

Is God Responsible for COVID-19?

By Kwabena Donkor

With the challenge of COVID-19 has come questions and statements about the role of God in natural disasters and pandemic outbreaks. Some question why such disasters occur and whether the 2020 coronavirus is God's means of drawing humanity's attention to His sovereignty. Others have said that the virus is God's "angel of death" in seeking justice for practices such as homosexuality and transgenderism. But is God really responsible for the deadly coronavirus epidemic?

The attribution of pandemics to God does not arise in a vacuum since, as some see it, in Luke 21:10 Jesus made a prediction about the occurrence of pestilences before His advent. Kourtney Kardashian read 2 Chronicles 7:13 and on her Instagram announced the text to mean that God would punish an evil world with an epidemic. Kardashian, therefore, draws a direct link between the text and the current epidemic. Indeed, there are several passages of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, that seem to suggest it is God who brings plagues and pestilences on His covenant people because of their disobedience (e.g., Jer 14:12; Ezek 14:21; Amos 4:10). Yet, there are passages in Psalms that suggest we ought not to draw such a direct causative connection between God and every plague or pestilence. One such passage is Psalm 91, for example, where the psalmist presents God as the one who provides a shelter or refuge from, among other things, plagues that do not seem to originate from Him. Indeed, it is suggested that the "it" in Psalm 91:7, referring to the pestilence and destruction of Psalm 91:6 that causes thousands to fall, could refer to plagues that frequently broke out during military campaigns.¹

The issue at the heart of the question in this short discussion is the relationship between divine and natural causality—namely, whether *God* is the cause of the coronavirus epidemic or whether it is the result of *natural causes*. Implied in this discussion is the broader subject of theodicy—the seeming challenge one confronts in presuming, as Christians do, the coexistence of an infinitely good, loving, and omnipotent God and

occurrence of "evil" such as coronavirus in the natural world. Evil for this purpose is defined as events that have detrimental impact on humans. Unless one is willing to accept the proposition that because God is omnipotent, He must be held responsible for whatever happens in the world, the answer to the question of whether God is responsible for the current coronavirus calls for careful analysis.

Biblical Principles to Take Into Account²

From a biblical point of view, to simply take certain biblical passages that seem to suggest that God on occasion brought pestilences to discipline His covenant people, concluding thereby that pestilences such as COVID-19 are the punitive acts of God, oversimplifies the problem. The biblical viewpoint is rather complex and requires the consideration of several important principles that ought to bear on the discussion.

Goodness of God

First, the Bible is unequivocally clear in affirming the reality of a personal God who, besides being omnipotent, is surpassingly good. The goodness of God is not just one of His attributes; it is a depiction of His very essence (Exod 33:18–20). His nature is inherently good. The psalmist invites humans to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:8).³ It is this essential goodness that God displayed in His creative acts. The Genesis 1 creation account describes God as bringing things into being with the divine word, repeatedly affirming alternately, "God said," "and it was good." Robert Jensen observes that in the Genesis story "the 'and it was good' belongs to the creative act itself: things are in that they are judged good by God."⁴ So, the psalmist declares of God, "You are good, and what you do is good" (Ps 119:68). Consequently, God's goodness implies that His purposes for humanity are good. Thus, James declares that God, our Heavenly Father, desires only good for us: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (Jas 1:17). Significantly, from Romans 8:28, God's good-

ness is to be judged from God's perspective: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It is in this light that God's interaction with Israel, including His disciplinary actions, ought to be understood and evaluated.

In answering the question about God's relationship to natural disasters, therefore, it is imperative to keep in perspective the biblical view of the goodness of God. Any answer to the question about the origin of natural disasters such as the coronavirus that fails to reckon with God's goodness towards the world is, to that extent, defective.

Human Free Will

The second biblical principle to be acknowledged in responding to the question about divine and natural causality is human freedom and the responsibility that accompanies the exercise of human free will. It is manifestly clear in the Bible that God has granted humans the freedom to make choices that are not coerced—even by God Himself. And the free choices that humans make are accompanied either by life or destructive outcomes. Thus, in concluding His covenant with the Israelites, God seems to set before them the facts and dynamics of creaturely existence: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways . . . then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed" (Deut 30:15–18). The consequence and apparent inevitability of wrong choices leading to death and destruction seem evident when God discloses to His people, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? . . . Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live" (Ezek 18:23, 31–32). While we are not told precisely *how* wrong choices lead to destruction, it seems that they are able to originate evils that impact not only humans, but the rest of God's creation. The account of the fall in Genesis 3 shows that because of man's disobedience, the whole world—animals, plants, and the ground—no longer embodies the goodness with which it was originally endowed. Significantly, in Isaiah 24:5, the sinful actions of Israel defiled the earth.

So, as we consider the question of whether God is responsible for the coronavirus, it is relevant that we keep in mind the biblical truth about human free will and choices as well as the consequences that such choices have on all reality.

The Natural World

The truth of the biblical principle regarding human free will and choices outlined above leads to a third

factor that needs to be considered when answering the question about divine and natural causation. This factor has to do with the reality of our natural world out of which natural disasters proceed. Romans 8:19–23 expresses profoundly God's plan for the natural world. The passage depicts the present corruption of the natural world and the eschatological vision that awaits it. The biblical facts about nature in its current state is that "creation was subjected to futility" (Rom 8:20) and as a result it is in "bondage to decay" (Rom 8:20) and "has been groaning in labor pains until now" (Rom 8:22), awaiting its eventual redemption (Rom 8:20). Thus, while the natural world is not itself disobedient to God, Adam's sin had the cosmic effect of bringing the created order into bondage to death, decay, corruption, and futility (Rom 8:20–21). In other words, while "in the things of nature, marred as they are by the blight of sin, much that is beautiful remains,"⁵ nature does not now possess the condition it originally had when it was created.

The biblical portrayal of nature as embodying decay, corruption, and futility is a fact that cannot be overlooked in any account of disasters that arise from nature.

The Reality of Evil

The fourth biblical principle that should be recognized regarding divine and natural causality in natural disasters is the reality of evil itself. The Bible does not relegate evil to the realm of non-reality by treating it merely as a "privation of the good" or a strictly psychological phenomenon. The biblical view of the reality of evil is connected with a *real* celestial being, Lucifer, in whose heart evil originated (Ezek 28:15; Isa 14:13–14). This is the devil or Satan who is depicted in the Bible as one who, though possessed with limited power, has the ability to foment trouble and cause destruction in both humans and the natural world (see, for example, Job 1:13–19). In the New Testament Satan is depicted as the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 16:11; cf. 14:30; 1 John 5:19) whose work is at cross purposes with the God of the Bible. Perhaps nowhere is Satan's intentions more clearly portrayed than in Christ's parable of wheat and tares (Matt 13:24–30). The answer "An enemy has done this!" (Matt 13:28) to the question, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" (Matt 13:27) suggests that, on occasion, evil is the work of an adversary (Satan) who opposes the Master (God). Despite the anti-supernatural tendencies of contemporary Enlightenment-influenced cultures, the Bible presents Satan and his fallen angelic hosts (Rev 12:4) as constituting a causal factor in the reality of the evil that manifests itself in the world.

Toward a Comprehensive Answer

In attempting to answer the question, from a biblical perspective, of whether God is responsible for the coronavirus, we have come to the point where a comprehensive answer is required, taking into account the goodness of God, the reality of human free will, the

actuality of evil in the post-fall natural world, and the reality of evil itself as depicted in the Bible. How does one bring all these biblical principles to bear on the problem of natural disasters such as the coronavirus? The Seventh-day Adventist view of the Bible’s “philosophy of history,” which is commonly referred to as the cosmic conflict or great controversy between good and evil motif, provides a model with which to correlate the four biblical principles outlined above. In this model, God is *not* presented in the Bible as determining everything that happens in the world. It is therefore premature to conclude, in the face of a natural disaster such as the coronavirus, that God is responsible for it as a means of punishing sinners. Evil in the natural world may have causes other than God’s direct action, but in His providential rule over creation He brings all things to work toward creation’s goodness (Rom 8:28). In addition, the exercise of human free will is able to bring about evil consequences contrary to God’s desires for the well-being of His creation (Isa 66:4), and Satanic agencies are able to wreak havoc and bring about calamities, including loss of life through natural causes as in the case of the destruction of Job’s children. This capability on Satan’s part should not be surprising, since the entrance of sin in the world through Satan introduced decay and futility into the natural order, such as to make it subject to vulnerabilities. That Satan is allowed to carry out such evil schemes, albeit within limited parameters, suggests the operation of what appears to be some “rules of engagement in the conflict.”⁶ Furthermore, because the central issue in the cosmic conflict involves God’s character, it appears that the omnipotent God, by self-limitation, curtails His power to act unilaterally to bring about His desires.

The Bible, however, predicts a time when the con-

troversy will come to an end, sin and Satan will be eliminated, and a new heaven and earth will be brought into being (Rev 20–21). Then, God’s goodness and love will be vindicated when “sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all will flow life, and light, and gladness, throughout the realms of unlimited space . . . and from the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy will declare that God is love.”⁷



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¹ M. E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 20, *Psalms 51–100* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 455.

² See Richard W. Kropf, “Natural Disaster or ‘Act of God’: The Search for the Missing Link in Theodicy,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 57–65. Kropf sees the significance of recognizing principles similar to the perspective presented in this study, but comes to the conclusion that the theory of evolution offers “the only way of establishing a linkage that can account for all or most of the types of suffering experienced by the human race” (*ibid.*, 63).

³ All biblical quotations are from NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Robert Jensen, “Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation,” in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 22.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 291.

⁶ For a discussion of the nature of the cosmic conflict and the possibility of “rules of engagement,” see John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 87–118. On specific biblical references hinting at rules of engagement, see p. 105.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 678.