

“Divine Judgment and the Created Moral Order”

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The most common agent of divine judgment is the created moral order. That is, God has created the world in such a way that deeds (whether good or evil) will have consequences. Generally speaking, the relationship between deed and consequence is conceived in intrinsic rather than extrinsic terms. That is to say, the consequences grow out of the deed itself; they are not a penalty (or reward) introduced by God into the situation. That good deeds have consequences may be called blessing; that sins have consequences may be called judgment. We focus on the latter in this context.

Several matters of translation and interpretation come together in thinking through this issue.²⁰ Initially, I focus on the common use of moral order language in Jeremiah.²¹ Sometimes this word refers to the wickedness of the people, sometimes to the effects of their wickedness, commonly translated "disaster" (the word 'a-wôn, "iniquity," is also used in both senses in the Old Testament; see Gen 19:15).²² In other words, the same Hebrew word is used to speak of both the wickedness of the people and of its consequences ("disaster"). This verbal linkage makes it clear that the judgment experienced by the Israelites flows out of their own wickedness (ra-'a- h leads to ra-'a- h).

This understanding of ra-'a- h issuing in ra-'a- h may be observed in several formulations. God brings disaster (ra-'a- h), which is "the fruit of their schemes" (Jer 6:19, emphasis mine; see Hos 8:7; 10:13). Or, "I will pour out their wickedness upon them" (Jer 14:16, emphasis mine). Or, God gives to all "according to their ways, / according to the fruit of their doings" (Jer 17:10; see 32:19). Ezekiel 7:27 puts the matter in these terms: "according to their own judgments I will judge them." Like fruit, the consequence grows out of (or is intrinsic to) the deed itself. This leads to a certain amount of correspondence thinking in the prophets, that is, like produces like (e.g., Jer 50:29); the people will stew in the juices they themselves have prepared. This type of thinking may have its roots in a fundamental concern for fairness, namely, in terms of any human canons of accountability, the judgment fits the crime.²³

How is God involved in the move from sin to consequence? Several images have been suggested: God mediates, midwifes, facilitates, sees to, carries the mail, greases the skids for, puts in force, or completes the connection (s.a-le-m) between sin and consequence. God's personal anger may be said to be a "seeing to" this movement from deed to consequence that is the moral order. In some texts God takes a more active role, at other times a more passive, withdrawing role (e.g., delivering them into the hands of their enemies, Isa 64:6-7; Ps 81:11-12).²⁴ A related image is God's giving people up, reflected in many Old Testament texts (e.g., Ps 81:11-16; see also Isa 34:2; 43:28; 47:6; 64:7; Jer 29:21; Rom 1:24-28). This "giving up" is not an arbitrary divine act, but a giving the people up to the consequences of their own choices. Ezekiel 22:31 is a striking text in this respect. God declares: "I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath." What that entails is immediately stated: "I have returned [natan]

their conduct upon their heads."²⁵ Again, such language is witness to an intrinsic relationship between sinful deed and consequence.

This dynamic understanding of sin and its effects can also be observed in the use of the verb *pa-qad*, "visit." Its translation as "punish" in NRSV is often problematic, as in Jer 21:14: "I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings." A more literal translation is clearer: "I will visit upon you the fruit of your doings" (see 5:9; 14:10).²⁶ It needs to be considered whether the word punish is ever an appropriate translation of the verb *pa-qad* (see also the related noun *peqûdah*, often translated "punishment," e.g., Jer 46:21).²⁷

While the understanding of sin-consequence in these texts could be expressed in language such as "your sin will find you out," or "you reap whatever you sow" (Num 32:23; Gal 6:7), God is not removed from the connection between sin and consequence; Israel's understanding of God is not deistic. But, generally speaking, judgment is not something that God introduces into the sinful situation, such as imposing a penalty specified in the law; rather, God mediates the consequences that are intrinsic to the wickedness itself.²⁸ God thereby sees to the moral order—a reality that God has built into the very structures of creation. In other words, given the interrelatedness of all creatures, Israel's sin generates certain snowballing effects or negative "fallout." At the same time, God is active in the interplay of human sinful actions and their effects, and "third parties" may be used by God as agents for that judgment (e.g., the Assyrians). Both divine and creaturely factors are interwoven to produce the judgmental result. In more modern terms, our own sin and the sins of our forebears press in upon us, but no less the hand of God. For history is our judgment and God enables history—carrying the world along, with a personal attentiveness in view of a relationship of consequence. God's salvific will remains intact in everything, and God's gracious concern is always for the best; but in a given situation the best that God may be able to offer is burning the chaff to fertilize the field for a new crop.²⁹

This moral order does not function in any mechanistic, precise, or inevitable way; it is not a tight causal weave. And so it may be that the wicked will prosper (Jer 12:1), at least for a time, and the innocent will suffer for unknown reasons (Job) or get caught up in the effects of the sins of others, as we have noted. Ecclesiastes 9:11 even introduces an element of chance or randomness in relating human deeds to their effects: "time and chance happen to them all." God is to some degree subject to this just order (see Abraham's question in Gen 18:25), though this cannot be factored out except to say that the looseness of the causal weave allows God to be at work in the "system" without violating or (temporarily) suspending it and, in these terms, God is certainly an agent.

This point leads back to Israel's understanding that roots its own law in a creation theology.³⁰ And so Israel's violation of matters relating to social justice, and God's wrath related thereto, cannot finally be reduced to matters of covenant. God's creation is at stake in Israel's behaviors, not simply their more specific relationship with God.