

Review of *Redeeming Judgment*

My book, *Redeeming Judgment*, arose from my sense of urgency. The Protestant church in which I grew up and to which I belong has largely grown silent about the judgment of God. It seems that we are bent upon living up to H. Richard Niebuhr's caricature of liberal Protestantism: "A God without wrath brings men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (*Kingdom of God in America*, p. 193).

Redeeming Judgment is meant to remedy this aversion to judgment. Judgment accompanies God's saving work throughout the Bible. *Redeem* has been prefixed to judgment to indicate that I am proposing to *reclaim* this theological teaching. Moreover, judgment is itself a component of the redeeming action of God. Thus, we are out to reclaim a teaching that is essential to the redeeming purposes of God.

The book traces the story of divine judgment in the Bible's version of human history. The first chapters of Genesis expose the human condition: creatures, capable of ruling; on the other hand, sinners. I take the story of the "fall" to be an account of how innocent humans become responsible. Mysteriously, the state of responsibility entails irresistible temptation to sin. The state of irresistible temptation is "inherited" by the couple's sons: the first criminal trial in history. Cain is banished from the soil he has stained with blood.

Eventually the Lord concludes that humans are a lost cause, and decides to wipe humanity out by flood. When he decided to save one family, he had no illusions: humans would continue imagining evil (Gen. 8:21); God would simply handle it differently.

The Lord selects one family to be a blessing to the rest of the families of the world, cultivating righteousness within and interceding for nations threatened with judgment. The family does not undergo divine judgment during the era of patriarchs and matriarchs.

The family moves to Egypt and flourishes until the Egyptians enslave them. In response, the Lord intervenes to liberate them. God's act becomes judgment on the Egyptian ruler and people only when they renege on an agreement to let the Israelites leave.

Once liberated, the newly emerging people march to Mount Sinai where they 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. Their 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 the whole people break it. This is the first grave sin and judgment on Israel's record; it is analogous to the fall of Eve and Adam. The covenant is amended to allow for forgiveness and God's dwelling among them.

A rebellion precipitated by the hardships of the desert and the report of scouts prompts the Lord to condemn the exodus generation to live out their lives in the wilderness. 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 reinterprets this divine decision as disciplining – training, so to speak, for living faithful lives in the Promised Land.

Numerous passages assert that the Canaanites are judged for their impiety and immorality. During the period of the Judges, there are periodic judgments on Israel for apostasy, followed by repentance and deliverance under a judge. These schematic accounts of sin and judgment are designed to warn the reader about the dangers of apostasy.

Prophets inaugurated the kingship, gave legitimacy to the Davidic dynasty, divided the kingdom at the succession of Rehoboam, and pronounced judgment on several later kings. The Lord exercised his role as judge of rulers through these prophets. The history from conquest to exile not only covers the judgments of individual rulers, but also builds a case for the condemnation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah are the culmination of the message of divine judgment in history. Each reports a call to prophecy at the heart of which is the commission to pronounce God's judgment. Their message 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.

Jeremiah's challenge was to revive the message of his predecessors: their messages had become literature and attained sacred status, so now the message had to be made a living word for Judeans at the end of the seventh century. Decades later Ezekiel was called from among exiles living in Mesopotamia. 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 and foresees restoration and "conversion" for the people of God.

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. The entire book is issued under the authority of Isaiah of Jerusalem, a prophet commissioned by the Lord 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 adapt the message of salvation to post-exilic conditions.

Isaiah 1-39 all fall under the heading of judgment, but there are repeated promises of salvation as well. Isaiah 40-55 brings the reading audience "forward" to a time when the people are languishing in Babylonian exile. Isaiah 56-66 takes the reading audience forward to when a contingent of exiles has returned to Jerusalem. No matter what God does, sin persists. But the promise that judgment is over and done means that the prophets cannot adopt a cyclical view of history.

At the end of the book we hear of an unconditional salvation, a “final judgment” resulting in a division between the humble, penitent, intensely spiritual addressees and arrogant, oppressive, ritual-bound contemporaries (who will be excluded from salvation). We find the same spiritual ideal and final judgment in the Psalms and elsewhere.

The message of divine judgment doesn’t stop at the beginning of the Christian testament. Jesus proclaims divine judgment along with forgiveness and salvation. Revelation portrays the story of judgment from Christ’s sacrifice until the end. 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.

Dale Patrick