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ARTICLE

Defining Evil from the Hebrew Text of Genesis

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Abstract

An overview of findings from an in-depth inductive study of 'the lexical, exegetical, conceptual, and theological study of evil from the Hebrew text of Genesis' provides key insights into the broad use of the primary lexeme(s) for evil (*ra* as an adjective, *raa* as a verb, and *raah* as a noun). The use of *evil* is followed sequentially through each occurrence in Genesis to assess its meaning and concept contextually. The plot conflict of good and evil is observed from the beginning to its bookend. Evil is never called good nor found to be the absence of good, but rather, the corruption of creational and covenantal goodness. God is found to work in and through flawed and dysfunctional humans to overturn evil and accomplish his good creational and covenantal purposes.

Keywords: evil; Genesis; good and evil; Tree of Life; Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil

1. The plot conflict between good and evil

The grand story in Scripture begins in Genesis with a conflict between good and evil. The central plot is 'the great spiritual and moral battle of good and evil'.[1] Yet, oddly, for all that's been written about the philosophical problem of evil and theological theodicy, a thorough study of evil from the first book of the Bible has been lacking.

This article consolidates the inductive findings of 'A Lexical, Exegetical, Conceptual, and Theological Study of Evil Genesis',[2] along with subsequent research.[3] No previous study explored the use of the Hebrew word(s) evil in context through Genesis or any other entire book of the Old Testament, except, more recently, a dissertation on the use of evil in Judges.[4]

[1]Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, 'Introduction', in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 35–36.

[2]Ingrid Faro, 'A Lexical, Exegetical, Conceptual, and Theological Study of Evil in Genesis' (Dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2013).

[3]Ingrid Faro, *Evil in Genesis: A Contextual Analysis of Hebrew Lexemes for Evil in the Book of Genesis*, Studies in Scripture & Biblical Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021).

[4]Joseph Tan, 'A Lexical and Narratival Analysis of Evil In The Book of Judges' (Dissertation, Springfield, MO, Evangel University, 2019).

As moral philosopher Susan Neiman writes, 'The problem of evil can be expressed in theological or secular terms, but it is fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a whole'.[5]

The storyline of redemption in Scripture addresses how God will overcome evil with good. As N. T. Wright states, 'The Old Testament isn't written in order simply to "tell us about God" in the abstract. It isn't designed primarily to provide information or to satisfy the inquiring mind. It's written to tell the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil'.[6]

We begin by looking at the use and meanings of good and evil in order of appearance throughout Genesis from the received Hebrew text.[7] In this process, we will observe how the plot conflict develops and is at least partially resolved. We conclude with a summary of key findings and implications.

2. Beginning with goodness

To define evil from Genesis, we start where the book begins: with the goodness of creation in Genesis 1–2. God alone creates the heavens and earth with unrivaled action as Initiator, Spirit, and Word. Unlike all other cosmogonies in the Ancient Near East, this God is uncontested by any other spiritual entities. This God creates by forming and filling the primordial emptiness with flourishing life, order, and purpose.[8]

God speaks to the land to produce plants and trees that sprout up and replicate themselves. God does not create each stalk and stem *ad infinitum* but places life within life to reproduce itself. God gives governing power to the celestial elements, with their spheres of dominion over days, times, and seasons.

Fish, birds, and land animals, like plants and trees, have replicating capacities and are made to teem, swarm, increase, and fill the waters, sky, and land with a certain inherent, untamed freedom. Even great sea creatures, or sea monsters (*tanninim*), were 'created' to play in the waters (Gen 1:21). Humanity itself, as male and female, was created as God's image bearers: divine representatives mandated with magisterial rule over the living creatures in this wild and wonderful physical domain of God's cosmic sanctuary.[9]

God makes with purpose, order, and direction but does not micromanage his creatures' teeming growth. He evaluates each new act and calls it good, indeed, very good. This seven-fold refrain in which 'God saw that it was good' speaks unequivocally of the character of God himself. Unlike humans, God is internally consistent. What God thinks is aligned with what he says and what he does. All that God plans intends, speaks, and does reflects who he is. The central message of creation is that God is good.

[5]Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, First Princeton Classic edition, Princeton Classics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 21.

[6]N. T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), pp. 45–46.

[7]The Masoretic Text.

[8]Multiple perspectives and debates surround the interpretation of *tohu ve-vohu* in Genesis 1:2. However, that discussion is tangential to the present exploration of the meaning and use of evil in Genesis.

[9]G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), pp. 32–37.

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3. Freedom and fragility in the good creation

Fragility was built into this good creation as well. Humanity (*adam*) was formed from the dust of the ground: earthy, malleable, made from the same ground (*adamah*) as the animals (Gen 2:7, 19). Yet, humanity stands apart from all other earth creatures, uniquely commissioned and in-breathed with the life breath of God (Gen 1:26–28; 2:7). Only access to the Tree of Life could perpetuate our physical existence (Gen 2:9; 3:22).

Furthermore, the narrative of Garden foreshadows a threat to Edenic life. The human (*ha-adam*) was installed in the Garden of Eden 'to work it and take care of it', or to *serve* ('*bd*) and *protect* (*shmr*) it. These two words are used together in the rest of the Hebrew Bible in reference 'to "serving and guarding/obeying" God's word' or 'to priests who "serve" God in the temple and "guard" the temple from unclean things entering it' (Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chr 23:32; Ezek 44:14).[10] In other words, these words together speak of a divine directive to care for sacred space and to protect it from defilement or contamination.

Both freedom and fragility in the Garden are signaled through access to but prohibition against consuming from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil.

The opening two chapters of Genesis proclaim humanity's responsibility and authority to steward the goodness of God's creation and protect the sacred space of the Garden from violation.

4. Something 'not good' in the good Garden

Unexpectedly, something was 'not good' (*lo tov*) in the good Garden where God's royal human was installed as priest. It was not good for the human to be alone (Gen 2:18). This was not evil, but goodness not yet fulfilled.

Humans had needs and desires, even in the Garden, which was part of God's goodness. They needed life from God, water, and air. The trees in the Garden were d*esirable* (*neḥmad*) to look at, and *good* (*tov*) for food (2:9). But it was not good for the human to be alone, without a strong ally, a suitable partner (*ezer*) (Gen 2:18, 20).[11]

Although it was not good for the *adam* to be alone, there was a period of waiting for God's provision. God wanted the *adam* to participate in the process of discovering who would meet this need and desire. Therefore, first, God paraded animals past him, for him to observe and identify. This helped the human realize that not the giraffe, the flamingo, or the elephant was intended to meet the need for effectively ruling together as God's royal children and priests 'in expanding Eden to the ends of the earth'.[12] When the man finally saw the woman, he broke out in poetry that here, at last, was 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Gen 2:23).[13]

[10]John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), pp. 98–100; and Gregory K. Beale, 'Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48 (2005), 6–8.

[11]Note: Sixteen times out of the twenty-one times that *ezer* occurs in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to God or Yahweh as a *helper/help.* For example, Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalm 40:17; 70:6; 121:1, 2; 124:8; and 146:5.

[12]G. K. Beale, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden To The Ends Of The Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2015).

[13]Tracing the terms 'flesh and bone' through both the Old Testament and the New Testament always refers to kinship, family. See Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of*

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Genesis 2 emphasizes the unity and closeness of the man and the woman and concludes by remarking that they had no shame and nothing to hide. This was good.

5. Evil in Genesis: Distribution, use, and implications

The main Hebrew root word for *evil* (*ra*) in the Hebrew Bible occurs forty-six times in Genesis: *ra* as an adjective thirty-four times, *raa* as a verb nine times, and *raah as a* noun three times. Thus, it is primarily used to modify, describe, or qualify someone or something.

Studying the use of *evil* progressively and contextually in Genesis provides insight into its meaning and implications.

5.1 In the Garden

The first two uses of *evil* occur in Genesis 2, in reference to the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9, 17). This tree is only mentioned again in Genesis 3 and then never again in Scripture. Yet, it is for the sake of this Tree that humanity rebels against God.

Before leaving the peaceful Garden scene, we take note of the first two times Yahweh God 'commanded' the humans. The first command was about his provision of goodness and abundance: 'And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden"' (Gen 2:16). This included access to the Tree of Life.

The second command has the same grammatical structure as the first. In contrast to God's emphatic invitation to eat from all the trees of the garden, there was one boundary: 'but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die' (Gen 2:17).[14]

Two questions are generally asked regarding the Tree of Knowledge. First, why did God set up this boundary at all?

Without boundaries, humans would have no moral identity or responsibility to make choices.[15] These traits and capacities are integral to our identity as God's image bearers, as his likeness, and distinguish us from animals.

The second reason approaches the question of whether God wanted humanity to have knowledge or to be able to discern good or evil. Simply, yes. God wanted his royal children to have wisdom and knowledge through their relationship with God and trusting obedience to him. The rest of Scripture portrays this, giving wisdom, knowledge, and understanding through Torah, nature, wisdom literature, history, and prophecy. The question is not whether God wanted humanity to have wisdom, but rather, from what source(s) did he want humanity to obtain wisdom?

5.2 Enter the serpent

Yahweh's first command to the human to freely eat of all the trees of the Garden was twisted by the cunning serpent who asks the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must

Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of the Mīs Pî, Pīt Pî, and Wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia … and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, 1st edn, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), p. 138.

[14] All quotes from Scripture are taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

[15] Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*, Annotated edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 13–16.

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not eat from any tree in the garden"?' (Gen 3:1). Its language turned their eyes away from the abundance of all the trees to focus instead on the *one tree*, the only source among vast bounty that was forbidden, the only boundary.

The serpent first engaged the woman in his dialogic trap and then directly contradicted God's words: 'You will not certainly die! … For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (or a god), knowing good and evil' (Gen 3:4–5). The serpent asserted itself as the arbiter of truth and God as the liar.

'Your eyes will be open' reflects the final step often conducted in image-making rituals in Egypt and Mesopotamia, typically carried out in a Garden. In 'the opening of the eyes' ceremony, the statue or image became a god, endued with special powers of its own.[16] This was the actual enticement for the woman and the man (Gen 3:6).

Let's take a closer look at four significant points in the fateful or fatal moment in Genesis 3:6.

> When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good (*tov*) for food and pleasing (*taawah*) to the eye, and also desirable (*neḥmad*) for gaining wisdom (*haskil*), she took (*laqaḥ*) some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

First, the grammatical structure of the first phrase is set in contrast with the sevenfold refrain in creation: 'God saw that X was good (*tov*)'.[17] In Genesis 3:6, 'the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good (*tov*)'. For the first time, the woman and the man saw differently from God. Her perspective and, consequently, her assessment of what was good, now contradicted God's.

Second, she identified the tree of trespass as 'pleasing (*taawah*) to the eye'. Whereas in Genesis 2:9, all the trees were *desirable* (*neḥmad*) to look upon, the enticement of what was forbidden is a word connected with *aesthetic pleasure, craving* (*taawah*). Believing the lie, she now craved what it could offer.

Third, instead of desiring the abundance of all the trees of the Garden, the woman now *desired* (*neḥmad*) the Tree of Knowledge to give her *wisdom* (*haskil*) independently from God. By taking the fruit of this tree she would be her own judge of right and wrong, good and bad.

The trees in the Garden were *desirable* (*neḥmad*) to look at, and this was good (Gen 2:9). However, when the humans desired and craved what was harmful to them, they invited death and conflict into their world (Gen 3:15–24). Just as cut flowers look alive and beautiful for a time, but they are already dead, cut off from their root and source of life.[18]

Fourth, the woman *took* (*laqaḥ*) the fruit, ate it, and gave some to her husband who was with her (Gen 3:7). To see and take something that did not belong to them trespassed a moral boundary. Now, they would experience not only good but also evil.

[16]For details on the 'washing of the mouth' and 'opening of the eyes' rituals see especially McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden*, 43–114. Also, G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch and Its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), p. 109.

[17]God's seven declarations of 'good' in creation: Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

[18]Notably, the two words identified with taking what is desirable (*neḥmad*) and pleasing (*taawah*) in Genesis 3:6 are the same root words in Deuteronomy 5:21, the Tenth Commandment, for coveting and desiring.

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Yahweh confirmed that they became like God, or like an *elohim* (a god). 'And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever"' (Gen 3:22). God denied them access to the Tree of Life to protect them from perpetually living in a decaying, conflicted state.

The consequences of rebellion ushered in grief, conflict, misplaced desires, misused governing, and fratricide, all within a generation. Yet, God promised and *appointed* (*shyt*) that the seed of a woman would come who would crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15).

Eve remembered and believed God's promise. She named her third son Seth (from the verb in Gen 3:15, *shyt*), saying that God *appointed* (*shyt*) me another child (*seed*) in place of Abel, since Cain killed him (Gen 4:25). Faith in Yahweh continued, for Seth had a son, Enosh. 'At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD' (Gen 4:26). This language became synonymous with worshipping Yahweh and was picked up by the prophet Joel and by Peter and Paul for salvation.[19]

The genealogy in Genesis 5 confirms that humanity, although still God's image-bearer and giving birth to image-bearers, was subject to death, expressed through the metronomic drumbeat unique to this genealogy: 'And he died… and he died … and he died…' (Gen 5:1–3, 5, 6, 11, 14, 17, etc.).

5.3 Evil, corruption, and the flood

The next narrative use of *evil* occurs at the Flood scene's introduction, describing humanity's great inclination toward evil (Gen 6:5). There is no language of divine wrath in Genesis 3:9. Rather, Yahweh's response is grief, using the same word to describe the *grief* or *pain* (*'tsb/ 'itsavon*) felt by the woman and the man as a consequence of their rebellion (Gen 3:16–17; 6:6).

The Flood scene is framed by Yahweh's assessment of humanity as inclined toward evil (Gen 6:5 and 8:21). Yet, in God's own words, he accepts the reality that the human heart is bent toward evil from their youth and enters into a covenant with all living creatures to preserve life (9:5–16).

An interesting group of four Hebrew words collocated in the Flood narrative occurs in two later narratives. These three stories are the only places in Genesis where God takes human life: the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the first two sons of Judah. The four words are *evil* (*ra), corrupt/destroy* (*sḥt*), and *die* (*mwt*), which are contrasted in each of these scenes with a person who is called *righteous* (*tzadiq*).

5.4 Evil, corruption, and Sodom and Gomorrah

Following the Flood, the next appearance of *evil* is associated with Sodom and Gomorrah. Foreshadowing the upcoming destruction is the description found in Genesis 13:10, 13, when Abram and Lot parted ways due to their growing herds.

> Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before

[19]See Gen 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1; Exod 17:15; 1 Kings 18:24; Ps 116:17; Joel 2:32; Zep 3:9; See Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13.

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> the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) … Now the people of Sodom were wicked (*evil, ra*) and were sinning greatly against the LORD.

Between Genesis 13 and the judgment of Sodom, Yahweh invited Abraham into a conversation. In Genesis 18, Abraham negotiated with God for the sparing of lives if there were at least ten righteous in the city. A fundamental rhetorical statement about the character and justice of Yahweh is spoken by Abraham in Genesis 18:25, 'Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to kill *the* righteous with *the* wicked, that the righteous would be as the wicked! Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?' (LEB). The use of justice/judge language unfolds in the ensuing spar between Lot and the townspeople of Sodom.

In Genesis 19, the next three occurrences of *evil* are spoken between Lot and the gang demanding to rape his guests. Lot first told them not to do this evil. They responded that Lot, 'a foreigner', was playing the judge, and they threatened to do greater evil to him than they intended toward his guests. The people of Sodom rejected Lot's plea, confirming the violent self-rule of the masses in Sodom. Lot's choice to listen to the angels brought the sparing of life for himself and the family members who chose to follow. The Sodomite's callousness brought consequent divine judgment and death.

The final words spoken toward the conclusion of the demise of Sodom are from Lot to the angels who protect him. Lot asked them the favor of not having him flee to the hills, fearing *disaster* (*evil*) overtake him there (Gen 19:19). They granted him permission to flee instead for refuge to the small town of Zoar. However, his wife looked back and remained 'a pillar of salt', leaving Lot and his two daughters alone. The three then left Zoar for the hills, where his daughters got him drunk and bore his children who became the Moabites and Ammonites.

5.5 Abraham and Sarah disagree: Yahweh changes Abraham's perspective

Progressing through Genesis, the word *evil* is increasingly nuanced. Its meaning and use widen, demonstrating this Hebrew word as a hypernym with a broad semantic range.[20] The next use of *evil* occurs obscurely in English in the dialogue between Abraham and Yahweh (Gen 21:11–12).

Sarah gave birth to Isaac at age 90 (Gen 21:1–8). As Ishmael grew and teased Isaac, Sarah saw him as a threat to Isaac as heir and told Abraham to banish Hagar and her son! Abraham was greatly *distressed* (*raa*) by this demand (Gen 21:11). 'But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed (*raa*) about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned"' (Gen 21:12).

The Hebrew expression God used in this statement is 'do not let it be evil (*raa*) in your eyes concerning the boy'. Abraham listened to God and changed his point of view to align with what God said. God promised Abraham that Ishmael would also become a nation. After Hagar was subsequently banished, God appeared to her a second time, promising her that Ishmael would become a great nation, and God cared for them (Gen 16:10–14; 21:18–19).

[20]John I. Saeed, *Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 68.

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5.6 Laban and Abimelech: Recognizing Yahweh's perspective to provide for and protect Isaac

Laban, the link to Abraham's seed, enters the scene and often returns as a shady character. He is the great nephew of Abraham, the brother of Rebekah, and the father of Leah and Rachel (Gen 24:15–29).

After Sarah's death, Abraham sent his servant back to the region of Haran in the hope of obtaining a wife for Isaac from his own family line. The servant came upon Rebekah, where the longest story of betrothal in Scripture is found. Dialogues, gifts, and festivities ensue in Genesis 24.

When the time came for Rebekah to decide whether she would leave with Abraham's servant to become Isaac's wife, Laban and their father replied, 'This matter has gone out from Yahweh. We are not able to speak to you evil (*ra*) or good (*tov*)' (Gen 24:50, my wooden translation). The language of not speaking 'bad or good' is likely idiomatic here for 'one way or another', yet it recalls the garden lexemes of good and evil and speaks to allowing God to be the one to determine what is good or bad.[21]

Laban is a potential foil to the plans of God and frames the narrative of the emerging Abrahamic family. Rough and deceptive a character as Laban was, he reluctantly yielded to what he perceived as being brought about by Yahweh's hand, and conceded to God's perspective and warning.[22]

The language of good and evil next returns in covenantal language with one of Isaac's encounters with Abimelech of Gerar (Gen 26). Whether this was the same Abimelech that Abraham tried to trick, presenting Sarah as his sister in Genesis 20, is uncertain. Nevertheless, after Isaac tried the same thing with Rebekah, Abimelech observed the blessing of God on Isaac's life and requested a covenant of peace between them, saying,

> We saw clearly that the LORD was with you; so we said, 'There ought to be a sworn agreement (or oath) between us'—between us and you. Let us make a treaty (*berith*) with you that you will do us no harm (*evil, raah*), just as we did not harm you but always treated you well (*tov*) and sent you away peacefully (*shalom*). And now you are blessed by the LORD. (Gen 26:28–29).

The two men swore an oath and performed a covenant ceremony to live peacefully alongside one another and do no *harm* (*evil, ra*). Treating the other *well* (*tov*) meant living as neighbors in *peace (shalom)*. Their covenant vowed a relationship of goodness toward one another, which would promote harmony and flourishing for their families and communities.

5.7 Esau's wives

The narrative then moves toward the struggles between Esau and Jacob, twins of Rebekah and Isaac. Jacob, named 'heal grabber' at birth, continued to live into his reputation as a deceiver. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for some 'red, red stew', and

[21]Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 1st edn (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 168 n.50.

[22]Howard N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta, GA: Brill Academic Pub, 1985), p. 123. Also Walter Vogels, 'Like One of Us, Knowing tôb and ra' (Gen 3:22)', *Semeia*, 81 (1998), 150.

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Jacob stole Esau's inheritance blessing by deceiving his father, Isaac (with Rebekah's guidance). Neither the words good nor evil are used in these narratives or dialogues; however, there is clearly ongoing familial dysfunction and deception.

The next use of *evil* occurs in Rebekah's complaint to Isaac about Esau's Canaanite wives. First, she described living among them as making her life not worth living (Gen 27:46). Esau then saw that his wives were *displeasing* (*evil, ra*) to his father, Isaac (Gen 28:8). This is similar to the relational pain Abraham experienced when Sarah told him to banish Hagar and Ishmael. In this scene, Esau's solution was to add a daughter of Ishmael as his wife.

5.8 Laban and Jacob

After Jacob deceived his father, he was forced to flee from his home to his relatives near Haran to look for a wife and hide out there to avoid being killed by Esau.

The words *good* or *evil* were not used in Laban's wife-swap at Jacob's marriage, through which Jacob found himself with two wives and 14 years of labor to pay for both of their bride prices. However, after Jacob served Laban for 20 years and had twelve sons plus daughters, he was finally ready to flee back to Canaan, fearing for his life and that of his family.

In Genesis 31, the word *evil* was used five times in dialogue. This chapter began with Yahweh telling Jacob to return to the land of his ancestors and that 'I will be with you' (Gen 31:3). Jacob then told his wives, Leah and Rachel, that although he served Laban with all his strength and integrity, 'your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God has not allowed him to harm (*bring evil* against) me' (31:7).

His wives agreed to escape with him, stating that their father treated them like foreigners, sold them, and spent their inheritance. For the first time, the sisters agreed and supported Jacob in his plan to return to Canaan. They packed up their children, servants, herds, and belongings and fled.

When Laban discovered this, he gathered his men and caught up with them, intending to take back all 'his' property forcibly. 'Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good (*tov*) or bad (*ra*)"' (Gen 31:24), idiomatically, do nothing at all.

Laban's intentions toward Jacob before the intervening dream are apparent in his words. 'I have the power to harm (*bring evil* against) you; but last night the God of your father said to me, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good (*tov*) or bad (*ra*)"' (Gen 31:29, using identical language as in 31:24). We notice that Laban emphasized his ability and plan to destroy Jacob and his family.

Laban added,

> The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine or about the children they have borne? Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us (Gen 31:43-44).

The final use of *evil* in this lengthy scene appears toward the conclusion of Laban and Jacob's covenant meal and ritual, setting boundaries, once again, to do no *harm* (*raah*) to each other (Gen 31:52–53).

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The uses of *evil* in this chapter are all relational and interpersonal, speaking to the potential for physical harm caused by broken relationships, assumed rights, and mistreatment. The covenant Abimelech made with Isaac in 26:29 to not *harm* (*do evil*) is similar.

In this section, Isaac and Jacob, although faulty characters, obeyed Yahweh's words, which progressed the seed of promise. They lived in or returned to the land promised to Abraham (31:3) and thus received Yahweh's blessing. Becoming a blessing to the nations remained in question.

6. The final extended story of Genesis

6.1 Introduction of Joseph as a main character

The final twenty-five occurrences of *evil* in Genesis are in the Jacob–Joseph–Judah narrative, from chapters 37:2 to 50:26.

This last extended narrative unit is centered around three pairs of dreams that underpin the lives of Joseph and Jacob's family. It begins with Joseph's two dreams (Gen 37), then the two dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Gen 40), and finally, Pharaoh's two dreams (Gen 41).

6.2 Young Joseph: Favorite son, and most hated brother

Joseph took center stage at age 17 in the family of Israel. He was introduced in Genesis 37:2 by a curious sentence structure in Hebrew hosting a double entendre that could be interpreted either as 'he was shepherding his brothers among the flocks' and/or 'he was shepherding with his brothers the flocks'.[23] The verse continues, 'and he brought their father a *bad* (*evil, raah*) report about them'.

This is immediately followed by the narrator's comment that Jacob loved Joseph best and made him a special *tunic* (*kutonet*, recall Gen 3:21). Therefore, his brothers 'hated him and could not speak a kind (*shalom*) word to him' (37:4). Then, to make matters worse, 'Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more' repeated twice (Gen 37:5, 8).

After he told them his second dream, the narrator stated the brothers were *jealous* (*qnh*) of him, which is forebodingly similar in sound to the verb for Cain's name (*qn'*). Evil gained an association with hatred, jealousy, and the lack of shalom.

Without repeating the familiar story, the next two uses of *evil* are spoken by the brothers as they plot to kill Joseph, dip his tunic in the blood of a 'ferocious (*evil, raah*) animal' and ask their father to 'please examine' his tunic as evidence of his death (Gen 37:20, 33).

This description of a wild animal is unique in Genesis to Joseph's murder plot.[24] The narrator could have used the alternative terminology for an untamed animal 'animal of the field' or 'animal of the earth'. However, an animal that takes life accurately uses the Hebrew understanding of *evil.*

[23]Faro, *Evil in Genesis*, p. 56.

[24]The description of a wild animal using the adjective *ra* only occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in Lev 26:6 and in Ezekiel (5:17; 14:15, 21; 34:25).

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6.3 Judah's first two Evil Sons

After Jacob's impassioned wail that he would go to his grave mourning his son, Judah left the family complex to live with the Canaanites. The account of Judah taking a wife and conceiving sons is quick and coarse, though delicately smoothed over in most English Bibles (Gen 38:1–4). A more true-to-color translation is,

> There Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua, and he took her, and he came into her, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and he named him Er. And she became pregnant again and gave birth to a son, and she named him Onan (my translation).

The words 'saw … and took' used in the second verse have a rather dark history in Genesis (Gen 3:6–7; 6:1; 34:2).

Judah successfully assimilated into Canaanite society and became a man of means, as evidenced by his ring, cord, and staff.[25] He then took a wife for his oldest son Er, named Tamar (38:6). The narrator gives an exceptionally clear assessment of Er and Onan,

> **7** And Er, the firstborn of Judah, was evil (*ra*) in the eyes of Yahweh, and Yahweh killed him. **8** Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to the wife of your brother and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother'. **9** But Onan knew that the offspring would not be for him, so whenever he went in to the wife of his brother he would waste *it* on the ground so as not to give offspring to his brother. **10** And what he did was evil (*raa*) in the sight of Yahweh, so he killed him also (Gen 38:7–10, LEB).

What defined Er as evil is not specified. However, reversing the letters of his name in Hebrew spells *ra.* As for Onan, a similar Hebrew word with the same consonants means *injustice, iniquity*. Onan's evil is specified. The language indicates that he sexually abused Tamar, repeatedly having sex with his sister-in-law but always ejaculated on the ground to make sure she would not conceive. Onan broke his covenantal responsibility toward Tamar and exploited the one he was supposed to protect.[26] The injustices against Tamar mirror some of the injustices against Joseph in Egypt, which occurred within a similar time frame.

After the death of Onan, Judah withheld his youngest son, Shelah, from marrying her and sent Tamar back to her father's house. However, Tamar was still considered the spouse of Shelah due to the practice of levirate marriage in Canaan and many parts of Mesopotamia. Therefore, she was not free to marry anyone else even though her husband was dead.[27] The levirate laws of some Ancient Near Eastern cultures, including

[25]Zohar Amar and Naama Sukenik, 'Epistles: The Signs That Bind: Why Tamar Requested Judah's Signet, Cord, and Staff', *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 2021, 1/6, (https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/47/3/22) [accessed 15 July 2024].

[26]John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), pp. 582–83.

[27]Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. by Helen Richardson and M. E. J. Richardson (Boston; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 297.

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Canaan, allowed the obligation to pass to the widow's father-in-law when there was no available brother.[28]

Since Judah withheld his son Shelah as Tamar's kinsman redeemer (*g0'el*), Tamar was acting within her legal right to require Judah to fulfill the responsibilities and obligations of the law to produce an heir. After Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant, he first tried to eliminate her as a problem in his life, demanding they 'burn her!'

However, she sent his ring, cord, and staff with the words, 'Please examine' these. Upon hearing these words, he must have been transported back to the scene of grief and death that he brought upon his father Jacob with the words 'Please examine' the bloody tunic of Joseph. Judah's next words were, 'She is more righteous than I' (Gen 38:26). Judah then returned with Tamar to his father's family for her twins, Zerah and Perez, to be raised in Jacob's household.

The four words used in this scene also mirror those in the Flood and in Sodom and Gomorrah: *corrupted, evil, death* (*sḥt, ra,* and *mwt*) and reference to one as *righteous*.

Tamar's bold actions instigated the transformation of Judah and thus saved the continuation of the seed of promise (Gen 3:15), for Perez became the ancestor of King David.

6.4 Joseph from Pit to Prison

The next chapter, 39, returns to Joseph as a slave and then a prisoner for a combined 13 years. The one occurrence of *evil* in the chapter is framed by a curious refrain with minor differences: 'Yahweh was with him, and … Yahweh made him successful …' (39:2–3), and 'Yahweh was with him. And whatever he did, Yahweh made it successful' (Gen 39:23, LEB).

From most people's perspectives, these must be the strangest accounts of success in Scripture.

Due to the favor of God in his life, Joseph was placed in charge of everything in Potiphar's household. However, Potiphar's wife repeatedly attempted to seduce him. Joseph rejected her efforts stating, 'No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing (*evil, raah*) and sin (*ḥatath*) against God' (Gen 39:9)?

The words *evil* and *sin* appear together, as they did when describing the people of Sodom in Genesis 13:13.

Even though Joseph was a slave, he maintained his integrity before God. However, this did not negate the dreams God gave him. Nor did Joseph call his slavery or imprisonment good or a blessing. He continued to hope for a reversal of events. The good was God's presence and success within his circumstances. Evil was sinning against God and the circumstances that brought and held him in slavery and prison.

7. Joseph, the royal cupbearer, and the baker in prison

During his confinement, the Pharaoh's royal cupbearer and baker were imprisoned for some undisclosed wrong done to their ruler (Gen 40:1–3). While Joseph was assigned to attend to them, each man had their own dream the same night.

[28]Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, JSOT 113 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), p. 87.

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When Joseph came to them in the morning, he looked at them, and behold, they were *troubled* (*zo'aph*). And he asked the court officials of Pharaoh that *were* with him in the custody of his master's house, 'Why *are* your faces *sad* (*ra*) today' (Gen 40:6–7, LEB).

The narrator described the look on their faces as *troubled* or *distressed.* When Joseph spoke to them, he called their look *evil*, intending to convey the same meaning as *distressed*, deeply *troubled*. Joseph correctly interpreted their dreams and asked the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh for his release.

Working our way through Genesis, we continue to see the wide range of meanings of *evil* through the words collocated with it or used as synonyms or antonyms within each context.

7.1 Pharaoh's dreams and 'evil' cows

Two years later, Pharaoh had two dreams. In his first dream, seven cows *beautiful* (*yapheh*) in appearance and *healthy* (*bari'*) of flesh, came up out of the Nile. These were followed by seven starving cows described as *ugly* (*ra*) in appearance and *gaunt* (*daq*) of flesh (Gen 41:2–4). In the second dream, seven healthy (*bari'*) and *good* (*tov*) heads of grain are followed by seven thin (*daq*) and scorched (*shaduph*) heads of grain (Gen 41:5–7).

None of Pharaoh's magicians or wise men could interpret the dreams, so the chief cupbearer finally told Pharaoh about Joseph (Gen 41:1–8). Pharaoh had Joseph hastily cleaned up and brought before him. Upon being asked if he could interpret his dreams, Joseph replied 'It is not in my power; God will answer *concerning* the well-being (*shalom*) of Pharaoh' (Gen 41:16, LEB).

Pharaoh retold the dreams, using the same descriptors (41:17–18; 20–24), and added, '—never have I seen *any* as them in all the land of Egypt for ugliness (*evil, poor quality, ugly, ra/ roa*)' (41:19b LEB).

Evil as *bad, ugly* described the starving cows and famine conditions. In contrast, *good* pertained to healthy heads of grain and conditions of abundance.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream using the same descriptors the third time (41:25–27) and responded wisely regarding handling the divine warning. Pharaoh thus elevated Joseph to second in command over Egypt.

The names Joseph gave his two sons reflected his thoughts about the events of his life, 'God has made me forget all my *trouble* (*amal*) and all my father's household' and 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my *suffering* (*oni*)' (41:51–52). Even though Yahweh was with Joseph in his slavery and imprisonment (Gen 39:2–3, 23), Joseph called his experience for what it was: difficult, painful, suffering affliction from which God delivered him.

7.2 Joseph tests his brothers

As the good years passed and the famine advanced, Jacob's family ran low on food. Jacob directed his ten oldest sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. The next five uses of *evil* occur in Genesis 43–45.

When the brothers arrived and appeared before Joseph, they understandably did not recognize him. Although Joseph sold them grain, he accused them of being

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spies and warned them not to return again without their younger brother, Benjamin (Gen 42).

When Jacob's family ran low on grain again, Jacob told the brothers to return to Egypt. They repeated that they could only return if Benjamin came with them. Jacob reproached his sons for telling the yet unknown Egyptian leader that they had another brother, saying, 'Why did you bring *trouble* (*evil, raa*) to me by telling the man you still had a brother?' (Gen 43:6). Judah then pledged his own life as surety for Benjamin's safety (Gen 43:8–11). And so, they returned.

Joseph was not done testing his brothers. After seeing Benjamin, Joseph sold them more grain but put his silver cup in Benjamin's grain sack. Joseph instructed his servants to overtake his brothers and asked them, 'Why have you repaid evil (*raah*) for good (*tov*)?' and 'This is a wicked (*raa*) thing you have done' (Gen 44:4–5).

Judah then addressed Joseph in a lengthy discourse, in which he described the misery (*raah, ra,* Gen 44:29, 34) that would overcome his father if any harm (*ason*) befell Benjamin. *Evil* described the deep sorrow and grief Jacob would experience if Benjamin also died. Judah's transformation was shown by his compassion, loyalty, and willingness to offer his life in exchange for Benjamin's.

Joseph could no longer hold back his tears. He revealed himself as their brother, saying, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed (*'tsb*) and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you' (Gen 45:5).

The word translated *distressed* (*'tsb*) in this verse is the same verb as in Genesis 3:16–17 and the related form expressing God's grief in Genesis 6:6. Even though Joseph's brothers had done evil and violence against him, he asked them not to be *distressed*, or *grieved*. With Pharaoh's consent, Joseph invited his entire extended family to move to the fertile delta of Egypt.

Here, the circle of the plot conflict of good and evil in Genesis begins to close as mercy and forgiveness overcome the grief and destruction of evil.

8. Pharaoh, meet my father

Upon arrival in Egypt, Jacob was brought to meet the Pharaoh. When the Pharaoh asked his age, he said 130 years old. He added, 'My years have been few and difficult (*evil, ra*)' (Gen 47:9). It is argued that either Jacob was thinking of the grief of living without Joseph for so long or that he was following proper court etiquette by minimizing the length of his life in comparison with his ancestors.[29]

This, too, is not qualitative or moral evil, but deficiency or lack along with grief.

8.1 Jacob's blessings

As Jacob approached the end of his life, he first blessed Joseph's two sons and spoke of 'the Angel who has delivered me from all harm (*evil, ra*)—may he bless these boys' (Gen 48:16). In the next verse, 'When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on

[29] A. S. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch in its Relation to Egyptian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 17.

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Ephraim's head he was displeased (*raa*); so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head' (Gen 48:17).

With close proximity, we recognize *evil* used to speak of both physical harm and emotional or relational distress. For the latter, *evil* referred to perceptions of what was good or bad, right or wrong. Joseph relented to his father's will and, in this case once again, the divine perspective.

8.2 Genesis comes full circle almost back to the garden

The final uses of *evil* occur in Genesis 50. Jacob died and Joseph's brothers still fear that Joseph could seek revenge. 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the *wrongs* (*evil, raah*) we did to him' (Gen 50:15). Therefore, they delivered a contrived message to Joseph from their father,

The *evils* they admitted to were contained in a letter. The brothers collectively urge Joseph to *forgive* (*ns'*) the *transgression* (*pesha'*) and *sin* (*ḥattath*) for the *evil* (*raah*) they brought upon him (50:17). As these related terms for evil converge, the brothers fall before Joseph saying, 'We are your slaves' (Gen 50:18).

Joseph's response bookends Genesis 2–3, 'Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? As for you, you planned evil (*raah*) against me, *but* God planned it for *good* (*tov*), in order to do this—to keep many people alive—as *it is* today' (Gen 50:19–20).

Joseph responded to their admission of doing evil by placing God's perspective and plans at the forefront so that good could come out of their circumstances instead of more evil, to save many lives. He forgave them and trusted God to untwist the evil and transform it into goodness.

9. Summary of some key findings on evil in Genesis

The results of this inductive study of evil from the Hebrew text of Genesis produced four primary findings:

> (1) *lexically*, the Hebrew root word evil (*ra*) is a hypernym, a major category word with a broad range of meaning referring to anything perceived as bad: from unpleasant, ugly, displeasing, deficient, to harmful, sinful or wicked (not simply morally sinister as commonly depicted), with the chief antonym being good (*tov*); (2) *exegetically*, good and evil play a role in developing the plot conflict in Genesis through linguistic and literary devices; (3) *conceptually*, evil is closely related to the concepts of death and cursing, in direct opposition to good, life, and blessing; (4) *theologically*, evil is anything that departs from God and his good ways as established in creation and in covenant.[30]

Evil is most succinctly defined as 'the corruption of creational and relational goodness: a violation of divine design'.

> Evil is not the absence of good nor is it preexistent before the creation of heaven and earth … Evil, in human hands, is found to be the independent taking of

[30]Faro, *Evil in Genesis*, pp. 195–96.

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> something created as good and twisting it for self-fulfilling, autonomous purposes rather than enjoying and employing it as God intended. Thus, that which is intended for good becomes corrupt and distorted for evil.[31]

Good is a quality of God demonstrated in all he thinks, intends, and does. Evil is a consequence of departing from God and his ways. Genesis demonstrates God's decision to allow good and evil to coexist in this present world. God works amidst the good and the evil, as he declared he would after the flood in Gen 8:21–22.

Evil is assumed to be part of life. Therefore, the questions addressed are not why there is evil or why evil happens but rather how the person responded. God's ability to fulfill his promise to humanity in Genesis 3:15, to bring the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent, is held secure despite human failings.

God interacts with humans to accomplish his will, knowing all have mixed motives and intentions. Yet, in Genesis, God demonstrates that he can bring about his good purposes even through the evil intentions of those acting contrary to his ways through those who turn to him and remain faithful.[32]

[31]Faro, *Evil in Genesis*, p. 198.

[32]For detailed results, see Faro, 'A Lexical, Exegetical, Conceptual, and Theological Study of Evil in Genesis'; Faro, *Evil in Genesis*; and Ingrid Faro, *Demystifying Evil: A Biblical and Personal Exploration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023).

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