imagery these passages depict.

Levenson brashly remarks that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the belief that God created the world out of nothing, is no longer generally accepted as an adequate understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. Amazingly, he does not even attempt to defend this remarkable claim by appeal to any noted biblical scholars. This overstatement of the discredited status of *creatio ex nihilo* in the absence of any solid evidence—biblical, theological, or philosophical—has become characteristic of the scholarly trend today whereby one cannot show sensitivity to misery and suffering without advocating some variation of Process theology. Evil forces are deemed to reside eternally alongside (or even within) God so that he must struggle against them to bring good out of evil, order out of chaos. Joining the chorus of those who seek to find the source of evil in a cosmic struggle between God and uncreated realities, Levenson seeks to defend from a biblical analysis the thesis that God's creation of the heavens and

things when the reality of life on the prairie meant making coffee from brome grass.

If you enjoy Dutch-American history and don't yet know this story, you should. Mareah Scholte's life on what some called the Great American Desert is surely one of the great stories of Dutch people in this country.

This old story has been republished by Inheritance Publications, of Neerlandia, Alberta. Reportedly, Scholte's gently written history is the first of its planned publications. It's more than a shame when a people lose track of their own stories. Inheritance Publications deserves support in its quest to help us understand who we are on the basis of who we have been.

the earth is a primordial act of conquering pernicious powers that attempt to thwart the formation of an environment conducive to habitation by finite humans.

The central concept of divine creation, according to Levenson, is *mastery*. God is not the lone sovereign being from all eternity, as the traditional theologies have always dogmatically asserted. Rather, God becomes the sovereign ruler of the world through his waging battle with primeval forces, subsequently triumphing over them. By means of God's subjugation of these evil forces, he fashions the creation into an orderly realm. Thus Yahweh gains mastery over these chaotic powers, transforming them into order; he does not possess mastery over the world from the very beginning. Thus Levenson interprets the water of Genesis 1:2 as primordial, not having been created. This idea makes sense only if Genesis 1:1 is translated as an introductory clause to v. 2, such as in the following way, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth...the wind of God was moving over the face of the waters" rather than as a complete sentence, as most translations have it, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." As an introductory clause, the first verse of Genesis does not indicate an extraordinarily terse summary of the comprehensive act of creation, but instead, signals the beginning of God's waging war on the malevolent powers that threaten everlasting chaos and emptiness, symbolized by the waters. Levenson claims that the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 has steadily fallen out of favor since the medieval period, but, incredibly, given the scores of theologians who still maintain it, mentions only Claus Westermann as one biblical scholar who seeks to defend that interpretation. Yet in a footnote dealing with Westermann's views, Levenson is impelled to remark that "it must be conceded that a resolution of this old controversy is probably

impossible'' (158, n. 12). Nothing in the main body of the book, however, would suggest that Levenson really believes that the issue remains open for debate. Since Genesis 1:1 and following is such a pivotal text for the belief of creation out of nothing, I would think that Levenson would at least engage in a broad discussion with other scholars with whom he disagrees in the hope of strengthening his own claims by demonstrating the weaknesses in others. Regrettably, such a conversation never takes place in the book.

The idea of God's struggling against cosmic powers that desire to destroy the orderliness of creation seems to conform to our present situation in the world, according to Levenson. Although the Bible is firm in its teaching of God's rule over creation, this cannot mean that evil is now totally vanquished, for that is not the reality that we presently experience nor was it the reality experienced by the biblical writers. The unopposed sovereignty of God was a hope to which the ancient Israelites looked forward precisely because it was not actualized in their historical encounter as a people in the midst of both oppression at the hands of pagan neighbors and apostasy within their own covenantal ranks. During these disheartening times of Israel's history, their faith helped them to cope with their suffering through the reminder that God promises to defeat the persistent forces that continuously threaten to undo the divinely imposed order of the world. For example, Genesis 1 recounts God's mastery over rival forces in ordering the creation so that distinct physical entities—plants, animals, and persons—may emerge and continue to be sustained. This ordering is fragile, however, and chaos may at any time break through the bounds that hold it back. Also Isaiah 65:10-18 speaks of God's final defeat of his enemies once and for all through his creating a new heavens and a new earth, clearly signalling that divine omnipotence was not yet an accomplished unchallenged fact. The Israelite community's memories of Yahweh's mighty deeds of the past (for example, the exodus) and their hope for the future international rule of Yahweh (for example, the flocking of the Gentiles to the temple in Jerusalem for worship) renewed their convictions that, despite the appearances, Yahweh nevertheless remained in control of the universe, keeping the destructive forces—often mythologized as the dragon, the sea monster, Leviathan, or some other aquatic creation (cf. the waters of Gen. 1:2)—in constant restraint.

In the final section of his study, Levenson broaches the topic of freedom in the context of God's covenant with his people. He argues for a belief of an inherent autonomy of persons who are persuaded to voluntarily accept God's rule in their lives. This dialectic builds on both Hegel's master-slave relationship (which Levenson recognizes) and Kierkegaard's paradox of sovereign God and autonomous creature (which Levenson fails to mention).

Hegel's dialectic of master and slave involves the notion that true mastery of one being over another can take place only if the conquest is worthwhile, in other words, through persuasion rather than coercion. Here again we hear the echoes of a familiar theme from Process thought. Kierkegaard's dialectic consists of God's demand that I, an autonomous human being, should through my autonomy freely choose to submit to God's will. Although Levenson does not talk the language of theodicy, his views implicitly offer us yet another rendition of the enormously popular "free will defense" for the presence of evil in the world. There is evil because freedom is the most important, valuable, and glorious property for beings to possess. Thus the freedom to do evil is more worthwhile than not possessing freedom at all. And so God's sovereignty is limited from the very beginning. God cannot create just any world that he pleases. Primordial opposition in the form of freedom stands in his way, and only after mastering these chaotic forces can God begin the process of creating the actual world from the residue of the pre-existent opposition.

The covenant is the framework within which God and his people, ancient Israel, promise to fulfill their appointed duties *voluntarily*. Israel swears allegiance to Yahweh as vassal, directing its freedom from autonomy to economy, while Yahweh promises to provide for Israel as a benevolent suzerain. Thus the idea of the covenant as it is found in the Hebrew portion of the Bible reflects the ancient Near Eastern political treaty between king and subjects. In this form the freedom of the weaker of the two partners of the covenant is not annihilated, but rather, channeled toward obedience. Nevertheless, the freedom of the weaker partner remains autonomous; it always retains the ability to rebel against the dominant partner. Yahweh does not eliminate the freedom of his people. They remain autonomous in either obedience or rebellion. Freedom is a natural endowment of actualities, whether they are primordial powers or created beings. God's creative activity begins from this context of resistant freedom in the world, a freedom that he must combat in order to execute his will. Precisely because he did not create it and cannot obliterate it, God must resolutely manage the freedom that attempts to thwart his designs for the world by keeping it in check.

Levenson's most informative insights concern his relating the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:3 to the ceremonial cultic act of the construction of God's temple. The meticulous distinctions that God's priests made in fashioning the tabernacle and, later, the two temples, are paralleled in God's precise ordering of the original creation. Thus the temple was a microcosm of the entire creation over which God rules. Evil is restrained in the world because of God's wise ordering of creation, and so, ancient Israel was able to cope with evil by par-

ticipating in the orderliness of the temple cultus. As estimated by leading biblical scholars, the close proximity of the writing of Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the beginning of the construction of the second temple (near the end of the sixth century B.C.E.) lends evidence for the close theological connection between the two.

Insofar as we Christians, both academics and laypersons, rarely, if ever, consult a Jewish interpretation of Old Testament themes, we fail to avail ourselves of op-

What's Good about the Good News: The Plan of Salvation in a New Light, Neil Punt (Chicago, Illinois: Northland Books, 1988). 142 pp. \$7.95. Reviewed by John Struyk, Professor of Foreign Languages.

Are the millions of aborted babies condemned to hell because of original sin? What happens to children who die in infancy? In the course of history millions and millions of children and adults have died who never heard the Gospel. Are these people eternally lost? These are the types of questions that are often raised in connection with the doctrines of election and reprobation. Typical answers to these questions range from "we don't know" to "we must trust that the Lord is just."

Romans 1:20-23 is often pointed to as an answer. There we read that people can know God from his creative acts and should therefore praise and thank him. Foolishly, people rejected God and chose to worship images of their own creation. These verses do seem to indicate that if humankind has no excuse then there is a possibility of being saved without knowing the Gospel.

In 1977 the Christian Reformed Church received a formal complaint in the form of an overture to Synod against some of the teaching as expressed in the *Canons of Dort*. What it came down to was that the *Canons* teach that people are "consigned to everlasting damnation before they ever came into being" (Punt, 21). In 1980 the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church came with the result of the study that was initiated after the 1977 overture on reprobation. Some of the statements of this report are very interesting: "God consigns someone to destruction only on the basis of what that person does." "The basis for that condemnation is to be found solely in the persistent unbelief and sin of those so condemned" (1980 *Acts of Synod*, Christian Reformed Publications, 593).

All these questions concerning election and reprobation Neil Punt deals with in his books *Unconditional Good News* (1980) and now in *What's Good about the Good News*.

Punt's basic argument is based on texts that speak of all persons coming to new life through the sacrificial blood of Christ, texts like John 1:9. John 3:17. John 12:47. Romans 5:18. In I Cor. 15:22 we read: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Punt says

Let the Whole World Know: Resources for Preaching on Missions, Richard R. DeRidder and Roger S. Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988). 203pp. \$7.95. Reviewed by Gerald W. Vander Hoek, Assistant Professor of Theology.

In recognition of the need for biblical preaching to promote missions, DeRidder and Greenway have assembled

opportunities for enriching the understanding of our own faith. This book would allow Christians to become acquainted with an analysis of God's Word written from a differing faith perspective, yet one that equally seeks to discover the teaching contained in that text. Levenson gives us an intriguing contemporary Jewish interpretation of creation, evil, and God's omnipotence that challenges us either to rethink or to confirm our traditional theological assumptions.

that such texts have to be taken at their face value: "The universalistic texts speak of a certain-to-be-realized salvation in terms of all persons" (Punt 12). In other words, faith in Christ Jesus is not a condition of being saved but a result. Here are Punt's words:

True faith is a result or fruit of salvation, not a cause, prerequisite, or condition for salvation. Faith (as well as repentance and obedience) is absolutely necessary for all who hear the gospel because those who choose to remain indifferent or refuse to repent, believe and live in joyful obedience thereby reject God's will as he has made it known to them. (vii)

Punt of course realizes that the Bible teaches that many will be lost. He says that when the Bible talks about "all die," Christ is the exception. When the Bible says that "in Christ all will be made alive," this also is a generalization which has many exceptions. All who "willfully disobey" either the revelation of God's Inscripturated Word or his revelation of himself in creation, will be lost.

What does all this do for mission motivation? That question Punt anticipates by pointing out that Matthew 28 is clear: go out and share the Good News. He says that the Word of God *must* go out so that the man of God can be equipped for every good work.

Punt's book is a challenge to every biblical scholar and sincere Christian. It leaves many questions unanswered, especially questions related to texts that deal with "before the foundation of the world." But Punt's book is definitely worth reading and debating, although one does come away from the book a bit weary: it is very long for its 142 pages. Punt wants to make sure that he gets his main points across and he repeats them *ad nauseam*. However, buy it and read it. It will fascinate you and you will come away from it as either a friend or an enemy of the ideas, but keep an open mind.

some helps for pastors in sermon preparation. The book contains four sections: (1) Homiletic Outlines on Mission