



R. Potgieter

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# DIVINE EXULTATION AND AGONY IN THE FACE OF EVIL, A CREATION THEODICY OF DIVINE RESTRAINT

## ABSTRACT

Horrendous evil describes the anthropological view of excessive evils which devastate and dehumanise both victim and perpetrator, casting doubt as to whether life is worth living. Divine exultation and divine agony are viewed from the perspective of divinity, whose initial creation brought God pleasure and its fall an offence so deep that, though he considered its total destruction, God instead opted for divine restraint.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bible is filled with accounts of persons airing their doubts, fears, disagreements, anger, frustration, even recording disagreements and quarrels with God about his ways and their treatment. These accounts seldom give conclusive answers to the evil experienced by, for example, Jonah. Added to this is the issue of the differences of opinion regarding the question of the problem of evil,<sup>1</sup> made the more complex by the traditional understanding of God as omnipotent, omniscient and altogether good. A doctrine which suggests an intractable perspective and so a major problem in considering the matter of theodicy<sup>2</sup> nevertheless “evil is a problem for *theism*” (Davis 2001:viii (cursive in the original)). Whatever form theism might take, there is some commitment to deity, although the statement itself is fraught with controversy (Davis 2001:ix). How God relates to the

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1 “Das Theodizeeproblem ist das Problem der Rechtfertigung Gottes angesichts des Übels in der Welt” (Gesang 1997:21). See also Feinberg (2004:447); Plantinga (1974:63-64).

2 An alternate view could be to measure God according to some standard only to find that it is insufficient (Gesang 1997:97-98).

continuing presence of evil is not as much a matter of simplistic solutions but of mature critical approaches resulting in a mental environment of “deeper and wiser faith in the creator and redeemer God” (Wright 2006:41). This would take various approaches into account (Griffin 2001:108-109). These difficult questions easily range from Plato’s *Timaeus*’ creation emerging from primeval chaos to Kiernan-Lewis (Van Inwagen 2004:x, 75, 83) who, for instance, does not believe that an argument from evil must necessarily relate back to a classical understanding of the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being,<sup>3</sup> as conflicting philosophical arguments arise. Besides, all will ultimately attain salvation. Caputo (2006:2-20), on the other hand, from a postmodern perspective, aborts the orthodox view of God’s omnipotence, substituting a scientific understanding of “weak force” directly associated with event. This means that God sometimes capitulates before the immensity of the problem of an event. On the other hand, the problem is addressed by classifying certain evils in the light of some gradation of moral good. Such evil is not merely the opposite of bad as it may stand without reference to any other event, whether intentional or natural. This view leads to justifying morally good persons, permitting certain evils for morally sufficient reasons for doing so. To gauge the benchmark for sufficient reason is, of course, a matter of debate which may, on the one hand, be logically formulated or, on the other, evidentially justified (Burger 1987:177-178). Classifications of evil have ranged from pointless, gratuitous to dysteleological. In this regard, Adams (1999:26) suggests a significant definition of horrendous evil:

evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a good to him/her on the whole.

Her definition encapsulates an evil so devastating, dehumanising both victim and perpetrator, that there is sound reason for the victim to doubt whether life is worth living. Endemic to this definition is the purposelessness of such evil which elicits the additional description of “horror” to the definition. From a theological point of view, these paradigms of evil and horror relate to the fall of humankind into sin and its consequences. As helpful as Adams’ insight is, it is my contention that this approach to the problem of evil is primarily from an anthropological perspective. While it does deal with the pain and horror of sin’s consequences, it does not do justice to the story from God’s perspective. That is what I aim to do.

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3 See Hermani (2002:24) and Ward (2007) proposing the changing deity of process theology and open theism in an emerging universe and suggestive of middle knowledge.

The scope of this article will be limited to the context of Genesis 1-6, spanning creation, fall and God's assessment of events prior to the flood. The article will mainly focus on those aspects which refer to God's exultation and agony and conclude with divine restraint. Although an artificial construct, the higher critical approach with its overlap of intertwined narratives, nevertheless gives some useful insights<sup>4</sup> to the argument as a whole. By its very nature, this study merely attempts to establish some groundwork. Divine exultation is expressed in terms of completed acts of creation, whereas divine agony further reveals the choice that God as creator made not to destroy creation and humankind, but to allow its devastation through sin, through the depths of depravity with the seed promise of renewal. This latter insight serves as the basis for the thesis of God's choice to opt for restraint instead of destroying humankind.

My underlying concept is based on Pratt's (1977:69) approach to literature as context and Wenham's (1987:lili, 5) view of creation as movement. In the context of literary theory, the narratives of the accounts of creation do not only suggest history as movement, but succession in terms of movement. Rather a "system in motion" which together with "systematization" suggests moments which constitute systematic structure. In other words, my approach to theodicy is that it is the ongoing story of God relative to the whole of creation but, in particular, mankind.

## 2. DIVINE EXULTATION: GOD AND THE BIG PICTURE OF APPRECIATION AND EXPECTATION

### 2.1 God and creation myths

There are major differences between the deities of myths of antiquity and the God of the Bible. Creation myths are, by and large, defined by explaining created reality and humanity. Many of these myths have been explored<sup>5</sup> and will not be repeated in this article. Some have correlative links with the Hebrew account of creation such as, for instance, the Enuma Elish account. In this account, Marduk establishes himself after the

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4 Westermann (1974), for instance, follows the popular historical-critical construct along the four main interdependent literary components of JPDE. P is said to have been written in the late exilic period c. 550-450 B.C.E. Wenham (1987:xxv-xliii) gives a brief scholarly overview of source criticism. See also Wenham (1989:84-89) where he usefully assesses the use of higher critical constructs.

5 See Leeming (1992:166) whose study is from a universalist/psychological perspective.

splitting of the primal mother most unlike the Hebrew account of creation in establishing humankind's role. Both of these have been extensively explored. Wenham (1987:5) sees little or no significance in this supposed correlative, while Leeming (1992:24) accepts the dependence of the Hebrew account of creation myths as evident in later scriptures on the basis of the Tiamat-tehom (watery chaos/deep) connection. By contrast, Wenham (1987:5) views the early chapters of Genesis as being about affirming the unity of God and the ongoing relationship between the two main subjects, God and humankind. Another stark comparison to various polytheistic myths is that the Hebrew deity's omnipotence is starkly contrasted to the impotence of the gods. Nor is his justice capricious and, instead of exploitation, he expresses concern for humankind. Humankind's primeval wisdom is contrasted with the created image of his Creator and later with his sinful obedience. Wenham (1987:!) comments insightfully:

Because as Christians we tend to assume these points in our theology, we often fail to recognize the striking originality of the message of Gen 1-11 and concentrate on subsidiary points that may well be of less moment.

I wish to use the spirit of this approach in this article. In conclusion, it must be mentioned that, in spite of some resemblances among mythic and proto-creation stories, the Hebrew God creator is not easily confused with similar creation myths. The Hebrew account unambiguously pronounces on the fact of God's supreme utterances in the sense of fiat, for the unfolding of His planned handiwork. It is not only an account of the Creator's ability but also a revelation of his character. The creation narrative excellently conveys an underlying sense of divine restraint in as much as there is an indelible accompaniment of a legal *fiat justitia ruat caelum*.<sup>6</sup>

Within the setting of the Hebrew scriptures, the early content of the book of Genesis is testified to by other books of the Bible. The poetry of the book's psalms records ancient songs praising the Creator, testifying to the exultation of his work of and in creation (e.g., Psalms 8, 136, 148). Proverbs 8:22-31 and Job 38, for instance, refer to the mystery of divine creativity (Wenham 1987:10). P is in a language of elegant prose and succeeding narratives flow from it and triumphantly tell of God the creator, inviting all of humankind to adore him.

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6 "let justice be done though the heavens fall" (emphasis mine).

## 2.2 God's appreciation and exultation in the creation narrative

From the Judaeo narrative, the Hebrew God is the sole creator. I do not wish to discuss what is understood by the implication of plurality of the Godhead.<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say that there is no sharing of status or vying for supremacy. It is a narrative about the Creator, creativity and creation, freely acknowledged in the cosmogonic myths and supported in later Hebrew and Christian scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator from the P source conveys something of the marvel of what comes about creatively.<sup>9</sup> While the narrative element is minimal, it is an ordered account of earliest beginnings, of succession of days of creativity which culminate with the sixth, the creation of mankind. The creative acts dynamically take place within time and space,<sup>10</sup> consequent to the authoritative words uttered by the Creator. Creativity progressively brings about a daily shift from original chaos so that at the close of each successive day there is the suggestion of completeness with the divine response in the pronouncement of "good". The apex of pronouncement is the "very good" of verse 31 which pertains to the systematic structure brought about after a succession of six-day acts. It is significant that the Creator culminates by pronouncing divine satisfaction when omnisciently surveying his work with admiration (Wenham 1987:18). The statement of doubly good (good, very good) reflects the standard of that which lies within God himself, the most sublime expression of divine satisfaction in the all-knowing of completion. All that the Creator had set out to do is completed and done with enthusiasm (Hamilton 1990:34). Humankind

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7 I merely acknowledge that Genesis 1:26 is variously interpreted without exploring the divergence of ramifications for accepting one or another view regarding the plurality in God's address nor the image of God in man. See Wenham (1987:27-32). I also agree with Hamilton (1990:32) that men and women share in the divine image and that "Adam, the first man created and named, is representative of humanity".

8 Such as the poetry of Psalms 8, 19, whereas Romans 1:20 develops this further as reflecting some of the invisible qualities of God since the creation of the world.

9 For instance, the beauty ascribed to the light precedes its separation from darkness so that the notion of the beauty of light in itself is conveyed. The word *towb* may mean beauty as being pleasant to the senses or good.

10 Wenham (1987:xliv-liii) seeks to discover the original meaning of the early mythology for its original readers but not necessarily within a time and space setting, suggesting that this was not the intention of the original author. Hamilton (1990:120) makes more of time, suggesting initial creation and space and the institution of rest in P as sanctifying the category of time.

is implicitly invited to recognise divine appreciation and to consciously share in the fact that ultimately it is the Creator God who is pre-eminently good, his completed handiwork clearly reflecting his character (see, for example, Ps 100:5). Word and deed resulted in a marvellous display of the Creator's omnipotence on the sixth day, revealing divine plan and activity suggestive of a glorious tomorrow. Implicit are set limits designed to maintain created reality. The nature of creatures, for instance, further reveals God's choice for a single creation which may have been totally different among a myriad of alternate possibilities (Futch 2008:66). Rather, God's restraint is evident in the choice of this creation so that, within the context of this particular reality, humankind is the apex of God's creation, with the additional institution of "rest".

Not all agree with this elevated view of generic man.<sup>11</sup> Generally, though, the accepted view is that, in the first account of creation, humankind was the apex of creation and, in the second, the pivot of creation (Kidner 1976:58). He alone is uniquely created in the image of God and as imitator of God, capable of personal relationship with his maker and serving as his vice-regent on earth for its continued administration. The focus of the creation accounts echoes the elevated view of Adam, the one creature God singles out for personal attention. People's creation is uniquely shaped to fulfil this planned mandate by God and gloriously reveals the image of deity within him. He is not deity. Rather, in his resemblance of deity, the lesser pointing to the greater in God's creation through his earthly activity. Conversely, humankind is created deity on earth.<sup>12</sup> He cannot be confused with ultimate deity who alone is the creator and sustainer. However, a person is person the creature, restrained in being deity's image bearer.<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:27 suggests that God created a male and female, both sharing in his image (Hamilton 1990:138). Together they are godlike and the creator's vice-regents on earth are tasked with its administration. God's delight in exultation includes this impartation of trust to these godlike creatures that

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11 This is, for instance, in contrast to Caputo (2006:283): "(I)f truth be told, we none of us – neither believers nor unbelievers, neither believers in this or unbelievers in that – know who we are. We are always in the dark."

12 This is not suggestive of apotheosis.

13 I will not digress into the varied meanings of what is or may be implied by the *imago dei*. To maintain the richness implicit within this concept, I suggest a generic compromise of image as "pattern" in the sense Wenham (1987:32, fn. 19) proposes and, in addition, employ Hamilton's (1990:138) insight of image as "exercise of dominion" as royal language. "Man is created to rule. But this rule is to be compassionate and not exploitative. Even in the garden of Eden he who would be lord of all must be servant of all." Hamilton refers to various sources in support of this approach in his footnote 19.

bear his image. They are created for that task so that, in their administration of the earth and the fulfilment of their mandate, they might glorify their creator. Humankind serves within the bounds of restraint imposed by the created reality entrusted to them. Such is the trust God places in people that He withdraws only to meet with them from time to time “in the cool of the day”. Humankind, mandated to rule the twice good creation, must account to his creator.

Finally, all of created reality carries the stamp of the Creator, in that a vegetarian diet excluded the taking of life for food (Hamilton 1990:140). The omniscience of God must not be measured according to the limitations he imposed upon creation nor relative to the myriad of alternate possible creations. Rather, it should be viewed as how it magnificently accords with the particular choice of his divine plan brought about omnipotently. With all in place, there is a doxological pause before the seventh day,<sup>14</sup> but without the implication of the Creator’s inactivity.<sup>15</sup> It is divine restraint upon the process of creative activity that had come to an end. A fitting culmination to the six days is a final revelation of something of God’s character of his regard for his own handiwork, the care of creation and humankind in the institution of a day of rest. It is this seventh day that God blesses<sup>16</sup> and makes holy. Though this supersedes the “good, very good” formula, it is implicitly inclusive. God’s resplendent creative activity is brought to conclusion. The whole is to the satisfaction and exultation of God. Together the blessing of the seventh day and pronouncing it holy bring about a sanctification peculiar to it, significant for people and creation. Wenham (1987:38, 143) suggests that it was created for humankind and so inclusive of the other parts which constitute the whole of the domain of creation entrusted to him.

Blessing is an issue from God in relation to humankind and his earth. According to Heschel (quoted in Hamilton 1990:143), separation is implicit in holy and relates the day directly to the Creator and not to space in and its material occupation. With the further significance that the blessedness of

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14 According to Hamilton (1990:141), Genesis 2:1 suggests a collective ceasing of activity, silence awaiting its epilogue.

15 The omission of the word *šabbāt* and divine rest marks the uniqueness of the Hebrew creation story. Kidner (1976:53) suggests that the Sabbath rest as it were seals God’s creative activity in terms of completeness.

16 This is the second blessing in the passage after 1:28. Blessing is recounted in 1:28, 2:3, 5:2 and 9:1. With the seventh day comes the conclusion of the creation account. God blessed the animals 1:22. This is to be understood according to Wenham (1987:24) in a common sense quote “Where modern man talks of success, OT man talked of blessing”. Connecting success relative to the Creator.

humankind's rest from his six days of activity relates directly to creation's rest within the ongoing rest of the seventh day (Kidner 1976:53).

P concludes the narrative pericope of 1:1-2:4a which introduced the Creator omnipotent to end with the Creator holy. From this pericope, with its characteristic exultative pronouncements of God, the Bible narrative continues. Genesis 2:4bff. is the creation account continued, but from the perspective of humankind.

It is clear that humankind was not present at creation, as implied by Job 38:4. But he was present at the exultation of God (Wenham 1987:34) latent in the formula, "it is good, very good" (v. 31) and the enthusiasm of God as he contemplated his entire work comprehensively included in the formula. Every word issued from deity was creatively formulated to translate into the ontological being of created reality now at the conclusion of its completeness, where humankind is present to survey, to be awed by and to marvel at the Creator and the Creator's creation of which they are part. It is the formula that would serve as standard for Adam and Eve's vice-regency. They would seek to maintain the standard of "good, very good" and express it in everything they did. This becomes clear in later Hebrew scriptures (Ps. 8, 19) in which God is praised by his creation, persons and angels.

God is well-pleased. All is well, between God and his creation, God and the apex of his creation as witnessed by those who were present at humankind's creation (Gen 1:26). His divine omnipotence and character are expressed in delighted doxology as he surveys his own handiwork.

From the setting of the above scene, one can now appreciate the consequent divine agony of God, faced with the ruin and continued rise of evil of both humankind and creation, once so supremely pleasing to him.

### **3. DIVINE AGONY: GOD AND THE CHOICE TOWARDS RESTORATION**

#### **3.1 A cataclysmic shift from one reality to another**

There is no indication during God's creative activity that the Spirit which hovered over the earth before and during creation, had left. This added element of the priestly account leaves the reader with added insight and feeling of awe at the creative and continuation of the ordered restraining

power of God. The Jahwist<sup>17</sup> (J) account of Genesis 2:4b-3:24,<sup>18</sup> on the other hand, brings about another perspective as mentioned earlier.

Implicit in the J narrative are the concluding doxological exultation and pronounced blessing of the first creation account P. These underlie the continuing story of the good, very good creation. In the J account, the narrative shows how humankind was disciplined for the task of vice-regency and to cope in God's absence. The seed for divine agony is planted within the sufficiency of creation's perfection,<sup>19</sup> for God's plan for his creation is adequate and includes his expectancy for its continuance under the vice-regency of humankind. This is proto-anthropology of humankind in its earliest beginnings.<sup>20</sup>

Let us for a moment remember the dreadful total chaos that existed before God's deliberate intervention in bringing about creative order upon the earth. Progressive ordering and subjugation of chaos over a period of six days underpinned the emergent created order, daily qualified by God as "good". Divine restraint allowed for a particular expression of created reality consequential to divine utterances. Creation's continuance in the light of God's good, very good pronouncement was made contingent on the maintenance of excellence by his vice-regent. Nevertheless, within all the freedom of created reality and accountability to God, humankind's rule was latent with the possibility of rebellion. This existent paradigm, encapsulating created reality with its potential for regency by humankind, was approved by the Creator, and the context within which God and persons' relationships developed. This is a paradigm of potential chaos,

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17 So-called because of the Yahweh spelling of God's preferred name in German and which is the name used in this account stretching from Genesis, Exodus and Numbers said to be composed ca. 960-930 B.C.E. (Gottwald 1985:137).

18 The *inclusio* divisions of the two creation narratives of P and J as 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24 are based on the editorial reverse order of the phrase "he created" (Wenham 1987:5).

19 Of the many worlds that could have been chosen for actualisation, this one with all its limitations expresses completeness and perfection in terms of its boundaries not in terms of its idealisation. Variations of Leibniz's theory are found as quantum theory develops.

20 A distinction can be made between the logical order of God's eternal decrees and the timing of election; which choice God made before creation. This is debate centred upon humankind's lapsing into sin. A supralapsarian view holds that for reprobation God ordained some to fall into sin which logically preceded the actual timing and means of the event. On the other hand, an infralapsarian view reverses the order: God's decree to permit a fall into sin preceded that of election. That means that after the Fall God's choosing of some (the elect) means a passing over of others (non-elect) (Berkouwer 1960:254-277).

the allusion towards deconstruction in the light of seeming absence of divine restraint. Potentially a return to the situation of Genesis 1:2. God was not ignorant of all the possibilities which faced humankind when God pronounced this world as twice good. This insight is remarkable in the light of all that we know from these accounts of the Creator. God pronounces blessing and satisfaction upon a creation which has the potential to regress.

Genesis 3 brings about a new paradigm, reminiscent of a state of reality in reverse, towards the direction of previous primeval chaos<sup>21</sup> as existed prior to the creative utterances of the creator. The implication is that it is not a full return to the chaos of Genesis 1:2, but a retreat from the very good creation that gave pleasure to God. It had the potential to fall into total chaos without continued intervention. What emerges from Chapters 3-11 is that sin does not come without a price nor does it have immunity. The events immediately after the fall in meeting with God must be seen in the light of what now guides God's emotions. Clearly, this is an anthropological perspective; nevertheless, within the new paradigm, according to the narrator, God now expresses a new emotion, grief (Gen 6:6). This is a far cry from exultative approval. What develops in the narrative from Genesis 3 must consider God's expression of grief and pain that now underlie his further actions. Doxological exultations in later Hebrew scriptures shifted from divine utterance to humankind's expressive utterances in passages such as Psalm 8, 19:1, 50:6, continuing to express the glory of God, but from the present experience of a fallen reality.

With this in mind, we return to the Garden and to the further developments of the relationship between God and mankind.

### 3.2 In the garden and thereafter

Genesis 3:8 seems to indicate periods when God was noticeably absent from the garden, for this was the period of the Creator's rest with his vice-regent administering his world with his full confidence and trust. As all things are created by God, even the possibility of antithesis comes from him. Evil came through humankind for whom all answers to questions are void of hope, for its source, evil, lives in the shadow of God, but is emancipated from God (Link 2003:338).

Humankind, though in the image of deity, has obvious limitations, even as the Creator kenotically withdraws in favour of his vice-regent. According

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21 The implication is that it is not a full return to chaos of Genesis 1:2, but a retreat from the very good creation that gave pleasure to God with the potential to fall into total chaos without continued intervention.

to the narrative, he needs to learn that the plan of God's good creation is filled with early possibilities of regency and administration (Gen 2:15).<sup>22</sup> Under the watchful eye of the Creator, he gets to know his environment and craft, the creatures inhabiting the environment and, most of all, the author of all of creation. Within the same anthropology, Adam acquires knowledge such as the limits of the garden's geography, and learns that he is not God. Because there is no magic in Eden to look after itself, he learns of the possibility of failure and his important role as its servant administrator. The one cardinal symbol of his subservience as supreme regent of the earth for Von Rad (quoted in Hamilton 1990:89) is the restriction not to eat of the fruit of one specific tree, disobedience of which will return all things to death, the state of chaos evidenced in Genesis 1.2 and entrance into mysteries evidently not meant to be explored.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, within the "good, very good" creation of the Creator, and in spite of his fellowship with God, he experiences loneliness.<sup>24</sup> Adam learns to recognise the providential care of a good God and gets to see first-hand something of the creativity of God in bringing the woman, Eve. Adam and Eve experience a heightened understanding of the good of creation, sharing a shameless state and oneness, similar to the other creatures Adam named.

However, the increase in knowledge also seems to be in the form of pre-fall proto-reasoning, evident when Eve considers the serpent's questions and answers before actually committing the sin of eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Jahwist narrator seems

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22 *'abad* "to exercise dominion" and *šāmar* "subdue", implying that humankind is divinely appointed to rule over and dominate living creatures, and suggests force such as taming and subduing the land (Hamilton 1990:139-40, 171 and 140). This must also be read in the light of servanthood as implied in Genesis 2:15 for the purpose of qualification. This is unlike the account of the Enuma elish in which the gods plea for relief of the weariness of maintaining the earth that is beneath their dignity to do and Marduk consequently creating man as the servants of the gods from the blood of Kingu, a defeated god. "The anthropologies of Gen 1 and Enuma elish could not be wider apart".

23 Von Rad suggests that for human existence to exceed the boundaries as determined by the Creator for his existence and to enter mysteries beyond the reach of man is to trespass without falling into sin.

24 This is the first occasion of meeting with something that God does not fully accord with the "good" of Genesis 2:18. At this point, completeness is a characteristic of creation, the sky with its luminaries, the sea with its creatures, and so on. Though complete as an individual, Adam stands alone and God sees the lack of incompleteness of a wider plan. A helper (*ēzer*) is created, the same word used of Yahweh being Israel's strong helper (Exod 18:4; Ps 33:20; 115:9-11). "The woman in Gen. 2 delivers or saves man from his solitude" (Hamilton 1990:176-77).

to imply that Adam may well have been present. Eve's independence in acting alone could have been based on the fact that she had the necessary information to enable her to counter the snake's temptations. Nothing of this scene disrupted the good of God's creation, not until the actual eating of the fruit.

The J narrator superbly takes the narrative to the expected meeting with the Creator and, for the first time, we are informed that both vice-regents will be in attendance. But the daily tryst is not kept. Both are in hiding and answer from there and when they appear they do so covered.

The myths of other religions consistently reveal their deities' ignorance and surprise at events and happenings.<sup>25</sup> I do not believe that this sense is intentionally imported in this instance by the narrator. Did God know where Adam and Eve were? In the light of His creative ability this seems almost too obvious to ask. Rather, it is my opinion that it reveals something of the genius of the narrator in grasping the play unfolding for the vice-regents of the earth. The temptation employed by the serpent centred on the question of an increase in knowledge. God plays on this fact even before his meeting with Adam and Eve and the serpent. Evidence of increase in knowledge<sup>26</sup> becomes evident as it matures and develops with God's questioning (Gen 3:11f.). In their failure to continue in submission to God, they evidence their sinful natures by shifting their blame,<sup>27</sup> their accountability, and with that the drama staged reveals that there are three creatures present during all this time: Adam, Eve and the snake.<sup>28</sup> While the man and woman are recorded as conversing with God, the latter simply allows the consequences of his action to speak for themselves.

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25 These tales were not written to entertain. For Blenkinsopp (2011:17, 21), there is no adequate theology of creation. They cannot serve as factual historical accounts merely reconciling a view of deity with mystery thus accepting mistakes and God's regret. Outcomes even for the gods were never quite certain such as when Apsû is destroyed leaving Tîamat furious and seeking revenge (Budge 2010:17). Kvanvig (2011:2) refers to the confusion regarding the gods and creation with further discussion about a crisis among them regarding the creation of humankind and themselves (2011:56).

26 Later, Jesus insightfully revealed that the fall did not erase the ability to discern good from evil, evidenced by the fact that evil persons can do and appreciate good things (Mt 7:11).

27 Any mention of remorse and confession of guilt is significant.

28 Whether the snake was there all the time is not evident but he certainly is present when God addresses him (Gen 3:14-15), and indirectly as God speaks to the woman establishing the protevangelium of Gen 3:15.

The focus now is upon the Creator whose trust had been violated. His pronouncement of “good, very good” is no longer valid. Any reason for doxology and exultation is absent, for the consequence of the fall was that both woman and man died.<sup>29</sup> But God is God, and continues unchanged as he was before creation. He takes control without an expected reaction of possible anger, disappointment, and frustration. He begins by cursing the snake.<sup>30</sup> Whether the curse is extended to man as person is debatable, though God deals with the woman and the man individually.<sup>31</sup> Humankind’s, now God’s fallen image bearer, capability to fulfil the Creator’s mandate to administer and rule is greatly diminished. Work would become a matter of existence and rule and of domination over all creatures inclusive of fellow human beings. Worst of all, whatever humankind does reveals the dishonour of the glory of God’s “good, very good” creation in its ongoing story. Indeed, Creation is groaning (Rom 8:22).

Not only can God’s creation never again (Hamilton 1990:273)<sup>32</sup> be pronounced as “good, very good”, the blessing of the seventh day is violated by the progressive increase of sin of humankind reaching its climax with the period shortly before the flood. It becomes the sordid sin story of regression. There is no new fall into sin, but an increasing degree of depravity which finally leads God to reveal the depth of his feelings

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29 Death is variously understood. It is the inevitable accompaniment of Adam’s life-long struggle with the accursed earth (3:17) to which he would finally return to the very dust from which he had been made (Wenham, Genesis 1-15, p. 89). However, man and woman also underwent change as implied in God’s comment that they “have become like one of us” (Gen 3:22), suggesting that death-change brings about a conscious awareness of what normal creation of humankind would have restricted. I do not wish to explore the many interpretations of this concept of ‘death’, but rather to propose a generic solution. What may be stated to the satisfaction of most would be that a polarised tension was evident in the changed relationship to one another, with God, with created reality.

30 To curse or to bless, both are dependent upon divine will for effect (Wenham 1987:78, 80). It is the earth and the snake that are cursed, not Adam and Eve. This creature which shared in the doxological pronouncement of “good, very good” is now cursed for all its life to eat of the dust of the ground. There may be significance in that man originated from the earth and returns to its dust. Hamilton (1990:196) views the practicality of this decree symbolically.

31 It is clear from the text that, though both Adam and Eve are dealt with individually, their individual sentences by God will impact upon their oneness expressed in terms of childbirth, work and hardship.

32 Its dust would receive that which it never was intended to receive back, dissolved man. Dietary demands would be changed from vegetarian produce to eating of creatures never intended for such use.

regarding sin,<sup>33</sup> expressed in the time shortly before the flood.<sup>34</sup> He surveys the evil going on and regrets, with the underlying implication of “repent” (Hamilton 1990:275),<sup>35</sup> having created man. Though expressed in human terms, this does not negate the sense of true repentance on God’s part in facing a *fait accompli*, the remedy of which would be in sending His son to remedy in a future time what is now proto-enacted in the rescue of a “righteous man”, Noah and his family in the destruction of humankind by the flood. There is no qualification for good in God’s regret and repentance, for it is missing in all that people do. Humankind is taking over the world with a lordship of vice-regency that has little or nothing to do with the Creator’s pleasure resulting in evil and godless living.

It must be noted that the Creator repents of creating humankind, not the world. Humankind will be washed<sup>36</sup> away from the earth. Thus, in the midst of depravity, is there any cause to hope for mercy? If so, what does it depend on?

#### 4. A MEETING OF DIVINE EXULTATION AND AGONY: DIVINE RESTRAINT

In seeming contrast to the faint hope of the protevangelium of Genesis 3:15 is God’s distress at the progressive movement of evil prior to the flood. An agony so deep that he repents having made humankind, even determines to destroy humankind. Not only had Adam and Eve sinned;

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33 It is a sin-infested earth in Genesis 6:5 with the animals as the only innocent bystanders. All of humankind is affected, his thoughts (*machashabah*) and scheme/imagination (*yetser*) imply fashioning daily activity through what occupies their thoughts far removed from God. Whatever humankind fashions is continually repulsive, a condition of malaise and not simply a spasmodic lapse.

34 In the Athrahasis Epic of the flood, humankind causes such a din that Enlil starts to suffer insomnia and after repeated attempts to quieten mankind sends a flood. A far cry from the biblical account of death by drowning due to the heinousness of sin (W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, quoted in Hamilton 1990:274).

35 Hamilton tries to capture both the changeable and the unchangeable of God inclusive in the word *nacham* “repent”. This does not, however, negate true repentance on God’s part of a *fait accompli*, which His son in a future time remedies. It is, therefore, expressed anthropologically, demanding a solution which only comes later and is proto-enacted in the rescue of a “righteous man” (Noah and his family).

36 V. 7 *machah* is to “cleanse/remove by washing” so much so that God’s judgement erases sins and sinners alike (Hamilton 1990:275-276). It is unqualified destruction.

they were so consumed that to all intents and purposes it effaced the divine image within them. Nothing contrasts Adam more from before the fall than humankind in its wickedness after it (Gen 6:5).

One would have expected divine anger as a reaction to humankind's disobedience and continued sin or some call to divine righteousness in relation to the affront and yet remarkably this is not so. In contrast there is simply grief, so deep that God contemplates removing the most favoured of his creation, humankind created in his own image, from it. From that issued divine restraint.

It begs understanding beyond humankind's ken to glimpse into the depths of God's being for the explanation of such restraint which caused him to find "favour" (Hamilton 1990:278) with Noah (Gen 6:8). Further development of the Hebrew/Christian story reveals that God chose restraint up to the point of final retribution upon humankind at a set time when he will appear as judge. Biblical anthropology also shows that humankind's sinfulness is not the totality of truth about him. Hamilton captures something of the thoroughness of 'ruin' of the earth and person

*gone to ruin* was the earth ... indeed, it had *gone to ruin* ... all the flesh had ruined its way ... I will *ruin* them" (cursive in the original) (1990:278).<sup>37</sup>

Indicative was the violence accompanying their lawless deeds already in prototype evident in the death of Abel (Gen 4:8) and the deeds of Lamech (Gen 4:23-24) which became the stuff of popular songs. A far cry from the eulogy one would have expected to issue from the lips of humankind for God's gracious restraint in sparing their lives and for the promise of the protevangelium of Genesis 3:15. However, it is precisely in the unfolding of biblical history that God's story continues to unfold as it pertains to humankind, indeed to all of creation.

In the light of the above, a fair conclusion is that, in spite of the evil, God's restraint toward humankind and the world is still part of its ongoing but skewed story in which forgiveness and reconciliation direct its finality to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit (Wright 2006:164). For that reason there is a need to finally formulate some degree of understanding of divine restraint so that it is applicable for the ongoing story of this world in the present. This will allow some freedom for humankind in facing the daily realities of suffering. Viewing the evil at

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37 Using the various forms of the key verb *šamar*. There is the "good in us" through a paradoxical spiritual union with Christ. So much so that imperfect Christians do and continue to play a central moral role in this imperfect world (Raath 2010:377).

work within his creation, God does so with continuing grief and chooses to exercise divine restraint until the time of retribution. The day when divine exultation and divine agony will again result in doxological pronouncement (Rev 21:3-4).

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