

by Bryan E. Beyer

Evil

The Meaning

THE FIRST BIBLICAL reference to evil appears in Genesis 2:9, where the term refers to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Bible describes evil as continuing to corrupt this present age until the Lord Jesus Christ returns to usher in His everlasting kingdom. At that time, He will forever separate His people from evil and every kind of evil practice (Rev. 22:14-15). But exactly what is evil? How does the Bible use the term? The Hebrew word *ra* is commonly translated “evil” in the Old Testament. The term appears as both a noun and an adjective. Both forms possess a wider range of meaning than our word “evil.” First, *ra* may describe calamity, misery, or difficult circumstances. In the Joseph accounts, Judah did not wish to see the *ra* that would overtake his father Jacob if Judah returned to Canaan without Benjamin (Gen. 44:34, “evil”).¹ Later, Jacob described his own life to Pharaoh as *ra* (Gen. 47:9, “unpleasant”). The Book of Proverbs describes all the days of the afflicted as *ra* (“bad”), and *ra* also denotes a “troubled” heart (Prov. 15:15; 25:20). God brings *ra* on those who oppose Him (Isa. 31:2, “disaster”; 45:7, “calamity”; Amos 9:4, “evil”). The term also describes the strong warning God gave to His people after they sinned by making a golden calf (Ex. 33:4,

Background: Camel market at Darow, Egypt. Those who bargained in the marketplace sometimes tried to purchase goods for less by claiming the items were of low quality.

COREL PHOTO

Right: Grains and dried fruits on sale at an Arab market in Jerusalem.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/RENTOUCHTON (3/25/8)

“sad”). Second, *ra* may denote something of inferior quality. Pharaoh so described the ugly, sickly looking cows he had seen in his dream (Gen. 41:19, “ugly”). The law of Moses commanded worshipers to bring good animals to sacrifice, never “bad” animals of poorer quality (Lev. 27:10,12). Those who bargained in the marketplace sometimes tried to purchase goods for less by claiming the items were of low quality (Prov. 20:14). Jeremiah used the term to describe a basket of rotten figs (Jer. 24:2,3). The figs’ rottenness symbolized the condition of the people’s hearts before God. God would soon cast them into exile. Third, *ra* may depict opposition to God and His ways, the moral perversion of the sinful heart. After evil’s introduction into the world in the garden of Eden, its power and effects soon corrupted all humanity and led to the great flood (Gen. 6:5). As the Israelites traveled through the wilderness, the Lord expressed His frustration to Moses that they were an “evil congregation” who continually grumbled against Him (Num. 14:27). In

Lesson Reference
LWS: Genesis 3:1-6
Isaiah 5:20-21
Malachi 2:17

the period of the judges, the high priest Eli admonished his sons Hophni and Phinehas for their wickedness and condemned their evil deeds against the people of Israel (1 Sam. 2:23). His sons, however, refused to listen to him and soon experienced God's judgment, dying in a battle with the Philistines. God's prophets thoroughly denounced the people's evil. Jeremiah lamented that the people had committed two great evils—they had forsaken the one true God, their source of life, to worship other gods who could not profit them (Jer. 2:13). Amos encouraged Israel to turn from evil to good so they might live (Amos 5:14-15). Micah decried those who loved evil and consequently trampled on the rights and dignity of the poor and helpless (Mic. 3:2). Malachi condemned the evil practice of offering to the Lord lame or sickly animals (Mal. 1:8). In later Rabbinic sources, the term *ra* continued to have this range of meaning.² It may denote difficult circumstances such as the poor experience. We cannot always know why one person experiences good and the other *ra*. But many passages use *ra* in its moral sense. One passage refers to those who cannot distinguish between good and evil and yet try to offer God a sacrifice. Another describes the close relationship between evil and wickedness. Still another suggests the righteous people so surpass evil people in righteousness that even the good things evil people do are like evil to the righteous.

Genesis 3:1-6 describes evil's introduction to the human race. Satan, in the form of a serpent, approached Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and began a conversation with Eve. Displaying the evil tendency that already controlled him, the serpent challenged God's earlier command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17). In fact, he boldly declared that if Adam and Eve would eat of the fruit God had prohibited, they would become like God, knowing good and evil. Their eyes would be opened—that is, they would have a deeper understanding they did not currently possess. The woman reflected on the serpent's words as she pondered the desirability of the forbidden fruit. She took it and shared it with

Below: Bronze brazier from the Hellenistic period found in Pella, Greece.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ/ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM AT PELLA (11/23/16)

Adam, and indeed, their eyes were opened—to their newly gained sinfulness. Instantly sin corrupted them. Adam and Eve had walked with God, but now they feared Him (3:10). Adam blamed his sin on Eve and God (“the woman whom Thou gavest to be with me,” 3:12, NASB), and Eve blamed the serpent (3:13). They did know good and evil (3:22), but they had destroyed their innocence in the process. The apostle Paul later explained how through this first sin, sin and death spread to the entire human race (Rom. 5:12). In Isaiah 5:8-30 the prophet Isaiah pronounced six woes against his rebellious generation. In verses 20-21 he denounced the morally twisted, who called evil good and good evil, who substituted darkness for light and light for darkness, and exchanged bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. God's people had totally reversed God's moral law to justify their sin. They rebelled against His righteous, holy commands and showed by their behavior that they held evil in high regard. They placed their stamp of approval on those actions God condemned. As a result of their evil, the people thought themselves wise and clever; but Isaiah assured them God knew otherwise. Their wisdom lay only “in their own eyes.” Many people today also try to change God's laws in order to live as they please. Sometimes they substitute sweeter sounding terms for the biblical terms. For example, “affair” sounds so much more acceptable than “adultery.” “Alternate lifestyle” sounds better than “fornication” or “homosexuality.” “Pro-choice” sounds preferable to “pro-abortion on demand.” As people adopt new terms for sin, they do exactly what Isaiah condemned. They think themselves wise, but they do not fool God. The prophet Malachi, prophesying about 450 B.C., also saw God's people struggle with good and evil. In Malachi 2:17, he described them as wearying God with their words as they claimed the Lord had lost His sense of justice and blessed everyone who practiced evil. As evildoers prospered in their wickedness, many wondered if God's standard of good and evil no longer remained valid. Malachi assured his audience God had not forgotten the righteous (Mal. 3:1-6). His messenger soon would usher in the day of the Lord, a day that would witness God's judgment against all sin. God would purify His people and visit them with salvation again. Malachi's words can encourage us today when we see evil people prosper. God is still keeping score! The New Testament typically uses the term “evil” (Greek *poneros*) in the moral sense. Evil's power continues throughout this age (Eph. 5:16), and sometimes even infiltrates the church (1 Cor. 5:13, “wicked”). But we have God's promise—His power within us is greater than Satan's power (1 John 4:4). He will help us face every temptation (1 Cor. 10:13) as we look to the day when God will destroy evil forever.

¹All citations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB).

²Marcus Jastrow, comp. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1971), 1485.

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