

23A 2017 SML  
EZ 33:7-9

Divine retribution for sin in this life does not exist; divine retribution for sin in this life it is outdated, Old Testament theology; divine retribution for sin in this life is good reason to be atheistic.

Since the concept of divine retribution for sin in this life first came from the prophets, namely Ezekiel, from where this evening's (morning's) first reading is taken, some background on the prophets is in order.

Freed from slavery in Egypt through the prophet Moses, Israel was led across the desert for forty years and came to the Promised Land. While the Promised Land was a land flowing with milk and honey, conquering and keeping the Promised Land was not easy. The constant fighting recorded in the Old Testament was all in an effort to keep the Promised Land. Yet, amidst the fighting were definite highlights:

- ✓ the reign of Kings Saul, David and Solomon;
- ✓ economic prosperity;
- ✓ the building of the great temple in Jerusalem.

The Israelites made money off the land; they wanted more, and they would do what they had to do to get it. Israel looked to

the neighbor pagan countries, saw how well their crops grew and asked,

"Assyria, Assyria, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?"

"With temple prostitution and little ba'al dolls buried in the dirt all in a row!" (or so they thought)

Prostitute in the temple all you want and bury your dolls left and right, the neighbor's garden grew well because their soil was rich and their weather was clement. Yet Israel adopted their pagan practices and sinned against Yahweh.

- ✓ Political ties to the pagan countries,
- ✓ adopting their religious practices,
- ✓ heavy taxes,
- ✓ forced labor,
- ✓ the rich got richer, the poor got poorer

. . . enter the prophets.

Now the word "prophet" *pro/phetes* has two meanings: to speak for (f-o-r); the prophet speaks "for" God; and to speak fore (f-o-r-e); the prophet speaks be"fore" it happens, that is, the prophet foretells the future.

Prophet after prophet spoke for God against the abominations of Israel:

- ✓ her worshipping the false gods,
- ✓ her pride,
- ✓ her self indulgence,
- ✓ her callous injustice toward the poor.

They prophesied that the Israelites would loose the land and the prophecy came true.

In 587 B.C. Babylon invaded and the Israelites of Jerusalem were taken from their country and their city, from their homes and their temple, from their wealth and their security. They were dispersed and exiled throughout Babylon. Psalm 137 captured the lethargy of God's people:

By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps, though there our captors asked of us for songs, and our despoilers urged us to be joyous; "Sing for us one of Zion's songs." But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.

They longed for the days of David, they longed to climb the Mountain of Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. They longed to feast their eyes on the great Temple in Jerusalem. And there was no light at the end of the tunnel as far as they could see.

Enter the prophet Ezekiel, who was the first to receive the call to prophecy outside the Holy Land. Where Ezekiel and the

prophets went wrong was their explanation of what caused the Israelites to lose the Promised Land. The prophets' explanation was the loss of land was due to the wrath of God, that it was Yahweh's punishment for their worshipping the false gods. For example, just five verses prior to where this evening's (morning's) first reading begins is the verse, "When I bring the sword against the country," (EZ 33:2) gives the very strong impression that it was God's will that brought the enemy to their country." Not true. The Israelites lost the land not because it was God's will, but for reasons aforementioned:

- ✓ political ties to the pagan countries,
- ✓ adopting their religious practices,
- ✓ heavy taxes,
- ✓ forced labor,
- ✓ the rich got richer, the poor got poorer.

Losing the land was the consequence of sin. They sinned and there were consequences, but these consequences were not God's will for a sinful people. I've used the phrase many times. It's an "It is what it is!"

That God punishes in this life is not something Catholics believe. Of course our Jewish brothers and sisters believe it – it's Old Testament theology. Baptists believe it, which is

something I do not understand since Baptists are Christian, Baptists “should be” New Testament theology. Catholics do not believe that God punishes in this life.

A simple example to make this point. You steal something. If you get caught, there will be consequences to pay, consequences as a result of committing a sin. If you do not get caught, there will be no consequences in this life, but there will be consequences – divine retribution for sin (namely, purgatory), which will not begin until judgment day.

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Repent America, an organization of Christian fundamentalists (those who read the Bible black and white), claims the destruction brought on by Hurricane Katrina, is God’s judgment against New Orleans for holding “public celebrations of sin.” Director Michael Marcavage said, “The citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness of their city for so long . . . May this act of God cause us all to think about what we tolerate in our city limits, and bring us trembling before the throne of Almighty God.” Marcavage concluded by quoting

Matthew 5:45: "God sendeth rain on the just and the unjust."

That Marcavage missed the point of Matthew 5:45 is not surprising given his outdated, Old Testament theology. Is it not correct to say that if Hurricane Katrina was an act of God's will, then would not relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina, the relief efforts of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, which sociologist Kenneth Storey and actress Jennifer Lawrence (neither of whom are theologians) blame on how Texas and Florida voted in the last presidential election, all be against God's will? Should not all relief efforts be called off, if hurricanes are sent as part of God's will?

Those along the Gulf are hanging on by a thread. Those of us who know better know - Repent America is way, way off center. Dr. Sociologist is way, way off center. But for those questioning God, for those who are hanging on by a thread, this outdated, Old Testament theology of divine retribution in this life, as Marcavage said, "on the just and the unjust," would be just enough for the vulnerable hanging on by a thread, to be atheist.

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