

Evil

The concept of evil generally describes behavior or attitudes characterized by extreme wickedness and intent to cause social, physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual harm. The concept encompasses moral, ethical, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions.

Concept Summary

Hebrew uses two main word groups to describe evil: words related to רָעָה (*rāʿāʿ*, “to do evil”; [Gen 19:7](#)) and words related to רָשָׁע (*rāšāʿ*, “wicked”; [Ezek 3:18](#)). The first group includes the feminine noun רָעָה (*rāʿā*), the adjective and masculine noun רָע (*raʿ*), and the masculine noun רָעָה (*rāʿā*), all of which can be glossed as “evil.” The second group includes the adjective רָשָׁע (*rāšāʿ*, “wicked”), the masculine noun רָשָׁע (*rešāʿ*, “wickedness”), the verb רָשָׁע (*rāšāʿ*, “to act wickedly”), and the feminine noun רָשָׁעָה (*rišʿā*, “wickedness”).

The two primary Greek words for evil in the NT are πονηρός (*ponēros*, “wicked”; [Matt 12:34](#)) and κακός (*kakos*, “evil”; [Rom 13:10](#)). These words usually refer to moral evil but can sometimes also refer to things that are harmful or otherwise bad. Two other significant Greek words are associated with evil. The word ἐπιθυμία (*epithymia*, “craving”; [1 Thess 4:5](#)) refers to strong desires or cravings; not all strong desires are evil, but inordinately strong desires often lead to evil behavior. The word σκότος (*skotos*, “darkness”) is often used metaphorically to refer to evil (e.g., [Matt 6:23](#), where

both *ponēros* and *skotos* are used for moral evil).

Unlike English, where multiple words can refer to degrees of evil or wickedness, biblical Hebrew and Greek may use the same word for different bad experiences, situations, or behaviors. For example, in addition to the moral sense of wicked opposition to God and what he defines as good, the Hebrew word group *rāʿaʿ* may indicate simple displeasure (Gen 21:11–12), sadness (Gen 40:7), ugliness (Gen 41:19–21), oppression (Exod 5:19–23), physical harm (Num 35:23), natural disasters (Ezek 5:16–17), or the upheaval of invasion and war (Ezek 7:5; Dan 9:12–14).

Theological Overview

The concept of evil is generally used to describe behavior or attitudes characterized by wickedness and intent to cause harm. The first references to “evil” (רע, *raʿ*) in the OT canon define the concept in opposition to “good” (*tôb*), with reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9, 17; 3:5, 22). The identification of something as evil or bad depends on one’s perspective with relation to what is considered good or right. The biblical standard of “good” is established by God (Gen 1:31; 2:9), so anything that deviates from divine expectations of goodness is evil (Gen 6:5; Eph 5:16; 6:13). After the Eden narrative, the book of Genesis emphasizes the damage that the knowledge of evil caused for humankind (Gen 6:5; 8:21; 13:13). People are often referred to as doing evil (רעו, *rāʿû*; 2 Sam 3:39; 1 Kgs 11:6), and the book of Proverbs repeatedly contrasts the wicked (רשע, *rāšāʿ*) and evil (רע, *raʿ*) behavior that people should avoid with the righteous and good behavior that people should emulate (e.g., Prov 11:21; 12:12–13). In the NT, Paul

contrasts the evil behavior of unbelievers with the godliness associated with following [Jesus](#), indicating that the evil in the world will undoubtedly result in persecution for those who are following God ([2 Tim 3:12–13](#)). [Jesus](#) identifies good or evil as the fundamental condition of one’s heart ([Matt 12:33–37](#); compare [Gen 6:5](#)).

The OT sometimes uses terms for evil to describe situations or events that may cause distress or inflict pain and suffering; in these situations, the word is not being used to describe something as morally bad but simply as adverse. For instance, Job says that when he expected good, evil came upon him ([Job 30:26](#)). That is, he found himself in the midst of misery and calamity. Unfavorable or unpleasant conditions are evil, in that they represent horrible conditions ([Job 42:11](#)).

While Scripture affirms that God cannot be evil or do evil ([Psa 5:4](#); [Jas 1:13](#)), in [Exod 32:12](#) Moses expresses his concern that if God destroys the Israelites, the Egyptians will say that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt with evil intent. Some passages speak to God’s covenant promises to bring disaster if the covenant is broken ([Deut 30:15](#); [31:17–21](#)) and emphasize God’s ultimate power over evil ([Isa 45:7](#)), ultimately realized through Christ ([1 Cor 15:24–26](#)).

Lexical Information

Old Testament

רָעָה (*rā‘a’*). vb. **to be evil, bad; to be displeasing; to do evil.** *Some grammatical forms primarily mean “to be evil or displeasing,” while others primarily mean “to do evil, to harm.”*

This verb primarily refers to states or actions that are

detrimental to one's life or to the life of other people. The Qal forms of the verb mean “to be evil, to be displeasing”; thus, Moses was displeased (*rā'a'*) by God's anger ([Ps 106:32](#)), and Hannah was sad (*rā'a'*) because she was barren and mistreated ([1 Sam 1:8](#)); it went badly (*rā'a'*) for Moses when the Israelites complained in the desert ([Psa 106:32](#)). Sinful actions, such as David killing Uriah and taking his wife, displease (*rā'a'*) God ([2 Sam 11:27](#)). The Hiphil forms of the verb mean “to do evil, to harm.” Pharaoh did evil (*rā'a'*) to the Israelites ([Exod 5:23](#)). Worshiping gods besides Yahweh and making idols constitute doing evil (*rā'a'*; [1 Kings 14:9](#)); Joshua says that God will harm (*rā'a'*) those who worship foreign gods ([Josh 24:20](#)).

רָעָה (*rōa'*). n. masc. **badness, evil, inferior quality, sadness.**
Refers to physical, emotional, or ethical badness.

This word is related to the verb **רָעָה** (*rā'a'*) “to be bad, evil.” It can be used without moral connotations to refer to inferior quality (e.g., [Jer 24:2](#)). It can also be used in phrases to express sadness (e.g., “sadness [*rōa'*] of face”; [Eccl 7:3](#)). However, its most common use in the OT does have moral connotations: it is used in the phrase “the evil (*rōa'*) of [someone's] deeds” (e.g., [Jer 26:3](#); [Isa 1:16](#); [Deut 28:20](#)). [First Samuel 17:28](#) uses a similar phrase: “the evil (*rōa'*) of your heart.”

רָעָה (*ra'*). adj. **bad, evil**; **רָעָה** (*rā'*). n. masc. **evil, distress, misery, injury, calamity.** *As a noun, it refers to the abstract quality of evil or harm or to what is evil or harmful; as an adjective, it describes things as evil or harmful.*

This word is related to the verb **רָעָה** (*rā'a'*) “to be evil, bad.” In Hebrew, the distinction between nouns and adjectives is slight; this word can function as either. It can refer

to things as morally wrong (e.g., [Gen 2:9](#), [Judg 2:11](#)) or as harmful (e.g., [2 Kgs 4:41](#)). It can be used to describe news or reports as bad—i.e., negative (e.g., [Gen 37:2](#), [Jer 49:23](#)).

רָעָה (*rā'â*). n. fem. **bad, evil, disaster, trouble**. *Identifies something as wicked, harmful, or having negative consequences.*

The feminine noun for “evil” is **רָעָה** (*rā'â*). It can refer either to what is morally wrong (e.g., [Deut 31:18](#)) or to what is disastrous or harmful (e.g., [Exod 32:12](#), [Neh 6:2](#)). The meaning “disaster” is especially common in passages about God bringing disaster (*rā'â*) upon people for their sin (e.g., [Exod 32:12](#), [Jer 18:11](#)).

רָשָׁע (*rāšā'*). vb. **be wicked or unrighteous; be wrong**. *Refers to being wicked or guilty, or to acting wickedly; some forms can mean “to pronounce guilty, to condemn.”*

After **רָעָה** (*rā'a'*) and related terms, the **רָשָׁע** (*rāšā'*) word group is the most common for describing evil and wickedness in the OT. Unlike *rā'a'*, *rāšā'* has a fairly narrow range of meaning, almost always referring to morally bad actions, guilt, and intent to harm. It appears frequently in Wisdom literature in contrasts between the righteous and the wicked ([Prov 10:3](#); [12:26](#)).

רָשָׁא (*rāšā'*). adj. **wicked, guilty**. *Describes one who is guilty of crimes or sins or whose behavior is characterized by wickedness.*

The use of *rāšā'* to describe a person or activity indicates that the person’s guilt is certain or that the behavior in question has unquestionably been established as wrong. The term appears in ethical teaching about people who resist obeying the laws (civil or religious) or who oppose God’s

standard for righteous or good behavior (Deut 25:2; Ezek 3:18; Prov 17:23; Mal 3:18).

רָשָׁע (*reša'*). n. masc. **wickedness**. *Refers to evil and wicked behavior, often in contrast with righteousness.*

The book of Ecclesiastes laments the prevalence of wickedness in the world instead of justice and righteousness (Ecc 3:16). Wickedness is associated with violence and sin (Prov 4:17; Deut 9:27; Jer 14:20). The psalmist indicates that one quality of a good king is that he loves righteousness and hates wickedness (*reša'*; Psa 45:7).

רִשְׁעָה (*riš'â*). n. fem. **wickedness, guilt**. *Refers to evil and wicked behavior, often in contrast with righteousness.*

This form of the word is used less frequently but in much the same way as *reša'* or *rāšā'*, to indicate wicked behavior or guilt that has already been demonstrated. In Deuteronomy 25:2, the guilty man is punished in proportion to his “guilt” (*riš'â*). Proverbs 13:6 uses the word for the same contrast between wickedness and righteousness. Wickedness is behavior or attitudes that are not aligned with God’s righteousness, so evil and wickedness are also considered sin (Ezek 33:12).

אַוְנָה (*'āwen*). n. masc. **trouble, sorrow, wickedness**. *This term is a general designation for evil that has a wide range of applications.*

This term usually means wickedness or iniquity (e.g., Mic 2:1), but it can also refer to affliction or calamity (e.g., Job 5:6). These are not always sharply distinct: plotting trouble (*'āwen*; Psa 36:4) for someone is an instance of plotting evil. Many passages using this word indicate that people who do or plan *'āwen* will receive trouble and punish-

ment from God.

New Testament

πονηρός (*ponēros*). adj. **bad, wicked, evil**. *Refers primarily to moral badness but also can refer to an undesirable condition.*

Occasionally *ponēros* may describe something as physically harmful or painful (e.g., [Rev 16:2](#)). Usually, though, *ponēros* is used to describe a person (e.g., [Matt 12:34](#)) or action (e.g., [Luke 3:19](#), [Jas 4:16](#)) as morally evil. People who lack spiritual insight are called an “evil (*ponēros*) generation” ([Matt 16:4](#)). Spiritual ineptness or worthlessness is characterized as *ponēros* ([Luke 19:22](#)). Satan is called “the evil (*ponēros*) one” (e.g., [Matt 13:38](#), [John 17:15](#)), and demonic spirits in general are characterized as evil (*ponēros*; e.g., [Luke 11:13](#), [Acts 19:12–16](#)).

πονηρία (*ponēria*). n. fem. **evil, wickedness**. *Refers to the state of being wicked or evil.*

Unrighteous people are described as full of wickedness (*ponēria*; e.g., [Luke 11:39](#), [Rom 1:29](#)), and evil spiritual beings are described as “the spiritual forces of wickedness (*ponēria*) in the heavenly places” ([Eph 6:12](#)). In the NT, the word regularly refers to people being in a state of malice and sin, opposed to God and divine truth ([Luke 11:39](#); [1 Cor 5:8](#)).

κακός (*kakos*). adj. **morally reprehensible, evil, injurious**. *Primarily describes things as morally evil; sometimes describes things as harmful or painful.*

The adjective *kakos* is a general term for evil; as with Greek adjectives in general, it can also be used as a noun. People (e.g., [Matt 21:41](#)), thoughts (e.g., [Col 3:5](#)), and deeds (e.g., [Phil 3:2](#), [Rom 13:10](#)) are characterized as *kakos*. Addi-

tionally, *kakos* can describe things as harmful or painful without implying that they are morally wrong (e.g., [Acts 16:28](#), [Rev 16:2](#)).

[ἐπιθυμία](#) (*epithymia*). n. fem. **intense desire, longing, craving**. *Refers generally to strong desire; in context, a desire may be good or bad.*

The word *epithymia* can refer to any kind of strong desire. Temptation arises from inordinate evil desires ([Jas 1:14](#)). An intense craving for worldly things can arrest spiritual development ([Mark 4:19](#)). Through Christ, Christians are to “put to death”—i.e., get rid of—such excessive cravings ([Gal 5:24](#); [Col 3:5](#)), which characterize the behavior of unbelievers ([1 Thess 4:5](#); [2 Pet 2:10](#)). On the other hand, the NT encourages the intense desire for Christian fellowship ([1 Thess 2:17](#)) and for fellowship with Christ in eternity ([Phil 1:23](#)).

[σκότος](#) (*skotos*). n. neut. **darkness, gloom**. *This term means darkness; it can be used metaphorically to refer to evil.*

The literal meaning of *skotos* is darkness, the absence of light. Darkness eclipsed the light during [Jesus’](#) crucifixion ([Matt 27:45](#), [Mark 15:33](#); [Luke 23:45](#)). Because darkness makes it impossible to see, blindness is conceptualized as darkness ([Acts 13:11](#)). Darkness is sometimes used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness to perceive spiritual things; it then takes on a meaning similar to “evil.” People can sit in darkness ([Matt 4:16](#)), be full of darkness ([Matt 6:23](#)), and turn from darkness when their spiritual eyes are opened ([Acts 26:18](#)). It is also sometimes used more directly as a metaphor for evil. [Col 1:13](#) draws an opposition between the kingdom of Christ and the domain of darkness (*skotos*); [Ephesians](#) similarly describes our opponents in spiritual warfare as “the world rulers of this darkness

(*skotos*; Eph 6:12). Darkness (*skotos*) is also described as a feature of eternal torment (e.g., Matt 8:12; Jude 1:13).

G. SCOTT GLEAVES

See Also

- **Related Concepts:** Judgment, Final; Light and Darkness; Obedience; Pride; Punishment; Righteousness; Satan; Sin
- **Bible Sense Lexicon:** evil age, bad (moral), badness, badly (wrongly), depravity (perversion), evil realm ⇔ darkness, to do evil (act), to do evil ⇔ blaspheme, to do evil (manner), evil, evil (behavior), evil (quality), evil craving, evil desire, evil person, unsound ⇔ evil, evildoer, morality, evil realm ⇔ night, perverse, to sin, sinner, wicked, wicked person, wicked woman, worthless (despicable), sin (act)
- **The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil** Lexham Bible Guide: Genesis 1–11