

Redeeming Judgment

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Lecture Surveying *Redeeming Judgment*: The Judgments of God in the Biblical Story and the Evolution of the Understanding of Judgment

When the average churchgoer hears the expression, “divine judgment,” the idea of the last judgment probably pops to mind. To be sure, fundamentalist preachers may speak of HIV/Aids as judgment for homosexuality, but the vindictiveness of such an idea is repulsive to most of us. If we can’t take these fundamentalist ideas seriously, we fall back on the idea of something that happens after death.

Divine judgment is just about as welcome as death. Like death, it is an unavoidable fact of life if one is living out the Biblical story of redemption. Actually, death is a fact of life no matter what one’s faith, whereas divine judgment is a fact only for those who believe in God, recognize his commandments and aim to please him.

In my view, the last judgment is the culmination of all the judgments passed by God on his human creatures. Final judgment is not even on the horizon of consciousness until the prophets of judgment made their appearance in the 8th through the 6th centuries BCE. Before that time, Israelites and their neighbors alike were aware that their actions could be interrupted or boomerang, and their world could be turned upside down due to the wrath of deity. Israel differed from her neighbors as to whether there was one or many gods that had to be answered to, but everyone was aware of supernatural interventions that overturned human purposes. Some of Israel’s neighbors also expected a divine judgment at death, but for Biblical Israel the final judgment came at the end of history. For those who died before the end, the end would come right after death.

Redeeming Judgment traces the story of divine judgment in Biblical history, particularly Israel’s history. In and after the exile, Israelites became conscious of a “final” judgment on the horizon of all human endeavor. Once that happened, all historical judgments became intimations of the eschatological denouement. The latter not only brought perdition, it brought salvation as well. Historical judgments were also redemptive as well as retributive.

The word “redeem” was added to the title to indicate that I am proposing to *reclaim* the theological teaching of divine judgment. It is also intended to characterize judgment as an essential component of redemption. Judgment, in particular, initiates a transformation of character from bondage to sin to a penitent, reformed person and community.

Old Testament

The first chapters of Genesis set forth the human condition in height and depth. Humans are creatures, made in the image of God, capable of ruling the world of living things. On the other hand, we are sinners. I take the story of the “fall” to be an account of how humans become responsible, how they come to know good and evil. We at first are innocent, children, but we become responsible by “disobeying God’s command,” acting against his will. Mysteriously, the state of responsibility entails irresistible temptation to sin. Adam and Eve are already guilty when they begin to blame each other during the Lord’s interrogation; the “sentence” for their wrongdoing is the struggle for existence.

The state of sin, that is, irresistible temptation, is “inherited” by the couple’s sons: Cain cannot resist envy and kills his brother. There follows the first criminal trial in history. The killer is banished from the soil he has stained with blood.

After a number of generations has come and gone, the Lord concludes that humans are a lost cause, “that every imagination of the thoughts of (the human) heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). God decided to wipe humanity out by flood, but at the last minute, so to speak, he decided to save one family for a new beginning. But God had no illusions: humans would continue imagining evil (Gen. 8:21); he would simply handle it differently.

Once more humans decide to challenge the divine sovereign, to ascend to heaven. This time the Lord thwarts their effort at collective mastery by creating misunderstanding, which causes them to disperse around the world. From now on there will be no unified human history, no collective action to challenge the sovereignty of God. Now human societies and language groups will check each other.

The Lord selects one family to be a blessing to the rest of the families of the world. He accompanies his election with promises to provide the numbers necessary to endure and prosper, and for protection from enemies. Abraham and his offspring are called to cultivate righteousness within and to intercede for nations, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, threatened with judgment. It so happens that the family does not undergo divine judgment during the era of patriarchs and matriarchs, though several incidents, especially the enslavement of Joseph, could have resulted in judgment.

The family moves to Egypt and flourishes until the Egyptians enslave them. In response, the Lord intervenes to liberate them. The struggle between God and the Pharaoh is narrated so as to highlight YHWH’s power. The event becomes judgment on the Egyptian ruler and people only when they renege on their agreement to let the Israelites leave. So far Israel has not been subject to judgment.

Once they pass through the Sea of Reeds, the newly emerging people march to Mount Sinai where they experience a theophany and enter into covenant with the God who brought them out of Egypt. This covenant grants YHWH sovereign authority over Israel and Israel a unique status with the one universal God. The special status calls for a unique law, a law shaped by the over-arching prohibition against recognizing any God besides YHWH. No sooner is the covenant in place than it is broken by the whole people while Moses is away on the mountain receiving further revelation. This is the first grave sin and judgment on Israel’s record; it is analogous to the fall of Eve and Adam. Now the covenant is amended to allow for forgiveness and YHWH dwells among them in the tabernacle. Before they leave Sinai, they receive more law, covering sacrifice, sanctity and civil rectitude.

Before we launch into the history of the people after Sinai, with its national actions and judgment, we consider the status of the individual within the covenant community. Proverbs guide male youths of the people to choose a lifestyle congruent with the healthy functioning of the community. The teachers of Proverbs were convinced that what was good for the people was good for individuals as well. The Psalms have prayers for individuals to use in times of crisis. The prayers allow a person to enlist God’s intervention to deliver him, or to accuse God of betrayal and hostility. The transaction between supplicant and the Lord has a quasi-judicial character.

When the people leave Sinai, the hardships of the desert and the fearful report of the scouts precipitate a rebellion, prompting the Lord to condemn the people to live in the wilderness until the exodus generation dies off. This is an event of divine judgment on the whole people of God, a precursor of the exile of Israel and of Judah in later centuries. Moses himself later says, however, that this divine decision was not a full-fledged judicial judgment, but disciplining; the 40 year wilderness sojourn was training, so to speak, for living faithful lives in the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 8, also Hosea 2 and 13; Jer. 2:1-13).

More rebellions break out during the 40-year sojourn, but God “commutes,” so to speak, collective judgment and simply punishes the instigators.

At the end of their period of waiting, when the exodus generation has died off and the new generation is about to assault the Promised Land, Moses delivers a grand parting speech, hands on his leadership to Joshua, ascends Mt. Pisgah and dies. The address imparts courage and firm resolve to eradicate the Canaanites and erase their religious culture. The law given at

Sinai/Horeb is re-interpreted to apply to the conditions the people will face in the settled land. The rhetoric emphasizes corporate responsibility for maintaining a holy, righteous and just society. The address concludes with predictions that the people will arouse YHWH's wrath by apostasy and disobedience, and the people will have to be rescued from exile. These concluding chapters speak to those who live at the time spoken of in the last chapter of Second Kings.

Israel has been promised the land from the time of the patriarchs, but now, once Moses has died and Joshua has taken the role of leader, they must conquer it, kill or drive out its inhabitants and settle down. This theme raises serious questions about the impartiality of Israel's God. Some passages justify the conquest as divine judgment on the previous inhabitants as well as the fulfillment of a promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Interpretation of the conquest as divine judgment is often confused with commands to the Israelites not to imitate Canaanite practices. Israel has its own divinely revealed religious and ethical norms, and must not deviate; however, the Canaanites cannot be condemned for not following uniquely Israelite norms. A few passages (Leviticus 18, 20) explicitly claim that the Canaanites arouse God's anger by their sexual mores, but it is uncertain whether they were rightfully held accountable to a law revealed to Israel. Thus, it is an open question whether the conquest meets the criteria of genuine divine judgment. Perhaps we should adopt the view of Deuteronomy 9 that their guilt is between them and God of the nations.

There is another question regarding the conquest: How can "ethnic cleansing," even genocide, be justified? This is said to be commanded. The reason is to keep the Israelites from accommodating to Canaanite religion and ethics. We must ask: Is it, and to what degree is it legitimate to destroy a society and culture because it tempts the people of God? It would seem to be better to build barriers between peoples, no intermarriage or cultural "exchange." There are problems with this strategy, too, but it would at least keep the people of God "pure" from accommodation with a suspect lifestyle.

Israel is judged for failure to comply with the rules of "holy war." In one case, the thief and his family are executed for taking booty from the battlefield. In another, the covenant between the Israelites and Gibeonites obtained by ruse still stands but the Gibeonites must serve in the temple to retain their status as members of the people.

Joshua, in his retirement speech, warns the people of a deadly judgment for apostasy and idolatry, and predicts that the Israelites will indeed betray their God. In the years that follow, there are periodic judgments for apostasy, followed by repentance and deliverance under a "judge." These accounts of sin and judgment are schematic in the extreme, designed to warn the reader about the dangers of apostasy.

The period of judges ends with narratives that expose how undisciplined the people were without a central authority, a king. In the books of Samuel and Kings we read the story of the establishment of the united monarchy under Saul, followed by David and Solomon, and then the division of the citizenry into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, at the ascension of Rehoboam. The history of the two kingdoms comes to an end with the exile of Israel and then, a century and quarter later, of Judah.

The establishment of the monarchy brought with it the office of the prophet. Prophets are agents of God who direct the course of monarchical history. A prophet inaugurated the kingship, gave legitimacy to the Davidic dynasty, divided the kingdom at the succession of Rehoboam, and various prophets pronounced judgment on king after king. In these prophets the Lord exercised his role as judge of rulers who were invulnerable to human courts.

The history of the nation from conquest to exile not only covers the judgments of individual rulers, but also builds a case, so to speak, for the condemnation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Both kingdoms were subject to God's capital punishment, so to speak. The last book ends with the leadership classes of both kingdoms in exile and the homeland with mixed populations. Nevertheless, the story ends with signs of hope, and the last chapters of Deuteronomy address readers with a call to repentance and promise of restoration.

The Eighth Century prophets of judgment, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, are the culmination of the message of divine judgment in history. They are called classical prophets

because they set the standard for Biblical prophecy. Each reports a call to prophecy, and at the heart of that call is the commission to pronounce God's judgment. Whatever else they say is postscript, so to speak.

These prophets were so important that each was given a book in his name. Each book locates the prophet in time, so the prophet's words could be "inserted" into the story told in the book of Second Kings. The books were not narrated, though, but preserve oracles of the prophet in an order designed to convey the essential message of the prophet. They were preserved for those who knew the outcome of the prophet's judgments, and needed to learn the lesson of what was said and what happened.

The message of the four eighth century prophets is shocking: the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, thus, the entire people of God, are so deeply corrupted that there is no escaping the wrath of God. Amos accused the people of oppressing and enslaving the poor while the rich enjoyed luxury and security. Hosea decried Israel's apostasy, idolatry and immorality, and political policies of foreign alliance and military armament to save the ruling class. Isaiah charged Israel and Judah with social injustice and dangerous foreign alliances and military preparation. Micah inveighed against the same offenses as these other prophets, with a particular emphasis on the responsibility of those in power, mostly living in the city of Jerusalem.

These four prophets all predicted doom for the people, though all foresaw a continuation of the people, in exile, and a national revival. Though the prospect of repentance and reform is occasionally broached, the four prophets were convinced that the people were so mired in their sin that they could not be changed without radical disruption. The political order would collapse and the people would be taken off as war prisoners. Only then would they be malleable enough for reformation.

A modern reader may wonder how God is able to bring judgment on a nation, or any entity in time and space. God isn't on the same plane as humans, so his actions – both to save and to judge – must be performed by agents or by the sequences of events. Isaiah introduces the idea that Assyria is YHWH's agent to judge his people; they entangle themselves in the political machinations of their day and thereby contribute to their doom.

The prophecy of these messengers of God was fulfilled in the destruction of the kingdom of Israel and the deportation of its leading citizens. The Judean countryside also experienced Assyrian wrath, but Jerusalem survived – by a strange turn of events, perhaps a miracle. After that Hezekiah reigned over a truncated territory, and his son Manasseh succeeded him. Manasseh ruled a long time and kept in the good graces of the Assyrians, but Israelites remembered him as the worst sort of apostate and oppressive ruler. The author of Second Kings is so shocked by Manasseh's record that he blames the exile of Judah to Babylon on this king (2 Kgs 21:10-15).

There were no prophets during the reign of Manasseh, but we have a new outbreak of prophecy during the reign of Josiah. Of the four (Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah), Jeremiah is the most noteworthy. He too is a prophet of judgment. His challenge was different than his eighth century predecessors: their messages had become literature and attained a sacred status, but now the message had to be revised, made a living word for Judeans at the end of the seventh century. At first Jeremiah sounds rather like a disciple of Hosea. He is speaking during the period of Josiah's Reform, which he evidently supported. Thus, his message of judgment is rather conditional; there is hope that the Judeans will reform and avert destruction and exile. When Josiah is killed by the Egyptian army on its way to support Assyria, and his cynical son Jehoiakim is put on the throne by the Egyptians, Jeremiah becomes convinced of Judah's doom. No matter what they do, it seems to nail one more nail in the coffin.

The end comes a step closer when Jehoiakim attempts to throw off the Babylonian yoke in favor of Egypt, provoking reprisal by the empire. Fortunately he dies before the Babylonian army reaches Jerusalem, and the city capitulates without resistance. Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin is taken, along with several thousand leading citizens of Jerusalem, into exile as "hostages," so to speak; Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah is put on the throne.

Zedekiah was a weak king and an anti-Babylonian faction around him took control and entangled Judah in one conspiracy after another. In 598 BCE, Babylon assaulted Judah and this time Jerusalem was destroyed and the Davidic dynasty removed from the throne, never again to reign. All along Jeremiah sought to foil the policies of the anti-Babylonian faction and avert the complete destruction of Jerusalem, while apparently believing that destruction and exile were inevitable.

During the final decade of Judah's existence, another prophet of judgment was called from among the exiles living in Mesopotamia. His name is Ezekiel. He is just as "fatalistic" as Jeremiah. He is convinced that the history of Judah is corrupted from the very first, and can lead only to destruction. Once Jerusalem falls, he begins to announce the judgment of Judah's neighbors: one of the most striking is the judgment of Tyre, not a city which had oppressed others, but a commercial center. It so happens that Tyre did not succumb to Babylonian assault, nor did Egypt, one of the other nations condemned by both Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

None of the prophets of judgment thought the story would end with judgment. There would be no need for prophecy of judgment if it were the last word. This is specifically true if the prophet proclaimed inevitable punishment. Moreover, our books of oracles are designed for later generations. The books of prophecy teach later generations what the events that ended the kingdom phase of the people of God mean. Events of judgment posit meaning just as much as saving events like the exodus.

We find words of salvation scattered through the books announcing judgment. Usually these promises of salvation are independent of the pronouncement of judgment. They are answers to the people's plea for deliverance. The response of the people to the judgment of God, announced by the prophets, executed by foreign powers, is preserved in communal laments. In the laments of the Psalter, the people protest their treatment vehemently. They throw the words of God "back in his face." They deny responsibility for their condition, and blame God for betrayal, negligence or hostility. In the book of Lamentations, which arises from the ashes of a destroyed Jerusalem, the people hover between protest and penitence.

The prophets were called on to respond to these cries. In Hosea and Jeremiah, we have laments of the people (composed by the prophet) and prophetic responses. Sometimes the prophet rejects the people's cry, but after the disaster has run its course, the Lord offers consolation and hope through the prophet. The people are expected to approach God in contrition, and God will respond in mercy.

One prophetic book, Isaiah, journeys much further along the way from judgment to redemption. The book has three major prophetic voices and many other anonymous contributors. All the book is issued under the authority of Isaiah of Jerusalem; we are called upon to read the other prophetic writings as extensions of the message commissioned by YHWH in the year Uzziah died (Isaiah 6). Isaiah is commissioned to proclaim judgment on Jerusalem and Judah. The prophet known as Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is told to declare the end of judgment and the beginning of salvation. Chapters 56-66 are also commissioned as a message of salvation, though the addressees may be restricted to the poor and poor in spirit.

Isaiah 1-39 all fall under the heading of judgment, but there are constant promises of salvation as well. The judgment of Jerusalem will purge the city and nation of the evil-doers and one might say the grip of evil, restoring it to justice and righteousness. It will become the "capital" of the nations, who will go there to receive inspired decisions on conflicts between nations (thereby eliminating the need for war). The Davidic king will also take on the role of establishing justice and righteousness. The over-all picture is: judgment will prepare the way for a new order for Judah and the nations. YHWH has a "plan" which he is executing, and judgment is an essential component of his redemptive action.

Isaiah 40-55 brings the reading audience "forward" in time, to 550-538 BCE, when the people are languishing in Babylonian exile. The prophet announces the victory of Cyrus of Persia over all other powers, particularly Babylon, and that Cyrus will free the Judean exiles and allow them to return home. The new time of salvation will never again be shattered by divine judgment. The salvation of the exiles will be accompanied by the judgment of the gods of the

empire and the conversion of their adherents. Woven into the oracles are the “servant songs” which speak of a redemptive figure. At times this figure speaks in first person, as if he were the prophetic author of Isaiah 40-55; but at other times either God or humans speak about him. Most striking is the fact that he suffers vicariously for others.

The last eleven chapters of Isaiah take the reading audience forward a few decades, when a contingent of exiles have returned to Jerusalem. The exiles have been permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild, but living conditions are hardly ideal. The divine promises must have been held back because sin again pervades the people. No matter what God does, sin persists. But the promises that judgment is over and done means that the prophets cannot adopt a cyclical view of history (vacillating between judgment and salvation). The only alternative is that sin is forcing God to withhold full fulfillment. Near the end of the book we hear of an unconditional salvation, eschatological in scope, which results in a division between the humble, penitent, intensely spiritual Jews and an arrogant, oppressive, ritual-bound class of Jews who will be excluded from salvation. Though we have no final trial scene in the book of Isaiah, we have the makings of a “final judgment.”

The book of Isaiah, taken together, encompasses the message of judgment, redemption and restoration. The events of judgment and exile, of forgiveness and return, and of disappointment and reassessment must be incorporated into one theological scheme. In the very last chapters of Isaiah we glimpse a new horizon, as it were, a final judgment and the establishing of a new heaven and earth. This is the culmination and completion of the judgments of history, and the reader stands between the already and not yet. The book as a whole provides the reader with the framework of a comprehensive theological scheme.

The inheritors of the new heaven and earth, according to Isaiah 66:2, are men or women who are “humble and contrite in spirit and tremble() at my word.” This new ideal can be called “penitential piety.” We have a number of prayers in the Psalter which exemplify it (above all, Pss. 50, 51, 106 and 130). It eschews blaming God for what goes wrong, instead it blames the self, who is deeply embedded in sin. This new piety was quite infectious and became characteristic of Second Temple Judaism.

The older form of piety, in which the supplicant either sought to persuade God to intervene in his behalf or accused God of indifference or injustice, did not disappear. The individual laments of the Psalter are predominantly of this kind, and the book of Job can be read as a defense of “classical” lamenting and an exposé of penitential piety. Ironically, most interpreters have construed the final exchange between the Lord and Job as conforming to penitential piety.

The concluding chapter on the Old Testament identifies a number of Psalms which praise God for his judgment and a few Psalms that look forward to a final judgment. Those who fear, despise or reject divine judgment need to realize that it was regarded as a good in most OT passages. When God judges, good is established and evil banished. The expectation of a final judgment is an expectation of a full resolution and rectification of the conflicts and contradictions of history.

New Testament

The message of divine judgment doesn’t stop at the beginning of the Christian testament. Many believers say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, whereas the New Testament proclaims a God of love. This slogan is badly mistaken. Jesus proclaims divine judgment along with forgiveness and salvation. The message about Jesus retains the prospect of judgment as well as salvation. Paul sees human history under the sign of God’s wrath and redemption for those who throw themselves on God’s mercy offered in Christ.

Here is the way I lay out the argument for the New Testament portion of the book. The eschatological or final judgment is brought proleptically into the present in the message of John the Baptist. The heart of his message is a warning to his contemporaries that the end is at hand and only those who divorce themselves from the present, evil age have a chance to be saved. Baptism is a symbolic renunciation of the sinful life each and every one of his Jewish audience

has lived. Jesus accepts John's message and takes up the calling of announcing the arrival of the Kingdom. For Jesus the coming of the Kingdom is good news, especially for those who suffer in the present age. Those who do not receive the Kingdom are, as John warned, destined for wrath.

The Gospels do not stop with Jesus' message and acts of healing, they go on to proclaim Jesus' life, death and resurrection an act of God. As Jesus travels about preaching and healing, he stirs up opposition. The Pharisees in Galilee do not really seem to threaten his life, but they do indicate what will happen when Jesus goes to Jerusalem. Jesus takes power over the city and temple symbolically, but the authorities conspire to eliminate him and stifle any unrest among the crowds. Jesus is arrested, tried and executed by the temple authorities and Roman governor. Practically everyone in the Gospel story is implicated one way or another in this act. But God reverses Jesus' fate, and in raising him declares everyone else guilty. However, Jesus' death is simultaneously vicarious – redemptive for those who accept its saving significance. From now on, entrance into the Kingdom entails belief in Jesus as suffering servant as well as Son of Man.

Some readers of the New Testament might say that we have been focusing on the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of John is different, and it gets it right when it says, "For God sent the son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). A closer inspection of the Gospel, however, shows that it is not substantially different than the Synoptics on this question. Those who believe in Jesus are under his everlasting protection; they enter into eternal life. Those who do not believe condemn themselves, they choose darkness, they are ruled by Satan. On the cross, Satan's power is broken and Christ becomes lord of all. Several other times Christ is said to atone for all. The Fourth Gospel leaves us uncertain as to whether all are saved or only believers. However, never is judgment abolished; at most it is transformed.

No book of the New Testament has as much judgment as the Apocalypse of John. The book tells the story of the world from the time of the incarnation until the establishment of the New Jerusalem. The focus is on humans in mass and the demonic forces that drive nations, cities, and institutions. We read of God's judgment on the fallen world in two separate, parallel visions (4:1 – 11:11, 12:1 – 22:5). The messianic figure is at the same time a sacrificial lamb. He and his adherents do not participate in the power conflict between God and the powers of this fallen world, but prepare a phase in the complex transition from the fallen to the redeemed world. God uses coercive power in judgment, but redemption is through sacrifice and withdrawal.

The background of the Gospel message of justification by faith, according to Paul in Romans, is the realization that all humans have sinned and are under the shadow of divine judgment. The first three chapters of Romans (following the letter opening in 1:1-17) support this contention. Actually Paul believes that the only premise that needs proof is that all humans know or should know that there is only one transcendent Creator and Sovereign – one God. But humans have deified creatures in place of the true God and their punishment is the whole spectrum of immorality, injustice and violence so characteristic of our race.

Do Gentiles, who do not have the law, know what they are doing is wrong? Paul says yes, their behavior shows that they (we) have a law written on the heart. Jews have an advantage, they possess the revealed law, but Gentiles do know the law well enough to be held accountable. As for Jews, they may know the law but they frequently disobey. Indeed, neither Jews nor Gentiles are good enough to earn God's approval. If anyone is to be saved, it must be God's merciful gift. Indeed, Christ is that gift and he is available to faith, and the power to have faith is given by the Spirit of God.

The death of Jesus on the cross has the effect of justifying sinners. Paul uses the language of sacrifice, but certainly doesn't offer a fully articulate doctrine of atonement. Perhaps Jesus dies as a substitute for the sinner, but I would propose the alternative that Christ transforms judgment into a redemptive process: the sinner "dies to sin" in baptism, and is raised to new life. That new life still entails struggling with temptations. However, it is not burdened with remorse, but is elevated with joy and dignity. The Spirit of Christ, according to Paul, takes over one's will and enables the fulfillment of the good intended by the Law.

Romans 9-11 deal with the Jewish people and their troubled relationship with Christ and Christians. Jews are God's elect and God will not abandon them. They have not accepted their own messiah because God has hardened their hearts in order to direct missionary work to Gentiles. When a Gentile accepts Christ, he is "grafted into" Israel; at the end Jews will become jealous of the grace shown Gentiles and also accept Christ, erasing the division between Jew and Gentile.

Some Theologians of Judgment

At the end of Part I, I survey a number of theologians who have applied the concept of divine judgment to historical events: Dan Via, H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, and Desmond Tutu. This list shows that it can be done by thinkers of stature. At the end of Part II, I examined Jurgen Moltmann's doctrine of the end; he argues for universal salvation.

Summary and Theological Follow-Up

If we take the Bible as a whole, judgment occurs not only at the end of history, but again and again in the course of human events. The final judgment is the culmination of historical judgments, completing, correcting and transforming the numerous "rough and ready" judgments that occur over time.

For an historical event to be divine judgment, it must be revealed by God or recognizable on the basis of theological wisdom. As Amos says, "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (3:7). On the other hand, the prophet is called to persuade the ones judged that God has declared them guilty and slated them for retribution. The audience should be able to confirm the truth of prophecy from their own experience and understanding.

An event of judgment always entails retribution. Those who deny that God would punish according to the rule of *lex talionis* do not know the Biblical God. Of course, retribution need not be as literal as an eye for an eye. Moreover, judgment may also be reformative. Indeed, divine judgment is never solely retributive, it intends to make the perpetrator contrite about what he or she has done (or failed to do); yet both perpetrator and observer should recognize that he or she has received what they have deserved. Only then will the sinner be on the way to conversion.

We notice in the Old Testament that God also changes from event to event; he adopts new strategies for handling human sin. In Genesis, the Lord God momentarily gives up on humanity, then decides to save Noah's family. At the end of the flood, the Lord promises never to destroy everyone again; now it will be a carefully distributive justice. After the golden calf was made, and destroyed by Moses, the covenant incorporates a provision for forgiveness and distributive justice. Human sinfulness will continue no matter what happens, but God continually adopts new strategies for neutralizing its pernicious effects.

Most monotheistic doctrines of God do not allow for changes in the Godhead. If God keeps changing strategies, one must assume that he is not all-knowing, all-powerful or completely benevolent. I suspect that the reader of Genesis 2 would find the depiction of God deficient, and chalk it up to a naive theological mind. This is unfortunate, for the authors of these narratives have a very sophisticated understanding of God; he accommodates himself to the sophistication of the humans he is dealing with. Perhaps some idea like that could be grafted into a "Process" theology that allows for interaction between God and the finite world. We need not endorse any particular version of Process theology to appropriate the basic position.

We would still insist that God remains constant. We have to be able to say that his judgments in the past still stand, that he remains consistent with himself and in relationship to his creatures. The changes in history cannot render past actions of God obsolete. There is no "progress" in that sense. God remains true to himself, remains the same, though he constantly adapts to the situation at hand. This is the presupposition behind the reading of Scripture as word of God.

We should also reply to those who regard any idea of God acting in history to be mythological or otherwise out of sync with serious historical explanation. It is true that the “science of history,” like natural science, rules out God as a cause of any finite event. But that is acceptable to the position advocated here: God does not directly intervene in the finite world, but uses “agents,” from meteorological phenomena to historical entities and forces. It is the prophet who identifies the “agent” and shows how the course of events resolves the tension between the historical situation and God’s will. God’s intervention is in and through the interaction of finite beings. It is as if the historical situation is put into tension with God’s will and forced to evolve toward resolution.

How about the claim of miracles? There is no question that interruptions in the expected flow of things occurs in Biblical narratives. It is quite possible, as Nicolas Wolterstorff argues (in *Divine Discourse*), that divine interventions could occur in a scientific account of events. The neutral observer would have to say that the event had no known explanation, but a believer could see God’s direct intervention. We do not have to take recourse to divine interventions of this sort, however, to speak of God active in history; only rarely do the prophets predict such occurrences.

Now we come to final judgment. I would take this concept to claim that no judgment comes afterward. In a sense, there is no *after* final judgment; that is, if we think of the last judgment as the end of time. Stated more soberly, God brings all the issues of time and history to a resolution. No follow-up, so to speak, is necessary.

This way of conceiving of the final judgment raises problems for locating it in a series. One might think of a line that has an eternity mark at the end. Thus, the last or final judgment is a part of the series but not really located as one point on the line. Every point on the line is equidistant to the final, eternal event. That is, one does not grow closer to the last judgment as times goes on (despite what Paul says [where?]).

Theologians of hope protested against Karl Barth’s eschatology of the eternal present (Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*); their criticism might fall on my reasoning as well. Yet, my impression of Moltmann’s view is of an unconditional future – one might say, “future-ness.” That may be a better way of conceiving the final judgment. In any case, we have to admit that eschatology, like creation, is beyond our capacity to think. It is nevertheless always on the horizon of time.

Any scenario of what will take place on judgment day leaves conundrums. Let’s begin with the most common scenario in the popular imagination: those who have lived a good life (however that is defined) will go to heaven at death, while those who have done evil are destined for hell, a place of eternal torment. This scenario gives free choice and retribution their due, but has no place for God’s redeeming grace and human reformation.

If one is uneasy about God torturing the damned eternally, one can simply have the damned passed over on judgment day; they have died once for all time. That has the down side of not restoring retributive justice, but it does save God from sadism.

So far there has been no place for God’s redemptive action. The Christian scenario assumes that all humans are guilty and deserve damnation. If anyone is to be saved, God must make up the difference, so to speak. And, according to Paul, God has done so in Christ’s cross. God himself bears the damnation due sinners, so they can be regarded as righteous.

But there is a complication: Are all humans atoned for by Christ’s sacrifice? If one were to say yes, then all are saved. But alas, they are saved by a legal fiction. Whatever happened to the idea that salvation entails a transformation of a sinner into a righteous person?

This is why atonement demands an “anthropological correlate,” faith. To receive the gift of atonement, the sinner must receive the offer and live by it. The effort to live a righteous life is called sanctification. One of the on-going debates of Christian theology is how much “progress” can be made during one’s life.

How about those who do not believe, who do not accept the offer of righteousness? One could conclude that they are destined to die along with the world. If so, atonement is not

universal because it has not redeemed this segment of humanity; either they will perish along with the world or they will be sent to hell.

This scheme, it should be noted, entails predestination. That is, God grants the power to believe and attain sanctification to some, but doesn't do so to others. This line of thought imputes an arbitrary willfulness to God. Why should he want to condemn some of his creatures to eternal punishment or eternal death if he could save them?

One might suggest that those who do not come to faith in this life will be converted at the last judgment. We might adopt the doctrine of purgatory (instead of, not in addition to, hell). The problem with this solution is that it involves continued "development" after death. In other words, we look for the resolution of the contradictions of history outside of history.

One might continue to spin out wrinkles in the scenarios, but I doubt that anyone can escape conundrums like those we found. As far as I can see, none of the scenarios of the last judgment prove satisfactory. I would, rather, abandon the quest for rational coherence and take the truth of each. The end must include retribution and redemption, both free choice and Spirit-given faith, atonement for all and sanctification for those who believe. We should hope for the redemption of all humans, but admit the possibility of damnation (including ourselves). The final judgment should resolve all the contradictions of human existence, but at least for now the conundrums remain.

Dale Patrick
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Lord our God, Judge of the world, Your holiness reveals all our righteousness as filthy rags; You make the judges of the world as vanity; You resist the proud and give grace to the humble—we worship You in Your majesty of goodness.

O God, Redeemer of the world, You take no delight in the death of the wicked but desire that all men and women come to the knowledge of life, and in Christ You suffered with us and for us—we worship You who are the fountain of mercy and the Rock of salvation.

*You have created us in Your image, O Lord, endowed us with freedom, and when we use that freedom to defy Your will, You contrive by every stern measure of justice and every guile of mercy to reclaim us. How marvelous are Your works in human history, how terrible Your judgments, yet how merciful Your goodness to those who are of contrite heart. Ursula Niebuhr, ed., *Justice and Mercy*, by Reinhold Niebuhr (New York, etc.: Harper & Row, 1974).*