

"In the end, we all get ours," says the old saw. As I was a battered child, the expression makes me think first of "getting it" where I usually did, viz. in the rear end. As for the futuric sense of "end," the death-event divides the prophetic (this-worldly) from the eschatological (other-worldly) sanction. And since rewards is no problem of comparable perplexity, this thinksheet is about the primitive notion--which I share--that the god punishes us for being bad: bad for God, bad for ourselves, bad for each other, and bad for the rest of the biosphere, maybe even bad in some unknown senses for the cosmos! "Father, I have sinned against heaven [=guilt] and in your sight [=shame], and am no more worthy to be called your son [=alienation]." Some comments for discussion:

1. Biblically, "punishment" is more future- than past-oriented. It's God's action calling us, individually/collectively/corporately, to "return" to God, to reality, to relationship, at the very places where we've wandered off the Way....not so the god can rub our noses in our filth, but so that we can stand upon our feet toward a future less apt to see divagations in us: God is more concerned about sins our "repentance" [in Hebrew, our "return"] will forfend than about sins we've committed. The radicality of this thought appears in dominical parables whose time-orientation is future to present to past, rather than the reverse, the time-line of "everyday calculation."

2. Consequently, "punishment" is about hope, not desolation-depression-despair. Ezekiel was about 26 when he got dragged from Jerusalem to Babylon [597BC]. "By the rivers of Babylon" he could not sing the old song, and had to scratch up a new one meeting the following requirements: theocentricity and hope. He and others like him had to "do theology" in a new key, with the promise collapsed down into itself again--king and temple and land all lost. Let's look at him as he considers his options:

(1) It's all been a mistake. There is no god. [This option is expressed enough in Scripture to come in for condemnation more than once; and it's common in modern times: Nietzsche, Rabbi Rich. Rubenstein, etc. An instance of this atheism hitting a whole church is late 19th-c. Unitarianism in America--which went Comtean positivistic, and is only now beginning to recover.]

(2) God still loves us, but Marduk is stronger. [During and since World War II, indeed in crescendo, this power-limited god has become a popular theodicy of folk tinged with the personalitic and/or process traditions.]

(3) God is supreme, but the notion that he's benevolent was an illusion. [Back to "nature red with tooth and claw."]

(4) God is supreme in power and love, but he's run out of patience with us, and is in the market for a new people. ["God has not disowned his people, has he? Of course not!"--Ro.11.1(Wms.)]

(5) God, who is supreme in power and love, has to punish us for violating his covenant with us. It's the only way we can be restored to his shalom and the hope of its full-coming in the holiness of love and truth and righteousness. [This was Ezekiel's option, as well as Jer. and 2Is.]

3. "Option 5" is the standard theology of Israel's prophets, who say in the teeth of adversity "We as a people must have been doing something wrong." In Jewish history, the Holocaust is a shocking exception: the central mode of sense-making in the prophets gets, in Holocaust theology, hardly honorable mention. As a Christian, I can do little more here than point out this odd discrepancy to Jews.

4. In modern synagogue and church, a positive theology of punishment is virtually absent [even in the form of Simone Weil's "the soul's need of punishment"]. "Getting ours" has deteriorated, in the whole culture, in one-sidedness, viz. greed.