

## **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THEODICY: A NON-CLASSICAL APPROACH THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE GOSPELS**

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This paper contends that for Christian philosophy, the classical approaches to Problem of Evil, especially those that attempt to justify God's omnipotence, are not adequate answers to the pressing problems of suffering, and that the canonical Gospels offer more valid contentions for defending his benevolence in the face of gross evil. It is therefore attempting to contribute a voice to a long-running debate between classical theist approaches and postmodern (or otherwise non-classical) arguments for God's validity in a world saturated with evil. Positioning itself against the traditional Augustinian and Iranian schools of theodicy, the essay returns to the original ideas that answered the earliest Christians when they were confronted by adversity, the plight of the weak, the wrongdoings of the powerful, but also the death of their teacher and leader, Jesus. These are the ideas recorded in Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, in which contemporary philosophy of religion has found itself exploring new outposts to engage the Problem of Evil. It will also be argued that the nature of these Gospel defences is primarily eschatological, although they cannot be compartmentalized into any single category of religious philosophy. This paper is *not* intended to serve an expressly Christian purpose. Rather, its main objective is to give a greater exposure to less traditional defences of God in the *strictly philosophical context* of theodicy.

### **Introduction**

Theodicy is the justification of God's action, or inaction, in the face of great suffering and evil. Its grimmest struggle, philosophically and historically, has been against the evidential Problem of Evil. There is no treatise on theodicy in the New Covenant<sup>1</sup>, and as a formal subject, it is not present either. However, I would be doing injustice to Christians if I assert that there is no response to the Problem of Evil in their Scriptures because, if the Gospels compose the zenith of spiritual life for Christians, the charge that there is no defence of their God in the face of very real evil is an extremely

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<sup>1</sup> Lee (2005)

serious one. This is because the Problem of Evil presents the gravest challenge to the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God. While this God may not always be the God of the New Testament, it is the conventional view of Divinity that has come to be due to the influence of classical theism. The fact of evil powerfully challenges the assertion of God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence through murdered babies, the torture of innocent animals and children by psychopaths, and natural disasters that destroy thousands of lives, many of them Christian. Consequently, the endeavour to preserve this omni-God, this awkward fusion of the passionate Hebraic God with the deistic, transcendent Deity of the Greek philosophers, has abounded in difficulties. Dostoevsky's small child, beating its chest in tortured sorrow<sup>2</sup>, remains bitterly unswayed by apologists. Traditional apologetics have remained unable to achieve a final, satisfactory refutation. But is God necessarily omnimax? According to Peter Geach's apologetic lecture on 'The Irrelevance of Omnipotence', Christians are obliged to hold that God is 'almighty', but not omnipotent.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, all the problems regarding the omnimax God entail only the rejection of a *particular kind* of belief.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there is a different direction, one that is perhaps grounded in a more concretely affirmed belief in the New Testament: God's providence in his interaction with humanity within history as 'redemptive history'<sup>5</sup>, or as compensation for evil. This culminates in the Almighty's revelation of Jesus. The future culmination of this historical interaction is the *eschatological hope* for Christians. For the faithful, it is a pilgrimage of struggle towards the Celestial City<sup>6</sup>, where a traveller can be confident that his or her final outcome is worthwhile in the face of all tribulations in life. This is a more plausible

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<sup>2</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. (1986) pt. II, bk. V, chap. 4

<sup>3</sup> Geach (1977) pg. 30

<sup>4</sup> Clack and Clack (1998) pg. 96

<sup>5</sup> Conzelmann (1960) pg. 149

<sup>6</sup> Hick (1977) pg. 386

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answer than continuously attempting to defend God's omnipotence, to which Geach bluntly protests: 'a Christian need not and cannot believe in absolute omnipotence.'<sup>7</sup>

In this paper I hope to elaborate on how the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John<sup>8</sup> outline a manner of eschatological theodicy that has been largely overlooked by an apologetic tradition dominated by Augustinian and Iraenean ideas, many of which, due to their reliance on the omni-God concept, have become outdated and unsatisfactory.<sup>9</sup> My objective, therefore, is not to provide a new manner of theodicy, but to support my fundamental assertion that since evil poses too powerful a challenge to 'orthodox' theism, a study of the canonical Gospels' narratives is an alternative methodology to examine answers to the Problem of Evil. The focus of a Gospel's eschatological theodicy also begins relatively narrowly: The first writer, Mark, presents a 'basic' or preliminary examination, dealing with God's own suffering along with his people. Building on the prospect of the eschaton, Matthew emphasises the Kingdom as the final, apocalyptic answer to evil, a reality imposed by God on a corrupt world. Luke writes of a 'present' eschatology and Jesus's uplifting of the lowly. And John's mysticism is centered around Christ the Word, who defeated evil by entering the mortal time-space continuum and manifesting as the Incarnation on Earth. So although the relation between theodicy and eschatology enjoys no systematic discussion in the Gospels<sup>10</sup>, it is also possible to discover a more competent idea of God than that of the medieval scholastics, an idea that confronts evil in a real way.

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<sup>7</sup> Geach (1977) pg. 11

<sup>8</sup> I am proceeding in the chronological order in which the Gospels were apparently written.

<sup>9</sup> Clack and Clack (1998) pg 54, 56 – 57

<sup>10</sup> Lee (2005)

### **Preliminary Theodicies: Mark**

Crucial to the background of Gospel theodicies is Jesus's own death. The writer of Mark was faced with a twofold dilemma in his Christian community: the mission of Jesus had ended in a humiliating death, but it seemed to parallel the gross, unjust sufferings of his disciples, sufferings that they were powerless to defeat.<sup>11</sup> Mark primarily attempted to show that the death of Jesus not only renewed discipleship with the Messiah, but also revealed the paradox of the Cross. In Mark 8:27 – 30, the Divinity humbles himself by assuming the form of man and reverses the status of the lowly and humiliated – the crucified – and through a graphic and humiliating narrative of the execution<sup>12</sup>, displays God's true power in the face of evil, both in death and resurrection<sup>13</sup> – and affirmation of his participation in his own followers' despair and helplessness. It was his gruesome death that was central in the Gospels' theodicies, because God not only suffered this great evil alongside his people, he vindicated it: even the earthly, evil powers acknowledged that during Jesus's ultimate humiliation and agony, 'Surely this man was the Son of God'.<sup>14</sup> Mark's Gospel was intended to reassure readers that God's sovereignty was re-established, or at least still potent in the mission of Jesus<sup>15</sup>, while his death in powerlessness and humiliation transformed the understanding of God's presence and power. This arose out of the apparent paradox of a crucified Jesus and the Son of Man coming in judgement.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the eschatological theodicy in some ways was not as focused on a single theme as the others might have been. Mark interpreted Jesus's death as God being no stranger to suffering. God somehow participates in innocent suffering, sharing the

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<sup>11</sup> Neville (2005)

<sup>12</sup> Mark 15:22 – 32 and 15:33 – 41

<sup>13</sup> Mark 16:6

<sup>14</sup> Mark 15:38 – 39

<sup>15</sup> Neville (2005)

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

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pain and absorbing it into God's own being to be transformed.<sup>17</sup> In the context of apocalyptic theodicy, there is some in its purest sense<sup>18</sup>, but this is not as strongly emphasized as the later Gospels. It was Matthew who would expand on this transformation of power/powerlessness and glory/humiliation, and go further to write of this transformation as an eschatological future that supplants evil entirely, with God firmly in power.

### **Matthew's Kingdom**

John Hick concludes his book *Evil and the God of Love* with a hopeful affirmation of the role eschatology plays in answering the problem of evil in that there might be a future good so great as to render bearable, in retrospect, the totality of human experience, with all its wickedness and suffering as well as all its sanctity and happiness.<sup>19</sup> With this one hope comes many implications of eschatological belief in response to gross suffering. It seems almost a natural religious evolution of the explanation of temporal unjust events to the events that will take place in the future. Therefore eschatology is intertwined with history; humanity's history is played out and interpreted as a theodicy. This is the background of history that was given meaning in the prophecies of the Old Testament, from the words of the prophets and the psalms.<sup>20</sup> Just as eschatological hopes dragged on and were frustrated, the visions became increasingly 'final', until such visions entailed a New Eon altogether, one free from evil. The hope was that God would succeed where human beings failed.<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Mark 8:38, 13:26, 14:62

<sup>19</sup> Hick (1977) pg. 386

<sup>20</sup> O'Brien (2005)

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien (2005)

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apocalyptic tradition of the vindication of the righteous<sup>22</sup> carried on from Judaism and penetrated into Christian thought. Isaiah spoke of a King who will reign in triumph, where those who are suffering most shall enjoy justice.<sup>23</sup> Now this 'End of Days' became a key concept of the teachings of Jesus. Christians believed that Christ fulfilled, and will fulfil in his Second Coming, the King's role, with justice as his sceptre.<sup>24</sup> God's effective rule has not been established, so sin and evil persisted. Jesus comes to establish that rule.<sup>25</sup> His forerunner John the Baptist and he himself therefore summon men to repent and believe the good news that God is now acting with finality to defeat evil and establish his rule on Earth.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel, turning to apocalyptic ideas in the face of certain evil and an uncertain future for Christianity, believed Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament by his birth, life, death, and defeat of death.<sup>26</sup> The triumph of Jesus<sup>27</sup> was the fulfilment of the prophesied new eon: the Kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup> Now only the Second Coming remained to fully realise Matthew's eschatology. As a writer, he seemed to emphasize the advent of the Kingdom as the primary triumph of good over evil. 'Kingdom' in Matthew means the active kingship and rule of God. Jesus was suffering with his people, but God remained *powerful*. But the Kingdom in its full form is in the future. It will be realised at the end of the age, and every evil will be crushed; all men judged, and the perfect eternal order established.<sup>29</sup> The eschatological message outlined in the Gospel was that believers could look forward

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<sup>22</sup> Psalm 72

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 11:1 – 9

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 45:7

<sup>25</sup> Filson (1971) pg. 32 – 33

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 28:6

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 4:17

<sup>29</sup> Filson (1971) pg. 33

to this future because this was not a timeless reality; no verse occurs which refers to the Kingdom as a past fact.<sup>30</sup> The Kingdom is the result of God stepping into the world and acting. It is this reason, that God acted,<sup>31</sup> that constitutes the main defence of God's action in the face of suffering for Matthew. Jesus's own powerful exorcisms (and other miracles) indicated that the Kingdom was coming.<sup>32</sup> His fulfilment of the suffering of holy Israel<sup>33</sup>, and his own death meant that the eschatological time has dawned. Like the Jews of antiquity, Jesus cried out in righteous complaint<sup>34</sup>, demanding that justice be done in the face of great evil and darkness. But this humiliating death was but a fundamental recognition that it was wrenchingly humiliating, because when Jesus died, 'paradoxically' evil was being defeated and the rule of God was advancing.<sup>35</sup> In particular with Matthew, the cosmic signs of the earthquake<sup>36</sup> and the appearance of dead saints in the city<sup>37</sup> heralded in principle the believer's own participation in a totally new epoch of existence and physical resurrection, one that did away with the old misery and agony of the past world (affirmed by the Resurrection). Therefore for Matthew, Christian life is soteriological in nature and eschatological in temporality. The death-resurrection was the turning point for the believer, because the turning of stone by the angel<sup>38</sup> symbolised a turning of the ages by God and the angel's sitting on the stone where Jesus' body lay meant that death and evil had been conquered.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the Church waits for the time when Jesus will come to judge, vindicate and justify them. This awaiting of the Last Judgment and eternal life moulds temporal Christian existence, no matter how

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<sup>30</sup> Filson (1971) pg. 32

<sup>31</sup> Moynihan ed. (2005) pg. 95

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 12:28

<sup>33</sup> Psalm 22:1 – 12

<sup>34</sup> Psalm 22:1

<sup>35</sup> Filson (1971) pg. 37

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 27:51

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 27:52 – 53

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 28:2

<sup>39</sup> Meier (1978) pg. 208

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difficult, as eschatological existence.<sup>40</sup> Matthew hopes for a glorious coming of Christ that fulfils the Christian meaning of life, although his eschatology is not fully realised, opening up an indefinite future *until* the end of the age.<sup>41</sup> Until then, the Matthean soteriology is founded upon the eschatological hopes of Christians: 'All our hopes find their culmination in the one hope: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The earth will become heaven.'<sup>42</sup> It is this possible future that Hick grounds his hope in, a future that validates even the most unjust suffering currently apparent on Earth.

Jesus did not know the exact arrival time of that future, nor could his disciples know it<sup>43</sup>, but it is a decisive *work of God* in the apparently linear fabric of history. John the Baptist announced its imminence<sup>44</sup>, and Jesus began his public ministry with the same stirring proclamation.<sup>45</sup> How exactly the Judgement takes place is also not known, and only the exhortation of the community's preparation for that Judgement is emphasised.<sup>46</sup> Therefore the timing is uncertain while the reality is definite. Yet this eschatological defence, for many Christians today as it was for Matthew, has not been realised. More than two thousand years have passed. Great evil persists in the mortal world, and the final, radical, Judgement of good and evil has not been realised. Like the Old Testament<sup>47</sup>, New Testament eschatological theodicy promises this future experience that confirms faith and hope in God's purpose. But it is not difficult to maintain that Matthew's apocalyptic Kingdom alone is not adequate in answering

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<sup>40</sup> Meier (1978) pg. 38 – 39

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 28:20

<sup>42</sup> Moynihan ed. (2005) pg. 165

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 24:36

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 3:2

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 4:17

<sup>46</sup> Luz (1993) pg. 128

<sup>47</sup> O'Brien (2005)

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evil. The next step is to turn to the King himself, Jesus Christ, and how his life on Earth brought those who suffered from evil under his protective wing.

### **Luke's Jesus the King**

Both Matthew and Luke, through Markan eschatology, write of Jesus's death as an apocalyptic, end-time event succeeding Jesus's own apocalyptic warnings.<sup>48</sup> But Luke explicitly presupposes that God is always in supreme control, from the beginning to the end.<sup>49</sup> It is God who sends down the angels to Zechariah, and to Mary, proclaiming the future King.<sup>50</sup> Hence his Gospel narrates the long-awaited and determined activity of God's historical, salvific purpose.<sup>51</sup> God is the King, and therefore the Lukan eschatology emphasises God's historical interaction with humanity (climaxing in Jesus) as the King's challenge against evil. God's plan and control of redemptive history is described under two aspects. The first aspect is the redemptive rule of God himself, resting on the systematic execution of a divine plan, and the second aspect is the content of this divine plan, which is glimpsed in Christ, who is at the centre of human history.<sup>52</sup>

Writing in the context of the Roman Empire, where the Pax Romana was imposed only after much bloodshed, suppression and injustice, Luke envisages Jesus as the King who transforms this worldly order. As heir to the throne of David<sup>53</sup>, Jesus does

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<sup>48</sup> Matt 21-25; Lk 20-22

<sup>49</sup> Danker (1976) pg. 5

<sup>50</sup> Luke 1:11 – 38

<sup>51</sup> Green (1995) pg. 22

<sup>52</sup> Conzelmann (1960) pg. 149 – 150

<sup>53</sup> Luke 1:33

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herald the Kingdom of God as Providence's work.<sup>54</sup> He enters Jerusalem as the King<sup>55</sup>, and presents the Kingdom to his disciples.<sup>56</sup> But he is a totally different King to Augustus Caesar, for he brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, salvation for Luke is pre-eminently status reversal, and this includes not only the raising up of lowly persons, but also the liberation of the people of Israel from tyrannical Rome. This is the first form of 'liberation theology' as God's option for the poor, in the unity of the Luke/Acts narrative (Prior alludes to Luke 4:16 – 30 as Jesus's exemplary interest in the plight of the oppressed).<sup>58</sup> Garret makes a worthy point that the earthly powers are presented alongside Satan's own dominion, the dominion of injustice, evil, dark magic and demonic powers in particular. The Lukan Jesus is understood to have conquered Satan's claims of authority and his earthly agents, who oppress and dominate.<sup>59</sup> In a broader context, the Kingdom is here to deconstruct worldly systems and barriers, inviting all, especially those who are marginalised and excluded, to participate in this community.<sup>60</sup> This is Jesus's challenge to the earthly and demonic powers of oppression as the agent of God. His miracles also entail not simply a physical healing, but a healing of the social isolation and loneliness that the downtrodden have suffered.<sup>61</sup> This twofold healing is evident with the woman who suffered a haemorrhage<sup>62</sup>, the emphasis on Jesus's sorrow for the mother whose son died<sup>63</sup>, and the Gerasene demoniac<sup>64</sup>, who are all primary recipients of God's eschatological salvation. Such healings of Jesus along with the

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<sup>54</sup> Luke 4:43 and 9:2

<sup>55</sup> Luke 19:38

<sup>56</sup> Luke 22:17 – 18

<sup>57</sup> Luke 1:52

<sup>58</sup> Prior (1995) pg. 16

<sup>59</sup> Garret (1989) pg. 108

<sup>60</sup> Green (1995) pg. 94

<sup>61</sup> Green (1995) pg. 96

<sup>62</sup> Luke 8:43 – 48

<sup>63</sup> Luke 7:11 – 17

<sup>64</sup> Luke 8:26 – 39

other miracles are seen as the overthrow of the demonic or diabolical. Not simply that, but God's anticipated action is salvation<sup>65</sup> from spiritual and political and social alienation. The crucifixion of Jesus in Luke offers an insight to those who are drowning in misery and suffering, of the exact nature of this salvation. Jesus reassures the weeping and mourning women of their ultimate triumph as the meek and the downtrodden, going as far as to call them 'Daughters of Jerusalem', an affirmation of Israel as their rightful home and himself as their ultimate King.<sup>66</sup> He declares, even as he is bearing the agony of the cross, that blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.<sup>67</sup> Another powerful image is not a violent overthrow of the Roman Empire by the Kingdom of God, but of the climax of the inversion of status and values propagated by Jesus.<sup>68</sup> The master will sit his faithful slaves at the table to eat, and he (the master) will serve them (the slaves). This rights the wrongs of the world and transmutes evil into goodness. Compared to the other theodicies, this is similar in the sense that the Lukan community shared in the same political and social injustices as the Markan and Matthean churches. Christians were a small, marginalized group living on the fringe, and they were under the rule of the tyrannical Romans, who crucified their Lord. Subsequently God was not known nor cared about by the powerful. Therefore it is not surprising that this affected the timing of the Lukan eschatology. Whereas the Kingdom of God is a temporal *present-future reality* imposed on a sinful generation in Matthew, Luke's Jesus emphasises that salvation is already present.<sup>69</sup> Also, the idea of the Kingdom appears as early as in John the Baptist's preaching in Matthew 3:2, whereas for Luke this is impossible

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<sup>65</sup> Danker (1976) pg. 111

<sup>66</sup> Luke 23:27 – 29

<sup>67</sup> Luke 23:29

<sup>68</sup> Luke 12:35 – 38

<sup>69</sup> Luke 4:21, 19:9, 11:20, and 17:28

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because it is Jesus the King who preaches about his own prophetic fulfilments.<sup>70</sup> A crucial narrative is the exchange which occurs between the crucified criminals and Jesus. The second criminal who defends Jesus against the accusations (of false kingship and divinity) of the first<sup>71</sup> is promised a future heaven with conviction by Jesus: 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'<sup>72</sup>

In the previous section I wrote that Matthew's eschatology is not fully realised, opening up an indefinite future *until* the end of the age. When one observes that it was evident in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E. that Jesus's return was not imminent, Matthew's defence seems hollow. But in Luke's Gospel Jesus answers the criminal's indefinite 'when you come into your kingdom' with '*today*'.<sup>73</sup> The Kingdom is *now*, a temporal certainty. The first criminal believes that Jesus is not the Christ if he cannot save himself and them. But the criminal who defends Jesus replies that by accepting crucifixion, Christ is showing his true majesty: he does not attempt to escape, like the guilty, whereas the first criminal, who was guilty, wanted Christ to free them too.<sup>74</sup> Guilt is on humanity, as guilt is upon the criminals, but Jesus suffers also, though he is not a criminal and was not guilty. The banishment of evil, for the criminal who defended Jesus, comes from the repentance of the lowliest state of being, leading into the personal realisation of salvation that Jesus affirms. Luke's Jesus is a Christ of hidden power: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass

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<sup>70</sup> Luke 16:16 and 18:31

<sup>71</sup> Luke 23:40 – 42

<sup>72</sup> Luke 23:43

<sup>73</sup> Danker (1976) pg. 111

<sup>74</sup> Luke 23:39

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away.<sup>75</sup> God in this sense is not omnipotent, but he is in control, of both history and the salvific process. Jesus defeats the evil powers in this way.

Luke's theodicy is the majestic control that Jesus exercises, particularly among the rejected and isolated. Matthew writes more of the future. But Luke did not simply collapse the eschatological hope into the present; the Kingdom has a future element *and* a present one<sup>76</sup>, though the temporal location of the future element, like Matthew, is uncertain: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'<sup>77</sup> Luke's emphasis on the certainty but unpredictability of his eschatology means that it is necessary to be alert, lest there be serious consequences.<sup>78</sup> Yet, is this theodicy restricted by its political context? It seems to be mostly an expansion on Matthew's apocalyptic Kingdom theodicy with its emphasis on the temporal power of the King. Even with this affirmation of God's continuing battle against evil in the present, it does not seem powerful enough to defeat the forces of evil so prevalent in our world. It is the ascension<sup>79</sup> of Jesus in the epilogue that answers this, which entails an important philosophy regarding the hidden power of God: he dispenses with worldly political power and dispenses justice for all nations.

Expanding on this timeless vindication, there is one more aspect to the eschatological theodicy: aside from Jesus's apocalyptic Kingdom and his kingly nature and benefaction, his divine nature itself might be an answer to evil.

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<sup>75</sup> Luke 21:33

<sup>76</sup> Green (1995) pg. 98

<sup>77</sup> Acts 1:7

<sup>78</sup> Luke 12:47

<sup>79</sup> Luke 24:51

### **John's Eschatology of the Incarnation**

From an eschatological perspective, there is a progression of the attempt to fulfil messianic expectations in Mark and more strongly in Matthew, to a present benefaction by Jesus in Luke. For 'John', however, it was due to his community's many experiences, religious, historical and psychological, that gave birth to the worldview<sup>80</sup> that would shape the eschatology, and hence the following theodicy, of the Fourth Gospel. This is by far the most mystical theodicy of all: it is an eschatology of presence<sup>81</sup> on Earth. The writer of John's theodicy wrote of Jesus *himself, as the Incarnation*, as the answer to evil.<sup>82</sup> The prologue of John harkens back to Isaiah, who in a vision saw God enthroned in his glory, but then received a task that he must carry out in lowliness and concealed glory.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, the eternal Word entered the mortal fabric of a material world corrupted by sin and evil, assuming a body in the Incarnation of Jesus. The objective of the Incarnation was to reveal the loving, self-giving nature of God<sup>84</sup>, from the beginning of his ministry, to his crucifixion and resurrection, all of which were part and parcel of Jesus's explicit belief in his own God-given mission<sup>85</sup>, to bring the divine plan to fruition through the utter banishment of evil.

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<sup>80</sup> Burge (2001)

<sup>81</sup> Lee (2005)

<sup>82</sup> John 3:19

<sup>83</sup> Westermann (1998) pg.6

<sup>84</sup> John 6:32

<sup>85</sup> John writes of Jesus of being God (John 1), while at the same time sent by God to spend time in the mortal world (like a Gnostic intermediary). There are many verses in John that point to both views as valid. In regards to Jesus being sent 'from above', or the Father, to the world, we have John 3:17; 34; 4:34; 5:36 – 38; 6: 38 – 39; 7:16 – 18; 12:44 – 50; 15:21 – 24.

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John's eschatology provides a slightly different theodicy: he narrates a battle between the forces of God, light, and life, against the forces of darkness, death, sin, and evil. Darkness, however, cannot overpower evil, for it could not overcome the pre-existent Word<sup>86</sup>, much less defeat the light that shines in such darkness.<sup>87</sup> Craig Koester notes that it is interpreted in three ways in John<sup>88</sup>: Darkness signifies 'the powers that oppose God', which are demonic in origin but manifest themselves in human actions, particularly the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. Secondly, darkness is symbolic of the 'lethal estrangement from God' resulting in death, both physical and spiritual, an estrangement typified by various figures in the Gospel<sup>89</sup> (Lazarus and Martha being two of them). Finally, darkness refers to human 'ignorance and unbelief' in the face of revelation, a state that is not in itself culpable. The man born blind lives in darkness because he literally cannot see Jesus; he is also ignorant of Jesus's identity and is hence ignorant of his identity as the Christ.<sup>90</sup> Knowledge is the key to salvation. Like the Gnostics, this knowledge includes the divine disclosure of events before the creation and a mystical awareness of the inscrutable Father through the elusive awareness of the Son.<sup>91</sup> Jesus makes the blind man see again and the man worships him in return.<sup>92</sup> Darkness is therefore an active agent, possessing power, so much power in the temporal world that the ignorant authorities that persecute Jesus are infected with it. Sin and evil's cause is the wilful wandering in the darkness of ignorance about Jesus. To be within the realm of sin and evil is exemplified in the

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<sup>86</sup> John 1

<sup>87</sup> John 1:5

<sup>88</sup> Koester (2003) pg. 143 – 44

<sup>89</sup> Lee (2005)

<sup>90</sup> Lee (2005)

<sup>91</sup> Edwards (2004) pg. 162

<sup>92</sup> John 9:39 – 41. There is a textual problem in John 9:38 – 39, with some textual witnesses omitting it (Brown: 1966 – 1970: *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. New York: Doubleday). Argument for their inclusion is strong, however (Metzger: 1975: *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. London/New York: United Bible Societies), and taken in the context of the worship of Jesus as the Christ, the text seems genuinely appropriate.

refusal to believe in Jesus as the Word, as the Son of God. This leads to a lack of self-knowledge, and a lack of knowledge about God. This also includes religious leaders who claim to follow Jesus and abuse their power or exploit their flock.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, to know God is to share in a divine intimacy with the Word, and in this way eternal life is attained. This life is characterised by a dispelling of darkness, banishment of evil, and participation in eternity.<sup>94</sup> This message is written into the narrative of John, where the literary, metaphorical, and theological meanings of Jesus's statements and deeds, although diverse, pointed to the sole fact of his Incarnation.<sup>95</sup> The conflict was always in the favour of the Word, because although there is darkness, and hence, ignorance, evil, and sin, the darkness has not understood the light; it remains unable to understand such a light that shines forth from the men who believe in the Word.<sup>96</sup> The evangelist speaks eschatologically<sup>97</sup>: theodicy cannot explain why such evils occur, but the eschatology reveals that God's purpose is loving and life-giving.<sup>98</sup> Even Jesus reminded his faithful that they would encounter trouble in the world. But he himself had overcome it.<sup>99</sup> So it only remains to fulfill prophecy<sup>100</sup> so that God's fullness of revelation can be completed. Another way in which evil is confronted is an almost docetic manner, a complete contrast to Mark's suffering Jesus: In John, Jesus shows no true signs of pain. Suffering does not touch him, not even at death.<sup>101</sup> John's docetic style presents a mystical theodicy, where Jesus is the Son and representative of God, who is the source. God sends Jesus and raises him out of death, evil and suffering, implying that all who believe in him, as 'sons of God', can hope for the

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<sup>93</sup> Lee (2005)

<sup>94</sup> Rensberger (2001)

<sup>95</sup> O'Day (2001)

<sup>96</sup> John 1:5

<sup>97</sup> John 9 and John 11

<sup>98</sup> Lee (2005)

<sup>99</sup> John 16:33

<sup>100</sup> John 19:28

<sup>101</sup> John 19:28

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same future. The narrative shows that the conflict is in favour of light and goodness, because God defeated darkness from the beginning of Creation by banishing it on the first day<sup>102</sup> and that there was no suffering for Jesus, only his mission, which was to redeem humanity. Judgement and salvation have already 'occurred'. For John, eternal life starts now<sup>103</sup>, from the moment of accepting Christ.

The reason why the Johannine Jesus is the most otherworldly and transcendent Jesus of the canonical Gospels is because John believes that the answer to evil is the Incarnation. This Incarnation dispels the darkness and smites evil, and brings his light to his faithful. In Johannine irony, sin and death, and Jesus's own death is transformed into beauty, light, and truth. Therefore, darkness, sin, and death are everything that the Johannine God stands against, but Jesus has already won this battle. In a rather Gnostic manner of theodicy, Jesus answered the question of evil by bridging Heaven and Earth, the Divine and human, the spiritual and the material. In doing so, he essentially transformed life and death.<sup>104</sup> Benedict XVI affirms this sense of Johannine revelation, presence, and eschatology: 'God has given us in Christ His Son, Himself, His entire Word. He could not have given us more. In this sense revelation is closed. But because this Word is very God and all the words point back to the Word, precisely for this reason it is never only in the past, but always present and future and always at the same time the anchor of our life in eternity as it is the opening to eternity, the guarantee of the true life, which is stronger than death.'<sup>105</sup> Therefore

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<sup>102</sup> Genesis 1:3 – 8

<sup>103</sup> Rensberger (2001)

<sup>104</sup> John 11:25 – 26

<sup>105</sup> Moynihan (2005) pg. 167

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while the Johannine defence of God comes close to the classical theodicies that argued for God's omnipotence, it is not identical to them.

## Conclusion

According to Matthew, the age of suffering's end<sup>106</sup> is not long; in fact, it is coming very soon.<sup>107</sup> But for a modern day theodicy, this assurance is not enough, and perhaps even hollow. The radical anticipation of the Kingdom must be tempered by the affirmation of Jesus's suffering and promises as affirmed in Mark and Luke, and God's bridging the dark chasm (of darkness, ignorance, sin and evil) between himself and humanity as the Incarnation in John. This Incarnation, his Benefaction, and his coming Kingdom are the religious answers to evil. Pope Benedict XVI identifies with John Hick's hope: 'We who have been baptized, as children of a world which is still to come, in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, catch a glimpse of that world and breathe the atmosphere of that world, where God's justice will dwell forever.'<sup>108</sup> As with Jewish apocalyptic belief, the just and righteous are condemned by worldly powers and undergo terrible tribulation before being redeemed by God. Whether Jesus heralds the Kingdom or fulfils his reign over the demonic powers, the different (yet canonically similar) eschatological themes of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are that they are all situated in a temporal location beyond the present eon. Human history is bound tightly within the framework of God's agenda, whereupon Jesus will usher in a new era of peace and vanquished evil. With this mode of theodicy, Hick cannot conclude immediately on the eschatology's worthiness. He can only look back in

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<sup>106</sup> Psalm 13:1

<sup>107</sup> Filson (1971) pg. 35

<sup>108</sup> Moynihan ed. (2005) pg. 126

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retrospect before deciding whether life's injustice, cruelty, and terror were worthy.

Until then, he awaits the herald of the eternal Kingdom, and in the temporal present,

enjoys the Benefaction of the Incarnation who triumphed over evil during his life on

Earth.

Christians should not, however, take this eschatology for granted; in actual fact, they cannot be satisfied with a simple explanation of eschatology in the Gospels and hope to be grounded in it indefinitely. The reason for this is that the Gospels' theodicy that I have outlined is still *restricted*. The constraint of this eschatology-based theodicy is its limit within the human history of *this world*. The magnitude of natural evil, including the cosmic laws of entropy and the unlikely permanence of at least *this* universe, have yet to be reconciled with the prospect of the body's resurrection and eternal life as promised by the Gospels, at least for all future humanity. Furthermore, the likely existence of other world-systems and universes other than our own and the possible existence of other sentient beings remains an unknown (some may consider it possibly irrelevant) factor for the future of Christian eschatology. But the anthropocentric view of mankind as the sole recipient for deliverance from evil can be troublesome for an eschatologically centred theodicy. Even John's Gospel might not be able to maintain its position of the divine intermediary's sustenance of the vast universe so easily (hence my emphasis of the futility of defending the omni-God concept in the Introduction). It is the dilemma of historical soteriology that it is bound within the framework of history and our Earth-world, unlike trans-historical religious philosophies like Buddhism.<sup>109</sup> A community's historical methodology can direct its

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<sup>109</sup> Chang (1971) xiv – xv.

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religious and eschatological thought, and in his book *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, Garma C.C. Chang provides an extremely insightful analysis into the different historical templates of the Judeo-Christian aesthetic and the Dharmic (specifically Buddhist for him) view on time. Key differences are that Christian history and eschatology are centred on planet Earth and is moving towards a final destiny enacted by the Divinity, whereas Buddhism holds that human history has no unique significance because there are countless universes with histories of countless other sentient beings being enacted, as well as innumerable religious dramas unfolding on different worlds. In short, Chang argues that there are two basic views regarding history: either a God/Man/Earth-centred view, or one centred on the premise of an infinite variety of universes and of sentient beings.<sup>110</sup> The philosopher who utilises the former view must be aware of the potential restrictions it places on the discipline of theodicy, in particular Gospel eschatology-based theodicies (generally God/Man/Earth-centred writings), and develop counter-arguments to the latter philosophical position accordingly. Any evil that may imply the world's physical annihilation ironically threatens an apocalyptic salvific eschatological theodicy. Furthermore, epoch-making changes in the world that cannot be attributed to God (*apparently* apocalyptic wars like World War I and II most certainly did not herald the advent of the Kingdom) also lead to complications in the theodicy, especially with such emphasis on a divine interest in the world. It will depend on the philosopher's own capabilities to formulate a plausible theodicy for the theistic Divinity of this Earth, or to adopt another approach. Can Matthew, Luke and John defend God against the charge of incompetence in the light of these philosophically problematic contentions? Can they defend the apparent meaninglessness of a child

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

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who is brutally tortured and murdered? It is not in this paper's place to give a certain answer. Either way, it is certain that this theodicy is no mean feat; no theodicy is easy. The Gospels' eschatological theodicies are just one of those that may manage to be a worthy defence of God in the face of evil.

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