

## Book Review

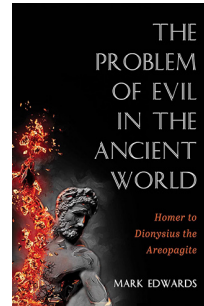
Mark Edwards.

*The Problem of Evil in the Ancient World:  
Homer to Dionysius the Areopagite*

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023.

Pp. 364. £50 (HB) ISBN: 978-1-7252-7164-7.

Reviewed by, Joshua Jo Wah Yen, University of Oxford



In *The Problem of Evil in the Ancient World*, Mark Edwards applies his expertise in Platonism and patristics to examine the development of the problem of evil in the ancient world from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives. This examination helps Edwards demonstrate the value of studying 'dead philosophers' (p. ix) and the differences between the problem of evil in the ancient world and in modern scholarship (p. 297). While modern scholars focus on the compatibility of God and evil, the ancient problem was concerned with the nature of evil, God, and humans with specific emphasis on providence (p. xii). Due to this difference, Edwards analyses the themes of evil, the supernatural, and providence instead of presenting ancient views within the framework of the *logical* or *evidential* problems of evil and modern theodicies.

Edwards relegates discussions on the value of studying the ancient problem of evil and its relation to modern debates to the introduction and epilogue, employing the body of the book for a chronological summary of ancient perspectives. The scope of Edwards' work is impressive. He begins with Homer and the early Greeks (chapter 1 and 2) and ends with Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite (chapter 12). The chapters are organised based on time period and intellectual movements. For example, Jewish theology comprises chapter

3, second century Roman thought chapter 5, Alexandrian theology chapter 7, and so on. This straightforward system allows the reader to trace the development of ideas through time and recognise the similarities and differences of opinion within the ancient world. His chronological approach allows readers to recognise how Plato influenced Lucretius and Plutarch (pp. 36-38, 104-107), how Aristotle influenced Alexander of Aphrodisias (p. 116), and the disagreements between Athanasius, Irenaeus, and Origen (p. 234). In addition, readers recognise the dangers of viewing each thinker in isolation and the importance of understanding their intellectual context.

Given the scope of Edwards' project, it would have been easy to gloss over lesser-known thinkers and themes. However, Edwards sufficiently covers more obscure topics like Gnosticism (chapter 4) and Manichaeism (chapter 9) as well as thinkers like Alexander of Aphrodisias (pp. 115-117) and Proclus (chapter 12) who would not be considered as significant contributors in modern discussions. Impressively, his focus on detail is not done at the expense of analysis of more influential theories. Edwards' knowledge of Platonism is exhibited throughout this work. The Platonic treatment of evil as the deficient of good and belonging to the realm of becoming rather than being is shown to be a prevalent influence in early thought (p. 25). Likewise, Edwards' expertise in patristics aids his analysis of Irenaean (pp. 132-136), Alexandrian

(chapter 7) and Augustinian theodicies (chapter 11), expressing how their views differed and represented key developments in the theology of the early Church. Given John Hick's influential categorisation of 'Augustinian' and 'Irenaean' theodicies, Edwards' analysis of Augustine and Irenaeus helps scholars develop a more critical understanding of Hick's historiography.

Despite the argument for a general absence of the modern problem of evil in the ancient world (p. 297), the breadth and cogency of the book is perhaps the strongest case for the value of this study. His engaging presentation achieves a precise examination of ancient ideas which helps illuminate underlying presuppositions behind modern debates on evil. Edwards successfully attributes the lack of the modern problem in the ancient world to different expectations and conceptions of divine entities, the unimaginability of atheism, and differing opinions on the nature and severity of evil (pp. 297-305). Awareness of these presuppositions allows readers to better engage and examine the merits and shortcomings of modern presentations of the problem of evil and theodicies.

Edwards' study mainly draws on primary sources, with secondary literature being discussed in the footnotes. While aiding precision and avoiding getting caught in the weeds of scholarly debate, the focus on primary sources can lead to the oversight of potential debates and sources which provide further context for the reader. For example, during his analysis of pre-Christian Jewish tradition (chapter 3), there is a lack of reference to the debate on the development of Jewish monotheism. Obscure but impactful, the debate surrounding the emergence of monotheism from a prior polytheistic or monolatrous framework, even if briefly, would introduce important

considerations for one's knowledge of Jewish approaches to the nature of God or gods in the semitic world (cf. Robert Gnuse. 1997. *No Other Gods*). This suggestion is not to give credence to the validity of said theological model, only to direct readers to elements of scholarship which will result in a more nuanced understanding of the subject. It should be noted that Edwards references the Book of Enoch which presents a more complex supernatural picture (pp. 66-67, 126-129). However, Enochian references do not constitute the bolder stances purported by the models of emerging monotheism.

Additionally, it can be suggested that Edwards' usage of the term 'theodicy' may lead to confusion. Given the recent coining of the term 'theodicy' (18th century by Leibniz) and its use in describing modern responses to the problem of evil, Edwards' usage of theodicy in the ancient world may lead readers to categorise ancient perspectives alongside modern theodicies which would be anachronistic. This is not to say that these ancient presentations cannot fulfil the aim of justifying the ways of God to man, which is the definition of 'theodicy'. However, it is important for readers to recognise the historical context in order to avoid miscategorisation.

*The Problem of Evil in the Ancient World* promotes reflection and provides insight on ancient views on key themes surrounding the problem of evil like the nature of God, evil, and mankind. For scholars in philosophy and theology, this work provides much food for thought. Likewise, it is written in a clear and accessible manner such that undergraduates and the wider Christian community would benefit from reading it to increase their knowledge on the topic.