



Short Course in Theology

To Act Justly: The Biblical Origins of Social Justice
From the Big Bang to Life, the Universe and Everything

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Social Justice

What is social Justice?

“The objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.” (Oxford Dictionary)

“**Social justice**’ is rooted in an attempt to ***mend the brokenness in society*** that people attribute as the causation of crimes. (A comment from the Urban Dictionary <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=social%20justice>)



1. What is the root cause of injustice in society (from the biblical POV)?
2. How can justice (and society) be restored?
3. What is the meaning of “life, the universe and everything”!!!!

Biblical concept of “social justice was forged on the anvil of war, pestilence, death

Beginning of the end for Judah fall of Samaria, Israel (722 BCE)

Prophet Micah



Israelites condemned, punished; and the Judahites on trial

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the Lord requires of you:
to act justly; to love mercy;
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8-9

↓
“Social” Justice
Micah 6:9-7:6

Exploitation of the poor
Corruption
Murder

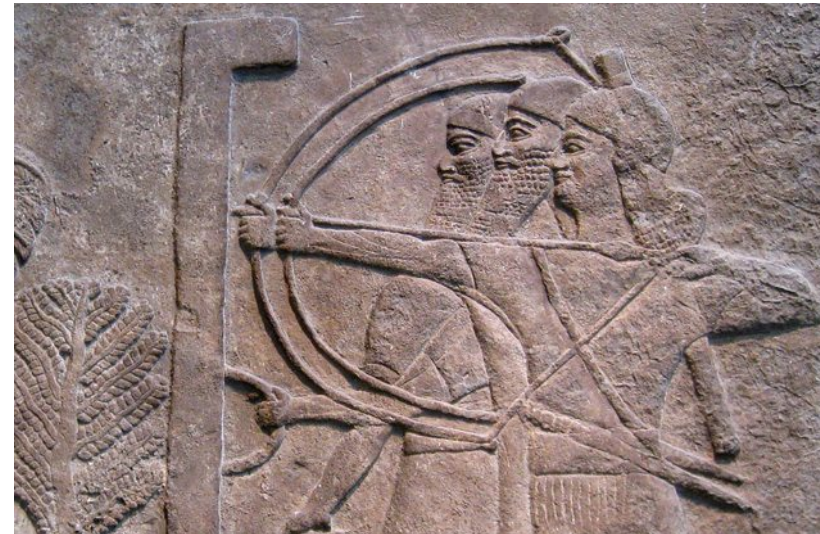


Photo credit: [Wikimedia](#)

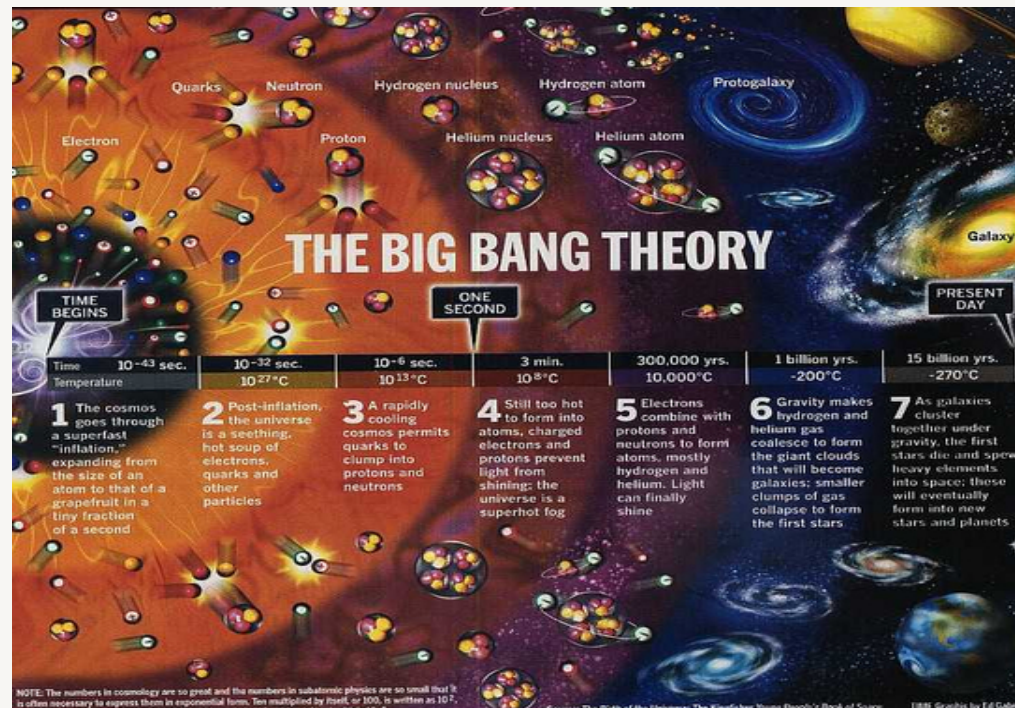
But the issue lies much further back in time

Source: <https://youtu.be/7dInBAImSIE>



Life, the universe and everything

[with apologies to Douglas Adams]



Source: <https://bhargavbassi.weebly.com/>

Life as we know it

1. Universe began 15 billion years ago as an unimaginably small, dense, hot, compressed ball of matter
2. Rapid inflation, expansion, cooling, coalescence of matter, gas .galaxies, stars, planets life
3. and all of it evolving, expanding, growing, dying, and, then, the emergence of consciousness, humans (2.5 million years ago) who continued to die, evolve, grow and die
4. Questions: What is the meaning of life, the universe and everything?
5. Two factors:
 - Complexity and relationality – interconnectedness, interdependence (evolution is about the survival of the cooperative)
 - Cost of evolution – indeterminacy, disease, earthquakes, pestilence and death (necessary for development of greater levels of complexity and cohesion)
6. All of which the biblical authors are aware

Biblical authors view of the cosmos

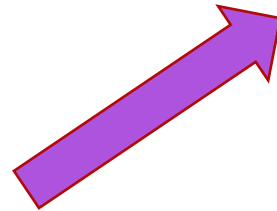
Futility of life

- Qoheleth/ Ecclesiastes
 - “collector” of wise saying
- “Vanity of vanities” (Eccl 1:2) – Hb. *Hebel* = emptiness, futility, absurdity
- “I have seen all things that are done under the sun and all chase the wind” (Eccl 1:14; 2:13, 17, 26)
- There is no profit or loss; death is the great leveller (Eccl 2:14-15)
- God is remote and uncommunicative; we cannot hope to understand or influence God’s activity in the world (Eccl 3:11; 8:16-17)
- We must rejoice in the (albeit fleeting) gifts God gives us (Eccl 2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-18; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9)

Why me?

- Job
 - Fanciful debate between friends (and God) about the “justice” of God’s actions
- Job and his friends put God on trial
- Job demands answer from God: Why do bad things happen to good people? (Job 3:3-26)
- Perhaps it is punishment and an invitation to repent – simple view of divine justice (view of Job’s friends)
- God answers by pointing to the wonders and complexity of creation and the relative insignificance of a single human life (Job 38:1-42:1)
- which points to the elephant in the room

The Problem of Evil



for monotheists in any case



Source: Ken Catalino on <https://townhall.com/political-cartoons/>

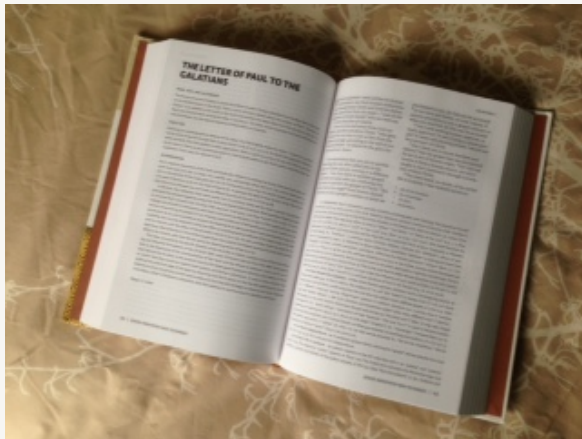
If God is good and creation ordered, why is there evil?



Source: Ken Catalano on <https://townhall.com/political-cartoons/>

Answering the problem of evil

which brings us back to the Bible



The Bible

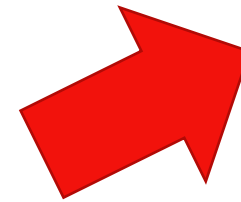
1. The bible didn't drop down from heaven
 - Collection of various texts/genre written at different times, by different authors, for different reasons
 - Evolved out of the prayer, reflection and liturgy
2. Primarily the fruit of ongoing reflection on the problem of evil
3. Three (observable) factors
 - Complexity, wonder and relationality of the cosmos – interconnectedness, interdependence (e.g., Psalms)
 - Cost of an ever-changing world (evolution) – indeterminacy, disease, earthquakes, pestilence, war and death (and, ironically, how that can lead to the development of greater levels of social cohesion, technological development, learning) (Wisdom literature)
 - A God who reveals the divine being as both creator and "Father", a God of majesty and power working through nature; and a God of love and relationship working through humanity – "covenantal relationship" (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus)



Key conclusion

Just as God works through the forces and laws of nature, so his justice and mercy are mediated through the just and merciful actions of humanity...and humanity's failure to act justly and love mercy results in...

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish with the earth.
The earth is defiled by its people;
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes
and broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt. (Isa 24:4-6)



Historical
experience of
Israelites

Key Dates

1250 BCE Approximate date of the Exodus

1000 BCE King David (Jerusalem, Monarchy and the First Temple)

922 BCE Divided Kingdom (Israel and Judah)

Prophets of Israel (Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea)

721 BCE Israel (Nth) falls to Assyrians

Prophets of Judah - Isaiah, **Micah**, Zephaniah, Jeremiah

587 BCE Judah (Sth) falls to Babylonians

Babylonian Exile (587-539 BCE)

Torah, History books, Prophetic books - Amos, Hosea Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah Ezekiel, [2nd] Isaiah, Obadiah, Nahum...

336 BCE Alexander the Great

Wisdom literature - Sirach, Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon...

167 BCE Maccabean Revolt – 1 & 2 Maccabees

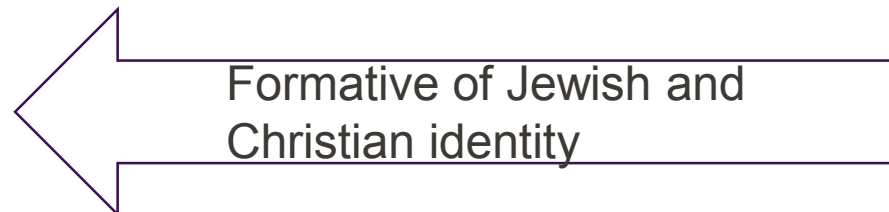
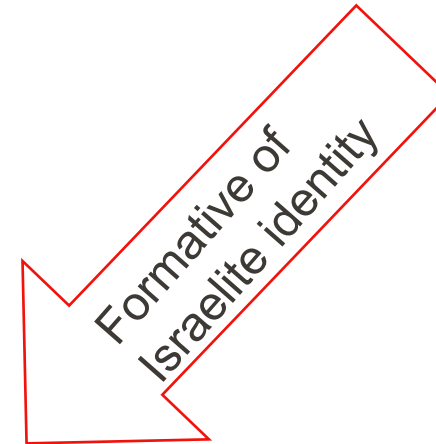
63BCE Romans conquest

6 BCE to 27 CE Life of Jesus

33-62 CE Christian Missions of Paul – Pauline letters

66-73 CE **Jewish Revolt**

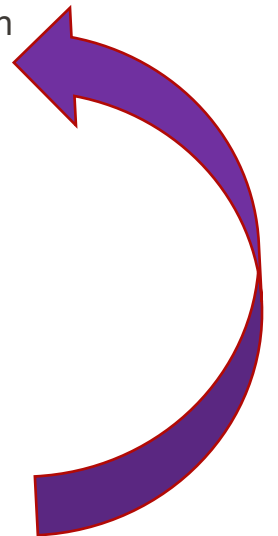
Gospels, Acts, Catholic Epistles, Apocalypse



The Answer to the Problem of Evil: Justice, Mercy, and Humility

Israel, Micah and the Great Powers

- Micah
 - Prophet active 737 to 696 BCE (fall of Samaria to Assyria 722 BCE)
 - Book contains oracles from later (fall of Jerusalem to Babylon 587 BCE)
 - Quintessential statement of Covenantal responsibility – “you have been told what is good to act with justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8-9)
 - In the face of war, dislocation, exile, death, pestilence, disease (some of which is the result of the actions of the rich and influential)
 - Focused on failure of (wealthy and powerful) Israelites to act justly (Micah puts them on trial) leading to political oppression, social dislocation, economic injustice and foreign occupation/exile (interconnectedness)
- Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy
 - Final form during or just after the period of the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BCE)
 - Epic narrative, myth, legends, folklore, interspersed with speeches and legal material, laws, liturgical rubrics
 - Product of centuries of prayer and reflection focused on the problem of evil
 - What has God revealed to us about what is good?
 - Focused on escape from Egypt (return from Exile) freedom from political oppression, social dislocation, economic injustice (cyclic round of failures to act justly, exile and restoration)



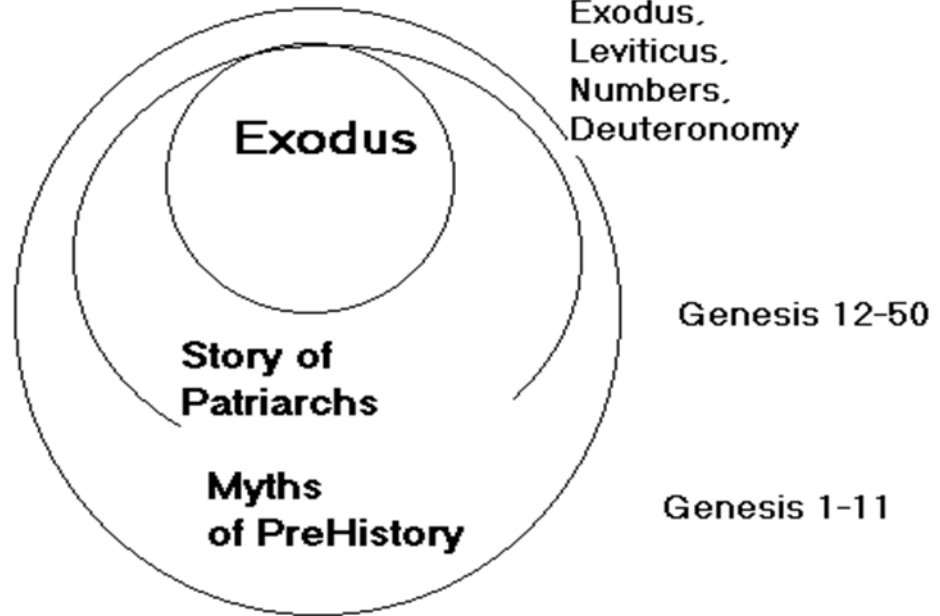
The heart of the Scriptures

*Freedom from
oppression and the
vision of an ideal, just
and merciful society*

Exodus



Prophets/Sages
reflecting on their
experience of political
corruption, oppression,
foreign occupation
and, ultimately, exile



The Biblical View (from Babylon) of Life, the Universe and Everything

Genesis 1-11



Source: Wikimedia

1. **Gen 1:1-2:3 Hymn to Creation** (reworking of Babylonian Creation myth)
 - God as creator of an ordered; humans as the “imago dei”; and interdependent universe; Sabbath as divine institution
2. **Gen 2:4-3:24 Creation and Fall** (draws on Mesopotamian-Babylonian mythology)
 - Humanity as stewards of the earth
 - Frailty of human nature and the created order – the Fall
 - Breakdown in relationship (God, self, others, environment)
3. **Gen 4:1-16 Cain and Abel** (common folklore – human nature in terms of brothers or twins)
 - Further breakdown in relationship – first murder (God, self, others, environment)
4. **Genesis 6:1-9:28 Noah and the Collapse of the Cosmos** (draws on Mesopotamian- Babylonian mythology)
 - Further breakdown in relationships- widespread evil (God regrets, nature turns against humanity)
5. **Genesis 11:1-11 Tower of Babel (Babylon)**
 - Final collapse of relationships – human pride and hubris (God, humanity, nations)

Relationship	Adam & Eve	Cain & Abel	Noah & Flood	Tower of Babel
With Self	Adam ashamed	Cain is mastered by sin	Human thoughts fashion wickedness	
With God	Adam hides from YHWH	Cain leaves the presence of YHWH	YHWH regrets making humans	Humans powerless to reach YHWH
With Others	Adam blames Eve	Cain murders Abel	Humans make violence	Humans can't even speak to each other
With Environment	Adam & Eve expelled and must work	Cain wanders as a stranger and builds first city	The earth is corrupt	

**Solution:
Covenanted
People -
Abraham,
Moses Jesus**

M. Nutting-Ralph, "And God Said What?" *An Introduction to Biblical Forms for Bible Lovers* Rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2003)



Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the prophetic promises to rectify relationships destroyed by sin

Eats with the marginalized: sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors – shares table fellowship – *restores the relationship with others*

Heals the sick and casts out demons – frees the captive – *restores the relationship with self*

Suffers death (saying yes to the Father), is restored to life by God – provides the means to resurrection of the faithful – *restores the relationship with God*

Safely navigates the wilderness, walks on water, calms a storm – is unmolested by the dark forces in nature – *restores the relationship with the environment*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
(Luke 4:18-19/Isaiah 6:1-2)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.
(Matt 22:37, 39)

The response to the problem of evil is...justice, mercy and humility (Micah 6:8-9)



Jesus' (and Biblical) vision of the "Kingdom"

To summarise: The story of the Bible



<https://thebiblproject.com/videos/the-story-of-the-bible/>

Life, the Universe, Everything and, Doing Justice

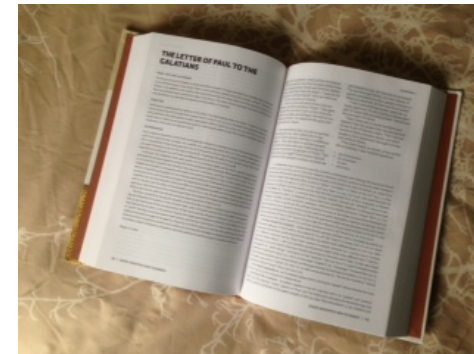
Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature. (Laudato Si)

An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us (Laudato Si)

You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: to act justly; to love mercy; and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8-9)



Strategies for a solution [to the climate crisis] demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (Laudato Si)



<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/3028-exhibition-of-photographs-pope-francis-in-israel-at-the-museum-of-slavonia>

Source: Wikimedia