

## Theodicy

### Evaluating God's Justness in Eschatological Judgment(s)

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#### Introduction

Many theories abound within or outside Christian circles that theologians and philosophers lock horns over revolving around varied issues. One of those is the consistency between God and Evil. Another is how Just God is, in the light of what people observe from a humanistic perspective. The latter case (i.e. Justice in God) interests us at this stage because it begs an answer as to how God can remain Just and yet appears to wink at sin or some such occurrence. Could this be so or merely apparent? Is He truly Just? In this paper, we briefly investigate this matter by considering some views justifying the ways of God. This is by no means an exhaustive treatment but merely opens the door to further discussion. It thus tackles only one or two components generating discussions today as relates to the broad subject of Theodicy, how evil can exist if a good God exists. Other components relating to this Theodicy like why evil exists in God's world are handled in separate papers.

#### What Judgment is: Some basic definitions

The word "*Judgment*" is used variously in Christian scripture, of course, depending on the context. In some instances, it refers to passing a sentence or condemnation as in Matthew 7:1-2. In another sense, it refers to making distinctions with a view to arrive at one conclusion or truth (I These 5:21; I John 4:1). In I Corinthians 2:15 Paul talks about the spiritual man judging all truths carefully or the prophecy that is being given. In that case, it refers to carefully weighing the truthfulness of what is being uttered. In yet a third sense, the word could refer to consigning someone to a particular fate based on the evidence adduced before an impartial judge. In this paper, we refer to the latter case where God is said to pass a verdict on people based on how they will have lived whether accepted or rejected the saviour. In Matthew 25: 31-46, a straight reading of this passage leads to the final Judgment where God is said to separate the wicked from the righteous, using an illustration from pastoralists keeping sheep and goats (Hale 2006 p 120; Adeyemo 2006 p 1164). The picture put before us is that of a just judge sitting on His throne and brings all people to

account for their lives and if found wanting, either cast into the lake of fire or acquitted and rewarded with blissful heaven. Although the passage may appear to clearly suggest one final judgment, theologians, including dispensational scholars, have searched the scriptures and claim that more than one judgment is taught in the Bible taking place at different times and in different dispensations. For instance, the Seventh Day Adventists teach that there was one such judgment that commenced (i.e. Investigative Judgment) in 1844 and takes place in Heaven, away from the scrutiny or awareness of mortals. Others teach that the judgments will be different and take place at different times, epochs and locations, with some even suggesting that the Matthew 25 passage has at least two judgments that are a millennium apart! What is the Christian to make of all this?

### **Judgment(s) and Their Nature: a brief Assessment**

Contingent on one's hermeneutical approach answers to this question may vary either that there is only one judgment or a multiplicity of them. If one is pre-millennial and dispensational, there is a multiplicity of them! The righteous are judged separately from the wicked either before or after the tribulation. In this scheme of hermeneutics, the wicked are judged after the millennium and consigned to their eternal doom, though the definition of this doom varies. Any biblically sound evangelical holds on to a Biblical literal eternal Hell while the Annihilationist, such as the SDA posits a total obliteration of the wicked so that no trace of them remains (Vlach 2021). Yet another approach to judgment(s) is suggested by SDA theologians revolving around the idea that although salvation is by grace alone, there are several divine universal judgments given at length though we here merely list them without elaborating. The reader is encouraged to explore these further in their own time:

1. Pre-cross judgments.
2. Judgment on the cross (typological judgment).
3. Judgment during our life time or decisive judgment.
4. Pre-advent, affirmative or confirmatory judgment.
5. Judgment at the second coming of Christ or realisation judgment.
6. Judgment During the Millennium or attestation judgment.
7. Final judgment.

Although these views appear plausible, a number of them scarcely have any Biblical warrant or at best improperly applied to explain the authorial intent.

Although we state thus, people suggesting these views ought not to be casually dismissed or treated with kid's gloves, although we may combat them on the following points:

- Annihilation is not Biblical and never taught anywhere in scripture. It's a result of human rationalisation and argumentation (e.g. that the idea of Hell fire has pagan Greek connotations and sources). A correct hermeneutical approach never yields annihilation, never! Care reading of context should yield answers, not forgetting what genre is at play.
- Though we can split the multiple judgments, the Bible does not strictly teach a multiplicity of them as suggested by some theologians. In our view, the multiplicity is apparent rather than actual. For understanding's sake, the divisions may be helpful though can equally be misleading at the same time! For instance, I & II Thessalonians focus on the Christian experience side of things while other passages like II Corinthians 5:10; Acts 24:15,25 or Matthew 25:31-46 tackle the whole picture as taking place at the same time.
- A respective church traditional position does not necessarily mean it is Biblical or taught by scripture in any way.
- God cannot be questioned by any of His creation, not even by Celestial beings. The suggestion that God will need to give a reason for justifying and condemning another is mere anthropomorphic language used by Theologians such as Moskala. God is absolutely sovereign though one of His attributes is that he is eternally Just. His justice is seen in the atonement.

### **Why the Judgment?**

Divine Judgment is essential to declare the justice of God and in accordance with God's will and plan (Shedds 1986). Before He judges, God often and always warns, and if the people do not heed, he comes in judgment. If He warns and does not make things come to pass, He may be charged with being inconsistent or tolerating evil. However, this cannot be. At times, God may be viewed to be slow but no, everything has a time. Further, the judgment or judgments demonstrate that God vindicates His justice and His people that were subjected to much affliction and suffering while on the Earth. When the judgment arrives, whether in this life or on the last day, the saints will glorify God for being Just, though it is admittedly difficult to conceive that some of the condemned will be blood relations and colleagues we may have loved. The comfort is this that the saints' glorified nature will be such that it will be in total sync and agreement with God, loving or hating what He does.

Perhaps a more specific question would be, why so many judgments instead of one final judgment as held by many ancient theologians? The answer is not easy to give but we offer some suggestions. Firstly, as one reads the totality of scripture, especially if one is dispensational leaning in hermeneutics, there appears to emerge multiple judgments, each for a special purpose. Secondly, as one reads the Bible and wishes to fit their theological framework into a synchronised systematic whole, often multiple judgments inevitably must come up, as was the case with the Jehovah's witnesses in 1914 or the SDA in 1844. Thirdly, the nature (i.e. genre) and interpretation of the prophetic books such as Daniel, Ezekiel or Revelation is often plagued with many difficulties. The reader is encouraged to refer to our over view of the book of Revelations in another/separate paper to further appreciate what we here connote. Not a few people have veered to this or other extreme thereby arriving at different conclusions, as they attempt to harmonise the books (Carson 2007). Finally, all the views point to one thing, God shall judge the world at some future point, whether to condemnation or glorification though the timing is not entirely agreed up.

One more idea though, begs inclusion: the judgments prove that God means what He says and will do what He intends. None can stay His hand or question His ways, although thank fully, He is Just in His essential being and nature.

### **Observations and comments on the judgments in relation to Theodicy**

Theodicy is aimed at explaining God's ways with a view to justify His ways. In a day when many question or attack the Christian God, theologians are increasingly seeking to demonstrate that God remains Just and above creature scrutiny (Romans 11:33-36). Reasons could include His dealing with sin in the atonement, His sovereignty and attributes. In attempting to prove that God is Just and yet benevolent, some theologians tend to over simplify matters and seem to suggest some ideas that are basically anthropo-centric rather than theo-centric. Care must be taken, especially when one reads some seemingly harmless writings sprinkled here and there with theological jargon when in fact are basically humanistic in outlook. Further, some rationalise too much and overly want to defend God when His word is there to declare His ways. God does not need a defender, He is His own defence! Though in apologetics, we may need to marshal arguments to prove God's justice in His acts, His paths are beyond tracing out (Romans 11:33). Another observation is that in attempting to prove that God is Just, consistent and fair, theologians fall into the trap of indirectly suggesting that salvation is by works rather than grace. Although they may loudly proclaim that salvation is by grace alone, they subtly introduce ideas of good works, attitudes, and will as basis for one's salvation! In keeping with the Reformation battle cry, we re-echo *Sola Gratia!*

## **What Others have Said and Written about Theodicy and Judgment(s)**

Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, R. Mccune and others who have written systematic theologies all agree that there will be a last judgment of both the wicked and the righteous. They may differ on some specifics but they certainly agree on a final assize where all people from every generation will assemble to be judged. Some Theologians however argue that the saints will not be judged with the wicked, suggesting that there is a thousand year gap between judgments. Thankfully, all these theologians (mentioned in this immediate section by name) hold a literal final eternal Hell where the wicked (the devil included) will be thrown for a conscious eternity for retribution for their sins. WGT Shedd's did a detailed study on the reality and nature of eternal punishment, a worth reading book for sure! The Church remains indebted to such minds or contributions.

Dr Moskala, C.I. Scofield and other theologians equally hold to a form of judgment though they split these judgments into several, based on their hermeneutic. For instance, Dr. Moskala tends to suggest at least five judgments of different modes and kinds while Scofield splits the judgments to cater for dispensations, groups of people and the millennium, in relation to the Prophetic books. These theologians however may not hold the same view on the final end of the wicked, whether a literal eternal hell or not, though they are agreed on the importance of the multiple judgments in relation to God's impeccable ways.

Finally, P.W.Pace II, does a great work in collating various views critiquing theodicies in relation to natural evil. Unlike Moskala who assumes that theodicy is in order, Pace demonstrates that various views have been held in the realm of Philosophy of religion. While some assert that the Christian religion has a reasonable case for explaining how a good God and evil coexist, others flatly reject the existence of God by using logical arguments such as one advanced by atheistic William Rowe who closely agrees with Epicurus of old. He argues as follows: 1. Pointless evil exists 2. If God exists, pointless evil should not exist 3. Pointless evil exists, God does not exist! This argument, at face value, appears potent though it may have its weaknesses. Suffice it to say however, that evil, albeit gratuitous evil, exists and the theologian must reconcile and explain this. Pace concludes his 2012 course research paper by asserting that the theistic argument and explanation makes good sense in agreement with some atheists! It needs to be borne in mind that the atheist does not buy into the Biblical accounts and reasoning but at some point acknowledges or rejects the Biblical view at face value. The effects of the fall in Genesis 3 have perilous effects including impaired judgment on matters, unless grace transforms and creation is fully redeemed as we see alluded to in Romans 8.

## Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

From reading on God's theodicy, we learn, among other points the following helpful take home lessons:

1. God is Just in all His ways.
2. The Atonement was pivotal to our salvation.
3. Any gospel that misses out or leaves the atonement is defective and may lead to error.
4. Many theologians have held varying views about the number of judgments, dispensationalists or not. Dr Moskala is one and C.I. Scofield another. These men propagated multiplicities of divine judgments based on what they read across the Bible with Dr. Moskala teaching that there are about five judgments which the Christian has to go through before final salvation. Scofield on the other hand taught several judgments and in the process spawned a new hermeneutical approach we now call dispensational theology. Reformed hermeneutics distances itself from Scofield on several scores. We do not handle that matter in this discourse.
5. One's hermeneutical approach influences their exegetical interpretation of passages. There is no neutrality even in theology.
6. It is awfully important to deeply know one's theological back bone as detailed as possible. It is only helpful.
7. God cannot be subjected to human courts or judgments over His ways, for they are past tracing out.
8. God is infinitely Just, Holy and benevolent in His essential nature, being and character. To think of Him in other ways is to err.
9. The wicked and righteous are said to be judged at the same time, at least in the Matthew 25 case, although the Acts 26 passage suggests the wicked and righteous being equally judged though does not give the timing whether it will be at the same time (i.e. simultaneously) and venue.
10. Christ's first advent set in motion eschatological events leading to the final judgment.
11. The fall in the Garden of Eden actually took place and explains the presence of sin in the world. Though some reject the historicity of an actual Adam and Eve, this is asserted as fact in scripture (Macarthur 2002).

12. The ramifications of the fall are graver than many realise.
13. Theodices have come under scrutiny and attack by many pundits on either side of the argument with some atheist claiming that God and Evil are mutually exclusive. If one is present, the other cannot be. Since evil is present, then God does not! Others argue for theodicy from various premises, including the Biblical premise that states that evil and God can exist in the same world though God is not the author or originator of sin. Man voluntarily chose to disobey God once placed in the Garden to be tested. Having a free will, humans made a choice that has had long term ramifications to the present day. Unlike what humanists suggest, human beings are inherently fallen and therefore sinful from birth. God must regenerate to change the picture.

### **Importance of this Consideration**

This subject is a wake up call to critically analyse (and reassert) the Just nature of God as well as other views held by equally high standing theologians like Dr. J. Moskala. The Bible is under siege both within and outside the house of God. What worsens the case is that many Christians are ill-equipped, not ready for battle; their discernment levels are low. Thankfully, there is equally a fair number of spiritually alert saints whose antennas are functioning well, ready for action and able to detect error from afar. All they need is are tools and indicators to sharpen their prowess. We are grateful to God for such souls. However, if one is not theologically trained, they may not discern the subtle errors or assumptions arrived at/taken by the Doctor (Moskala). In that sense, this is a fitting test/discussion not only to check how well versed one is on the judgments but close the existing knowledge gap. That is not to say everything Moskala asserts is entirely wrong or unbiblical per se but some of his conclusions are evidently skewed towards Adventism rather than what the Bible actually says. There is no neutrality even in theological matters! One's hermeneutic colours their theological perspectives. That said, the reference sources are to be carefully chosen for biblical soundness so that Christians are trained and made aware of what other people are thinking. The evangelical hermeneutical perspective should be the primary driver to interpretation as elucidated by Blomberg et al among others. Despite the minor differences within the evangelical household, the deviations are not too far from authorial intent. Michael Vlach (2021) has written a helpful book, though focusing on how New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament. This partly speaks to this discourse. Though we may not entirely agree with all his conclusions or recommendations, Vlach certainly triggers excellent discussion points. Christians need to have a fresh look at how scripture is treated or interpreted, as McArthur (2002) has rightly observed. The present biblical ignorance levels are deadly frightening needing urgent attention! On a positive note, Pace made a good case by demonstrating that Theodices have been under

a lot of scrutiny as the question of Evil and God coexisting seems a continuing vexing matter. This discourse has, however, demonstrated that the Biblical theistic argument is reasonable and makes sense to the extent that even some atheists acknowledge this fact. The reader is encouraged to read widely before imbibing any or every view on offer. For instance, it is good to read about the various view by the likes of William Rowe, Swinburne, Eleonore Stump, Nick Trakakis and Luke Gelinias among others that present voices for or against theistic theodicy.

## **Conclusion**

God's ways are infinitely Just and no mortal can or dares lay a charge against Him. He is from all eternity and thus not subject to creaturely scrutiny because He is before all things, sovereign and the one that sets the standards or parameters. The justice of God cannot be questioned as much as His holiness can be queried. The salvation of sinners will therefore remain a point of amazement for the justified sinner, Angel or any other celestial being in the Universe. God does therefore not need to explain His ways to any one and yet remains true to His just nature as evidenced by the atonement. The Christian has reason to rejoice in this great salvation wrought purely by His grace, not of works, attitudes, deeds or best motives or intentions on the part of the sinner.

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