

'Visiting the Guilt of the Fathers on the Children': Is God Immoral?

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I. Introduction

Is God irrational, or even worse, wrathful, unjust and immoral? How else can people outside of the community of faith, and even those within, understand the Old Testament proclamations that God visits the guilt of the fathers onto their children for three to four generations (Exod. 20:5; 34:6–7; Num. 14:18–19; Deut. 5:9–10)? How can a just God punish people collectively for the sins of others, and over multiple generations? Why is this God of the Old Testament seemingly harsher than the God of the New Testament?

One response to such challenging, but sincere, questions retreats to the theological platitude of saying that we simply need to trust in the sovereignty of God. A more faithful response struggles with these texts and probes into what they might have communicated about God to their original Israelite audience. Such inquiry actually produces valuable insights for the current community of faith.

This article will investigate the interpretive challenges of these texts and demonstrate the necessity of placing them in their various literary, sociological, historical and theological contexts.¹ The body of the article is written to guide the general reader, while the notes will often address issues for the more specialized, academic reader. The goal is neither to conduct an exhaustive analysis of each of these texts nor to pretend to give the final word on all the issues they raise. Rather, it is to demonstrate how a probing exploration of these texts reveals not the immorality of God, but the amazing faithfulness of God, a God who acts not only rationally and justly, but primarily mercifully.

1.1. The primary statements

The statements of an apparent multi-generational and collective judgement in which God visits the guilt² of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth

1 Although I will isolate and explore different contexts for the sake of clarity, they overlap and work together. For this reason, throughout the paper I will repeat some points and refer the reader from one section to another.

2 The Hebrew word here, *'āwōn*, translated 'guilt' in the following texts, has three basic shades of meaning that can overlap indistinguishably: guilt in the sense of culpability for unrighteous behavior, guilt experienced psychologically by the person, and guilt in the sense of the legal consequences. See *TWOT*, 650–51. In our texts, the nuance of culpability is prominent, with the expectation of the legal consequences taking place.

generation occur in four main texts,³ in basically two sets of similar settings, law and narrative. All four texts share some similar phrasing as indicated by the italics in my translations:

You shall not bow down to them and you shall not serve them, because I, YHWH your God, am a jealous God, *visiting the guilt of the fathers on the sons on the third and on the fourth [generation] to the ones hating me*, and showing faithfulness to the thousandth⁴ [generation], to those loving me and keeping my commands (Exod. 20:5–6).

You shall not bow down to them and you shall not serve them, because I, YHWH your God, am a jealous God, *visiting the guilt of the fathers on the sons on the third and on the fourth [generation] to the ones hating me*, and showing faithfulness to the thousandth [generation], to those loving me and keeping my commands (Deut. 5:9–10).

And YHWH passed before him and proclaimed, 'YHWH, YHWH God, merciful and gracious, slow of anger, and abundant in faithfulness and steadfastness, keeping faithfulness to the thousandth [generation], forgiving guilt⁵ and transgression and sin; *but he does not simply excuse, visiting the guilt of the fathers on the sons and on the sons of sons on the third and on the fourth [generation]*' (Exod. 34:6–7).

YHWH is slow to anger and abundant in faithfulness, forgiving guilt and transgression, *but he does not simply excuse*,⁶ *visiting the guilt of the fathers on the sons on the third and on the fourth [generation]* (Num. 14:18).

Since the two commandments (Exod. 20:5–6; Deut. 5:9–10) are identical in Hebrew, and since the overlapping parts of the other two passages (Exod. 34:6–7; Num. 14:18) are identical in the key Hebrew words and phrases (the only difference involving 'sons of sons' idiom), it is clear that we are dealing with a fixed formula on which we will focus of our attention.⁷

3 Another closely related text is Jer. 32:18. Moreover, one can find various quotations or allusions to the statements in such texts as: Deut. 7:9–10; Ps. 145:8–9; Nah. 1:2–3; Joel 3:21; Jon. 4:2; Neh. 9:17.

4 Both Exod. 20:6 and Deut. 5:10 read, 'to the thousands'; however, I have followed the inner-biblical interpretation found in Deut. 7:10 that reads 'to the thousandth generation' and have added in brackets the qualification 'generation' that also parallels the assumption that 'third' and 'fourth' apply to 'generation'.

5 The Hebrew idiom for 'forgiving guilt', here and in Num. 14:18, does not necessarily mean that there will be no consequences, as can be seen by the clause that follows, the interpretation of which is discussed below under §II.2c. The image behind 'forgiving guilt' here is that of God lifting or bearing the weight of guilt/punishment that rightly belongs to the person or community.

6 'He does not simply excuse' is an attempt to capture a Hebrew idiom (something like, 'excuse, he does not excuse') in which a repetition of the main verb in the form of an infinitive absolute adds a weight of emphasis.

7 This paper focuses on the canonical form and the literary-historical settings in which the texts now exist and not on the compositional history of these texts. Pursuing the

II. Examination of contexts

II.1. Literary Contexts

II.1a. Translation (grammatical) concerns

The first observation is a grammatical one that focuses on the last phrase in the two legal texts from the Ten Commandments, Exod. 20:5 (= Deut. 5:9); that is the phrase, ‘to the ones hating me’.⁸ The phrase ‘the ones hating me’ likely specifies the identity of those who receive the guilt of the fathers.⁹ If that is the case, then not all ‘sons’ receive guilt, but just those who hate God, who are unfaithful to the covenant (see last paragraph of this subsection).

This grammatical interpretation finds support in Deut. 7:9–10, an example of where one biblical text interprets another. Deut. 7:9–10 restates our text and qualifies the phrase of judgement further:

And know that *YHWH* your God he is God, the faithful God, keeping the covenant and love to the ones loving him and to the ones guarding his commandments to the thousandth generation, and repaying to the ones hating him to his face to destroy *him*. He will not delay to the *one* hating him; to his face he will repay *him* (Highly literal translation, with key terms in the singular in italics).

We can make three observations about this example of inner-biblical interpretation of Exod. 20:5 (= Deut. 5:9). First, judgement is only against the ‘ones hating him’ and not toward the innocent. Second, the movement from the ‘ones’ (plural) who are hating God to the singular ‘one’ and ‘him’, moves away from the collective to the individual. Clearly the interpretation found in Deut. 7:9–10 understood the judgement of multi-generational, collective punishment to be restricted to the individuals who opposed God. Third, we see in this interpretation that the number ‘thousands’ is understood to refer to the ‘thousandth gen-

historical settings in which these saying originated, as well as raising questions about their literary history, are legitimate enterprises. For instance, one cannot assume that these four texts arose from the same historical setting and meant the same thing to their respective original audiences. Also, it well may be that these texts were edited over time. This paper recognizes these possibilities. However, such historical-literary pursuits are not without their own presuppositions and, therefore, cannot result in definitive conclusions.

- 8 It is theoretically possible that the expression occurring without the qualifying phrase, ‘to the ones hating me’, as in Exod. 34:7 and Num. 14:18, is earlier and that the phrase was added to lessen the apparent severity of the impact. Although such a conclusion cannot be proven, I will consider it in the following discussion.
- 9 Such early Church Fathers as Chrysostom and Augustine understood this phrase as identifying the sinful nature of the sons: Chrysostom, ‘Homily 56, on John 9:1–2’, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. John* (NPNF1 14:200) [accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf14.iv.lviii.html>]; and, Augustine, ‘Psalm 109’, *Expositions on Psalms*, vs.14, (NPNF1 8:538) [accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.ii.CIX.html>].

eration', emphasizing the enormous extension of God's faithful mercy through time with His people.

A word of caution is in order. One could suggest that this interpretation found in Deut. 7:9–10 is a late interpretation of the second commandment and that a later editor added the qualification of 'the ones hating me' in the commandments to lessen its apparent harsh inclusiveness. Later biblical writers may have wanted to modify a general encompassing statement of guilt and may have wanted to move toward individual responsibility.¹⁰ But even if 'the ones hating me' is an interpretive addition, we still must deal with the phrase 'to the sons on the third and the fourth [generation]'. Surely the inclusion of that phrase must indicate some sense of collective responsibility.¹¹ Further, 'the ones hating me' is not present in Exod. 34:6–7 and Num. 14:18. Therefore, we must still explore the concept of collective responsibility.

Before moving on, there are two further observations to make about the phrase, 'the ones hating me'. First, 'hating' does not imply that a single act of transgression leads to such consequences. (After all, through the sacrificial system God provided atonement for many individual transgressions.) Rather, the use of the participle ('hating' rather than 'hate') presents an action as an on-going process. Judgement here is not against a single negative action, but against on-going characteristic behaviour. Second, 'hate', as well as 'love', and 'jealous', have a special meaning in the context of the Israelite covenant. Hating does not refer here to a mere emotion, but to a disposition of character that is set against obeying God, a rejection of a binding covenantal relationship. That 'hate' refers to a behavior of disobedience is supported by noting the opposite response of

¹⁰ Levinson makes the case that one finds subtle interpretive revisions throughout the Hebrew Bible. Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). However, I want to express a couple of notes of caution. First, even if the text of Deut. 7 is late, a late date does not mean a change in thought has taken place. We do not have a biblically internal interpretation that clearly provides a contradictory interpretation, a point that will be discussed in the body of the paper. Second, Kaminsky has shown that one of the main arguments for late modifications and/or interpretations is based on circular reasoning involving the issue of collective responsibility versus individual responsibility. Interpreters have often presumed that an evolutionary progress in religious thinking has taken place (that is, moving away from collective responsibility to a more 'mature' position of individual accountability) and then have used that assumption to date the texts that contain these concepts. See Joel S. Kaminsky, 'The Sins of the Fathers: A Theological Investigation of the Biblical Tension Between Corporate and Individualized Retribution', *Judaism* 46.3 (1997), 319–32. Related to this last point, both Kaminsky and Krašovec have demonstrated that collective and individual responsibility are not mutually exclusive concepts, but may be held together. See Joze Krašovec, 'Is There A Doctrine of "Collective Retribution" in The Hebrew Bible?', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994), 35–89; and Kaminsky, 'Sins of the Fathers'. Not only are both concepts found in Ezekiel and Jeremiah (see §II.4a), our contemporary culture does the same (see §II.2c).

¹¹ Krašovec, 'Collective Retribution', 50–54.

how loving God refers to the covenantal behaviour of 'guarding his commandment' (Deut. 7:9–10).¹² Therefore, when God 'visits guilt' on someone, it is for an on-going disobedience against God's covenant.¹³ So, too, 'a jealous God' in the context of covenant does not refer to a negative emotional state of God, but to the passion God has for a faithful relationship. Using the language of human emotions, the Old Testament here communicates not distasteful envy, but God's protective passion for a bond of faithfulness.

II.1b. Figures of speech and idioms

Do our texts even focus on God's judgement? We should not forget that the biblical speakers and writers employed literary artistry to communicate effectively and powerfully. Our formulaic texts not only have balancing statements about both God's mercy and God's judgement, but they also employ hyperbole. They portray an extreme contrast between God's faithfulness, which extends to the thousandth generation, and God's judgement, which only extends to the third and fourth generation. We miss the intended impact if we think that former statement literally means that God's faithfulness ends at generation one thousand and one. Rather, the hyperbole emphasizes the extreme longevity of God's faithful mercy in contrast to the brevity of God's judgement. Therefore, our texts are not even focused on God's judgement. Rather, they give prominence to God's dependable mercy!

Inner-biblical usage confirms this interpretation. For example, Num. 14:18 (one of our texts), Neh. 9:17–18, Jon. 4:2, Joel 2:13 and Ps. 86:15 all appeal to God by invoking the mercy part of the mercy/judgement formula that recites God's faithfulness. So, too, later rabbis interpreted the whole formula, not just the merciful half of it, as an appeal to God's graciousness.¹⁴ Still, although the full expression functions figuratively to focus on the mercy of God, that is not to say that God's judgement is not to be taken seriously. The judgement statement emphasizes the necessity for Israel to be faithful to the covenant relationship with God.

Still, we are left with the question: Does God literally carry over the punishment of the fathers to generations not yet born? The phrase 'on the sons on the third and fourth generation' also calls for further exploration. A common literal interpretation supposes that it refers to judgement that lasts for three to four successive generations, or even that judgement that can pass over the father to a following generation.¹⁵ What if it, too, functioned as a formulaic expression or id-

¹² So, too, Levinson notes the parallel vocabulary in the context of Hittite treaties, in *Legal Revision*, 51–52.

¹³ Birch, Bruce C., 'Divine Character and the Formation of Moral Community in the Book of Exodus', in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. by John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and Mark Daniel Carroll (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 131.

¹⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. by Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 393.

¹⁵ Levinson, who argues for such a transgenerational interpretation, gives as an example how, after David's adultery with Bathsheba, the child died rather than the

iom? For instance, another interpretative option is to understand the phrase as an idiom for the currently living, extended family of a father, his son, his grandson and possibly a great grandson. It was not uncommon for one household in the ancient Near East to include three, and occasionally four, living generations. And, such a person who lived long enough to see a great grandchild was regarded as particularly blessed.¹⁶ Therefore, the phrase may denote the generations within one's current household within the upper limit of one's lifetime, an ideal span of seventy or eighty years (Ps. 90:10). In other words, the phrase 'to the third and fourth generations' may well be an idiom for 'the whole family currently living'.¹⁷ Indeed, we find support for this idiomatic interpretation from other examples of ancient Near Eastern contractual language, in which the extended living family, from the father to son and grandson, bears the responsibilities of the contract or covenant.¹⁸ Therefore, recognizing this phrase as a typical legal expression com-

father, in *Legal Revision*, 53–56. The problem with this example, as will be identified further in the following section of the paper, is that our formulaic expression does not belong in the context of personal behavior but in the context of a corporate covenant. A stronger argument that Levinson makes is to say that the editor of Kings blamed Manasseh (2 Kgs 24:3–4) for the Exile that took place three generations after his reign (*ibid.*). That claim has some merit, but appears too simplistic. Samuel-Kings presents a portrait of cumulative guilt that built up through Manasseh and included the evil of his son Amon (21:20) and the sons of Josiah, Jehoahaz (23:32), Jehoiakim (23:37), and Jehoiachin (24:9). However, in this portrayal, Judah escaped judgement during Josiah's reign, because he was humble and repentant (22:19–20). Therefore, rather than supporting an example of a father's guilt being visited on an innocent son a generation of so later, a stronger case could be made for a righteous king temporarily saving a people from the cumulative guilt of the fathers.

16 *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament) Volume 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. by J. H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 232, 450. See also Job 42:16, Ps. 128:6, Ps. 90:10, and the seventh-century Aramaic tomb inscription of a priest of the Assyrian god Sin, which states, 'Because of my righteousness in his presence, he gave me a good name and prolonged my days. On the day I died, my mouth was not deprived of the words, and with my eyes I beheld children of the fourth generation' in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents From the Biblical World*, ed. by William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2:185.

17 So, too, McConville states, 'The best understanding of the statement in the present verse [Deut. 5:5–6] is, then, that the idolater's sin will have effects that will rebound upon ensuing generations; and perhaps even that he himself, though he live to see the fourth generation (the presumed upper limit of a lifespan), will never be free from the consequences of his deeds.' J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* 5 (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 127.

18 For examples, one finds some apparent parallels in *Context of Scripture* edited by William W. Hallo. In the Hittite treaty, 'Treaty Between Šuppiluliuma and Aziru', the contractual stipulations are made to the king, his sons, and grandsons (2:93); and the curses and blessings are directed to the king 'together with his head, his wives, his sons, his grandsons, his house, his town, his land, and all his possessions' (2:95); that is to say that the responsibility applies to all that the king possesses, including his extended family. So, too, other treaties are in effect for a family of three to four

plements the intended emphasis of the hyperbole mentioned above.

The contrast between judgement and mercy could hardly be more extreme. Whereas consequences of guilt could have an impact on one extended living family that breaks covenant with God, God's mercy and love, in great contrast, extend to the thousandth generation for those who keep covenant. Again, we find that our texts are not about a wrath-bearing, vengeful God, but about one who demonstrates covenantal faithfulness to the extreme.

II.1c. Genre and literary settings

Assessing these statements in their context, we note that although two of the texts are in law codes and two are speeches in narrative, all four are in the ideological context of covenantal, legal thought. The first two texts come from the two formulations of the Ten Commandments, specifically from the second commandment that forbids idolatry. The genre here is that of a covenantal law code. This type of literature states the contractual stipulations by which the people of Israel were to abide, if they wanted to enter into and maintain a relationship with YHWH as their God. The second commandment forbids idolatry, the act of worshipping other gods, because idolatry would destroy God's redemptive plans for Israel and for the nations. (The implications for these texts being covenantal, legal texts are developed below in §II.2a).

The third text, Exod. 34:6–7, is part of a speech within a narrative context in which God intends to replace the stone tablets on which the commandments of the covenant had been inscribed (vv. 1–8), the first set having been broken in the incident of the golden calf (Exod. 32:1–19). It is here the reader learns that the self-disclosed character of God establishes the basis for the formulaic phrase found in our texts. In this context, God approaches Moses on Mt. Sinai, proclaims his name and describes his character to Moses (vv. 6–7). Significantly, the narrative and ideological contexts are still that of covenant stipulations.

generations in the Hittite treaties, 'Treaty Between Muršili and Duppi-Tešub' (2:98), 'Treaty Between Tudḫaliya and Šaušgamuwa' (2:99), and 'The Treaty of Tudḫaliya IV with Kurunta of Tarḫuntašša on the Bronze Tablet Found in Ḫattuša' (2:103, §17); in a West Semitic treaty of 'The Inscriptions of Bar-Ga'yah and Mati'el from Sefire' (2:213, lines 1–6a). Even in an Ugarit land purchase, it appears that the arrangement is for the generations of father, son, and grandson, 'Land Purchase Text 3.104', 3:255). Also, in some Hittite literature involving commitment to one's god, one sees an extended-family concern. In the 'Ritual and Prayer to Ištar of Nineveh', after an invocation against enemies, the prayer petitions for Ištar's blessings to the third generation, 'Afterwards care for the king, the queen, the sons of the king (and) the grandsons of the king in wellbeing, life, vigor, (and) long years forever' (1:164, §9). In a Hittite apology justifying the cult of Ištar (199), the speaker invokes respect to Ištar from his son, grandson, and offspring, and requests cursing on those who would oppose the role of this son, grandson, and offspring ('Apology of Ḫattušili III', 1:199, §2; 1:204, §14). The above evidence, while open to interpretation, suggests that in contractual matters, certainly covenantal treaties, responsibility was to be borne by the extended family, all of whom could be living at the time of the contract and would have come under the authority (possession) of the father.

Num. 14:18 is also a speech in a narrative context. The Israelite people rebelled again against God and threatened to turn back to Egypt (14:1–4). In dialogue with Moses, God announces his intention to destroy all of the people and to begin a new people through Moses (vv. 1–12). Moses rises to the challenge and intercedes on behalf of the people and the covenant, reminding God of His character by appealing to the formulaic expression of God's mercy and judgement. As noted above, the employment of the whole figurative hyperbole here implicitly confirms that it functioned rhetorically as a statement primarily of God's faithful mercy over and against divine judgement. God's response is significant. In brief, God responds in mercy by maintaining the covenant relationship with the people as a whole rather than destroying them and starting anew. However, God still judges the ones who rebelled. That immediate generation, who had seen God's miraculous signs and who disobeyed several times, would not enter the promised land; they would wander in the wilderness, until that generation died off (vv. 20–23). Once again, although this text is not in the form of a law, but narrative, it assumes the context of covenant stipulations.

II.2 Sociological contexts

The observation that our texts of study occur in the literary context of covenant law is a major step toward proper interpretation. We, as readers who come from a different cultural perspective, need to learn what implications followed within the sociological context of the Israelite culture. Once we understand the nature of ancient Near Eastern covenant, we can see the rational and moral nature of our texts.

II.2a. Legal context of covenant

A covenant is a legally binding contract into which both concerned parties (individuals as in marriage, or nations as in treaties) enter voluntarily. As the Old Testament tells their story, the Hebrew people, who would later become the nation of Israel, chose collectively to enter into a legally binding covenant relationship with God, after God delivered them out of Egyptian slavery. This is the Mosaic covenant. In this event they bound themselves not as individuals but as a corporate community to YHWH as their God by agreeing to keep the stipulations of the covenant as specified in the Law/Torah. The people of Israel became the people of God. This contract stated both the blessings of obedience and the consequences of disobedience (e.g. Deut. 27:9–28:68). The purpose of this covenant community, as presented in the overarching storyline of the Pentateuch, was to bring about the promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. The covenant formed a people with a new identity as the people of God, a people who would be a blessing to all nations.¹⁹ The second of the 10 Commandments (contractual legal stipula-

¹⁹ Birch ('Divine Character', 132–35) rightly points out that the formation of Israel as a moral community, the people of God, was not simply a matter of establishing a legal code that was to be obeyed. The whole Exodus story is one about Israel forming a new identity by entering into the life of God who reveals his character. Our four texts relate to God's self-disclosure of his character to which Israel was to align her character.

tions), in which our phrase is found, specifically forbids idolatry. Idolatry would totally thwart the divine purposes of the covenant community. If God were to tolerate idolatry, the divine commission to Abraham could not be fulfilled.

When we place our texts in the context of covenantal law, we can recognize, as the biblical writers did, that our texts form the basis for an appeal to reason, not to irrationality. These texts presuppose morality, not immorality. They reveal a just God, who prefers to act with mercy. Here is a major point to recognize. The community who composed the collected literature of the Old Testament did not view God as irrational, immoral or unjust for holding their community responsible for violations of the covenant to which they agreed.

They found God to be reasonable. For example, although the prophets speak in graphic, figurative and passionate language, they still set forth rational arguments. Using technical, legal language, they state how God has a lawsuit against the people (e.g. Hos. 4:1; Mic. 6:1–2). They summon the parties involved (God and Israel), present the evidence of human wickedness and unfaithfulness, and announce the divine consequences. The biblical writers found the criterion of covenantal faithfulness reasonable. They interpreted their sweeping history in terms of whether or not they, as a nation, had kept or broken covenant with God. Their historical narratives evaluated kings in terms of their faithfulness to God.

They found God to be moral. The purpose of divine law was to create a righteous, model community, whose obedience would align them with the character of God and result in blessing. The purpose of divine justice was to reinstitute social order and justice where it had been lost. Poetically, the biblical texts borrow the ancient Near Eastern image of the 'divine warrior' as they portray divine judgement (for example, see Exod. 15:1–18), an image that is foreign and perhaps shocking to our culture. However, the ideal is understandable. People in parts of the world today in which there is no social order (or people who have been enslaved and abused) understand the battle imagery of fighting against injustice and restoring order. Just as executing justice in such societies today seeks to re-establish social order, the judgements of God against injustice called people back to order and righteousness.

They found God just. Throughout the Old Testament, one finds statements directed to God as in Neh. 9:33, 'But you are righteous concerning all that has come upon us, because in steadfastness you have acted, but we have acted unrighteously'. In fact, reference to the sin or guilt 'of the fathers' is frequently used as a motif, reminding later Israelites that they too followed in their fathers' sinful behaviour (cf. Lev. 26:39–40; Ezra 9:7; Neh. 9:2; Isa. 65:6–7; Jer. 11:10; 14:20; Dan. 9:16; and the combined force of Ezekiel 18 and 20).²⁰ The biblical writers saw

20 It is true that the Old Testament does record people complaining about being punished for the sins of their fathers, but those complaints are 'corrected'. The prophet Ezekiel appears to confront such a complaint in Ezek. 18 by calling the people to turn from their own wicked ways (18:25–32). And, in Lam. 5:7 one finds the complaint that the people are bearing the weight of their fathers' sins; however, that motif is included in their admission of their own guilt as they examine themselves, Lam. 3:37–42; 5:16.

God as acting justly in terms of the covenantal contract even in the disaster of the Babylonian Exile. As desperately agonizing as the descriptions of God's unbearable judgement are in the Book of Lamentations, the author still recognizes that God was just (1:18, 22; 3:39, 42; 4:13) and hopes in God's mercy (3:21–33, 49–50; 4:22).

II.2b. Legal context of covenant vs. criminal justice system

Perhaps the main reason we struggle with our texts is because we confuse covenant law with criminal law. It is imperative to distinguish between collective consequences within the context of violations of a corporate covenant and consequences within the context of the general criminal justice system. These are two different legal systems. The criminal justice system specifically prohibited punishing sons for the deeds of their fathers, a principle stated even in Deuteronomy, a book that records the formula of multi-generational punishment. Deut. 24:16 states specifically, 'Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin' (NIV). One finds this criminal-law principle practiced, for example, in 2 Kgs 14:6 = 2 Chr. 25:4. There are no accounts of the covenantal standard of judgement employed as a principle of criminal justice and carried out literally with children to the third or fourth generation receiving some punishment that their father earned.

We do find a noteworthy, albeit strange, example that could cause some confusion in 2 Samuel 21. In this chapter, King David hands over seven sons of the deceased King Saul to be put to death in order to atone for sins Saul committed against the Gibeonites, the guilt of which had led to a divinely caused famine in the land for three years. However, this is not a case involving the criminal justice system. Israel had made a covenant with the Gibeonites not to attack them (Joshua 9). Saul, as the king representing the nation of Israel, had violated that covenant (2 Sam. 21:1–2) and brought guilt upon his house and upon Israel. All Israel suffered the consequences of famine, until seven of Saul's sons were executed as atonement. However, it is important to note that this example of multi-generational consequences falls under covenant law, not criminal law.

II.2c. Cultural context: family and community solidarity

What about collective consequences? A popular interpretation of the sins of the father being visited on the sons is expressed by the saying, 'The apple does not fall far from the tree.' That saying expresses the psychological point that children learn from their parents. We should not overlook this kind of family solidarity, since two of our texts qualify the sons also as 'the ones hating me'. Familial solidarity can play either a positive or negative role. A righteous parent brings blessing to the children (Prov. 20:7). But, the corruption of the parent could easily carry over to the children. Indeed, one forms individual moral character not in isolation but in community.²¹

21 Birch ('Divine Character', 122–24) gives a brief overview of how recent discussions in

However, in the world of the ancient Near East – and, in many Eastern cultures today – familial solidarity went much further. In the cultural context of family ideology, the concept of collective and multi-generational dimension of punishment was a common expectation.²² Families had a strong sense of corporate identity. Honour or shame for one member of the family resulted in honour or shame for the whole family. Consequences for one member could well apply to the whole family. As noted earlier, various legal contracts held the whole multi-generational family responsible. Moreover, corporate identity extended beyond the family to the greater community. The failure of a community leader was the failure of the whole community. The community shared in the responsibility and the guilt. Cultures with such corporate identities understood that there were cases in which innocent individuals inescapably suffered along with the guilty. That certainly must have been the case in the Babylonian exile; children below the age of accountability suffered the consequences met by their parents.

In the Old Testament, the Israelite covenant with God was such a corporate contract. An illustration of some members violating the covenant and all being held accountable occurs in the immediate context of one of our texts, in Numbers 14. When the parental generation was forbidden to enter the promised land due to their rebellion, the children suffered along with their parents by being forced to wander in the wilderness until the older generation had died (Num. 14:33). But, more noteworthy, this consequence illustrates the mercy and faithfulness of God. Violation of the covenant allowed the legal consequences to fall on the whole community, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Technically the covenant should have become null and void for all of them. But, God did not carry out justice legalistically. Instead of destroying the whole covenant community, God spared the offending generation from immediate destruction, forbade them to enter the land, and allowed their children to continue in the covenant promises. This pattern characterizes the storyline we discover throughout the Old Testament narratives. Israel repeatedly voided the covenant, but God faithfully maintained it even in the worst-case scenarios through preserving a remnant of the purged community. The execution of divine judgement, although often turned back by communal repentance, was never to exterminate the Israelites, but to re-establish a righteous community.

Even though the Old Testament Israelite practiced collective responsibility, is

religious ethics speak about the formation of character in the context of the moral community.

22 Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 392–96. This sense of collective culpability may be seen in the prayer of the fourteenth-century BCE Hittite king Muršili II. Believing that a plague has come upon his people due to his father's violation of an oath, he prays to the Storm-god: 'My father sinned and transgressed the word of the Storm-god, of Ḫatti, my lord. But I did not sin in any way. But so it happens: The sin of the father devolves upon his son. The sin of my father has devolved upon me, and I have now confessed it...' (*Context of Scripture*, 1:158).

not this practice still primitive? At first thought, collective responsibility seems unjust to the modern, Western person. The Enlightenment ideal of individuality has contributed to shaping Western culture, so that one's initial response may be to condemn collective accountability as 'primitive' or 'immoral'. Indeed, within Old Testament scholarship, the trend has been to impose an evolutionary model of moral development on biblical texts, dating Israelite statements on this issue in terms of a progression from collective accountability (primitive) to individual responsibility (modern and mature).²³ But the concept of collective accountability is not unique to the Israelites, to antiquity, or even to Eastern cultures in general.²⁴ For example, even the contemporary Western world practices the same principle. There are modern examples in the Western world of holding people collectively and multi-generationally liable for what their governments did. One can readily think of the bombing of civilian populated cities by the Allies in WWII, or how the West made nations pay war reparations through their descendants (e.g. Germany paid off its WWI debt on Oct. 3, 2010). Economic sanctions against nations for policies of their leadership punish all of the people collectively. One may see a similar application of collective responsibility in the debates about making reparation to Holocaust survivors, to Japanese who were interned during WWII, to descendants of American slaves, and to American Indians. On a much lesser level readers might be able to recall personal examples, such as when a whole school class missed recess because of the actions of a few, or when in boot camp a whole squad did push ups because of one person's infraction. In actual practice, one observes in 'civilized' cultures today some sort of balance between individual and collective guilt. Also, as will be noted below, even the biblical examples of so-called individual accountability actually reflect a blend of both collective and individual accountability, which is mostly likely the case even in the most 'collective' of communities.

II.3 Literary-historical context: application in Old Testament

Thus far, we have primarily examined our texts abstractly as legally oriented statements. But, how did their common formulaic principle of mercy and judgment work out in actual practice in the Old Testament? On a whole, the biblical version of Israelite history records the long-lasting faithfulness of God toward a people who depicted themselves as repeatedly disobedient and wayward. The self-deprecating nature of the biblical literature emphasizes the mercy of God. As is well known, the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) and the Chronistic History (Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah) interpret changes in the national well-being in terms of the consequences of the leaders and/or the people obeying or disobeying the covenant. As the biblical authors record a long history of national disobedience, they make the point that God nonetheless never eliminated the covenant community. God remained faithful

23 Joel S. Kaminsky, 'The Sins of the Fathers: A Theological Investigation of the Biblical Tension Between Corporate and Individualized Retribution'.

24 Ibid.

well beyond the legal limits and any reasonable expectation.

Still, there are some specific instances in which God punished acts of rebellion by the covenant community, usually by death; and that punishment could include the whole living family, presumably those of the second, third and possibly fourth generation. Numbers 16 gives an example of whole families put to death. This chapter gives an account of communal rebellion as the assembly of Israel followed certain community leaders who rose up against Moses and Aaron, whom God had appointed as the official leaders.²⁵ Again, as in Numbers 14, the expected consequence was to be the destruction of the covenant community. However, Moses and Aaron interceded on behalf of the community (20–22). God responded by having Moses warn everyone to move away from the tents and belongings of the leaders of the rebellion. The leaders and their families remained with their tents and belongings and were destroyed together by the earth rupturing from under them (31–33).²⁶

Another case was that of Achan in Joshua 7. Although Achan alone is mentioned as having violated conditions of war spoilage, we are told that 'the Israelites acted unfaithfully' (7:1), and, as a result there were collective consequences. The Israelites were defeated at the battle of Ai and about thirty-six Israelites died (7:2–5). Later, when Achan was identified as the guilty party, he and apparently all of his family were stoned to death.²⁷

The major example of consequences for breaking covenant, after a long history of national disobedience, is the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. In this case, the Babylonians defeated Israel, specifically the nation of Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and carried people carried off to exile in Babylon. However, even after what looked like the death knell to Israel and its covenant, God still preserved a remnant to start the community once again. Interestingly, this restoration took place after a prophesied span of seventy years of service to the King of Babylon (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Although one can cal-

25 Numbers 16 appears rather disjointed, at least to a contemporary reader. It is likely that either three or four rebellions became coordinated or they were literarily united to emphasize the extent of Israel's rebelliousness. For a possible unraveling of the separate rebellious acts, see Milgrom *Numbers*, 414–23.

26 One could raise that possibility that family members could have withdrawn themselves from the area of destruction and have survived. As in other cases, it is one's responsibility, when the opportunity is offered, to remove oneself from the impending judgement (e.g. Moses and Aaron in Num. 17, Lot in Gen. 19, and Noah by boat in Gen. 7–8). However, in their culture of corporate identity, it is unlikely that family members would have done so. They would have seen themselves, and been seen by others, as members of a guilty household.

27 As with the rebellion in Numbers 16, it is likely that the whole family bore the guilt. Indeed, in the case of Achan, who hid devoted objects in the family tent, one would expect that the family members were part of the transgression, at least being aware of it. However, textual issues leave the exact picture unclear. Because of some ambiguities in the text regarding the antecedents of singular and plural pronouns, and because of differences between the readings in the MT and the LXX, it is possible that the story recounted only the stoning of Achan and not his family.

culate the time span of the exile in various ways based on what one sees as the beginning and closing events, it is significant that the prophesied seventy years could be considered the length of one lifespan (Ps. 90:10). As a result, the Babylonian exile becomes the paramount example of guilt being visited collectively on the third or fourth generation of the extended living households of those who were exiled.

II.4 Theological contexts

What should the Church today do with these observations? Good systematic theology, that which seeks to apply biblical teaching to the Church in its contemporary cultures, must start with sound biblical theology. Therefore, we must press more deeply into the issues of covenantal culpability and individual responsibility as well as pursue what the greater canonical context teaches about ultimate divine judgement.

II.4a. Divine covenantal judgement and individual responsibility

Is there a consistent theological understanding of divine covenantal judgement in the Old Testament? Some scholars have suggested that the Israelite perception of divine justice changed over time.²⁸ For instance, at a late period in Israelite history, one could argue that Ezekiel and Jeremiah seem to present a different principle representing a theological shift. Contrary to the more ancient principle of collective generational judgement, they seem to teach that God does not judge the child for the sin of the parent. In the following text, Ezekiel rebukes the people for claiming that they were simply victims of collective responsibility; and, he appears to deny that principle and set forth individual responsibility:

What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son – both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die (Ezek. 18:2–4, NIV).

So, too, one finds in Jeremiah a similar statement:

In those days people will no longer say, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes – his own teeth will be set on edge (Jer. 31:29–30, NIV).

To be fair, in terms of interpretative options, the statements of Ezekiel and Jeremiah might represent a case of 'progressive revelation'. The literary historical settings of the above texts come from a late time in biblical history, the time of the Babylonian Exile. It may be that the community of faith, through the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah, came to a clearer understanding of the character of

²⁸ Levinson (*Legal Revision*) has most recently extensively argued the case for a change over time.

God and judgement than that of earlier generations. However, there is evidence that this is not a case of progressive revelation. Both of these books, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, also speak about judgement coming on the whole 'house of Israel' collectively and justly in terms of destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. For instance, Jeremiah actually holds in harmony both the principles of collective guilt and individual justice:

You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the fathers' sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the LORD Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. Your eyes are open to all the ways of men; you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve (Jer. 32:18, NIV).

Moreover, the idea of individual responsibility, just as the concept of collective guilt, is not a late, modern concept. We also find a principle of individual accountability in the world of the ancient Near East. In the Gilgamesh Epic, which well predates the Israelites, after the story depicts the gods as indiscriminately killing humans by the flood, one of the main characters, Enkidu, makes an appeal on the basis of the principle of individual responsibility.²⁹

How could Ezekiel and Jeremiah hold together the principles of justice for both individual and collective punishment? Perhaps there is no conclusive answer, but one can make a few suggestions. First, these prophets may have employed the theme of individual responsibility rhetorically for emphases in order to get people to repent. For instance, in Ezekiel it appears that the people were using their proverb of multi-generational accountability (18:2) to excuse themselves from personal responsibility. In that case, Ezekiel found it necessary to specify their individual guilt. In Ezekiel 18, part of a section in which sins of Israel and Jerusalem are denounced (Ezekiel 12–24), Ezekiel appeals to the principle of individual responsibility to call people to repent who had not been willing to recognize their own culpability (cf. 18:2 and 32 which make clear that God does not want His people to die, but to repent and live). This is to say that rhetorically it was more effective to call for the admission of individual responsibility and repentance, than to call the community collectively to repentance. The emphasis in Jeremiah 31 on individual responsibility makes a very different point. It looks to the future and serves the purpose of giving hope to the generation that would be restored after the exile, when a new covenant would be made, and when the people would get a chance to start over. In both cases the prophets emphasize individual responsibility, but do not rule out the possibility of the collective guilt.

Second, both prophets did view all of the individuals as participating in the guilt of breaking of covenant, so that their guilt actually was collective. For instance, Ezek. 18:30 addresses the 'house of Israel' and 'each one' at the same time; and Chapter 20 rehearses historically how the sons have followed in the sinful footsteps of their fathers. So, too, Jeremiah sees all of Israel as being guilty

29 This point was noted by Daniel Bodi ('Ezekiel', 445), who cites the Gilgamesh Epic (9:14).

for generations (Jer. 32:30–32). In this case, one could say that cumulative individual guilt resulted in collective guilt. (One might recall how, because of Abraham's intercessory appeal to God's mercy, God had promised to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous people could be found [Gen. 18:22–33] and yet the cities fell for lack of such a few.)

A third way to reconcile these two principles theologically is to note that both can work together in a couple of ways. For example, in the case of Numbers 14, the people's rebellion against God that broke the covenant commitment legally should have resulted in the nullification of the covenant and the destruction of all of the people. Instead, consequences were limited. As a case of individual responsibility, while God did not permit the rebellious 'fathers' to enter the promised land, God did permit their children to do so. (The text assumes that all were guilty of rebellion except for Joshua and Caleb, whom God allowed to enter the land.) Still, there was an element of a collective, multi-generational consequence: the children of the rebellious generation wandered in the wilderness until their parents died and they became of age. One finds a second example with the community in the Babylonian exile. Although both they and their fathers had sinned, they had the opportunity to repent and appeal to the mercy of God, as is found in Lamentations. So, too, Leviticus 26, a text that addresses exile, states, 'But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers – their treachery against me and their hostility toward me...then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant ... with Abraham, and I will remember the land' (vv. 40–42, NIV). In each case, God did not fully carry out the expected consequences of breaking covenant, the destruction of the people (cf. Deut. 8:19–20; 27:14–26; 28:15–68). Rather, God consistently showed mercy beyond legal considerations. People still suffered consequences, but God preserved a remnant with whom the covenant could continue if they sought God (as promised in Deut. 4:25–31).³⁰

Finally, as has been observed, even modern, Western, individualistic culture in reality holds a blend of both individual and communal responsibility. Crimes of individuals receive individual judgement. However, crimes of nations, even when carried out by a few, may receive national consequences that cause innocent individuals to suffer. Not unexpectedly, neither Ezekiel nor Jeremiah ever state that the innocent will never suffer due to the sins of others.³¹

30 In the Babylonian Talmud, one finds the act of repentance as the resolution to the dilemma caused by apparently conflicting texts such as Exod. 34:6–7, which states that God will not excuse guilt, and those that speak of forgiveness:

The Master has said: Because it is written: 'He will clear of sins', how is it to be understood? That is as we have learned in the following Boraitha: R. Elazar said: We cannot say it means, He clears of sins, because it is written further, 'by no means' does He clear. We cannot say, He does not, because it is written 'clear of sins'. We must therefore explain the verse: He clears of sins those who do penance; and does not, those who are not penitent (Vol. 3 *Pesahim, Yoma, Hagigah*, 133–34).

31 Paul House, 'God's Character and the Wholeness of Scripture', *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23:1 (2005), 7–8.

II.4b. Canonical theological context: divine individual justice

Even if the ancient Israelites, as well as modern societies, accept collective consequences as just in some sense, should we not be disturbed by the suffering of the innocent individuals who were included in those consequences? In response to this question, the context of a canonical, theological perspective on divine individual justice provides a final way to reconcile the two principles of collective and individual responsibility. God's acts of purging the covenant community are acts of immediate and admittedly collective judgement, even though they were for the purpose of maintaining the divine promises rather than for the sake of carrying out legal consequences. Moreover, not only were they temporary in the broader context of the history of Israel, but also in the broadest context of eternal life with God. Such acts of community disciplinary purging do not indicate the final status of the individuals involved in terms of eternal life or ultimate destruction.³² From a Christian canonical perspective, with evidence from the Old Testament as well, one learns that God will act with fairness and mercy in terms of the final judgement of the individual. To give one example, we could turn our attention to the image of the 'Book of Life', a motif found in both the Old and New Testaments. Consistent with this motif is the teaching that God bases final judgement on individual accountability (Exod. 32:32, 33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27; 22:19). So, the final status of the individual, in terms of ultimate determination of eternal life or judgement, is a matter of individual accountability that rests in the hands of a merciful and just God who knows the heart of each person.

II.4c Reflection for the Church

Our Old Testament texts of study remind me as a Christian that my basic Christian profession of faith – 'Jesus is Lord' – also evokes a covenantal ideology. When I profess 'Jesus is Lord' I am making a binding statement of loyalty and obedience as from a vassal to a sovereign king, as the Israelites did. By this statement I pledge myself to submit to the rule of God. This pledge embraces the grace of

32 It is not my intent to plunge deeply into moral theology, a pursuit that is beyond me. Still, I would like to offer an observation about the divine use of violence in judgement and the suffering of the innocent. There is a tendency, albeit a simplistic one, to suppose that God should be held accountable to God's commands. With this line of thought, God should not take innocent lives, and God should not use the violence or evil of others to enact violence. However, divine commands to humans are accommodated to and limited to the temporal sphere of human responsibility. Divine commands are to effect righteousness in this temporal world. Divine judgement in this world also makes accommodation to the fact that societies, even modern and civilized societies, employ violence to reign in violence and to restore social order. Traditionally, arguments for violence have been used to support the death penalty, just war, and the destruction of military targets that might contain civilian lives (e.g. Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and not just the Conquest and the Exile. Ultimately, moral theologians must distinguish between the contexts of the temporal and the eternal. This distinction leads to the recognition that true grace, mercy, justice, and judgement are eternal matters of the divine sphere and well beyond human assessment.

God and the faithful redemptive work of Jesus, with the result that one becomes a member of the Kingdom of God, the Body of Christ. The covenantal context of these Old Testament texts also reminds me that God desires a holy people and that God will act to cleanse the Body of Christ. They remind me that my actions have consequences not only on me, but also on my household, on those close to me, my community, and the Church. Most importantly, these texts remind me that in faithfulness to this relationship, as in the Old Testament, God will act with unfailing mercy toward those who turn and repent when we so often fail, because God's faithfulness extends to the thousandth generation who love God.

III. Concluding Summary

Is the God of the Old Testament irrational, immoral and unjust for 'visiting the guilt of the fathers on the children'? The answer is clearly, 'no'. The phrases in question are formulaic and figurative expressions that served to emphasize the mercy of God as being totally disproportional to God's judgements. The expressions arise from a culture that had a strong sense of family and community collective identity. Such people expected individual honourable or shameful behaviour to reflect on and be borne by the collective community. As a result, the writers of the Old Testament do not present the Israelites as finding fault with God for acts of judgement. They did not find God irrational or immoral, and neither should a modern reader. Moreover, one still finds examples of collective and multi-generational responsibility operative in the modern, Western world in which the innocent suffer due to the guilt of others.

The formulaic statements apply to a people who entered into a voluntary and legally binding covenant with God and who understood that the covenant community had to be preserved from corruption in order for the promises and purposes of God to all peoples to be fulfilled. In the history of the application of covenantal consequences, God never completely abandoned the covenant community despite God's legal right to do so. Even the greatest disaster of all, the Babylonian exile, was for a formulaic period of '70 years', approximately the lifetime of an individual and the existing generations of a family unit that might extend from father to great grandchild ('third to fourth generation'). These formulaic expressions never expressed God's principle of justice for crimes committed by an individual or for God's ultimate judgement of the individual. In brief, these phrases acknowledge the serious, but limited, collective consequences caused by those who break covenant. But, more importantly they emphasized the enduring faithfulness and mercy of God for those who turn from wickedness and keep covenant.

Abstract

The repeated Old Testament injunction that God 'visits the guilt of the fathers on the sons' raises difficulties for the modern reader who might question the justice or morality of such divine behaviour. This paper explores: the injunction within

its various literary, sociological, historical and theological contexts; how this injunction is applied internally in the Old Testament; and how it differs from the realm of the criminal justice system and the theme of individual responsibility. As result, one learns that this phrase, in its full expression, uses figurative and formulaic language from the legal context of covenant. It belongs to an expression that emphasizes the lasting mercy of God, while still communicating the serious collective consequences of breaking covenant.

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