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Divine Judgment

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Early Judaism

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Judgment

Divine judgment is ubiquitous in the literature of early Judaism and forms a central concern in some documents. Earlier scholarship tended to maintain that following the Law while awaiting the judgment was the *summa* of Jewish devotion (e.g., Bousset 1926: 202). Recent research, however, has shown that great diversity characterizes conceptions of judgment in Second Temple literature. No systematic doctrine of judgment existed in early Judaism. Divine judgment is found wherever God, or a representative appointed by God, is involved in some judging activity. Most commonly, punitive actions against evildoers are prominent, but judgment is not restricted to negative or forensic matters, since ruling, deciding, and delivering also qualify as acts of divine judgment.

Hebrew Bible

The language and conceptions of divine judgment in early Jewish literature generally represent developments of the same found in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew term (usually *šāpat*) covers a wide range of activities, both human and divine. The English translation of the term as “judgment” is unfortunate, since it suggests only forensic concepts (deciding a legal case), usually negative (legal guilt or condemnation). *Šāpat*, however, can refer more broadly to various executive functions aimed at maintaining justice or *šālôm*. Thus, governing, ruling, restoring, delivering, and punishing are equally valid renderings in various places (e.g., Judg. 2:16; 3:10; Psalm 82).

As “judge of all the earth” God rescues Lot and punishes Sodom (Gen. 18:25), decides between the righteous and the wicked (1 Kings 8:32), rescues those who look to him (Lam. 3:58-59), executes punishment upon sinful Israelites (1 Sam. 3:13), and rules or establishes justice for the peoples (Isa. 51:5). This divine administration of justice takes place normally in localized earthly events in human history, but in some texts it occurs in the heavens (Ps. 82:1), has a future or eschatological setting (Joel 4:2, 12), or is universal (Eccl. 12:14). The phrase “the day of the LORD” makes its appearance especially in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 13:6, 9; Amos 5:18). Typically, God judges on the basis of Torah and the covenant with Israel (e.g., Deuteronomy 28-31); tensions arise, however, when a good or evil life does not result in the appropriate divine blessing or curse (e.g., Job; Ecclesiastes; Psalm 44).

Early Jewish Literature

Types of Judgment

Divine judgment takes a variety of forms in Second Temple literature. Not infrequently, it takes the form of a military engagement, crushing the opponents of God and bringing deliverance to God’s people (e.g., 1 Enoch 1:3-9; 1QM 1:4-5, 14-15; T. Levi 3:3). Increasingly, however, forensic judgment scenarios appear, as witnessed in the LXX translation of *šāpat* by the more forensically oriented Greek term *krinein*. Courtroom scenes, appearing already in the Hebrew Bible, occur repeatedly

in early Jewish texts: God sits upon a judgment throne, examines evidence, hears witnesses, and passes sentence (e.g., *1 Enoch* 47:3; 90:20-26; *4 Ezra* 7:33; *2 Bar.* 83:1-3; *Sir.* 35:14-15; *Testament of Abraham* 13-15).

A variety of means are employed in arriving at this judicial sentence. Souls (or deeds) can be weighed in a scale (e.g., *1 Enoch* 61:8; *2 Enoch* 44:5; 52:15; *T. Abr.* 12:13-14; 13:10). Betraying possible Egyptian or Greek influence, some writings contain a list of individuals' good or evil deeds, or the names of the righteous or wicked (*Jub.* 30:19-23; *1 Enoch* 89:70; 98:8; *CD* 20:19-20; *2 Bar.* 24:1; *2 Enoch* 52:15). Thus, the judgment sentence is "according to deeds" (*Ps.-Philo, Bib. Ant.* 3:10; *Sir.* 16:12-14). Criteria for this sentence usually relate in some fashion to the Torah and covenant with Israel (e.g., *Bib. Ant.* 11:2; *Tob.* 3:5; *4 Ezra* 7:19-25). Rather than flawless obedience, one's heart and deeds must demonstrate adherence to and love of God's Torah. In contrast to the wicked, the righteous or elect are typically shown mercy in this judgment (*Pss. Sol.* 2:33-35). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, one's adherence to the Torah as expounded by the Teacher of Righteousness is crucial (*1QpHab* 8:1-3).

Strictly speaking, these court scenes do not determine the guilt or innocence of the accused, since the parties typically enter already with labels such as "sinners," "righteous," "elect," or "enemies." Such a forensic determination of a status heretofore unclear does not appear in early Jewish texts until the late first or early second century C.E. (Reiser 1997: 149; cf. *Testament of Abraham*; *b. Berakot* 28b). Instead, forensic judgment publicly reveals and confirms the status of groups and individuals.

Earthly or Heavenly Judgment

Divine judgment can still take place within human history and on earth, through illness, death, warfare, or catastrophe. However, descriptions of the place of judgment grow increasingly transcendent (e.g., *4 Ezra* 7). Suggested reasons include the loss of earthly hope among Jewish groups along with the influence of Hellenistic dualism and apocalypticism. Earlier attempts to tie this earthly/heavenly distinction to differences of apocalyptic versus rabbinic, or Palestinian versus Diaspora, perspectives have been largely abandoned. For most scholars these increasingly heavenly and transcendent scenes of judgment indicate belief in a supra-mundane, wholly discontinuous new age or reality. A minority of scholars, however, take the language of transcendence as metaphorical for a strictly this-worldly expectation: salvation is essentially conceived as *here*, as earthly, with no suggestion of anything like transcendence (Reiser 1997: 148).

Agents of Judgment

God is normally the judge (*1 Enoch* 47; *T. Mos.* 10:7). In numerous texts, however, other figures are listed as judging, though their authorization by the divine judge is nearly always assumed: angels generally (*CD* 2:5-6); the Watchers in *1 Enoch*; named angels (e.g., "Michael" in *1QM* 17:7-8); messiah(s) (e.g., *Pss. Sol.* 17-18; *1 Enoch* 37-71; *4 Ezra* 12:31-35); Melchizedek (*11QM* Melch; in this

text, Melchizedek may be another name for Michael); Abel (*T. Abr.* 13:3); and the elect (*1QpHab* 5:4-5). In some cases, these other figures are agents of God's judgment who execute the penalty rather than pronounce the sentence (e.g., *1 Enoch* 54:6).

Individual or Collective Judgment

Judgment upon groups (nations, kingdoms) predominates in the Hebrew Bible, which often envisions the destruction of Israel's enemies. Such collective judgment is also envisioned in Second Temple literature, in both military and forensic scenes. However, an increasing interest in the postmortem judgment of individuals emerges, especially in apocalypses (e.g., *1 Enoch* 1-36; *3 Baruch*; *2 Enoch*; *Testament of Abraham*; cf. Fischer 1978: 37-123). Yet the collective viewpoint is seldom absent, since the judged individuals are often members of groups: the wicked, the righteous, Gentiles, and Israel (e.g., *Apocalypse of Abraham*).

Objects of Judgment

The most common objects of judgment are those receiving punishment, such as wicked individuals, the enemies of God or of Israel, or even inhabitants of cosmic realms (e.g., Belial, apostate angels). Earlier scholarship asserted an exemption from such judgment for Israel and Israelites (cf. *Wis.* 15:2a, "For even if we sin we are yours"). However, it is increasingly recognized that punitive judgment not only divides Israel from the nations but can also fall upon Israel and her leaders (*Wis.* 6:4-8; *1 Enoch* 62-63) and can separate righteous from unrighteous individuals within Israel (*Pr. Azar.* 1:3-9; *CD* 8; 19). Judgment upon the righteous normally results in some form of reward, but this is less frequently mentioned than punishment of the unrighteous. In some texts this judgment is universal (e.g., *1 Enoch* 1; 81; *Jubilees* 5; *T. Benj.* 10:8-9) and can include the living as well as the dead (e.g., *1 Enoch* 51; *4 Ezra* 7:32-44).

Time of Judgment

The older view in preexilic Israelite religion that divine judgments are experienced in this life is still attested in early Jewish literature (e.g., *Wisdom* 12; *Tob.* 1:18; *CD* 1), though the emphasis shifts decidedly from the past or present to the future. The precise timing of such future judgment yields an almost bewildering variety, including at or near the moment of death (*4 Macc.* 17:12; 18:23), some unspecified time after death (*4 Ezra* 14:34-35), during an intermediate period between death and the eschaton, at some point near entry to the age to come, or following a messianic interim period (*4 Ezra* 7:26-44) and/or a general resurrection (*2 Bar.* 50:1-4). In numerous texts this last conception is referred to as the "great" or "eternal" judgment (e.g., *1 Enoch* 25:4; 91:9; *Jub.* 5:10). Most texts show little concern to harmonize such variations in timing. An exception is the *Testament of Abraham*, which envisions three separate judgment events: immediately after death, later judgment of nations, and universal judgment (chap. 13). In some texts the transition from one's status in this age to that in the next occurs with-

out any explicit judgment scene, particularly in the case of righteous martyrs (4 Maccabees 14).

Purposes and Outcomes of Judgment

Both warnings of punishment and promises of reward are frequent in early Jewish texts. Even the warnings, however, generally serve a positive purpose for the hearers. Since outsiders would not normally be expected to hear these words, the threats of judgment upon them serve to strengthen Jewish listeners. Likewise, the warnings of potential negative judgment addressed to Jews can serve to lead such sinners in Israel to repent as well as to strengthen the obedient to stand firm in the face of suffering and temptation. Thus, divine judgment is of more interest as a motivational tool than as an object of doctrinal reflection *per se*.

The punishment of the wicked applies in some texts to the enemies of Israel, in others to sinners within Israel, and in others to humanity without such clear distinctions. The forms of such punishment vary widely, including everlasting imprisonment (1 Enoch 69:28), destruction by sword or fire (*Jub.* 9:15; 36:10; *T. Zeb.* 10:3), eternal torment (*Jdt.* 16:17), and annihilation (1QS 4:12-14; 5:13).

The reward of the righteous is likewise described in quite varied ways, including lasting memory among the living, (eternal) life, happiness, deliverance from oppression, enjoyment of earthly or heavenly goods, and immortality or resurrection. This last item, resurrection of the body, becomes increasingly important in postmortem judgment scenes (Nickelsburg 1972). In some texts human beings are raised for judgment, while in others resurrection is the result of the judgment.

New Testament and Rabbinic Literature

The Jewish character of the early Jesus movement is clearly seen in its large-scale continuity with Jewish views of divine judgment. Nevertheless, certain crucial differences also become apparent. The agents and recipients of judgment are largely the same, though the risen Jesus as Christ or Lord (or "Son of Man") now appears more centrally as judge alongside God, and the resurrection of the dead becomes more central (see esp. 1 Corinthians 15; Revelation 20). Most of the same means, outcomes, and scenes occur, including the relationship between judgment and human deeds (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 2:12-16; 14:10-11; Matt. 25:31-46; Jas. 2:14-26). However, the standard is now more often expressed in terms of relationship to Christ than to the Jewish Torah (e.g., Rom. 2:16; but cf. Matt. 5:17-20). The major shift involves the inaugurated or "realized" eschatology of the New Testament, whereby divine judgment has in one sense already occurred (e.g., John 3:18, 36; 5:22, 24, 26), but in another sense is yet to come (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:6; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; Rom. 2:16; 14:10; Acts 24:25).

Rabbinic literature maintains belief in most of the conceptions of divine judgment uncovered thus far, including military judgment, reward and punishment in this life, resurrection and last judgment. Debate over the

fate of Gentiles occurs more often. Since rabbinic sayings focus normally on behavior in this life, one does not often find speculation about divine judgment, except as that may have behavioral relevance. Older handbooks on rabbinic Judaism tended to give a false picture by assembling texts without regard to this underlying concern for present behavior. While rabbinic texts do place heightened emphasis on an individual's keeping of Torah commands, this is due to their concern for personal behavior rather than to a supposed legalistic view of obedience and judgment (*m. Sanh.* 10:1; *m. Qidd.* 4:14; *Sipre Numbers* 44). Human repentance is viewed as particularly effective in this literature to overcome judgment upon sins, and God is portrayed as leaning more toward mercy than strict justice (*b. Roš Haššana* 17).

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