

On Retributive Justice

Theological concept:

Both human experience and certain key biblical texts teach us that mere punishment for wrongdoing does not bring about the reformation of the wrongdoer. The divine grace of forgiveness and acceptance leading to gratified response of repentance and change are desirable not only on the level of individual personal relations but also in the state criminal justice system.

Genesis 6-9

Ancient extra-biblical flood myths attributed the catastrophe to the gods' capricious dislike of humans and attempt to annihilate them. Biblical authors telling the story of their God's dealings with humans showed acquaintance with the version in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Rather than depict God as arbitrarily anti-human, they said the cause was the corruption of the human heart resulting in universal violence. After the flood was over it was obvious that the human heart remained corrupted; drastic punishment had effected no change. Thereupon God changed God's manner of dealing with humankind to offer a better way of responding to human wrongdoing.

Amos 4:6-13

Speaking for God the prophet notes a series of catastrophes, which the deity visited upon the people: famine, drought, blight, locust plague, pestilence, war, and earthquake. After each comes the solemn declaration: "Yet you did not return to me," says the LORD. Punishment had no effect. What then? "Prepare to meet your God!" Customarily we take this to mean get ready for the final, complete punishment. But Amos goes on to speak of "the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals. . . ." Not by the sheer power of imposed punishment but by communicating the divine will does this God deal with sinners.

Hosea 2:2-15

Israel abandoned worship of God for that of Baal, the fertility god ("adultery" against her true "husband"), believing Baal the source of her prosperity. As punishment, God sent a series of empty harvests, expecting her to lose faith in Baal and say, "I will return to my husband, for it was better for me than it is now." It didn't work, even when intensified. "Therefore. . ." Therefore what? Heavier punishments? "Therefore I will now allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. . ." In Hosea's metaphor, instead of abandoning his adulterous wife GOD would now begin a second courtship. See also Hosea 14:4, "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely."

Mark 2:1-12

Jesus unconditionally forgives the sins of the paralytic and heals his infirmity.

Romans 11:32

"For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

2 Cor. 5:19

"In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their transgressions against them."

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