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Clarifying Jeremiah's Complaints

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Clarifying Jeremiah's Complaints

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is easy to believe that God does not enforce His own laws when one witnesses a sinner go unpunished for a crime. However, sinners are not condemned upon the execution of sin to an afterlife of damnation because as God's children, we are always given the choice to repent and follow God's teachings."



Amy Ryan

Clarifying Jeremiah's Complaints

"God bears with the wicked, but not forever" (Miguel de Cervantes).

Introduction

It is easy to believe that God does not enforce His own laws when one witnesses a sinner go unpunished for a crime. However, sinners are not condemned upon the execution of sin to an afterlife of damnation because as God's children, we are always given the choice to repent and follow God's teachings.

A. The Hope Within Injustice

Gerard Manly Hopkins was an intelligent man, blessed with the gift of exquisite writing, as can be seen in his loose translation of Jeremiah's eternal laments.

Jeremiah's scriptures are often compared to simple journal entries: neither poetic nor particularly insightful, they are filled with his passion and struggle for God and the everyday doubts and convictions of a man who has chosen to follow God's path.

However, Hopkins' poem gives Jeremiah's words the extra poetic lilt that serves to reflect the beauty that comes with uncertainty and remorse within religion. The last line, "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain" (14) especially rings out with a

magnitude of different emotions. Within it we can find exhaustion from the everlasting struggle against sin and those who commit sin; anger for the unfair situation Jeremiah has been through without any interference from the almighty power that recruited him; hope that there will eventually be a change in his circumstances; and reverence for the God that gave him life and showed him the truth. Hopkins was truly great with words.

B. Identifying the Wicked

Jeremiah was a prophet who saw and condemned the evil deeds of the people who surrounded him. In the scriptures, Jeremiah questioned the reason behind his people's continued success in the world while he, a righteous man with a devotion to God, was attacked and outcast by those he tried to help. In a fit of anger for the injustices of his situation, Jeremiah calls out to the heavens, wondering aloud why it is that the wicked are allowed to continue in the world without the repercussions that are fit for those who do wrong. However, to answer the question of why those who sin prosper, one must first define who the wicked are exactly.

Jeremiah, during his lament for the injustices he has experienced, pleads to God to “[pull] them out like sheep for the slaughter, / and set them apart for the day of slaughter” (12:3). Jeremiah's demands for justice in the face of sin can be compared to his first lament in which he equates himself to “a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19). From this one can infer that Jeremiah not only sees himself as an innocent man with no fault which deserves the punishment that he received at the hands of his prosecutors, but he also believes that those who wronged him should have been the ones to be punished. Jeremiah is “struggling to remain faithful amidst the odds that confront him” (Polan, p. 88).

Several scholars theorize that those who wronged Jeremiah were most likely his fellow villagers, maybe even his kin. During the time of Jeremiah's experiences, a new practice was being introduced in which all worship was to be centralized in the Temple at Jerusalem so as to cut down on the opportunity for corruption and scandal that could so easily breed in the more remote places of worship. Jeremiah, being a messenger and defender of God, brought it upon himself to inform his fellow village-people of the wrongness of their actions.

The "savage attacks which Jeremiah had made upon the social and religious corruption of his people meant that he was a highly controversial and unpopular figure" (Davidson, p. 104). This is highly believable in that most religious devotees are very sensitive to being told that the way they worship is not only wrong, but indeed sinful. Had the village people truly believed that their methods of worship were those that God intended them to use, they would not take kindly to the criticism and condemnation that Jeremiah offered, especially in a time when religion was never disputed. Jeremiah may as well have told the village people that the very basis of their lives was a hoax.

As a prophet, Jeremiah was destined to be tied in some way to the people he was sent to bring to God's light. With his insistence for justice came the harsher reality of his parallel and consequential suffering. Melvin states that "the suffering of the people will become Jeremiah's suffering, because as a prophet, he is inextricably bound to the people" (p. 104). Jeremiah's connection is proven in the images that Jeremiah uses to describe both the villagers and him. Twice he uses the same metaphor to depict the truth in the fact that despite the sinfulness of the villagers, they are the same. Jeremiah first describes himself as a helpless lamb, led to its death. Later in his cries he depicts

the village people plotting to “destroy the tree with its fruit... cut him off from the land of the living” (11:19). For each image of himself being persecuted, Jeremiah includes a parallel image of God bringing down his wrath upon those who sinned against him in a form identical to that which was inflicted upon him. Therefore, it can be assumed that the wicked in this case were those closest to him in form, but farthest from him in spirit.

B. Why The Wicked Prosper

Dante Alighieri and Jeremiah were much the same in that they were both men of God who sought to expose corruption executed wrongfully in the name of the Lord. They were both persecuted for their truthfulness and they both struggled to come to terms with the wickedness of those who surrounded them. The difference between the two lies mainly in the ways in which they coped: whereas Jeremiah pleaded with God to punish those who had wronged him, Dante went a step further and created a divine comedy through which he placed his persecutor directly into hell. Dante decided not to wait for God to right the wrongs that were done to him; he did it himself.

Dante's Inferno describes all forms of sinners in their own personal corner of hell, one of which is those who commit fraud. It categorizes sin according to the severity of the action and assigns each sin a unique form of punishment. In the case of those who are fraudulent, the punishment lies in “the vapors and the torrid soil / alternately their shifting hands they plied” (Dante, 17:3) and the gnats and flies that endlessly gnaw on their jaws and feet. In this one can assume that those who have sinned are ultimately punished. However, that does not answer the question as to why they are allowed to continue as if nothing evil had occurred while they still lived.

Those who do evil things almost consistently have a motive. One might steal food because one is starving, or murder a man because one was attacked or threatened. All who do evil things are not evil. Sometimes people make mistakes in a moment of weakness, or simply because they were tempted into making the wrong choice. Being punished for one's crimes does not always occur in one's life because God gave us the freedom to make our own choices. It is the greatest gift we could have received to be able to make the choice between acknowledging and ignoring God. As long as we live, we have the choice as to which path we will take and at any point in our lives we have the opportunity to completely change our directions, whether that means reformation or condemnation.

If God were to punish us directly upon the execution of our first sin, He would be refusing us the means in which we could choose to follow Him. For this reason it is apparent that the wicked prosper simply in the absence of divine intervention and as a result of God's ultimate regard for the spiritual wellbeing of humanity. Jaenke states that every human being has "a capacity for ingesting and metabolizing the full range of life's experiences, even difficult and horrific ones, and for creating something of beauty from the messiness, disappointments, and tragedies of life" (p. 5). Alternately, we have the opportunity to use these tragedies as an excuse for creating trauma in the folds of life through sinfulness.

In the case of fraud, sinfulness can be not only harmful to those who believe in the fraud, but also to those who are committing fraud. For the purposes of this argument, fraud can be defined as deceit perpetrated as a means of making a profit or gaining an advantage. Indeed, to be fraudulent is to deny the true nature of oneself in

order to gain an unfair and unnatural advantage. By saying that one is something other than the truth, one is accepting something that is not possible and thereby refusing a part of oneself which is essential to the makeup of one's being. This type of deceit can be absolutely devastating to one's psyche and, if it is not a result of personal misguidance, can certainly lead to it. Utz states that there are "six forms of lies that can be ranked in terms of how acceptable they are... ranging from altruistic motivations to exploitative motivations" (p. 49) all of which generate some level of general disapproval.

Similarly, Green makes a connection between deceit and social harmfulness by stating that "[a] society in which deceit and dishonesty are rampant will be unstable; commercial transactions will suffer, government operations will be impeded, uncertainty and cynicism will prevail" (p. 1093). The smooth running of any nation depends on the comfort, and by extension the consent of the people. If the state is being lied to, discord and chaos will reign. In this case, the wicked, or the fraudulent, prosper simply because they create too much disorder for anyone to repair in such a short amount of time.

Fraud is a sin that is committed solely for the purpose of gaining some form of profit, so it follows that those who sin through fraud will gain a profit in their physical lives. However, as Dante portrayed through his personal creation of hell, every sinner who does not seek redemption will be punished for their sins once they reach the point where they must face their judgment. Until that point, the only form of punishment a sinner will see will be at the hands of man, which has always been and will always be a fallible system.

Conclusion

Through the practices of exploration and analysis it has been determined that according to Jeremiah, those who are wicked are also those who are intentionally and wrongly harmful. It has also been decided that the wicked prosper, not because of some divine parody of justice, but simply because as children of God, we are given the choice to either find redemption, or experience retribution.

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Michelangelo
The Prophet Jeremiah
(Sistine Chapel, Rome, Italy)