

# Retribution theology

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



God delivered the children of Israel out of the Egyptian's abusive hands and gave them the Ten Commandments. These rules were given to live by and form an everlasting relationship with their God. But, if they failed to keep their end of the bargain, God would have to punish them. Retribution theology is the belief that those who are obedient to God are called righteous and will be blessed, while those that are disobedient are wicked and will be cursed (Tulloch 2006). From the beginning of Exodus and beyond the Babylonian Exile, retribution theology was prevalent in the lives of Israel. The Old Testament writings reiterate God's faithfulness towards Israel. "The Old Testament indicates that God's law was specially revealed to Israel in the context of His redeeming and delivering His people from bondage," (Bahnsen 1980). But before Moses, God established an unconditional covenant with Abram when he obeyed Him. God changed Abram's name to Abraham and told him that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan forever. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12: 2, NRSV).

These descendants became known as Israel and after 500 years of being God's chosen people, they became the slaves of the Egyptians. Since God is faithful and Israel was His people, He had to remove them from the oppression of Pharaoh. In a theophany, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and commissioned him to deliver the children of Israel. Once God freed them and provided them an escape route, under the leadership of Moses, He endowed them with the law and His blessings. "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. (Exodus 19: 5, NRSV). After freeing them, God provided

them with the means for remaining freed and receiving His provisions. In spite of their deliverance, the Israelites' problems did not end with their exodus from Egypt. They suffered many trials and tribulations, but from the hand of the God who had promised to bless them (Deffinbaugh 1976).

Because of their murmuring, complaining, and unbelief, God allowed Israel to walk around in the wilderness for forty years. This was literally only a three day journey.

In addition, God never intended for Israel to have to fight their way into the Promised Land; He wanted them to have faith and obey Him. Again, because of their disobedience, God allowed them to suffer the consequences of sin. God called Israel to be righteous before Him. Righteousness was what the people were to be and to do because of God. It meant to be in the right relationship with God, and to act accordingly in the world based on that moral relationship. He blessed Israel out of His love and cursed out of His righteousness or holiness (Deffinbaugh 1976).

To be righteous was to have the teaching of God in one's heart, to know and to understand the things of God. While the term could be used to describe ethical actions in the world, the primary focus of righteousness was toward God, what the people were in relation to God. Righteousness was the people's relationship to God based on the fact, that " I am your God. " Therefore, God felt that He had every right to curse them when they were disobedient to His covenant. The first commandment God gave Israel was to have no other gods before Him because He was the one true God.

Clearly, God knew and acknowledged that there were other gods or objects the people in that time worshipped. But He had proven to the Hebrew people that He was their deliverer, provider, and their God. The second commandment said not to make for themselves any type of idol, that God was jealous, and that He showed mercy to those that loved Him and kept His commandments. Now, He revealed His nature and how He was to be honored. It was only right, just and honorable that they worshipped and obeyed Him. There did not seem to be any secrets or mysteries on what God expected from Israel.

But, Israel just could not stop worshipping idols. They continued to worship Baal, the god of sun, rain, thunder, fertility, and agriculture despite the prophets' warnings. Many prophets such as Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, and Micah warned Israel of their wickedness and the consequences. When Israel became a nation, God's law of righteousness did not change. He still expected them to obey His word. God's national blessings and cursings were conditional as well. If a nation repented of its sin and turned to God, its threatened judgment could be prevented.

If a nation turned from God, its promised blessings would be taken away. Many forms of divine retribution can fall on a human life which is worse than immediate death. In fact, Jeremiah made just such a complaint about the punishment inflicted on Jerusalem (Lam. 4: 6, 9). One might think also of King Saul, whose last days were burdened with such mental and emotional turmoil that death itself was a kind of release. 10: 30-31. No one should

regard such a warning as an idle threat. God Himself has claimed the right to take vengeance and to judge His people.

In saying this, the author quoted twice from Deuteronomy (32: 35-36), a chapter which most vividly evokes the picture of God's people suffering His retributive judgments (cf. esp. Deut. 32: 19-27). Those familiar with this text, as well as other descriptions of God's wrath against " His people," agree: it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Not only did God operate in that manner of retribution theology, but Israel believed that if you obeyed the law, you would prosper. If you didn't obey the law, you would suffer.