

After Job

by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

*By John G. Stackhouse Jr., Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil. (Oxford University Press, 196 pp.)*

Of all the problems that theologians think about, surely evil is the least productive. Even the best pastors find themselves groping for words when comforting those who have been victims of an evil deed. How can a theologian try to explain the role of evil in the world without seeming abstract and insensitive? Anyone who tries to be extremely reasonable risks sounding like the comforters of Job, and we all know what God thought of them!

Yet Christianity demands a clear and consistent account of evil, since it is difficult to reconcile belief in a good and all-powerful God with a world so full of suffering. John Stackhouse, professor of religion at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, goes beyond Rabbi Harold Kushner and M. Scott Peck to address the problem of evil with theological sophistication, historical depth and philosophical precision. His clear prose is a model for how to write for a general audience about complex issues.

Stackhouse admits that he does not have any easy answers, but he makes so many interesting small points that the reader quickly stops looking for a grand solution. For example, in his opening chapter Stackhouse argues that evil is a problem for those inside, not outside, religious faith. If we eliminate faith in a good and loving God, we eliminate the problem of evil.

More specifically, it is monotheism that makes evil so problematic. Indeed, the easiest way to make sense of suffering is to change our conception of God. The less power God has, the more understandable the presence of evil seems to be. But to weaken God's power is to challenge the basic outline of the biblical narrative.

Another approach to this theological problem is to redefine evil to make it look like good in disguise. Environmentalism, for example, portrays the world as an ecological whole, perfectly balanced, so that evil is limited to the human exploitation of nature. Christianity, however, insists that the entire world is fallen. Evil precedes human initiative, even as humans add to the miseries of the world.

Stackhouse notes that the problem of evil is really the problem of the good. How can the good seem to be overshadowed by evil? After all, we can see evil only by the light of the good. Stackhouse argues that our moral development requires the freedom that leads to evil actions. The story of Noah's Ark should teach us that God cannot just destroy all evil, since doing so would mean destroying the world.

A morally complex world requires some level of evil. And who are we to judge whether God has allowed too much of it? It is silly to say that someday we will know all the answers. God's wisdom might be forever beyond our grasp. We are much too critical of God's administration of the world, even while we have no good advice to give our politicians about our many contemporary social ills.

Analyzing the everyday phenomenon of trust, Stackhouse rejects the idea of "blind faith." He argues that the burden of proof for religious belief is really not that burdensome. Theologians need to show only that there are sufficient warrants for trusting God. We trust things all the time without having their trustworthiness proven to us.

Stackhouse's pivotal chapter is a retelling of the gospel story, showing how the narrative as a whole can make sense of the world. The book ends with a fairly traditional Christian apologetics. The author spends many pages, for example, arguing about the plausibility of the resurrection accounts.

Stackhouse sometimes seems to stray from the topic of evil. Perhaps the point is that the only alternative to silence in the face of the problem of evil is to tell the whole gospel story from beginning to end. Proclaim the word, don't argue, Stackhouse seems to be saying. Anything short of that proclamation makes evil seem to be a greater problem than it really is by giving it the last word. Though this is circular reasoning, it might be the only reasonable thing to say.