

IS GOD THE CREATOR OF EVIL? A BRIEF EXAMINATION INTO ISAIAH 45:7

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From time to time I come across a student of who uses Isaiah 45:7 to declare that God is the Author or Creator of evil. The passage states: ***"I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster, I, the LORD, do all these things."*** Indeed, is God the ultimate source of evil? Let us explore this question.

If we examine the biblical historical context of Isaiah 45:1-8, we discover that a man named Cyrus will be commissioned from God to serve as His "anointed" for a special task (vs. 45:1). His task will involve releasing the Jews from their captivity so that they may rebuild Jerusalem which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. 2 King 24:13-14 records what the Babylonians did:

And he carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and he cut in pieces all the articles of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the LORD, as the LORD had said. Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land."

Why did God commission Cyrus? God not only wants to make known to Cyrus the future king that the God of Israel is "the LORD," but to also work all things out in human history "for the sake of Jacob my servant," the "God of Israel." In fact, one of the most amazing aspects of Isaiah and predictive prophecy is that twice God names this deliverer specifically by name: Cyrus. Thus, the God of Israel, not false gods, can reveal the future with such specificity; all other seers are "fools" (Isaiah 44:25). By naming the future deliverer by name, God reveals at least two things about Himself. First, God is Lord over time. Even though Cyrus was not even born when this prophecy was given, God knew Cyrus. We learn from history that a man named Cyrus indeed released the Israelites from Captivity and allowed them to return home to Jerusalem to rebuild their city.

Cyrus did not come about until the sixth century BC which is over a hundred years after Isaiah died. If Isaiah of Jerusalem was not the

single author of this book, and this section was composed by an additional author or compiler, believing that there must be some other explanation other than predictive prophecy, then the purpose for naming the liberator for Israel is completely undermined and loses its dramatic significance within the biblical context of this passage. To be sure, we have other passages that have such specificity in terms of Bible prophecy including the prophecy of Josiah more than 300 years before he was born in 1 Kings 13:2 and the birthplace of the Messiah, namely, Bethlehem (Malachi 5:2-3). But within the context of this whole passage, the overall declaration or truth expressed here is that that the LORD is absolutely unique; there is no other like Him. He evidences this truth with not only the naming of Cyrus, promising freedom to His people, but also acting out this prophecy in human history. God of Israel is able to predict and fulfill His predictions using pagan and powerful empires to bring about His purposes.

But naming Cyrus as that future anointed is not the only evidence of the incomparable God of Israel. God is not only able to control kings and rulers to complete His purposes, He is also God over light and good and darkness and evil. The imagery Isaiah uses is to not only deny the pagan idea that good and evil or light and dark are two eternally coexisting principles battling each other in the universe, but also to declare that He is GOD over ALL. Thus, Isaiah 45:7 is the refutation of this dualistic and pagan idea of the universe. This interpretation is in keeping with Isaiah 44:23-45:13 which is about God as Creator and Sovereign over human history; He is absolutely incomparable to any other power and His absolute power as sovereign God will be demonstrated for He will redeem Israel from their captivity! The sovereign God over human history will bring to pass His divine purposes for Cyrus (vs. 3), Jacob/Israel (vv. 4-5a), and the world (vv.5b-6c), for He is the God of history (vv.6d-7).

Once again, the overall declaration is that that there is no other God; God is altogether unique. In fact, He is incomparable. Thus, this truth is taken to new levels when we come to verse 7. God takes responsibility for both "light" and "darkness." Because of His creative will, God formed light by Himself, a biblical symbol for truth and salvation, and created darkness, which is the opposite of light. Darkness, in itself, is not evil. But these two words, "light" and "darkness" are commonly used metaphors in Hebrew Bible for that which is pleasant (life) and

unpleasant (death).¹ Coupled with “prosperity” (shalom) and “disaster” (ra’) we come to discover that all the diverse experiences life brings, they are also ordained; they are part of our experience over which God is absolutely and completely sovereign.² Thus, like Job 2:10 declares, **“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble [ra]?”** In fact, we observe that, **“I [God] bring prosperity and create disaster, I, the Lord, do all these things.”** God makes peace, wholeness, and well-being but also ordains calamity.

In particular, the phrase *“I create calamity”* or *“I create disaster”* [ra’] does not mean *“I create evil”* as translated by King James Version. It was an unfortunate translation in view of contemporary readers. There are about 640 occurrences of the word “ra” in Hebrew Bible. The range of meaning for this word is wide, going from a “nasty taste” to “full moral evil.”³ Context determines everything. And as used in Amos 3:6, this word, denotes “calamity,” “trouble,” or “disaster.”⁴ This is not an unusual meaning. In the Hebrew Bible we have about 275 instances where this particular nuance of “ra” is used.⁵ This is substantiated by the contrast made between “peace” and “evil.” The opposite of peace, wholeness, and well-being is not moral evil, but disaster or calamitous events.⁶ Therefore, as evidenced in Job 1-2, moral evil does not flow from God. Rather, as with all the blessings that come our way, when calamity hits us, we are to trust God with all the trials and troubles we experience. In fact, James declares what our attitude is to be as believers when we experience such calamities:

2Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, 3knowing that that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

For those of us who persevere through these trials, blessings await:

¹J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 303.

² Idem.

³ Ibid., 359.

⁴ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B. *Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), electronic edition.

⁵ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 359.

⁶ Pfeiffer, C. F., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press), electronic edition.

12 Blessing is a man who endures trials, because when he passes the test he will receive the crown of life that He has promised to those who love Him.

Therefore, our understanding of Isaiah 45:7 is that God is sovereign not only over both light and darkness, but also over moments of peace and calamity. He is over all! He ordains calamity because of judgment and allows calamity to mature us. Isaiah is declaring that the LORD, Almighty God, is ultimately responsible for all that occurs in both human history and nature. Like C. S. Lewis’ Aslan, “He’s not safe, but he’s good!”

Therefore, it would be totally incorrect to declare that God has created evil as if evil can flow out of God’s person. In fact, to argue that God is the Author or Creator of evil reveals a lack of applying systematic theology to the passage. Good, biblical, systematic theology will protect us from misinterpreting this passage to declare that God is the Author or Creator of evil. Since God is the sum-total of His infinite perfections, He is incapable of creating evil or even being tempted by evil. God is infinitely holy, glorious, and separate from all that which is morally wicked. Rather, evil is not an actual entity but a real corruption in a good entity (e.g., rotting teeth, rotting flesh, and rotting trees); evil is not a substance but a real corruption in a good substance that arose out of the abuse of creaturely free will (Genesis 1-3; Romans 5:12). Moreover, if God is the Author or Creator of evil, then why do we have the theme of a counterfeit kingdom in Scripture (e.g., Satan and his pestilence who operate a world system that is hostile to God)? There would be no need for one in Scripture if God is the Author or Creator of evil.

Once again, God is incapable of evil because He is morally perfect in His Person. This truth is substantiated by the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, who is undiminished deity and perfect Humanity. If God is the Creator of evil, then Jesus Christ, the God-man, could not be the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the one who substituted Himself for the sins of the world so that His people might receive eternal life. Moreover, the ministry of the Holy Spirit among unbelievers, convicting them of their sin, righteousness, and judgment, and within believers, sanctifying them into the conformity of Christ, would be incoherent.

Instead, what we discover is that God does not create moral evil, but allows calamities to come our way in order that we might be refined for His glory. Why? We qualitatively grow more from adversity than pleasure. He even takes the abuse caused by the sinful choices or actions of others and ourselves, and weaves them into a tapestry that reflects His good providence. Tragedies, pain, and death cannot escape His attention. They are used to bring about what is in our best interest. Therefore, we can trust Him. Like Romans 8:28 states, ***“We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose.”***

Just consider: God did not remove Himself from suffering. As God incarnate He directly experienced mockery, suffering, and death. But even with all the injustice Jesus experienced, all the horrific suffering He faced on the cross by the Romans, and all the betrayal he tasted by both friend and foe, He not only asked that they be forgiven, but He also took all our sins upon Himself; He became the sacrifice we needed so that we might have the possibility of eternal life. Since God is sovereign over all, even over death, our greatest enemy, He rose bodily from the dead, and offers to each of us, an opportunity to receive grace, namely, unmerited favor, and be his “son” or “daughter” and He our “Father” by placing our faith in Him, believing that Jesus is God, who died on the cross for our sins, and rose bodily from the dead. Thus, as Paul declares in Ephesians 1:11:

11 In Him •also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,

What conclusions can be drawn from this examination into Isaiah 45:7? Please consider the following:

1. God is altogether unique, sovereign, and incomparable. He is God over both light and darkness and peace and calamity; nothing is outside of God’s authority.
2. God directs human history for purposes that will bring about His perfect plans.
3. God is sovereign over both blessings and calamities.

4. God is not the author of evil for evil is the corruption of something good; evil arose out of the abuse of creaturely free will.
5. God allows evil to occur but He uses all to bring about spiritual maturity.
6. God Himself experienced suffering; He was not exempt from it as displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ in human history; He died on the cross for our sins. But He also rose again (1 Corinthians 15:1-7).
7. God weaves all things according to the counsel of His perfect will. Therefore we can trust Him even when our “whys” are never answered. Therefore, we “should not be discouraged when the appearances of history seem contrary to his promises.”⁷
8. Protect exegesis with sound, biblical systematic theology.
9. Pay close attention to historical context when interpreting Scripture.
10. You have good reasons to trust God no matter what comes your way.

⁷ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1323.