
The Godly and the Good Life: The Relationship Between Character and Circumstance in Biblical Thought

by David L. Thompson

The Problem

The question as to whether the godly do or even should receive “the good life” (health, prosperity, longevity) is of immense theological and practical significance and has been for millennia. Some implications are obvious. If there is a direct or even a close relationship between moral character and life circumstance, then what happens to one in life should say something both about God’s attitude toward one and the quality of one’s piety.

The current revival of well-intentioned but simplistic presentations of the relationship between piety and prosperity is evidence of enduring practical interest in the subject.¹ The fact that such works can be profusely furnished with supporting biblical texts should also indicate that the question may be significant for biblical theology.

The problems raised by such a proposition are nowhere described more starkly than in Ecclesiastes 9:1-2. There, one of Israel’s most provocative writers candidly observed that looking only at life’s circumstances, especially death that snares all men, one could say nothing either about the quality of individuals’ piety or about God’s disposition toward them. We are obviously in God’s hand, he said, but “whether it is for love or hate man does not know” (Ecc. 9:1). He continues in language strikingly reminiscent of contemporary existentialists stating that, viewed from the perspective that the godly receive the good life, “Everything before them (men) is an absurdity, since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked” (Ecc. 9:2).²

Dr. David L. Thompson is Assistant Professor of Biblical Literature at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Less fervent souls posed the same problem more caustically to Malachi. This prophet preached God's call for sincere worship (Mal. 1:6-14) and His promise of abundant blessing for an honest tithe (Mal. 3:8-12). His skeptical listeners retorted that, as far as they could observe, it would make no practical difference whether they obeyed or did not. To them God appeared to delight in evildoers (Mal. 2:17) and such persons seemed to prosper, putting God to the test with impunity (Mal. 3:15). Such amazing statements as those of the Preacher's especially led one to suspect that a study of the whole matter could provide an opportunity to think through again the phenomenon of biblical revelation itself. To a partial outline of such a study we now turn.

The Background

In the matter of the results of obedience to Yahweh, as in many other matters, God's early efforts to teach His people met them at their own, *ultimately* inadequate level. With regard to reward and punishment (one may call it that, though there is more involved) God first revealed Himself to Israel in terms familiar to them from their environment.

This accommodation contrasts with some points at which Yahweh's agenda of instruction called for a radical departure from the thought of Israel's environment, a radical, cultural "mutation" born of divine revelation. In a world replete with gods and their images, where personal and cultic religion was inconceivable without fertility worship and magic, Israel's proscription of idols³ and her conception of Yahweh as essentially asexual and beyond the reach of sympathetic magic⁴ are but two among many such astounding points. Thus, while it is unwise to ground a case for divine revelation on an exaggerated view of Israel's uniqueness,⁵ the other (humanistic) extreme which insists that one "must describe novel configurations in Israel's religion as having their origin in an orderly set of relationships which follow the usual typological sequences of historical change"⁶ (i.e., must not resort to "theological" causes) will not do justice to biblical evidence either. A preferable approach avoids both of these extremes and sees the whole process of accommodation and instruction as legitimately "revelation." Hosea's beautiful image of Yahweh's teaching young Israel to walk as a father would take a tottering child by the hand (Hos. 11:1-4) is a model here.

To return to the point, while Yahweh radically altered Israel's concepts of who God might be and how they might relate to Him, He allowed them in the beginning to conceive the results of obedience or disobedience to Him in terms familiar to them from their environment. A survey of the literature from the nations surrounding Israel makes this clear. So writing on "the good life" in Mesopotamia, Thorkild Jacobsen comments,

Thus the way of obedience, of service and worship, is the way to achieve protection; and it is also the way to earthly success, to the highest values in Mesopotamian life: health and long life, honored standing in the community, many sons, wealth.⁷

This theological construct of life undergirds, for example, "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" from the Cassite period in Babylon (mid-second millennium B.C., roughly contemporary with or shortly prior to the time of Moses). Here a sufferer reasons that his illness is a lot deserved by a wrong-doer, not one devoted as he is to the gods.⁸ Another Mesopotamian work, probably later, advises, "Reverence (for the god) produces well-being, sacrifice prolongs life,"⁹ while a prayer from the Neo-Assyrian period, roughly contemporary with the Israelite monarchy, reasons from the same viewpoint as that of the "righteous sufferer" in the Cassite period of the previous millennium.¹⁰

Turning from Mesopotamia to Asia Minor, a Hittite "Daily Prayer of the King" (fourteenth century B.C.) breathes the same air. In its hymnic section it is affirmed, "The godly man is dear to thee, oh Telepinus, and thou . . . doest exalt him."¹¹ Then in the concluding section the prayer continues with the request that Telepinus bless the royal family and Hatti land (the Hittites) with . . .

enduring life, health, long years Grant them sons . . . !
Grant them fertility of grain (and) vine, of sheep, cattle (and
people)! Grant them a man's valiant (and) victorious
weapon! Set the countries of the enemy beneath their feet
From Hatti land drive forth the evil fever, plague, famine
and misery! (And the opposite for the enemy!)¹²

Down the coast and closer to Israel, the people of Ugarit exhibit

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the same assumptions about the relationship between the godly and the good life. In this instance, one may cite the legal practice of using an oath not only to guarantee truth, but to discern falsehood. The serious assumption here is that a dishonest person actually will refuse an oath before a deity, fearing reprisal from the gods for a false oath (the real theological background of the now meaningless practice of requiring oaths in court).¹³ It is not an accident that in Ugaritic mythology the river is Judge River, a designation one would expect to derive from the practice of trial by ordeal that rests on the same theological construct. (Throw the accused in the water: the innocent survive, the guilty drown.)

In Egypt, already in the third millennium, this viewpoint is attested. “The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-Hotep,” which in general counsels on how to be a good state official without reference to the gods, also includes the following note: “Satisfy thy clients with what has accrued to thee, what accrues to one whom god favors.”¹⁴

Finally one may recall the reasoning of Israel’s immediate neighbor, the Moabite king, Mesha (ninth century B.C.). From the same premise he saw conquest of Moab by kings Omri and Ahab of Israel as evidence that Chemosh (Moab’s god) was angry with his land.¹⁵

Examples could be multiplied. The few cited here were taken from all points of the compass, from the third millennium through the mid-first millennium, and from divergent literary genre — hymns, prayers, letters of state, wisdom texts and public commemorative documents in order to show that the viewpoint summarized by Jacobsen on “the good life” in Mesopotamia was one of the bedrock assumptions of the whole ancient Near East.

The Godly and the Good Life: The Old Testament’s Dominant View

The significance of the preceding material for this discussion is that the viewpoint reflected is much the same viewpoint assumed in the Sinaitic covenant.¹⁶ A review of the blessings and curses which conclude the covenant, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, supports this. Obedience to the covenant brings immediate concrete blessing in this life. Disobedience brings the opposite — curses.

This view was not rigidly imposed on all of life so that every evil could necessarily be explained in terms of disobedience. Neither was service to God reduced to an exchange of worship for gain. The

narrative of Abraham's odyssey focuses on the nature of his relationship with Yahweh quite apart from "whether Abraham experiences anything of God's award or not."¹⁷ And Hosea recognized blessings of field and flock as coming from God, in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness (Hos. 2:4-9). Nevertheless, the content of the covenant at the point addressed here had a substantial influence on Israel's thought and provided the theological perspective for extensive amounts of the Old Testament.

The classical prophets preached assuming the *public* conscience in both Judah *and* North Israel to be informed by the covenant's laws and blessing-curse epilogues which were formally an integral part of that covenant. Amos' assumption clearly was that Israel should have interpreted "one calamity after another, famine, drought, failure of the harvest, failure in war, and epidemics" as Yahweh "knocking at their door," as von Rad correctly observes,¹⁸ i.e., as immediate, concrete results of their sin, brought in accord with the covenant's blessings and curses (Amos 4:6-11).

This point, of course, is not universally granted for various reasons. For example, one of the most outstanding recent students of the prophets, Hans Wolff, does not allow that Amos 4:6-11, belongs to the prophet himself. For stylistic reasons (which are not compelling) and precisely because of the obvious parallels with Leviticus 26 and more loosely Deuteronomy 28, Wolff feels these strophes in Amos 4 stand "in proximity to the Holiness Code, which probably came into being in the latest period of the pre-exilic cultus" (i.e., at least a century after Amos).¹⁹ In other words the blessing-curse formulae are not part of the backdrop against which Amos could have preached, because they belong to literature formulated only late in the monarchy. In this regard, Wolff is heir of the classic critical view and its treatment of Deuteronomy. D. R. Driver, for example, in 1895, viewed Deuteronomy as heir of the prophets, especially Hosea,²⁰ and regarded the parallels between Amos 4 and Deuteronomy 28 as unconvincing and incapable of proving Amos' familiarity with the blessing-curse formulae of the covenant.²¹ Driver failed to see that similarity in content is not really the point. Amos' whole preaching *assumes* the covenant's *curse*s. Without them the logic of his warnings fails completely (so Wolff's solution would be preferable to Driver's if these are the only alternatives).

From a different tack, Martin Noth has attempted to prove that the blessing-curse option in Deuteronomy presents a real way-of-life

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and way-of-death choice that can only have its *sitz im leben* in the late monarchy, based on later experience, not on old covenant form.²²

All of these measures are proven unnecessary by recent studies in the relationship of the prophets to treaty curses in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. On the basis of extensive analysis, Delbert Hillers argues convincingly *against* the fragmentation of the lengthy blessing-curse list in Deuteronomy 28 and just as convincingly *for* the prophets' knowledge of Israelite covenant form, complete with blessings and curses already in the eighth century B.C.²³ Not only so, but this understanding of the relationship between character and circumstance remained the prophetic frame of reference on into the restoration period. This is clear from the preaching of Haggai and Malachi. Haggai especially reasoned from external natural effects he observed in the community (poor harvest and hard times, Hag. 1:6) to moral causes (neglect of the temple building project for selfish reasons, 1:4,9). The passages noted earlier in Malachi show the same point of view (Mal. 2:17; 3:8-12, 13-15). Israel's historical books are written from that perspective as well.²⁴

There are important exceptions to be observed, the most striking of which is Isaiah 53. Here the sufferer is not only God's righteous servant (instead of a wicked man), but He suffers redemptively for the sins of others (Is. 53:4-12). The fact that such a situation troubled some sectors of later Judaism is reflected in the Targum's treatment of this chapter. There Yahweh's Anointed does not suffer — He is made the victor. We, not He, are "accounted stricken before Yahweh" (4). "He was praying and answered," not "was oppressed and afflicted" (7). "*He* shall deliver the *nations* like a lamb to the slaughter" (7).²⁵ But this striking theme is not pursued by Isaiah, and certainly does not pervade either the book or the prophets.

The personal suffering of such prophets as Jeremiah and Hosea demonstrated the need for additional revelation on the relationship between covenant-keeping and personal well-being. Jeremiah's suffering was the direct result of his obedience to Yahweh's commission. And the persecution he consistently met led to a spiritual and vocational crisis of major proportions in his life (Jer. 15). Nor does the story have a happy ending. His career ends in "disgrace" in Egypt (Jer. 42-44). But the matter is not pursued from the standpoint of the general relationship between character and circumstance. For these experiences of the prophets, the rigid

application of the covenant's blessings to individuals and the traditional wisdom description of the devout person's lot were not sufficient.

The covenant's view of the godly and the good life that provided the framework for much of the prophets' preaching appears also in Israel's wisdom and worship literature. It is well known that in Israel's wisdom literature the cult, the covenant, and the history of Israel are conspicuously absent.²⁶ It is also well known that Israel's wisdom literature is among the most cosmopolitan of her works, with close ties in form and content to the wisdom heritage of the ancient Near East. Proverbs 22:17-24:22 bears literary ties as close as any yet observed in the Old Testament to an extant, extra-biblical work in its relationship with "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet," an Egyptian composition of perhaps the early first millennium B.C.²⁷ And the Book of Proverbs itself identifies material drawn from outside Israel in chapters 30:1-31:9. Still, this writer remains unconvinced that the Old Testament's wisdom literature is really as devoid of cult and covenant language as is frequently claimed.²⁸

Whatever the source, Proverbs is built on the same view of the godly and the good life already seen in the covenant and echoed in the prophets. This probably reflects both Israel's wisdom contacts with her environment (recall the Babylonian and Egyptian wisdom texts cited at the beginning of this study) and the pervasive influence of the covenant on Israel's thought at all levels. The righteous and wise in Proverbs are promised health, prosperity, longevity — "life," while the wicked in repeatedly contrasting paragraphs and maxims are promised destruction, bad times and death. A study of the blessings and curses of Proverbs yields a list bearing striking resemblance to the covenant's blessings and curses. This same viewpoint is found in numerous Psalms, some of which (e.g., Ps. 1, 10, 11, 19, 34 and 37) are called "wisdom Psalms" among other things because of their similarity to the "two ways" of Proverbs at this very point.

To this point, it has been the intent of this article first to show that with regard to the matter of the relationship between character and circumstance (the godly and the good life), God began instructing His people in terms familiar to them from their environment. We have then seen that this view that obedience to God brings or is closely tied to "protection . . . earthly success . . . health and long life, honored standing in the community, many sons, wealth" (to repeat Jacobsen's words) is assumed broadly in Israel's legal, historical,

prophetic, wisdom and cultic literature.

This construct of life had the pedagogical advantage of simplifying the issues: one either was or was not in covenant relationship with the God of Israel, and there were clear results attached thereto. Furthermore, there were, to be sure, actual life circumstance results that flowed from keeping or not keeping God's covenant. But there was more to be said, and this viewpoint by itself was inadequate to account for all of life. One may notice, for instance, that the inspired analysts of Israel's history did not venture to comment on the implications of the prosperity and power of Ahab, who was at the same time one of Israel's most prosperous, powerful, and most wicked kings (a theological conundrum). The Old Testament itself addresses some of these difficulties, which is our next matter for investigation.

Difficulties Faced

The most obvious practical difficulty with the view that the godly should and do receive the good life is that it does not consistently work that way — the covenant's promises notwithstanding (Job 21:4-16, 27-34). It is highly significant that the liturgy of Israel's own worship incorporated material calculated to help the individual worshiper meet this difficulty. Psalm 73, doubtless sung or chanted by many in Jerusalem, describes the crisis of faith individuals will often face who attempt to understand all of life from the Old Testament covenant's perspective of blessing-curse. The obvious prosperity and well-being of some even blatantly wicked and blasphemous persons can cause envy and disillusionment (Ps. 73:1-14). In the course of worship (Ps. 73:17), the Psalmist saw again that the wicked often are "swept away utterly by terrors" (18-20) and more significantly, he affirmed that knowing God and His presence were more important than the destiny of the wicked anyway (21-28).

In a far more extensive fashion, the Book of Job meets the issue head on. Job, like Proverbs, has little, if any explicit reference to Israel's special covenant relationship with God or with Israel's cult. What boggles the mind is that the friends of Job, whose viewpoint is in the end pronounced inadequate by Yahweh (Job 42:7) is, for all practical purposes, the viewpoint of the covenant's blessings and curses.²⁹ No enlightened Israelite could have missed the similarity. At the same time, and more obviously, Job is the perfect wise man,

described in terms resounding with wisdom overtones: “perfect and upright, both fearing God and turning from evil” (Job 1:1; cf. Prov. 1). Job’s introduction (chs. 1-2) makes perfectly clear from the beginning that his calamities have not been caused by any sin, hidden or open. If anything, his piety has occasioned the trouble (Job 1:1-12). Defending the viewpoint that is at once the traditional viewpoint of the ancient Near East, of the covenant and of the standard wisdom literature in Israel, the friends “spoil it by exaggeration” and are eventually led to force facts to fit their understanding of life.³⁰ Whether this inspired qualification of the “orthodox” view is a later development or a reservation standing beside it all along is difficult to say. It is customary in some circles to assume that such a broadside at the traditional viewpoint (Job 15:7-19, it is stressed in those terms) could not have emerged until the covenant’s ethic and assumptions had been individualized,³¹ or until the wisdom school had rigidly categorized the equation that wisdom piety produces success.³² But both of these lines of “evidence” are at best inconclusive. There is nothing in the Book of Job itself, outside of its theology, that necessitates a date later than the early monarchy or even before. Job himself was known to Ezekiel (Ezek. 14:14,20) as a figure of great antiquity, named alongside Noah and a Daniel who is apparently (judging from the association with Samuel) to be identified as the patriarch of Ugaritic legend (second millennium B.C.).³³

More importantly, dating the individualization of piety predominantly in Israel’s later centuries is problematic. It is true that Jeremiah and Ezekiel contributed greatly to a heightened consciousness of each person’s responsibility to God (Ezekiel, chapters 18 and 33, are rightly cited in this regard). It is also true that the covenant was with the nation. And modern Westerners are no doubt inclined to see personal religion where it may not exist. But having granted that, one must add that individual piety can be traced to earliest days in Israel. The patriarchal epics must surely have given personal vitality to the cult, with their focus on “the attitude of the member of the covenant community toward the promise of the one who establishes the covenant.”³⁴ It must also be remembered that the Psalter is full of deeply personal works (as well as communal songs) many of which belong in the early years of the monarchy. Reading the early prophets, it is quite clear they did not make an artificial distinction between national and individual responsibility. Amos pronounced the same doom upon individuals he confronted (the

“cows” of Bashan, Amos 5:1ff. and the priest Amaziah, 7:14-17) as he did upon the nation. By the nature of the case, it was the individual who did or did not keep the covenant, and the individual’s fields, flocks, families and affairs where many of the covenant’s blessings and curses would either be realized or missed. Furthermore, the extra-biblical material shows that individuals had been asking Job’s very question — “What have I done?” (Job 13:20-23, 27) — for centuries.³⁵ There is no reason why this masterpiece cannot have been a part of Israel’s wisdom teaching from near the start.³⁶

Whatever one may decide about the date of the book of Job, the point is clear. Setting the major character outside Israel (Job is an “Uzite”), this thoroughly Hebrew work deftly, but obviously, qualifies the viewpoint of Israel’s covenant and her standard wisdom stance (or perhaps better, extensions or exaggerations of them) by underscoring the fact that the relation between character and circumstance most certainly *cannot* be reduced to a fixed equation. In this case suffering is put in the purposes of God of which *none* of the parties involved ever do receive an adequate comprehension (a lesson for modern theologians!).

The Old Testament’s other major qualification of the traditional viewpoint is, as we have already seen, the book of Ecclesiastes. Here one faces the problem of the unusual Hebrew of the text, not what one would expect from a Solmonic pen.³⁷ Little “objective evidence” beyond a couple of Persian words really demands a late date. Supposed Greek philosophic influence is seldom claimed among recent students, who stress the writer’s contact with traditional wisdom.³⁸ And the language is not so much *demonstrably* late as highly unusual.³⁹ Moreover, every student who has had the experience of knowing very well the orthodox dogmatics of his tradition and at the same time being painfully aware of stubborn data that simply is not compatible with those constructs, will be reluctant to refuse the work to Solomon or his scholars simply on theological grounds.

Again, whatever the date, the point is clear. In spite of extensive quotation of standard wisdom sayings and a conclusion that exhorts caution in “making many books” (along this line!? Ecc. 12:12), the inspired writer boldly claims that experience simply will not be forced into the rigid patterns of reward and punishment, blessing and cursing one might deduce from the maxims of the sages (see Ecc. 2:12-17; 8:11-14; 9:1-12 again) and obviously expected in popular religion in Israel (Zeph. 1:12; Mal. 2:17; 3:13-15). The Preacher’s

disturbing perception of the universality and finality of death compounds his distress. Job had also seen that *if* he could hope for life beyond the grave, his predicament would be mitigated, but he seems to despair of such a hope (a clear “no,” in Job 14; a possible “yes,” in 19:23-27, though the passage is very difficult).⁴⁰ The Preacher perceived that “time and chance happen to all men” regardless of their character (Ecc. 9:11), and there seems to be little correlation between men’s piety and the bane or blessing that comes to them in life. As a result, he concluded that from life’s circumstances alone one is at a loss to say much about the moral character of a particular person or about God’s attitude toward him (Ecc. 9:1-2 again).

In these matters and others, the book of Ecclesiastes forms a powerful preface to the Incarnation and the New Testament. This book asks the kinds of questions which simply have no adequate answer apart from “the Word become flesh.” Its candid believer poses problems for a simplistic view of character and circumstance which many modern believers, who are often influenced more by the old covenant than by the new in this regard, must consider more carefully. We will now proceed to the New Testament’s treatment of these matters.

The Truth in Christ

Reading the Gospels, one recognizes that the disciples (along with most of their contemporaries) understood the relationship between character and life circumstance in the traditional way (Job 15:7-19), from the perspective of the covenant’s blessings and curses and of the standard wisdom teaching. It is also clear that Jesus put Himself over against that view. The disciples reasoned, for instance, that since a man was born blind, someone had sinned, either he or his parents (Jn. 9:2). Jesus understood the suffering not in terms of the consequence of sin, but with reference to the purposes of God (Jn. 9:3ff.). And Jesus’ questions about the moral character of the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate and the Samaritans killed in the tower accident (Lk. 13:1-5) apparently denied any necessary relationship between their piety or lack of it and the ill that befell them. At the same time He affirmed the eventual relationship of character to destiny and called all His hearers to repentance (Lk. 13:3, 5; cf. Amos 4:6-11).

A comparison of the Old Testament’s “beatitudes” (such as in Ps.

1, a standard wisdom song) with Jesus' beatitudes as gathered by Matthew shows a significant shift. The Old Testament blessings/curses are largely immediate, concrete results of character. In Matthew 5:3-12, the blessings are largely internal and eternal — put within the disciple or placed in the eschaton. And suffering as a result of or at least involved in Kingdom life is expressly anticipated (Mt. 5:10-12). One learns that rain and sunshine are the expression of God's love, unrelated to covenant-keeping (Mt. 5:45; cf. the assumptions about rain in Lev. 26:4, 18-20).

Jesus' call to discipleship with a cross involved a whole reappraisal of the Sinaitic covenant's basic premise about the relationship between character and circumstance, together with the reflexes studied earlier in other Old Testament literature. That the Messiah should suffer was totally unexpected to the disciples (Mk. 8:31-33). This is emphasized by the recurring juxtaposition of Jesus' announcement of His death with pericopes demonstrating the disciples' complete lack of comprehension of the significance of that fact.⁴¹ And that the Messiah's disciples would also suffer was just as unexpected (Mk. 8:34-9:2; 10:35-45). Their amazement that the "rich young ruler's" prosperity was not a sign of acceptance in the Kingdom (given his other signs of piety) rises from the same source (Mk. 10:23-24).

This revision of the old covenant's perspective permeated the apostles' later understandings. They later lived out of assumptions quite different in this regard from those, for example, of Amos. "Natural" events — catastrophes of weather, health, fortune — are described by them quite apart from moral causes, a way of viewing things foreign to the Old Testament. Luke tells of Agabus' prophecy of famine in the empire without any reference to judgment (Acts 11:28; cf. Joel 1:1-2:17 and Dt. 23:4-5, 16-18). So also Paul's experience in the Mediterranean storm is treated as a weather phenomenon in which the apostle was caught, without reference to anyone's sin (Acts 27:13-26). Contrast the treatment of Jonah's experience in the storm in Jonah 1: same sea, similar weather, but completely different assumptions about character and circumstance.

Romans 8:31-39 perhaps most clearly reveals the advance that new covenant assumptions brought in the treatment of character and circumstance, the understanding of the relation between the godly and the good life. Paul catalogues overwhelming disasters and distresses and in the face of them all is able to affirm "God is for us!"

(Rom. 8:31, 39). One must see that this list includes old covenant curses — famine, nakedness, sword (review Dt. 28 and Lev. 26 again, along with Amos 4:6-11; 3:9-15), express signs of Israel's sins and of God's consequent displeasure. But in Paul's mind they are neutral events, unrelated directly to specific, moral causes and effects, placed confidently in the hands of a sovereign God who is working in love on behalf of His people (Rom. 8:26-30).⁴²

In the course of this crescendo of affirmation the apostle quotes Psalm 44:22: "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered," and does so expressing confidence in God's continual work of love in the world. The Psalmist quoted had quite a different view! For him the fact that the worshiping community was "killed all the day" was a grievous problem. Where was God? Asleep? (Ps. 44:23). Didn't He see their plight (24)? Had they not been faithful (17-21)? An entirely different set of assumptions.⁴³

The keystone of the entire shift is the whole point of the Pauline affirmation. Exactly how does Paul know "God is for us!"? What is the basis of this astounding confidence in view of what he had been through? He grounds his confidence in God's love in precisely the same place the rest of the apostolic community did — in God's unique and unambiguous demonstration of that love in Christ. It is God's love "*in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:39), demonstrated in the fact that God "did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all" that is the key (8:31-32, as previously in 5:1-11, where again suffering is viewed positively because of confidence in God's love demonstrated in giving Christ). The nakedness, peril and sword *do not* tell Paul about either his own character or God's disposition toward him. The life, death and resurrection of Christ did and still do. (Note the repeated comparisons based on this: Eph. 5:2, 25; Phil. 2:1-8).

It is the same with St. John. How do we know love? By God's provision for our basic needs, by prosperity, protection or healing? Perhaps, but that is certainly not the basis of John's confidence that God is love in all that comes to one. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins" (I Jn. 4:10; also 3:16 and Jn. 3:16). God *is* for us! We know it no matter what happens to us! We know it because He demonstrated it by meeting us at the point of our deepest need — our alienation from Him, from ourselves and from each other (Col. 1:19-23; the Psalmist was heading in the right direction! Ps. 73:21-28).

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Rowley contends that when Job finally found God *in* his suffering, when he discovered that God's "presence is given to men of integrity and piety in prosperity and adversity alike" he found consolation beyond which the New Testament did not go. But that is not so. The presence of Christ among us told us more than that God is *with us* (Immanuel), although it certainly demonstrated that! It said once and for all, that not only is God with us, but He is *for us*! He loves us! He loves us! And it is *this fact* that produces songs in the Philippian jail and a "none-of-these-things-can-separate-us-from-God's-love" outlook in suffering.⁴⁴ The very question which the Preacher saw to be a chief problem of life in this world (Ecc. 9:1-2) has been convincingly answered. We can know whether we are in God's hands "for love or for hate." It is for love.

Some Implications: Brief Suggestions

One of the most obvious implications of a study of this sort is its impact on one's concept of biblical revelation itself. There is more happening in this particular process of divine pedagogy than clarification of earlier truth. The earlier view is ultimately inadequate, and is shown to be so in the Scripture itself. And yet categories of errancy or inerrancy/truth or falsehood applied to the old covenant's view are not sufficient. Such categories do not do justice to God's whole attempt to communicate with men in thought forms they would understand, while at the same time working through an agenda of divine instruction which would, given the fullness of time, thoroughly remake their minds. This survey demonstrates once again the need for a use of the Scripture that takes developing revelation seriously into account and goes beyond the simple transfer of any biblical paragraph from the Scripture directly to the modern setting. Wesley's tendency toward a "flat Bible" shows up in his understanding of this whole motif. In his sermon on the "Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," he reasons just as Amos and Job's friends would have done. Earthquakes are seen as judicial acts rising from moral causes. Wesley's directive upon the occasion of such events, is to "fear God," repent, and believe the Gospel.⁴⁵ Significantly Wesley states that no one who believes the Scriptures can deny that sin is the "moral cause" (directly so) of such "divine animadversions."⁴⁶ One may disagree with this judgment, but it is clear that to believe otherwise one must come to grips seriously with the developing nature of inscripturated revelation.

Perhaps as important, the direction of biblical revelation outlined above should lead one to question widespread contemporary views of the “blessings” which those who know Jesus may expect. It should suggest the need to interpret the apparently unqualified promises in such passages as John 15:7 first in light of their immediate contexts and then in light of the qualifications inherent in the new covenant itself and in the experiences of the apostles who passed them on to us. This should involve a renewed quest for a biblical view of “success.” One will look deeper than his new house and good job for information either about one’s spirituality or God’s “blessing” upon one’s life.

The new covenant preserves the trust that as we “seek first the kingdom of God” we are cared for in ways we do not fully understand (Mt. 6:25-34). And the apostle Paul at least lived without apparent worry about the basics of life (Phil. 4:10-13), confident that God and His people would care for him, and that better still he would find strength in Christ for whatever came to him. But the basic frame of reference is different than in the old covenant.

A healthy “Christian realism” is best based on an understanding of the godly and the good life along the lines outlined above. All suffering and pain in the world simply cannot be accounted for in terms of direct cause and effect relationships between the character of persons and what happens in their lives.⁴⁷ One is not compelled to call tragedy and suffering somehow the “will of God,” except in the very broadest sense that for reasons completely beyond the comprehension of most of us He does not choose to avert them. Nor must one ask of every tragedy, “What did I do?” or “Why did God do this?” Rather one can look squarely in the face of both good and evil, tranquility and tragedy, and call them exactly what they are. God’s love is seen clearly in neither, but rather in the giving of His Son.

Finally, a truly global faith demands a foundation that includes material of the sort found here. One suspects a “seed-faith” equation of the godly and the good life is possible only from “the comfortable pew” of the “fat cat” American church. It simply cannot come to terms with the fact that saints around the globe whose character is above reproach are not going first-class all the way and never will, if indeed there will be enough bread to survive until next year. The Scripture affirms that God is for them too! ■

Footnotes

¹For example, Oral Roberts' book, *Miracle of Seed-Faith* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), where much edifying material is inextricably set in what one suspects is something of a distortion of the biblical picture.

Some sources in the notes below will be cited as follows: *Anet*³: James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Third edition with supplement; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); CTA: Andree Herdner, *Corpus Des Tablettes in Cuneiformes Alphabetiques* (Tome X of *Mission De Ras Shamra*: Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963); ICC: S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (eds.), *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark).

²The immediate context here is the "Preacher's" concern with death that overtakes all men regardless of their character (Ecc. 9:1-12). But other lines in this scholar's journal make it clear that he has serious reservations that "It will be well with those who fear God, because they fear him" (Ecc. 8:12). Notice 2:14b qualifying the standard wisdom sayings of 2:12-14a, and 8:14 over against 8:11-13.

³Exodus 20:4, Cf. W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Anchor Books Edition; Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 112-113, and Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 203-204, on Israel's intolerance of idolatry from the outset. See also Yigael Yadin, *Biblical Archaeologist* 22 (1959), pp. 12-14.

⁴A text such as the liturgical portrayal of El's seductive prowess in CTA 23, pp. 98-101, would be totally out of place in the Israelite cult.

⁵Israel is so closely identified with her surroundings in so many ways that arguments still persist as to whether there is really evidence for any "divine activity" in her history, as for instance in Bertil Albrektson's *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel, Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series I* (Lund, Sweden: Berlingska Boktryckeriet, 1967).

⁶Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. viii.

⁷Chapter VII in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (eds. H. and H. A. Frankfort; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 207.

⁸W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 21-62, especially columns I and II.

⁹Translated by Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Anet*³, p. 427. Reverse B.1-2, of "Counsels of Wisdom."

¹⁰The "Prayer to Every God," translated by Ferris J. Stephens, *Anet*³, pp. 391-392. Likewise in the "Hymn to the Sun-God," Shamash establishes punishment for the wicked, blessing for the good man. *Anet*³, pp. 387-389, column II-III.

¹¹Translated by Albrecht Goetze, *Anet*³, pp. 396-397; quote from p. 397.

¹²*Ibid.*, The famous "Plague Prayers of Mursilis" are based on the same view of life. *Anet*³, pp. 394-396.

¹³The following letters illustrate the point: RS 17.129, 133, 146, in Jean Nougayrol, *Le Palais Royal D'Ugarit, IV* (Tome IX of *Mission De Ras Shamra*: Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956), pp. 166, 188 ff., and 154 ff. respectively.

This is probably the very background of Ecc. 9:2, in the Preacher's complaint that "one fate comes to all alike, to the righteous man and the wicked . . . to the one who swears and the one who is afraid of an oath." The RSV, "shuns an oath," is, I think, too weak for *yare'*. The righteous man has nothing to fear and submits to the oath; the wicked man, if he believes the prevailing view, is afraid to submit to the oath. How can Barton argue that in the series here "the bad character uniformly comes first" (*I.C.C. ad loc.*, p. 159)? Isn't the opposite true? See I Kgs. 8:31ff. for the same idea.

¹⁴Translated by John A. Wilson, *Anet*³, p. 413, about line 340.

¹⁵H. Donner and W. Rollig (eds.), *Kanaanaische und Aramaische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966), Band I, Text 181, p. 33.

¹⁶Cf. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), Vol. 1, pp. 259ff.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 279.

¹⁸Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (Vol. II of the *Old Testament Theology*: tr. D.M.G. Stalker; New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), p. 137. Von Rad seems to grant the Amos 4:6-11 passage to Amos, but he does not relate it clearly to the Deuteronomy curse formulae, and elsewhere limits the covenant background of Amos' message to the Book of the Covenant. Technical, covenant terminology could be exploited more than von Rad does (e.g., Vol. II, pp. 142-143, on *da'at 'elohim*, the "knowledge of God") to tie the prophetic word clearly not only to law, but to "the law" whole covenant — preamble, stipulations, blessings and curses, were known and assumed by the prophets, whatever the date of the "final edition" of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch.

¹⁹*Joel and Amos* (in *Hermeneia — A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*: trans. W. Janzen, S. D. McBride, Jr.; and C. A. Muenchow; ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 212-214, and 214 for the quote.

²⁰*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy, ICC*, pp. xxvii ff.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. lxiii. Driver gives the then standard dating of Deuteronomy, in the late monarchy, pp. xxvii and xlii-lxv, and treats chapter 28 without any reference to ancient near eastern treaty form, pp. 312-319, no surprise since the major ancient near eastern treaties which have revolutionized the study of Deuteronomy have been unearthed since Driver's day!

²²In "Righteousness and the Law," *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies* (tr. D. R. Ap-Thomas; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 118-131.

²³*Treaty Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (*Biblica et Orientalia*, 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), pp. 32-42 and 82-84. This of course does not necessarily demand that Deuteronomy as it now stands is straight from the Mosaic period. Hillers understands Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 to be "late examples of lists of curses attached as sanctions to the stipulations of a religious covenant," containing much older material and resting on ancient practice, p. 85.

²⁴See Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 308, on the same viewpoint in the Old Testament's latest historian, the Chronicler.

²⁵For a study of this question see Kenneth E. Gooden, *The Targumic Interpretation of Isaiah 52:13-53:12* (Asbury Theological Seminary: Unpublished Th.M. Thesis, 1965).

²⁶As observed for instance by R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs — Ecclesiastes* (*The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 18; eds. W. F. Albright, et. al.; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965), p. xvi.

²⁷The earliest talk that the Proverbs material was copied or directly borrowed from the Egyptian work does not adequately account for the similarities, in my opinion (nor is the reverse likely true either). The order of the topics considered is so obviously different in the two as to preclude that. But the similarities in content do go beyond simple parallels to the point that textual difficulties can be solved in one by reference to the other. The relationship seems more what one would expect from a slightly garbled memory or highly adapted use of a text actually seen earlier. See Wilson's translation in *Aner*³, pp. 421-425, and any critical commentary or introduction to the Old Testament for relevant literature on the subject.

²⁸As for example in von Rad, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 435-437. Among other things the concern with inheritance in the land (Prov. 2:21, 22; cf. Dt. 29:15-16), with integrity in first fruits (Prov. 3:9-10), as well as the whole "life-death" choice of Proverbs are important contacts with covenant thought.

²⁹The lists in 5:24-26; 21:8-16; 24:13-17, 21; and 31:5-34, 38-40 are especially reminiscent of the covenant's language.

³⁰An apt characterization by R.A.F. McKenzie, "Job," in Vol. I of *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (eds. R. E. Brown, et. al.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 512.

³¹H. H. Rowley, *Job, The New Century Bible Series* (eds. H. H. Rowley and Matthew Black; Great Britain: Thomas Nelson, 1970), p. 18; cf. also R.B.Y. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. xix.

³²McKenzie, *op. cit.*, and J. Terence Forestell, "Proverbs," *Ibid.*, pp. 495-496.

³³*The Legend of Aqhat*, CTA, 17-19.

³⁴Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 279. Eichrodt's evaluation of the patriarchal narratives is certainly on target, even though the link with a ninth century "elohist" may be debated.

³⁵As in the fourteenth century B.C. "Prayer of Kantuzilis for Relief from his Sufferings," *Aner*³, pp. 400-401: "What did I do to my god?" he asks (rev. lines 13-14).

W.G. Lambert's summary from his study of Babylonian wisdom literature is particularly apropos:

"The most common complaint is virtually about a broken contract. A man served his god faithfully, but did not secure health and prosperity in return. The problem of the righteous sufferer was certainly implicit from the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur." The problem is reflected as well in personal names of the early period and is illustrated in religion texts from the First Dynasty of Babylon. *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, pp. 10-11 (quote, p. 10).

³⁶Francis I. Andersen's discussion in *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Inter-varsity Press, 1976), pp. 60-63, is balanced and very well done at this point.

³⁷Scott's comment closes the case prematurely, but states the problem clearly: "There is of course no possibility that the Solomon of history composed this book (Ecclesiastes); to claim this is like claiming that a book about Marxism in modern English idiom and spelling was written by Henry VIII." *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

³⁸Rejected, for instance, both by Scott, *Ibid.*, p. 197, and Roland E. Murphy, "Ecclesiastes (Qohelet)," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 534.

³⁹Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago:

Moody Press, 1964), p. 464.

⁴⁰It appears that there may be far more evidence for rather extensive views of the afterlife in the Old Testament than previous generations have realized, even if Dahood and his students are overstating the case with their customary zeal. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III*, 101-150 (Vol. 17A in *The Anchor Bible*; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1970), pp. xxxviii-liii, and N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Concepts of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament (Biblica Orientalia, 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969)*. This is not surprising in view of the voluminous amount of literature on the “other world” among other ancient peoples. But neither Job nor the Preacher bring such a view to bear on their predicament, nor does the rest of the Old Testament systematically relate final rewards to the problem of the relation between character and circumstance.

⁴¹Recall the Targum’s transformation of Isaiah 53.

⁴²In light of this, I Corinthians 11:29-30 presents some difficulties. Here Paul appears to reason from moral causes (eating the Lord’s table undiscerningly) to concrete circumstances (illness and death in the church). These are seen as chastisement (11:32; cf. Heb. 12:17). One does not know whether in Paul’s mind the matter of chastisement was not linked to his other assumptions based on the Incarnation, or whether this is a thought pattern not yet transformed by the more basic breakthrough of Romans 8, or what. A survey of standard commentaries shows little attention has been paid to the problem. This is even clearer if the *ho theos* variant is accepted in 8:28.

⁴³In my opinion insufficient attention has been given to the significance of Paul’s affirmation here as it relates to the matter of character and circumstance and the earlier testament’s treatment thereof. Several excellent commentaries on Romans make no reference whatever to the covenant language involved (admittedly Paul is using terms not confined to covenant language), e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Letter to the Romans,” *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, Vol. II, pp. 317-318; William J. Greathouse, “The Epistle to the Romans,” (Vol. 8 in *The Beacon Bible Commentary*; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1968), pp. 192-195; and Wm. Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Vol. 31 of ICC), pp. 220-224.

C. E. B. Cranfield takes Paul’s quotation of Psalm 44 as showing that tribulations are “nothing new or unexpected” but “characteristic of God’s people” all along, and refers to rabbinic application of the passage to the death of martyrs. But he takes inadequate account of the frame of reference from which the Psalmist wrote and the consequent point of the exclamation in its setting. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC, sixth edition; eds. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), pp. 434-444, quote from p. 440.

⁴⁴H. H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁵Sermon CXXXIX, 1750, in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. VII* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, reprint of the 1872 edition), pp. 386-399.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁴⁷It is obviously true that there often is a relationship between moral character and the good or ill that comes to persons, but it does not function in the way outlined in the old covenant and expected in standard wisdom teaching.