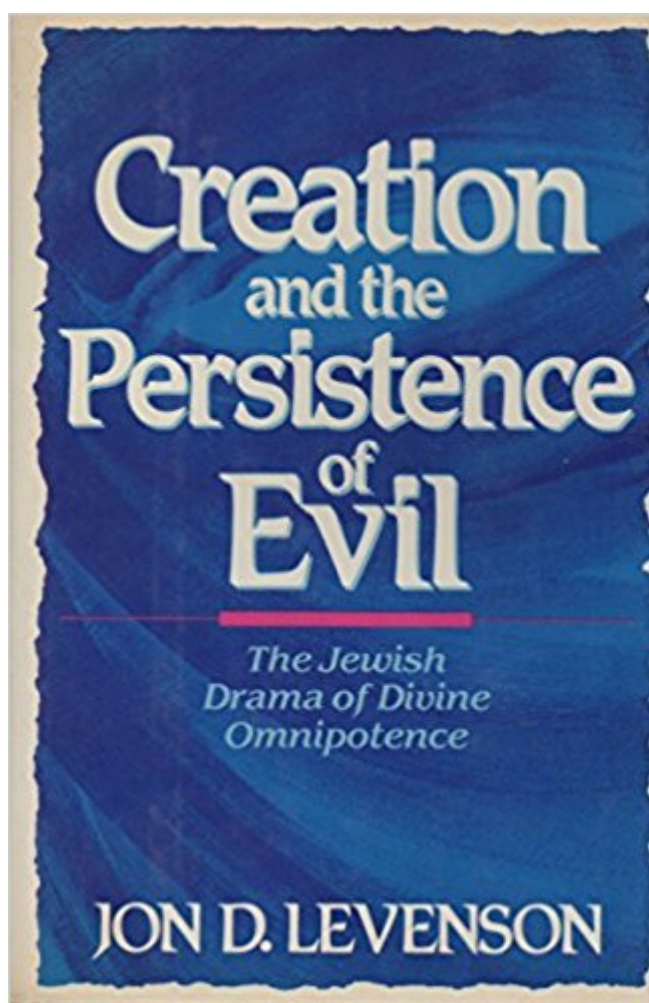


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Creation And The Persistence Of Evil: The Jewish Drama Of Divine Omnipotence



Synopsis

This paperback edition brings to a wide audience one of the most innovative and meaningful models of God for this post-Auschwitz era. In a thought-provoking return to the original Hebrew conception of God, which questions accepted conceptions of divine omnipotence, Jon Levenson defines God's authorship of the world as a consequence of his victory in his struggle with evil. He traces a flexible conception of God to the earliest Hebrew sources, arguing, for example, that Genesis 1 does not describe the banishment of evil but the attempt to contain the menace of evil in the world, a struggle that continues today.

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Customer Reviews

"A doctrine of creatio ex nihilo and a perception of creation as essentially a *fait accompli* 'in the beginning' have stripped much of the drama from the views of creation found in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson seeks--with impressive success--to restore that drama. He provides, thereby, a reflective biblical foundation, based in solid philological and comparative study."--Lee Humphreys, *Hebrew Studies* "This masterful biblical and rabbinic study of creation and evil may challenge Christian proponents of creation theology and spirituality and adherents of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo."--John C. Endres, S.J., *Theological Studies*

This paperback edition of *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* brings to a wide audience one of the most innovative and meaningful models of God for this post-Auschwitz era.

This is an interesting book. Our author, Jon D. Levenson, is both a monotheist and a believer in God's Omnipotence. This is curious because omnipotence is not here conceived as mere fact but, as our author puts it, "... a dramatic enactment: the absolute power of God realizing itself in achievement and relationship." Omnipotence is not rejected by our author; it is just not always enacted by God. - For reasons that always remain inscrutable. Our author pointedly denies writing a theodicy in the 1994 preface. Why? In the Bible (the O.T.) God's people want Him to Act, not explain. ...But theodicy is, above all, an explanation (of evil, suffering, etc.). So, who or what is God acting upon (or against) when He Acts? Chaos! Thus "...the world is good; the chaos it replaces or suppresses is evil." Levenson maintains that the 'nothing' (in the biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing) is not mere void, absence, privation. No. It is "something - something negative." What? Our author states that for the Jews of those times "it seems more likely they identified 'nothing' with things like disorder, injustice, subjugation, disease and death." If you philosophically identify God with Perfect Being, its opposite is nothing. But the world of the Hebrew Bible did not contain philosophers... Our author also maintains that the biblical understanding is that, "history, no less than nature, slips out of God's control and into the hands of obscure but potent forces of malignancy that oppose everything He is reputed to uphold." Why does this happen? Again, God's Will and Ways are Inscrutable and Mysterious. Yes, God entered into Covenant with His people. Why then are they so often forsaken? "The possibility of an interruption in His faithfulness is indeed troubling, and I repeat that I have ventured no explanation for it." The God of the Philosophers, the All, the One, Knows no Other, except nothing (void). Levenson argues that this is not the God of Israel. While the God of the Philosophers seems to lead some commentators in the direction of an 'All is God' position, our author will have none of it. "The notion of the God who sustains all things, though derived from some common biblical affirmations, is difficult to reconcile with the old mythological image of the divine warrior at combat with the inimical forces." When I picked up this book from I thought I was purchasing a theodicy. The 1994 preface, briefly considered above, disabused me of that. The preface was written to display what our author opposes: "the residue of the static Aristotelian conception of deity as perfect, unchanging being; the uncritical tendency to affirm the constancy of divine action; and the conversion of biblical creation theology into the affirmation of the goodness of whatever is." I was also surprised by his advocacy of a liturgical, indeed theurgical, understanding of the Hebrew Bible. Levenson argues that what is needed today, "is an appreciation of the theurgic character of religious acts in the Hebrew Bible, the way these affect God and move him from one stance to another." I think, btw, that the position of Levenson, while strongly rejecting the Aristotelian conception of god, might have some affinity with the Platonic. Plato (in the Timaeus)

taught that 'The God' created the world out of preexisting matter (Chaos). Plato, in his dialogues, also seems to indicate that Order is always imposed. I cannot think of anywhere that Plato displays the confidence in Natural Order that Aristotle does. It is the perfect 'unmoved Mover' of Aristotle who leads, eventually, to the philosophical conception of deity that Levenson here so strongly disputes. God's Kampf with Chaos (Order versus Chaos) continues to this day. ...And the days to come. The argument of this book strikes a realistic note that more Pollyannaish commentators and theologians do not. Four stars for a thoughtful presentation of a post-progressive theology. With the hopes that had been invested in secular universalism drying up in our wretched postmodern world, I expect to see more realistic and pessimistic theologies in the future.

A Note on Creatio and Theodicy

Now, there are several ways to think of the origin of the World. The first, and simplest, is that it (World, Cosmos, All-That-Is) has always existed and always will exist. One certainly avoids a great deal of theoretical problems with this conception! But if one denies this then one must believe the World came to be. But how? In the various religious traditions, there are only three or four ways the world came into being:

1. **Creatio ex Nihilo:** out of nothing. This is the way an omniscient, omnipotent God calls the world forth. - Our very familiar Aristotelianized (according to our author) understanding of Genesis. However, in *Doing everything*, this God comes to be thought of as Responsible for Everything - including Evil. In this book, Levenson wants us to read Genesis very differently.
2. **Creatio ex Materia:** out of some pre-existing material, typically co-eternal with the god. As mentioned above, this is what is argued in Plato's *Timaeus*. Here, 'The god' imposes Order on (an already existing) Chaos. (And again, note that (imo) there is no natural Order anywhere in Plato. Order is always imposed. I consider this the fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle.) Now, this Chaos is then thought to be 'responsible' (that is, it is the cause) of Evil in the World. Chaos is typically thought to be mindless and without will, so technically we say 'cause' instead of assigning 'responsibility' to it. But, in either case, 'The god's' hands are clean.
3. **Creatio ex Deo:** out of God. This is the emanationism that we find, not only in neoplatonism, but in most gnostics too. Why do they say 'emanate'? Because the One (the Source) did not Will to Create! But this emanation (actually, series of emanations: One -> Nous -> World Soul -> world) is not an accident. Just the opposite! It is an Unwilled Necessity. It is the God's Nature to overflow. The theory of emanations means that even 'gross matter' cannot be evil since it too ultimately derives from the One.
4. **ex Errore:** out of error. But what of Evil? It is certainly thought (save a few philosophers and mystics) to be undeniably Real. The Gnostics thought Evil was very real too. It is here, and only here, that we can speak of 'creatio ex errore'. For the gnostics, who are almost always emanationists, there were only two possible answers to the evil in the world. Either the god

(i.e., demiurge) who created our material world was ignorant or evil. For the gnostics there are many Levels of Reality (i.e., of Emanations) and typically the gnostics will make the last emanation (the last 'god') in the chain of emanations either ignorant of the Source of All, or outright evil. If the former, the god is often called Sophia. If the latter, he is usually thought to be the old testament Jehovah. In both cases, 'the creator god' (as an emanation) of the gnostics is very distant from the Source, and it is this distance that is generally thought to be the cause of the ignorance or evil. Our author can be said to be attempting to put some elements of the Creatio ex Nihilo tradition and some elements of the Creatio ex Materia position together. But of course his interpretation leans in a monotheist direction. Eventually, God will win. It is not clear to me that this last must be an axiom of the Creatio ex Materia position.

I was delighted to see that Jon D. Levenson's "Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence" had recently joined his earlier "Sinai & Zion: An Entrance Into the Jewish Bible" (Harper, 1985; corrected paperback, 1987; HarperOne digital edition, May 2013) in Kindle format. (They are also in Kobo and Nook.) "Creation and the Persistence of Evil" (Harper & Row, 1987) was one of the most recent books to be included in the distinguished MYTHOS series from Princeton University Press and the Bollingen Foundation (corrected, with a new Preface, Princeton University Press, paperback, 1994). It is the latter text that is the basis of the new HarperCollins EPub edition (October 1, 2013). This pleasure is partly due to the fact that an excellent book is getting a new lease on life, with, perhaps, a somewhat different market than that for scholarly monographs; but also to the fact that my copies of their paperback editions have been missing for some time, and this was a less expensive way to replace both "Sinai and Zion" and "Creation and the Persistence of Evil." Much academic writing is uninspiring, and much religious writing is more glib than precise. Levenson deals with weighty themes, with philological rigor, but his prose is exciting, and impressively quotable. Levenson even finds a place for humor: Referring to Psalm 104: 26, "Leviathan that You formed to sport with" -- "It is possible that the psalmist has here sanitized the old myth ... altogether, so that Leviathan appears ... as the plaything of YHWH (his 'rubber ducky,' as a student once put it).""Creation and the Persistence of Evil" takes on one the most enduring features of philosophical theology: the understanding of divine omnipotence as complete power over a created, dependent, universe. When joined to omniscience and benevolence, this creates the classic problem of theodicy (the nature of Divine Justice). Levenson examines this viewpoint in the Hebrew Bible, and finds that it is not the only one; indeed, the assumptions of omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence are most evident when God is

reproached with the continuing existence, and apparent triumph, of evil in the world. Levenson argues that the Hebrew Bible -- the Jewish Bible, which is not quite the same as the Christian "Old Testament" -- regards its God as the MOST powerful, but does not *always* draw the conclusion that everything else is powerless. From this perspective, God's triumphs over the powers of chaos and moral evil no longer have the appearance of a charade, but of a genuine (if still one-sided) struggle. Moreover, Levenson sees both the Biblical text and some Rabbinic responses to it as contradicting the long-held dogma of "creatio ex nihilo," creation out of nothing. As he states in the 1994 Preface: "When order emerges where disorder had reigned unchallenged, when justice replaces oppression, when disease and death yield to vitality and longevity, this is indeed the creation of something out of nothing. It is the replacement of the negative by the positive This crucial point will be lost on us if we follow the long-standing philosophical tradition of identifying God with perfect being, so that his opposite is non-being, or 'nothing' in the sense of a void. It will equally be lost if we draw a sharp distinction between creation and redemption." Although the two books can be read quite independently of each other, "Creation" picks up themes (mythological, symbolic, liturgical) explored in "Sinai and Zion," and the two volumes can be considered complementary.

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