

SUFFERING  
AND EVIL IN EARLY  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

EDITED BY  
NONNA VERNA HARRISON  
AND DAVID G. HUNTER

  
**BakerAcademic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

  
ORTHODOX  
PRESS

Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter, eds., *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2016 by The Stephen and Catherine Pappas Patristic Institute of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harrison, Verna E. F., editor.

Title: Suffering and evil in early Christian thought / edited by Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2016. | Series: Holy Cross studies in patristic theology and history | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016011173 | ISBN 9780801030789 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity—History of doctrines—Early church, ca. 30–600. | Good and evil—Religious Aspects—Christianity—History of doctrines—Early church, ca. 30–600.

Classification: LCC BR195.S93 S84 2016 | DDC 231/.809—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016011173>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NJPS are from the New Jewish Publication Society Version © 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Nonna Verna Harrison and David G. Hunter, eds., *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

# CONTENTS

Preface by David G. Hunter vii

Introduction by Nonna Verna Harrison ix

1. An Overview of Patristic Theodicies 1

*Paul L. Gavrilyuk*

2. Theodicy in Apocalyptic Thought: From Ancient Visions  
to (Post)Modern Nightmares 7

*John W. Martens*

3. The Suffering of Martyrdom: Greek Perspectives in the Fourth and  
Fifth Centuries 17

*James C. Skedros*

4. Learning through Experience: The Pedagogy of Suffering and Death  
in Irenaeus 33

*John Behr*

5. The Enemies of God: Demons and the Persecuting Emperors  
in Lactantius 49

*Dennis P. Quinn*

6. *Christus Victor* in the Work of Ephrem, Narsai, and Jacob  
of Serug 57

*Gary A. Anderson*

7. Greek Patristic Perspectives on the Origins of Social Injustice 81

*Nonna Verna Harrison*

8. Sympathetic Philosophy: The Christian Response to Suffering according to John Chrysostom's *Commentary on Job* 97  
*Douglas Finn*
  9. John Chrysostom on the Man Born Blind (John 9) 121  
*Nonna Verna Harrison*
  10. The Deaths of Macrina and Monica in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* and Augustine's *Confessions*: The Female Philosopher and the Problem of Christian Grief 131  
*Regina L. Walton*
  11. Evil, Suffering, and Embodiment in Augustine 143  
*David G. Hunter*
  12. Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Pedagogy of Destruction 161  
*Eric Phillips*
  13. The Word and His Flesh: Human Weakness and the Identity of Jesus in Greek Patristic Christology 171  
*Brian E. Daley, SJ*
  14. Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology 191  
*J. Warren Smith*
  15. "The Impassible Suffers" 213  
*Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia*
- Abbreviations 235  
Bibliography 237  
List of Contributors 251  
Subject Index 255  
Modern Authors Index 265  
Scripture Index 269

## PREFACE

DAVID G. HUNTER

This volume of essays has its distant origins in the Third Annual Conference of the Pappas Patristic Institute, “Evil and Suffering in the Patristic Period,” held at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, October 12–14, 2006. Owing to a variety of factors, its publication has been delayed, but this delay has enabled the editors to produce a collection that differs in many respects from the original conference presentations. All of the original six plenary lectures have been included (Anderson, Behr, Harrison, Hunter, Skedros, and Ware), although most in a considerably revised form. Of the original twenty-four shorter communications delivered at the 2006 conference, only six are present here (Finn, Gavriilyuk, Martens, Phillips, Quinn, and Walton). An effort was made to include chapters that addressed a range of patristic writers, Eastern and Western, and that would be accessible to a wide audience. Because this topic deserves a theologically nuanced treatment, the editors decided to solicit additional essays, including two that highlighted the christological contribution of patristic thought to the problem of evil and suffering (Daley, Smith).

The editors express their thanks to a number of people who have supported this project. First, thanks are owed to Dr. Bruce Beck, director of the Pappas Patristic Institute, for organizing the original conference and facilitating the participation of the contributors. We also acknowledge the assistance of the Editorial Board of the series Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History, which conducted an initial screening of the papers presented at the conference. We also thank Professor Brian Daley of the University of Notre

Dame and Professor J. Warren Smith of Duke University Divinity School for agreeing to contribute their essays to the collection. Let me also thank Nonna Verna Harrison for her essay about John Chrysostom on the man born blind, written for this volume.

We appreciate Mr. James Kinney of Baker Academic, who saw the project through the final stages of production. Most of all we express our deep gratitude to Dr. James Ernest, who departed Baker Academic for William B. Eerdmans Publishing just as this volume was going to press. James has been a stalwart supporter of the Pappas Patristic Institute conferences and has enabled the Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History to prosper. We wish him the very best in his new position.

Finally, we acknowledge the publishers who have granted permission to reprint material that has been published elsewhere: Yale University Press, for allowing us to use material from Gary Anderson's book *Sin: A History* (Yale University Press, 2009) in his chapter "*Christus Victor* in the Work of Ephrem, Narsai, and Jacob of Serug"; Eerdmans, for letting us reprint Brian Daley's chapter, "The Word and His Flesh: Human Weakness and the Identity of Jesus in Patristic Christology," which originally appeared in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*, edited by Beverly Gaventa and Richard Hays (Eerdmans, 2008), 251–69; and *Pro Ecclesia*, which originally published J. Warren Smith's essay, "Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 463–83.

## INTRODUCTION

NONNA VERNA HARRISON

What do we think of when we consider the end of the world? Nuclear war, robots or computers taking over the earth with humans as their slaves, a meteor strike blocking the earth's sunlight and causing living things to die, climate change gone awry, exhaustion of the earth's resources? Or perhaps the devil attacking everyone, pitting brother against brother, inspiring a ruthless dictator, and finally eradicating all human life? Whatever it is, it is probably a mega-nightmare scenario. One imagines oneself, as a mere human being alone, or even in a large family, completely overwhelmed and unable to begin to cope with the life-threatening challenges.

John W. Martens writes that Hollywood movies have repeatedly shown such scenarios on the silver screen, and they attract large audiences. I wonder what attracts people to such movies. They portray the apocalypse, but God is either absent or inactive. A few people fight against it, but evil is well organized, powerful, and relentless. Could it be that many people today can identify with the protagonists in these movies, though perhaps not consciously? Do not many experience life as an ongoing series of unjust and hurtful challenges, threats to their well-being or even their survival? They struggle to get by, and maybe they beg God for help over and over, but it seems there is no response. The struggles of our small lives are certainly not the apocalypse, but like the people in the films, we are often beset by suffering and evil and cannot find a way out of it.

If struggling people are theologically minded, they find themselves racking their brains about why it happens, why God does not help, what they might

be doing wrong in their relationship with God. Or they may wonder why God allows suffering. Why doesn't God do something to stop evil actions that are hurting people? These are questions about the area of theology called theodicy. And they may be the toughest theological questions of all. To be sure, questions about the Trinity, or about how Christ can be both fully divine and fully human, encounter profound mysteries and lead us to a contemplative silence; they can be answered only a little at a time, and only in part. But the questions about God, suffering, and evil arise from a heart full of anguish. They tear at our faith in an age when faith seems weak anyway. We may wonder: What did Christians say about these questions in the early days of the church, a time of persecution and missionary expansion when faith was strong? Can the church fathers and mothers offer us any convincing answers?

The purpose of this book is to show some of the different answers that church fathers and mothers found to these kinds of questions. The chapters are written by authors with different perspectives, and they discuss different perspectives among the early Christians. So by reading them, we can approach the questions of theodicy from a variety of angles. Perhaps each one of us can find at least the beginning of an answer that will satisfy our own questioning heart.

The first two chapters are introductions to the book. Paul Gavriluk's essay provides a road map of the theological framework on which early orthodox Christians agreed: God did not create evil, it arose from free choices by people and fallen angels, and God will destroy evil in the end. John Martens then discusses the book of Revelation and other ancient apocalypses. Unlike cinematic nightmares, they end not with Satan destroying humankind but with God destroying evil and restoring paradise.

The rest of the book is about that long period between the beginning and the end, the time in which we presently live, beset by suffering and evil. The chapters are arranged historically. A number of them are about how Christian people responded to suffering, while others discuss how God responds to suffering in the human world he created. James Skedros examines the early martyrs and describes how the church in later generations learned from their examples. John Behr explores Irenaeus's teaching that people can learn from their own wrong choices, sufferings, and mortality so that they turn to God. Here we also see how God oversees people's educational process as they learn to serve him, so that finally death brings their sinfulness to an end: they share in the resurrection and become God's likeness. Dennis Quinn discusses Lactantius's writing to show how some in the early church saw persecutions in the "pagan" Roman Empire as caused by demons and saw Constantine as called by God to defeat those evil spirits. In Gary Anderson's essay, we see

three Syrian theologians offering different explanations of how Christ gets rid of the debt people owe because of their sins. Nonna Verna Harrison then discusses how three Greek theologians had differing analyses of the causes of social injustice.

The next two chapters focus on John Chrysostom's use of Scripture to address the problem of suffering. Douglas Finn examines on how Chrysostom found strengths in Job that enabled him to endure great suffering with integrity and made him an example that others can follow, while Nonna Verna Harrison discusses the strengths Chrysostom saw in the man born blind (John 9) and commends his critique of discrimination against people with disabilities. The following two chapters turn their attention to Augustine. Regina Walton describes how two exemplary women, Gregory of Nyssa's sister Macrina and Augustine's mother Monica, each faced death and counseled their loved ones on how to handle their grief. David Hunter then examines Augustine's changing ideas about the root of sin, earlier as sensuality and later as self-centeredness that fractures human community.

The final four chapters address specific theological and christological questions related to human suffering. Eric Phillips draws on the writing of Theodore of Mopsuestia to discuss how God guides people to let go of bitterness toward those who caused their sufferings and to learn how to wish them good. According to Theodore, God trains people to let go of bitterness and choose good even when they are in hell, with the result that in the end everybody will be saved. Brian Daley's essay on the christological reflections of four Greek theologians and J. Warren Smith's essay on the soteriology of Cyril of Alexandria show how the divine Word incarnate as Jesus Christ experienced human sufferings so as to overcome them within himself through divine life and human strength; then he could share his divine life and human strength with other sufferers, enabling them to overcome along with him. In the concluding essay, Bishop Kallistos Ware offers his own perspective on how God suffers, drawing on early Christian and contemporary theologians. He says that God suffers in his love for humankind, yet he overcomes human suffering because his suffering love is active, powerful, and creative.

# 1

---

## AN OVERVIEW OF PATRISTIC THEODICIES

PAUL L. GAVRILYUK

### The Problem of Evil in Antiquity

There was no shortage of solutions to the problem of evil in antiquity. Consider, for example, the wealth of insight afforded by Greek tragedy. The tragic poets locate evils variously in the will of the gods, in the ignorance of humans and their tendency to be carried away by passions, and, more frequently, in the mysterious workings of fate (*tychē*, *moira*, *atē*) and necessity (*anankē*). Even if the specific cause of one's misfortunes is obscure, it is a divine law, first announced by the father of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, "that man must learn by suffering [*pathei mathos*]." <sup>1</sup> According to Aristotle, the pretended *pathos* of the tragic actors was intended to evoke an empathic *catharsis* in the spectators. <sup>2</sup>

The Stoics agreed with the tragic poets that bearable suffering could become a learning experience. They argued that it was pointless to regard unavoidable misfortunes as evil. They proposed that the best solution was to see all seemingly unfortunate events in the larger context of one's life. They located

1. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 177, trans. Peter Meineck, in *Oresteia* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 9. See William Chase Greene, *Moirā: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), 99–100.

2. Aristotle, *Poetics* 6 (1449b27).

evil in intentions that were not in accordance with reason: it was evil to inflict pain, but not to endure it.<sup>3</sup> The Stoic moral theory taught one how to endure ills with dignity by taking into account the bigger picture.

Plato was the first Greek philosopher to insist that evil, unless it served the purpose of remedial punishment for sin, could not be attributed to the gods. In the *Republic* he formulates the problem in the following way: “For the good things we must assume no other cause than God, but the cause of evil we must look for in other things and not in God.”<sup>4</sup> However, Plato’s answer to the question of evil’s origin was far from consistent. In *Timaeus* he attributed imperfections of embodied beings to the creative agency of the lesser gods and to the intransigence of the receptacle (*hypodochē*), the world’s chaotic substratum, which would come to acquire the more technical designation of matter (*hylē*).<sup>5</sup> In *Theaetetus* 176a, Plato hinted at the necessity of ontological dualism; he observed that it is impossible for evil to cease to exist, “for there must always be something opposed to the good.”<sup>6</sup> He did not develop this idea but rather emphasized that the material world was beautiful, good, and ordered to the degree to which it reflected the realm of the eternal forms. For Plato, the forms imprint structure, beauty, and order into the world’s matter.

Building upon Plato’s vision, Plotinus placed matter at the very bottom of the hierarchy of forms, as that which was completely unbounded, measureless, and formless (*apeiron, ametron, aneideon*). It followed that matter was a “privation of the good” (*sterēsis tou agathou*) and therefore “evil in itself” (*to kakon to auto*) or “the primary evil” (*prōton kakon*).<sup>7</sup> However,

3. Anthony A. Long, “The Stoic Concept of Evil,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 329.

4. Plato, *Republic* 379C, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 626; Greene, *Moirā*, 298. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 30A.

5. Plato, *Timaeus* 40–42, 50–51. For patristic critique of the Platonic idea that some things were created by lesser gods, see Augustine, *City of God* 12.25, who also denies that angels had any part in creation. According to Philo, *De confusione linguarum* 35.179, some imperfections in creation are precisely attributable to angelic participation in the original creation. See Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo*, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:273. For an illuminating discussion of Platonic theodicy, see Peter Harrison, “Laws of Nature, Moral Order, and the Intelligibility of the Cosmos,” in *The Astronomy Revolution: 400 Years of Exploring the Cosmos*, edited by Donald G. York, Owen Gingerich, and Shuang-Nan Zhang (Boca Raton, FL: CRC, 2011), 375–386. For a review of different competing theories of Plato’s theodicy, see Harold Cherniss, “The Sources of Evil according to Plato,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98 (1954): 23–30.

6. Plato: *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 195. This passage is discussed in Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8.6. On matter’s preexistence, see *Enneads* 2.4.5.

7. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8.4; cf. a similar point attributed to the Platonizing Celsus in Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.66.

against the gnostics, Plotinus argued that the material world was a beautiful, good, yet imperfect reflection of the intellectual universe of the forms.<sup>8</sup> Some critics observe that Plotinus was not able to fully account for the tension in his system between the evil of matter and the beauty of the material cosmos.<sup>9</sup>

## Early Christian Theodicies

In early Christianity, no one theodicy was ever adopted as binding upon the church as a whole. In the history of Christian doctrine, more generally, theodicy has never reached the level of dogmatic precision attained by the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Nevertheless, a tangible degree of unity has been achieved, in part by holding to theistic ontology, and in part by excluding the rival proposals of Marcion, the gnostic teachers, Mani, and most philosophers. For example, the shared commitment to monotheism ruled out all forms of strong ontological dualism. The benevolent and almighty Creator tolerated no eternal opposite, be it another divine agent, or matter, or the realm of darkness and chaos. God's goodness and power were not limited by matter but rather worked through it. The cosmological speculations of the gnostics received no less vigorous criticism, conveyed by declarations that the world was not an afterthought of an incompetent committee of gods or a result of Sophia's fall from the divine realm. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, among others, concurred with Neoplatonists such as Plotinus that God was not the author of evil.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike the Neoplatonists, the church fathers refused to locate the origin of evil in matter.<sup>11</sup>

Nourished by the biblical account of creation, the orthodox Christians rejected ontological dualism and held that the omnipotent and benevolent God created everything good. It followed that evil could not be among the things originally created; in this sense, it was nonbeing. Following the Neoplatonists, Christian theologians explained that evil was a privation (*sterēsis*) of the good

8. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8.3–5. See Denis O'Brien, *Théodicée plotinienne, théodicée gnostique* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

9. See Edward B. Costello, "Is Plotinus Inconsistent on the Nature of Evil?," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1967): 483–97; John M. Rist, "Plotinus on Matter and Evil," *Phronesis* 6 (1961): 154–66.

10. Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.53–55; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.9; Augustine, *Free Will* 1.2; 4.10. Only a fragment of Irenaeus's letter to Florinus, titled *On the Sole Sovereignty* or *That God Is Not the Author of Evil*, survives in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.

11. Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes* 9–11; Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 6; *The Incarnation* 2; Augustine, *Confessions* 7.5.7, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116.

in a way similar to how darkness was the absence of light.<sup>12</sup> Evil was not a substance since it was parasitic upon the good and thus depended upon the good for its existence.<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, following the Neoplatonist Proclus, proposed that evil was beyond nonbeing, since evil was more than mere lack of the good, mere absence of being, in that evil was destructive of that which is good.<sup>14</sup> Yet without introducing this technical and potentially misleading distinction between nonbeing and “beyond nonbeing,” most patristic theologians taught that evil was nonbeing in the sense of being the corruption, perversion, and destruction of the good.<sup>15</sup>

Within the framework of Christian theism, the belief that evil was nonbeing did not lead to the conclusion that evil was a grand illusion. On the contrary, from its very beginning Christianity was characterized by a keen sense that evil was real, powerful, and all-pervasive. Hence, the insight that evil was nonbeing was bound to provide only a partial answer. If God is not the author of evil, then who or what is? What feature of creation could be causally connected to evil without at the same time implicating God? Relatively early among patristic theologians, a broad agreement emerged that the free will of some rational creatures accounted for the actualization of evil. The Creator could not be held responsible for the free evil choices that rational creatures made, since God did not causally determine these choices.<sup>16</sup> However, when God chooses to permit evil, he always draws greater good out of that evil.<sup>17</sup> Thus God could be said to cause “external evil” in the form of physical suffering, when it serves the divine purpose of admonishing, converting, chastising, punishing, teaching, and curing those who are turned away from God.<sup>18</sup>

12. Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.4.5, 10; cf. Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 7.4–5.

13. Augustine writes in *Enchiridion* 8.27: “He judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist,” trans. J. F. Shaw, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1996), 33; cf. *ibid.*, 24.96; *Confessions* 7.12.18; Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 4.4; 7.3; *The Incarnation* 4.5; this point is emphasized by Gillian R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

14. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* 4; Proclus, *On the Subsistence of Evils* 38.7–11, discussed in Carlos Steel, “Proclus on the Existence of Evil,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 95.

15. Augustine, *The Nature of the Good* 4.

16. Augustine problematized this claim in *Free Will* 1.2.4: “We believe that everything which exists is created by one God, and yet that God is not the cause of sin. The difficulty is: if sin goes back to souls created by God, and souls go back to God, how can we avoid before long tracing sin back to God?”; trans. Dom Mark Pontifex, *St. Augustine: The Problem of Free Choice*, ACW 22 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1955), 38.

17. Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.68, points out that God permits evil but does not order evil by his will. Cf. Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 13; Augustine, *City of God* 1.8–29; 11.18.

18. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.13–15; Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.56. See Hans Schwartz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 103.

In addition to these philosophical considerations, the biblical narrative framework was indispensable for addressing the problem of evil. Salvation history, from creation to eschaton, offered the most comprehensive theodicy. Christians relied upon the creation account to support their claim that God was not the author of evil. For example, the fathers drew in part upon Genesis 3 and the story of the watchers in Genesis 6 to construct their theories of the human and angelic falls, respectively.<sup>19</sup> All patristic authors agreed that evil was causally connected to the misuse of free will, although their accounts of the fall differed considerably.<sup>20</sup> Evil resides in the inclination of the free rational agent who prefers the finite good of creatures to the infinite good of the Creator.<sup>21</sup>

It may be objected that while free choice could account for the existence of moral evil, the cause of natural evil was left unexplained. This challenge was met in different ways. Some fathers replied that the human choice of evil had tragic and far-reaching consequences for the rest of creation. Others argued that “natural evil” was a misnomer: strictly speaking, all evils were unnatural. Augustine proposed that such disasters as fires and hurricanes represent the working of natural forces that are inherently good but can be misdirected so as to harm humans.<sup>22</sup> Others speculated, drawing upon Stoic views, that natural disasters are not evil at all, because no evil intention is involved.<sup>23</sup> Still others deferred to the universal religious insight that natural disasters are a form of divine punishment for human disobedience. God sent natural disasters to admonish, correct, or restrain, and to mete out retribution for sin.<sup>24</sup> Origen more imaginatively hinted that natural disasters were a part of the demonic revolt against God.<sup>25</sup> On this analysis, natural evil is reducible to moral evil in its demonic form. Despite their considerable differences, these accounts of natural evil share one general point in common: the ethical categories of

19. Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

20. Tertullian, *Exhortation to Chastity* 2.4–5; Augustine, *Free Will* 3.17, 48; *On True Religion* 12.23; cf. *City of God* 13.14: “Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters: mankind is led from that original perversion, a kind of corruption at the root, right up to the disaster of the second death, which has no end,” trans. Henry Bettenson, *Augustine: Concerning the City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1984). See David Ray Griffin, “Augustine and the Denial of Genuine Evil,” in *The Problem of Evil: Select Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 197.

21. Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 7.3–5; *The Incarnation* 15; Augustine, *Confessions* 7.18.

22. Augustine, *City of God* 11.22.

23. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.4.4–13; 1.8; 4.4–44.

24. Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 17.

25. Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.65. See John M. Rist, “Beyond Stoic and Platonist: A Sample of Origen’s Treatment of Philosophy (*Contra Celsum* 4.62–70),” in *Platonismus und Christentum* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1983), 233–34.

moral corruption and sinfulness blend with the ontological categories of physical corruptibility, disorder, and death.

The narrative framework of salvation history offered the fathers more than just an explanation of evil's origin. Human history was presented as a series of God's redemptive acts, the climax of which was the divine incarnation. Incarnation was seen as a new creation, as God's restoration of his image and likeness in human beings, as the God-Man's victory over the powers of sin, corruption, death, and the sphere of the demonic. The fruits of this victory, abundantly available in the sacramental life of the church, would be most fully manifest in the eschaton. The hope for the resurrection of the dead and the orientation of life toward the final judgment expanded the horizon for a bigger-picture theodicy. Many ancient Christians endured persecution, torture, and martyrdom with the hope of attesting by their death to the power of Christ's resurrection. Apocalypse, despite its sobering features, also functioned as a theodicy: in the end God's justice will triumph by destroying all evil and rewarding all those who are obedient to God.

## Conclusion

The common core of patristic theodicy may be somewhat schematically reduced to the following five points:

1. God is not the author of evil.
2. God prevents or permits evil and draws good out of it.
3. Ontologically evil is nonbeing: a privation, corruption, and perversion of the good.
4. The misuse of angelic and human free will is the cause of evil.
5. Salvation history provides a narrative framework that accounts for the origin, spread, and ultimate destruction of evil.

The task of contemporary theology is to combine the penetrating patristic analysis of the dynamics of moral evil with modern sensitivity to cases of horrendous evil and undeserved suffering. Such a synthesis has the potential of being deeper and more existentially compelling than any version of protest atheism. Still, even if all objections to the traditional theistic account of evil were tested and found inadequate, there is much about this problem that is bound to remain shrouded in mystery, at least on this side of the eschaton.