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### The Concept of Vengeance in the Book of Revelation in its Old Testament and Near Eastern Context

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Musvosvi, Joel Nobel, Ph.D.

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Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

THE CONCEPT OF VENGEANCE IN THE BOOK OF  
REVELATION IN ITS OLD TESTAMENT  
AND NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

A dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

by  
Joel Nobel Musvosvi

March 1986





ABSTRACT

THE CONCEPT OF VENGEANCE IN THE BOOK OF  
REVELATION IN ITS OLD TESTAMENT  
AND NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

by

Joel Nobel Musvosvi

Chairman: Kenneth A. Strand

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH  
Dissertation

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE CONCEPT OF VENGEANCE IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION  
IN ITS OLD TESTAMENT AND NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

Name of researcher: Joel Nobel Musvosvi

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Date completed: March 1986

This study attempts to resolve the theological and ethical problems raised by the call for and rejoicing at vengeance as they appear in Rev 6:9-11 and Rev 19:2, respectively. Central to the study is the question of whether vengeance in Revelation expresses a vindictive human attitude or a divine attribute of justice.

In Chapter 1 a review of pertinent literature reveals the lack of agreement among scholars on the interpretation of vengeance in Revelation. Chapter 2 examines the concept of vengeance as it occurs in several Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties, the Old Testament, and Pseudepigrapha. This examination reveals that vengeance, in both biblical and extra-biblical documents

occurs in the context of covenant or treaty relationships. The evidence suggests that vengeance is not a human action of self-help; rather it is the prerogative of the highest authority in protecting loyal subjects.

Inasmuch as the survey of Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds revealed suffering to be the context in which calls for vengeance occur, there was need to examine evidences for persecution in the Apostolic era. Chapter 3 reviews these evidences in the New Testament and especially in Revelation.

Chapter 4 examines Rev 6:9-10 and 19:1-2, wherein the call for and response to vengeance occur in juridical contexts. In view of the unfair human verdicts against his saints, God must "retry" the case between them and the persecutor, so that the innocence of the saints and the guilt of the persecutor can be declared. The trial--a covenant lawsuit--involves an open review of the records of both defendant and plaintiff; and in line with the law of malicious witness, God reverses Babylon's judgments. Thus, vengeance is demonstrated to be a divine attribute of justice.

The scenes of rejoicing in Rev 18 and 19 recall the Exodus-from-Egypt/Fall-of-Babylon motif and have parallels in some Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties. The rejoicing is theocentric, and focuses on God's redemptive purpose. Vengeance means deliverance and the restoration of the kingdom to the saints.

Dedicated to  
My wife Angeline, my son Tendai, and my daughter  
Vimbai, who provided love and support.

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The German poet Goethe observed: "The greatest genius will not be worth much if he pretends to draw exclusively from his own resources." In the persuance and completion of this dissertation I have become deeply indebted to several people. But in mentioning some I run the risk of overlooking others. Nevertheless, there are those who deserve special mention because of their deep and enduring contribution to my study.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The fifth seal of Rev 6:9-11 introduces a view of souls under the altar who are crying out to God with a loud voice: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" This prayer for vengeance has its counterpart in Rev 19:1-2 where there is a song of rejoicing at the judgment of Babylon:

Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

In these two passages John introduces a term and a concept that is of great significance in Revelation. The word "vengeance" (*ekdikēsis*) and the broader concept of the vindication of God's people are of prime importance for the theology of Revelation. Because of the bearing of this theme on the overall message of the Revelation, a theological/thematic study of vengeance is desirable. This dissertation is a thematic study of the vengeance motif in Revelation in the light of its Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds.

These references to vengeance in the Apocalypse

have raised some problems for biblical scholars. The most commonly used explanation for the teaching of vengeance in these verses is that the Apocalypse has simply reverted to Judaism on this teaching and that, accordingly, the author has made use of earlier Jewish apocalyptic works. This is the opinion, for example, of E. Vischer, J. Massyngberde Ford, and some others.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Bauer perceives a difference in spirit between Luke 18:6-8 and Rev 6:9-11: "Only what in Luke is a lost chord becomes in the book of Revelation the key note for the whole." He concludes: "The Apocalyptist breathes a glowing hatred against all enemies and persecutors of Christianity and assuages himself with thoughts about the terrible sufferings which await them."<sup>2</sup> W. Bousset, with a similar perspective, contends that any attempt to weaken this attitude of revenge in Rev 6:9-11 is futile. "We must get accustomed," he states, "to the fact that the Apocalyptist, as he views the murdered martyr-band, lives in stronger attitudes of hatred and of hope than we can condone."<sup>3</sup> And in a similar vein,

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<sup>1</sup>E. Vischer, Die Offenbarung Johannis. Eine jüdische Apokalypse in christlicher Bearbeitung (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1895); J. Massyngberde Ford, Revelation, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Bauer, "Das Gebot der Fiendesliebe und die alten Christen," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 27 (1917):40.

<sup>3</sup>Wilhelm Bousset, Die Offenbarung Johannis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), p.271.

W. D. Davies summarizes the attitude of the book of Revelation to the Christian community's enemies as "an abortive hatred that can only lead, not to their redemption, but to their destruction."<sup>4</sup>

From a psychologist's perspective, Carl Jung has addressed the same issue of "vengeance" in the book of Revelation and has concluded that John was not able to separate his conscious from his subconscious. Thus, according to Jung, in the Gospel John consciously speaks of love, but in the visions of Revelation his pent-up feelings of anger burst out. In his attempt to practice love, John

had to shut out all negative feelings, and, thanks to a helpful lack of self-reflection, he was able to forget them. But though they disappeared from the conscious level they continued to rankle beneath the surface, and in the course of time spun an elaborate web of resentments and vengeful thoughts which then burst upon consciousness in the form of a revelation. From this there grew up a terrifying picture that blatantly contradicts all ideas of Christian humility, tolerance, and love of your neighbor and enemies, and makes nonsense of a loving father in heaven and rescuer of mankind. A veritable orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury that revels in fantastic images of terror breaks out and with blood and fire overwhelms a world which Christ had just endeavored to restore to the original state of innocence and loving communion with God.<sup>5</sup>

Even those scholars who do not see a vindictive

---

<sup>4</sup>W. D. Davies, "Ethics in the New Testament," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (1962), 2:176.

<sup>5</sup>Carl G. Jung, Answer to Job (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 125.

spirit in Revelation do not really wrestle with the issue of vengeance. Some only see here a doctrine of the state of the soul after death.<sup>6</sup> Others argue against such an interpretation and simply move on to the rest of the passage.<sup>7</sup> In either case, the real issue of vengeance is either bypassed or treated superficially.

It is quite evident that from the days of Marcion (second century A.D.) to the present, the concept of vengeance as a divine attribute has caused uneasiness among Bible students and has in some cases influenced the rejection of Revelation as a canonical book.<sup>8</sup> Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (third century A.D.) tells of "representatives of the older generation" who "criticized every single chapter."<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, even in more recent times this attitude has persisted. For instance, Martin Luther, for years, avoided the teachings of the Apocalypse because

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Rist, Revelation, Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), pp. 414-415; Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 133-134.

<sup>7</sup>"The Fifth Seal" [Rev 6:9-11], Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, edited by F. D. Nichol (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 7:777-779.

<sup>8</sup>The Apocalypse was omitted both in the whole of Eastern Syria and in Armenia as well as in Wulfila's Bible. Hans von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 235. For an example of a modern writer, see D. H. Lawrence, Apocalypse (New York: Penguin Books, 1931).

<sup>9</sup>Campenhausen, p. 236.

he did not see the gospel in it.<sup>10</sup> Calvin refused to write a commentary on it and gave it very little consideration in his massive writings.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of the modern critical era, J. S. Semler remarked that "the tone of the Apocalypse" was "displeasing and offensive" to him, and therefore he could not consider it to be inspired.<sup>12</sup> T. Henshaw, an even more recent scholar, wished it [the Apocalypse] had not been included in the New Testament canon, for "in the last hundred years it has ceased to exercise direct influence on any but eccentric individuals who have no knowledge of modern theological scholarship,"<sup>13</sup> while for Rudolf Bultmann the Christianity of the Apocalypse is "a weakly Christianized Judaism."<sup>14</sup> Such conceptions about the book clearly demonstrate the need for a careful investigation of the concept of vengeance in Revelation. Is vengeance really

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<sup>10</sup>Wilbur M. Smith, Revelation, Wycliffe Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 1491.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Werner Georg Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 332.

<sup>13</sup>T. Henshaw, New Testament Literature in the Light of Modern Scholarship (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), pp. 417-418.

<sup>14</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 2:175. Bultmann argues that the author of the Apocalypse has not grasped the meaning of Christian existence in present time, because he does not realize that the past is gone and a new age has begun (p. 175).

such an "un-Christian" theme? Are the afore-noted negative evaluations perhaps simply the result of a failure to take into account the rich Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds to this theme?

The present study attempts to investigate the concept of vengeance in the book of Revelation in the light of its Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds and context. The key problem which is addressed is whether the general vengeance theme in Revelation--as illustrated in the call for and rejoicing at vengeance--is contrary to or in agreement with general biblical theology and ethics. In other words, What is the basis of the vengeance motif in the Apocalypse? Is it an expression of a vindictive human attitude? Or does it reflect a divine attribute of justice? The two passages mentioned above (Rev 6:9-11 and 19:1-2) highlight this vengeance theme, and for this reason they serve as a springboard for our thematic investigation. While some work has been done on this general theme, there has been until now no thorough study addressing especially this topic.

Rev 6:9-11 seems, on the surface, to make plain that the martyrs can hardly wait for the punishment of their enemies. In contrast, Jesus had displayed a very different spirit--a spirit of forgiving his persecutors even while they were nailing him to the cross (Luke 23:34). Stephen, too, seems to have displayed a similar



forgiving spirit to his persecutors (Acts 7:60). Thus, it seems strange that the martyrs in Rev 6:9-11, who had died for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, should cherish an apparent spirit of revenge. Moreover, in Rev 19:2 (cf. 18:20) this attitude pertaining to vengeance is also revealed in the rejoicing that occurs at Babylon's judgment. How can such a "vindictive" and "unchristian" attitude on the part of victorious Christians be explained? Is the New Testament ethic of forgiving love not part of the martyrs' ethic? These questions call for a careful examination of the motif of vengeance in the Apocalypse.

### Purpose and Delimitations

#### Purpose

My purpose in this dissertation is to investigate the theological motif of vengeance in the book of Revelation in the light of its Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds. Because Revelation has strong allusions to, and thematic parallels with, the Old Testament, a thematic study of vengeance in the Apocalypse calls for a consideration of this motif in its Old Testament setting. Specifically, the following tasks are undertaken:

1. A survey and evaluation of some representative usages of **nāqām** ("avenge") and its derivatives in the Ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaties and in the Old Tes-

tament as a background for Rev 6:9-11 and 19:2 and the larger vengeance and judgment motifs.

2. A semantic study of the term "avenge" (Greek, *ekdikeō*, and Hebrew, *nāqām*) as a background for understanding the term's usage in Revelation.

3. The exegesis of the two complementary passages, Rev 6:9-11 and 19:2, in the light of Revelation's Old Testament perspective.

4. The construction of a theological framework in the context of persecution as a backdrop against which to interpret the vengeance motif in Revelation.

5. The investigation of the treaty/covenant theme and its bearing on the cry for vengeance.

6. The drawing out of theological implications.

### Delimitations

Of necessity, there are certain delimitations which must be placed upon the treatment in this dissertation. As stated above, the main focus herein is on Rev 6:9-11 and 19:2, these being the main loci wherein is presented most pointedly the call for and the response to God's vengeance. The ethical and theological issues raised in connection with these texts do receive attention, but no attempt is made to deal with the time of this vengeance.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The theme of judgment has a bearing on this topic but will not be pursued in great detail. The Hebrew *sāphat* is often used for "vindicate."

Moreover, because of Revelation's generally recognized use of the Old Testament and because the Old Testament provides a necessary background for the vengeance concept in Revelation, it is necessary to survey and evaluate the use of the Hebrew term *nāqām* and the overall biblical concept of vengeance, but this part of the study serves only as a background and is not exhaustive.<sup>16</sup>

#### Methodology

There are several different methodological routes that have been used in studies on the Apocalypse.<sup>17</sup> These often reflect the school of interpretation to which the author belongs. Perhaps the best approach is one that takes into account the biblical heritage from which John speaks. This heritage is discernible in the rich Old Testament symbolisms, allusions, and verbal and conceptual parallels that are found in the Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>G. E. Mendenhall, "The Vengeance of Yahweh," in The Tenth Generation (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 69-104 makes a significant contribution, though he does not deal much with the New Testament. Mendenhall's interpretation of vengeance as being both salvation and retribution is very insightful and helpful to this study.

<sup>17</sup>For a full discussion of the various approaches to the book of Revelation, see Kenneth A. Strand, Interpreting the Book of Revelation (Naples, Florida: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), pp. 11-16; George E. Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 10-14; and Robert H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 39-45.

<sup>18</sup>For a comprehensive discussion of the use of the Old and New Testaments in the Apocalypse, see Henry

At the outset, certain relevant considerations must be made. First, the Apocalypse is primarily concerned with the eschatological consummation of God's redemptive purpose. The heartbeat of the book is, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds" (Rev 1:7). Such an emphasis requires a method that allows this eschatological character its full expression. Second, the book claims to be a prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 9-11, 18-19). This factor should lead the interpreter to allow for the prophetic element--the book's predictive and declarative character. Indeed, John saw himself as belonging to the prophetic tradition (Rev 22:9-11, 18-19). Does this not suggest that Revelation should be interpreted in the larger context of Old Testament prophetic documents?

Taking the foregoing considerations into account has led me to provide an Old Testament background for the concept of vengeance in the Apocalypse. Such a background attempts to reflect the biblical perspective of John. But inasmuch as it is not possible to treat Old Testament concepts without interacting (to some extent)

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B. Swete, The Apocalypse of John (London: Macmillan and Company, 1906), pp. cxxxv-cliii, in which Swete gives a partial table of the usage of biblical passages in the Revelation. See also Robert H. Mounce The Book of Revelation; André Feuillet, L'Apocalypse (Paris: Desclee' de Brouwer, 1963); R. H. Charles, The Revelation of St. John, 2 vols. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920).

with the rest of the Ancient Near East, it is necessary to survey the usage of the concept of vengeance in non-biblical sources contemporary with Old Testament times.

In the Apocalypse, my treatment of the two complementary passages reflects both exegetical and thematic approaches. The words *ekdikeō* (avenge) and *krinō* (judge) receive special attention, not as an indication of a philological study, but because they are the external indicators of the concept of vengeance.

Chapter 1 is introductory in nature. It contains the statement of the problem to be investigated, together with an indication of the scope, purpose, and delimitations of the dissertation. A review of literature is provided as a way of showing the present status of research on this topic and as a justification for this research. In this review of literature a fairly complete survey is made of journal articles and topical studies on the subject. As far as commentaries are concerned, a survey of representative schools of interpretation has been made without trying to account for every single book.

Chapter 2 furnishes a study of the Ancient Near Eastern and biblical backgrounds to the vengeance concept. Some analysis of the word *nāqām* is made, and the bearing of Hittite vassal-treaties on the biblical concept of vengeance is explored. At the same time, such

concepts as "the vengeance of Yahweh" and "the vengeance of the covenant" are examined. These backgrounds have significance for a proper understanding of vengeance in Revelation.

Chapter 3 is a survey of the evidences for persecution in the New Testament. Because a preliminary investigation has revealed that vengeance has a context of suffering, it has been necessary to have a chapter on evidences for suffering in the period leading to and including the writing of the book of Revelation. This chapter deals primarily with the New Testament data and gives special attention to the Apocalypse.

Chapter 4 examines the motif of vengeance in the book of Revelation. It also includes word-studies of the terms *ekdikēō* and *krinō* and their derivatives. These word-studies include representative usages in the papyri and other Greek literature. Although lexical meanings have been given their due weight, James Barr's insightful point that the most important semantic unit is not the word but the sentence has constantly been borne in mind.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the aim is to go beyond mere lexical semantics to theological implications. The vindication formula "holy and true" is also examined in

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<sup>19</sup>James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). It is in the sentence that a full unit of thought is expressed, and it is when a word is used as part of the expression of a full thought that its meaning comes out most clearly.

chapter 4, for it sheds light on the vengeance theme.<sup>20</sup>

And inasmuch as there appears to be a "vengeance"/"covenant" relationship in the Old Testament literature, as demonstrated by Mendenhall,<sup>21</sup> the possible bearing of the covenant motif on the concept of vengeance and of the vindication of God's people receives careful consideration.

A final chapter provides a synthesis and draws some conclusions from this study. It also deals with the theological and practical implications of those conclusions as they relate both to John's original community and to the Church in succeeding ages. This drawing of implications for the Church in all ages grows out of what Strand has termed the Apocalypse's "philosophy of history," an approach "that allows for repeated historical fulfillments beyond the writer's own time or beyond any other specific time in history."<sup>22</sup>

#### Review of Literature

Inasmuch as several differing interpretations of

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<sup>20</sup>P. Staples, "Rev 16:4-6 and Its Vindication Formula," Novum Testamentum 14 (1972):280-293. This expression is used in predominantly vindicatory settings. It is also used in the vengeance passages in Revelation.

<sup>21</sup>Mendenhall, "The Vengeance of Yahweh," pp. 69-104. His contribution and its implications for this dissertation will be dealt with in the review of literature and in chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup>Strand, Interpreting the Book of Revelation, p. 14.

the vengeance motif have been proposed by different scholars, a review of pertinent literature on this theme is appropriate as part of an introduction to this dissertation.

#### Literature on Old Testament Backgrounds

A classical treatment on "vengeance" in the Old Testament is Erwin Merz's Die Blutrache bei den Israeliten, published in 1916. Merz begins by describing vengeance as a general human phenomenon which is motivated by a human desire to pay back for injury suffered.<sup>23</sup> Merz traces the history and function of vengeance as an inter-family conflict-management action. With the development of a more centralized system of government, the institution of vengeance was gradually shifted from the family to the king.<sup>24</sup>

Merz finds three basic motivations for blood vengeance. First, there is the psychological motivation. It is part of man in all societies to desire paying back evil for evil.<sup>25</sup> Second, there is the material motivation. This is particularly the case where the "enemy"

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<sup>23</sup>Erwin Merz, Die Blutrache bei den Israeliten (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1916), pp. 4-18.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 18-41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-44.



has caused material loss.<sup>26</sup> Finally, there is the superstitious motivation for blood vengeance. Merz sees this as having played a more dominant part in the thinking of Ancient Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Merz sees the development of the Yahweh-religion as the crucial factor in the transforming of blood vengeance from a social phenomenon to a religious motif. In the course of this process, Yahweh came to be viewed as the Protector of his people--the Avenger of blood for his loyal people.<sup>28</sup> Merz shows that Yahweh is the subject of vengeance in the Old Testament, while evil men are the object.<sup>29</sup>

Merz's work has not been seriously challenged. It makes a contribution which is much needed, and which provides a background for the concept of vengeance in the book of Revelation. He makes much use of the biblical material, and follows the biblical text closely. However, Merz makes no reference to the concept of vengeance in the New Testament. It is, however, in the New Testament that this theme raises so many theological problems. This lack of treatment of the concept in the New Testament underscores the need for this study. Also,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-46.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-57.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 61-66.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 71-83.

the question of Merz's presuppositions needs to be raised. He seems to have drawn from the Religionsgeschichte School. This leads him to account for the development of the vengeance motif on the basis of purely naturalistic and historical factors.

Mendenhall's study, "The Vengeance of Yahweh," is of pivotal importance in understanding the covenantal nature of vengeance in the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup> Mendenhall has done some very careful research on the usage of the term nāqām in the Ancient Near East as well as in the Old Testament. He has covered every occurrence of the term in the Amarna letters and in the Old Testament. His greatest contribution lies in his making the conceptual connection between vengeance and covenant. Another significant strength is his demonstration that there are both salvific and retributive aspects to this same motif.<sup>31</sup> The uniqueness of biblical usage has been given its due weight in his comparison and analysis of this Hebrew/Canaanite root, NQM.<sup>32</sup> Mendenhall's treatment of the New Testament is understandably very brief. It does not address the ethical issues that are raised by the cry of the souls under the altar in Rev 6:9-11 and the subsequent rejoicing over Babylon's punishment in Rev 19:2.

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<sup>30</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," pp. 69-104.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-89.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

A number of articles deal with imprecatory psalms and shed light on how to interpret them.<sup>33</sup> While these imprecatory psalms are not directly related to Revelation, they pose the same theological problem raised by the call for vengeance in Revelation. Because of this, the way the theology of those psalms is handled has a direct and important bearing on the present study.

Henning Graf Reventlow's article, "Sein Blut komme über sein Haupt," focuses on the fundamental goal of blood vengeance--how to redress the shedding of innocent blood. In the interrelations between God and man and between man and man there is an underlying, governing principle that right and wrong are measured by God and justly repaid.<sup>34</sup> Vengeance follows when blood has been shed in a violent and malicious manner.<sup>35</sup> Reventlow sees a transformation of blood vengeance from a mystical ritual to a religious concept. It is the prayer for redress that transforms the results from cultural fate to divine punishment.<sup>36</sup> The prayer means that man is not left to fate but can turn to the Lord of history. As Reventlow concludes, "The guilt of natural law becomes

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<sup>33</sup>J. C. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," Bibliotheca Sacra 138 (1981):35-43.

<sup>34</sup>Henning Graf Reventlow, "Sein Blut komme über sein Haupt," Vetus Testamentum 10 (1960):311.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 322-324.

sin against a personal God, and the consequence of the guilt turns from blind fate to [divine] punishment."<sup>37</sup> This study brings in some important insights, but it primarily describes a process of conceptual development from mystical cultural fate to divine vengeance, a process that does not seem to have its basis in the biblical text. The emphasis on the need for dealing with guilt that results from shedding innocent blood may be seen as being related to the call for vengeance.

In addition, some very important work has been done by F. C. Fensham of the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. In one article, Fensham has demonstrated the parallel relationship between malediction and benediction in Ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaties, and the curse and blessing in biblical covenants.<sup>38</sup> In another article, he reveals parallel responsibilities of the protection of loyal subjects between Hittite vassal-treaties and the Old Testament.<sup>39</sup> Both studies offer some suggestions that are relevant to our interpretation of biblical vengeance, and provide a helpful background to the motif of vengeance in the book of Revelation.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>38</sup>F. C. Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction in Ancient Near Eastern Vassal Treaties and the Old Testament," Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 74 (1962):1-9.

<sup>39</sup>F. C. Fensham, "Clauses of Protection in Hittite Vassal Treaties and the Old Testament," Vetus Testamentum 13 (1963):133-143.

An article by Henry McKeating, "Vengeance Is Mine: A Study of the Pursuit of Vengeance in the Old Testament," examines the theme of vengeance in the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup> McKeating focuses on the vindictive responses of some Old Testament characters and comes to the conclusion that the most deeply religious individuals of Israel are usually the most vindictive.<sup>41</sup> McKeating's study is a useful survey, but he has simply substituted the vindictive attitude of some biblical characters for the biblical concept of vengeance. Apart from providing the survey, Henry McKeating has not, in my opinion, seriously treated the available biblical data.

Finally, Raymond H. Swartzback presents an overview of the usage of the word "vengeance" in both testaments.<sup>42</sup> His study is not exhaustive and gets rather sketchy in its treatment of the New Testament data. Its strength lies in the evaluation of the theological implications of "vengeance." Swartzback provides no bibliography and almost no footnotes, but he briefly shows what can be done on a larger scale.

Other studies also shed much needed light and

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<sup>40</sup>Henry McKeating, "Vengeance Is Mine: A Study of the Pursuit of Vengeance in the Old Testament," Expository Times 74 (1962):239-245.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>42</sup>Raymond H. Swartzback, "A Biblical Study of the Word 'Vengeance,'" Interpretation 6 (1952):451-457.

have a direct bearing on this theme.<sup>43</sup> These have not been overlooked, for they form a basis for an evaluation of the present topic. However, because of the sketchy nature of the contribution made by these other sources, it is not necessary to include them in this review of literature.

Literature on Vengeance  
in the Apocalypse

The most commonly used explanation on the teaching of vengeance in the book of Revelation is that at this point the author has simply reverted to Judaism and is to be understood in the light of the attitudes of Jewish apocalyptic writers. The first major attempt in this direction was made by Vischer.<sup>44</sup> In his view, John has simply taken over a Jewish document and reworked it in a Christian context. Therefore, the cry for vengeance has as its source not the divine inspiration of a Christian prophet but the vindictive attitude of some oppressed Jewish apocalypticist.<sup>45</sup> Even popular writers have raised ethical questions about Revelation. For instance, Lawrence, in his characteristic way, views this

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<sup>43</sup>K. Baltzer, The Covenant Formulary (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>44</sup>Vischer, Die Offenbarung. See also J. M. Ford, The Revelation (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), p. 111.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. See also Johann P. Lange, Revelation of St. John (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1874), pp. 55, 68 for arguments to the contrary.

attitude of vengeance in the Apocalypse as resulting from a socio-political crisis. He argues that the book is an expression of the anger, hatred, and envy of the weak against the strong.<sup>46</sup> He sees in the use of the figure of Babylon another example of the outburst of powerless Christians who hated the great city, Rome, not because it was so evil but as an envious response to its splendor. Thus, they condemned its gold, silver, cinnamon, and wine, only because they wished it were theirs but could not have it.<sup>47</sup> But is this an adequate explanation of the concept of vengeance in Revelation?

Commentators have recognized the problem raised by the call for vengeance. A. Barnes notes four important points that need clarification: 1) the position of the souls--under the altar, 2) their call for vengeance, 3) the white robes given to them, and 4) the command to wait a little while.<sup>48</sup> Their position under the altar is seen as signifying the altar as the place for both expiation for sin and for supplication.<sup>49</sup> Their call is to be seen not as a call for personal vengeance but as a desire that justice should be done and the government of God

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<sup>46</sup>Lawrence, pp. 10-11.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>48</sup>Albert Barnes, Notes on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 1595.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

should be vindicated.<sup>50</sup> Barnes sees this scene as a symbolic representation not involving real souls but only the great principle that wrong will be righted and the oppressor will be duly punished. The white robes are seen to be a declaration of the innocence of the martyrs. These robes are therefore a symbolic representation of the martyrs' vindication by God.<sup>51</sup> The command to these martyrs to wait in patience for their fellow servants indicates that persecution was not only present but also future.<sup>52</sup>

This sort of interpretational procedure is followed in most commentaries, with varying degrees of thoroughness. Most commentators give more space to the nature of the souls and their position under the altar. It is interesting to observe that those who see in Rev 6:9-11 a scriptural evidence for soul-consciousness after death generally have a harder time explaining the call for vengeance.<sup>53</sup>

George Beasley-Murray sees indications of a number of Old Testament streams of thought converging in the events of the fifth seal. Thus, the differing symbolisms

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 1596.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Rist, p. 414; Lawrence, p. 65; Abraham Kuyper, The Revelation of St. John, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), pp. 77-78; and others are among the many examples that could be cited.



are to be understood not as belonging to water-tight compartments but as being complementary to each other. He points out that a court scene is in view here. The cry is not vindictive but a call for God to reverse the unjust judgments of the earthly courts.<sup>54</sup>

Beasley-Murray seems to have wrestled with the theological problem of the call for vengeance in the book of Revelation. He sees the seven seals as being parallel to the eschatological discourse of Mark 13, a view that is shared by C. Mervyn Maxwell.<sup>55</sup> Such a view underscores the dependence of the Apocalypse on other New Testament books, a dependence which is often forgotten when one is attempting to establish the sources for John's thought.

Leon Morris adds the insight that the expressions "holy and true" and "judge. . . and avenge" are used in such close association as to provide a strong legal setting for this seal. Both expressions have to do with justice as a divine attribute.<sup>56</sup> Morris suggests that the fundamental issue behind the prayer of the souls under the altar is really the question of power. John is

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<sup>54</sup>George R. Beasley-Murray, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 135.

<sup>55</sup>C. Mervyn Maxwell, God Cares: The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1985), pp. 179-209.

<sup>56</sup>Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983) pp. 108-109.

here concerned with the theology of power, and the cry for vengeance "is intelligible only on the basis that the supreme power in the world is God's power, and that he exercises it in a moral way."<sup>57</sup>

G. B. Caird addresses the question of the call for vengeance, but sees John's aim as being to let the living saints have assurance, since they too would soon be called upon to face martyrdom. He stresses the presence of legal language in this passage and shows that the issue is not personal revenge but the relation of the martyrs to their God. Caird sees here reference to the system of Jewish jurisprudence in which the plaintiff was to plead his own case. The cry is therefore a court appeal to the Supreme Judge.<sup>58</sup>

Among the commentators, perhaps it is William Barclay more than any other commentator who has wrestled with the question of vengeance in Revelation. In treating the fifth seal he draws attention to a rich background in the Old Testament, Apocalyptic, and rabbinic sources. He cautions against too hasty and judgmental a spirit in evaluating the cry of the martyrs.<sup>59</sup> Barclay observes in the section of Rev 19 which clearly

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>58</sup>George B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) pp. 84-85.

<sup>59</sup>William Barclay, The Revelation of John (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 2:10-12.

presents, with joy, the song of rejoicing over the judgments of Babylon that "we are very far from praying for those who despitefully use us." He reminds us that this is the voice of faith that prays for and rejoices in vengeance, and also that there is no personal bitterness, for these are not personal enemies but God's enemies. Then he concludes ". . . this is not the more excellent way which Jesus taught."<sup>60</sup> Clearly, Barclay cannot reconcile this prayer for vengeance with "the more excellent way." One feels the keenness of Barclay's tension, and comes to the end of the book with a sense of being close to a solution, but not quite there yet.

E. W. Hengstenberg saw the Old Testament animal sacrifices as prefiguring the sacrificial death of saints as they died for their faith. Thus, the call for vengeance was not made by the souls themselves but by their blood. Hengstenberg concludes that this call for vengeance is based on the servant/master relationship. He makes reference to the blood of Abel and discusses the background given by the imprecatory psalms.<sup>61</sup> He sees the song of rejoicing in Rev 19:2 as a transformation of the prayer for vengeance of Rev 6:10, and quotes Bengel: "The desire of the martyrs, with a very remarkable repetition of their words, is transformed into a song of

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>61</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, The Revelation of St. John (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1852), 1:261-272.

praise."<sup>62</sup> These two passages clearly belong together.

Heinrich Kraft deserves special attention because of two special contributions.<sup>63</sup> First, he offers a very good bibliography. It is evident that he has done some very careful work. The second is his emphasis on the Old Testament background of the Revelation. Kraft argues that the Old Testament is the main field from which John draws his language and thought.<sup>64</sup> He makes a few references to other Jewish literature and says nothing about Qumran literature. His main contribution lies in the emphasis he lays on the Old Testament as a background for the call of the souls under the altar. Kraft takes Ps 79:10 as the model for the call of Rev 6:10.<sup>65</sup> The size of his volume (197 pages) does not allow him to make an in-depth study of vengeance, but the ties he makes with the Old Testament are very valuable.

Mounce's commentary is one of the best in English. Its strength lies in the rich Old Testament background it provides, and the keen theological insights it brings out. Mounce makes good use of parallel Jewish apocalyptic literature and some rabbinic sources. His

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>63</sup>Heinrich Kraft, Die Offenbarung des Johannes (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974)

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

treatment of "vengeance," though brief, is thus enriched by three backgrounds: Old Testament, Jewish apocalyptic, and rabbinic literature.<sup>66</sup> It is Mounce's interaction with these relevant backgrounds that makes this commentary so helpful to the present investigation.

Ford's commentary is excellent in providing all kinds of background material. She often refers to Old Testament, apocalyptic, apocryphal, and even non-Jewish sources. She also provides an excellent bibliography. Ford sees the vengeance as primarily deliverance. She sees this call of the souls under the altar as a call to be given their bodies.<sup>67</sup> While I do not agree with her conclusions, her excellent interaction with other streams of thought has been very valuable to my study.

Another helpful addition to the works on the Apocalypse is Eduard Lohse's Die Offenbarung des Johannes.<sup>68</sup> Lohse considers the author of Revelation to have been a John who was steeped in Old Testament and apocalyptic traditions, and was also acquainted with astral myths of the Gentile world. Lohse takes the

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<sup>66</sup>Mounce, The Book of Revelation.

<sup>67</sup>Ford, pp. 99-100, 109-111.

<sup>68</sup>Eduard Lohse, Die Offenbarung des Johannes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960). Lohse seems to have some contradictions on the matter of sources. On the one hand, he thinks that the author used Old Testament, apocalyptic, and astral sources, while on the other hand, he allows for visions and dreams as a source for the message of the book.

persecution of Domitian as the Sitz im Leben for the writing of the Apocalypse. Consequently, the Apocalypse was written for its own age, not for later generations.<sup>69</sup>

An older work, Charles's The Revelation of St. John, is very useful in providing Old Testament, apocalyptic, rabbinic, and other background sources for interpreting the various symbols of the fifth seal as well as making use of several Grammars.<sup>70</sup> Charles sees a vindictive spirit, for "the note of personal vengeance cannot be wholly eliminated from their prayer."<sup>71</sup> For Charles, all the saints at the end-time will die of persecution, but God will respond in justice. Charles's work still seems to be the standard against which all others may be measured. While not agreeing with all his conclusions, I find much that is useful to my study.

Many more commentaries have been consulted on this issue, but it is very clear that they either make the points already covered by those mentioned above or at least make no new contribution. Several points are evident at this juncture: 1) No general agreement has been

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid. Lohse's monograph Märtyrer und Gottesknecht: Untersuchungen zur urchristlichen Verkündigung vom Sühntod Jesu Christi (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955) makes a good contribution in developing the martyr theme--a motif relevant to vengeance.

<sup>70</sup>Charles, The Revelation of St. John.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 1:17

reached on the role and significance of vengeance in Revelation; 2) the solutions which have been suggested are inadequate; and 3) not much work has been done to reach back to the Old Testament for the rich biblical concept of vengeance. Related to this last point is the covenant setting of vengeance in the Old Testament literature. This aspect seems to have been totally overlooked by many scholars.<sup>72</sup>

It is helpful at this point to turn attention to other literature which has made a contribution to this topic. Having made a thorough search in various bibliographies and dissertation abstracts, I have not found any abstract or reference to a dissertation which deals with vengeance in Revelation. Perhaps the closest approach to this aspect of the topic is a dissertation written at Manchester University (England) by D. A. Gray in 1974, and entitled, "The Day of the Lord and its Culmination in the Book of Revelation."<sup>73</sup> This biblical/historical study traces the development of the concept of the day of the Lord. Its bearing on vengeance is only indirect.

In the course of this review of literature, I

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<sup>72</sup>Some, such as Morris, pp. 108-109, have made this connection. However, it has been, at best, only a passing allusion to such a connection. There is a need for a more thorough study of this possible relation.

<sup>73</sup>D. A. Gray, "The Day of the Lord and Its Culmination in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester, 1974).

have examined hundreds of sources in the James White Library. I have also made use of the Inter-library service to obtain some material from the University of Stellenbosch. Work done by two members of that university's faculty--one of which is later cited--has a bearing on this topic.

The scarcity of studies on this topic is evident. The religion index volume on the periodical articles covering the years 1890-1899 does not have a single entry on either vengeance in the Apocalypse or Rev 6:9-11.<sup>74</sup> Such a lack over a decade is symptomatic, for this scarcity is evident even in more recent times.<sup>75</sup>

A number of articles make a contribution to this topic. One by William Klassen makes a significant contribution.<sup>76</sup> He notes the lack of research done on this topic and points out that "no book in the NT canon poses this question more sharply than the Apocalypse of John."<sup>77</sup> After briefly tracing the Apocalyptic background for the prayer for vengeance, Klassen shows how the rest of the Apocalypse is the answer to this prayer.

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<sup>74</sup>Index to Religion Articles 1890-1899.

<sup>75</sup>New Testament Abstracts and the Religion Index I both clearly reveal this point.

<sup>76</sup>William Klassen, "Vengeance in the Apocalypse," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 28 (1966):300-311.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., pp. 300-301.



The wrath of God is central to the Christian faith.<sup>78</sup> The focus is to be seen not in the destruction of the enemy but in the restoration of fellowship between the redeemed and their Lord.<sup>79</sup> Klassen overlooks the Old Testament background which would have provided depth to his study. His article is one of the best endeavors on this topic, however.

A. Y. Collins presented a paper at a Colloquium on Apocalypticism at the University of Uppsala in August 1979. She shows the connection between intense suffering and vengeance in the book of Revelation and shows the evidences of persecution in the book itself.<sup>80</sup> She concludes that "Revelation's call for vengeance and the possibility of the book's function as an outlet for envy give the book a tremendous potential for real psychological and social evil."<sup>81</sup> The connection between intense persecution and the call for vengeance is a contribution that needs to be made. Though Collins's study is good, it lacks Old Testament background. She concludes that the call for vengeance was motivated by socio-economic conditions of early Christians in Asia. Collins's paper,

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>80</sup>A. Y. Collins, "Persecution and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation," Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism at Uppsala, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983), pp. 729-749.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 747.

now enlarged into a book, Crisis and Catharsis: the Power of the Apocalypse, presents the same thesis--that the Apocalypse grew out of a real or perceived crisis.<sup>82</sup> The book has several references to the Old Testament, a development that enlarges the contribution of the work.<sup>83</sup> What is not so clear is whether Collins sees the Apocalypse as only a sociological phenomenon rather than as the New Testament development of an Old Testament motif.

Robert L. Thomas has briefly dealt with the issue of imprecatory prayers in the Apocalypse.<sup>84</sup> He deals with four issues: (1) the altar(s), (2) the incense, (3) the prayers themselves, and (4) the morality of imprecation. He concludes that the grace of God which spares the sinner must be tempered by the wrath of God which will ultimately destroy the sinner.<sup>85</sup> This study serves more as a survey and therefore lacks depth in its treatment of this subject.

A. T. Hanson has written a book dealing with the subject of the wrath of the Lamb.<sup>86</sup> This study throws

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<sup>82</sup>A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "Imprecatory Prayers in the Apocalypse," Bibliotheca Sacra 126 (1969):123-131.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>86</sup>A. T. Hanson, The Wrath of the Lamb (London: SPCK, 1957).

much needed light on the concept of vengeance. G. H. C. MacGregor also gives attention to the wrath of God in the New Testament. Unfortunately he does not treat the Apocalypse at all,<sup>87</sup> an omission which is hard to understand.

Three scholars have done some pioneer work in the area of the covenantal structure of Revelation. Kenneth Strand<sup>88</sup> and William Shea,<sup>89</sup> faculty members of the Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and J. du Preez, faculty member of the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa) have all indicated the relationship<sup>90</sup> between Ancient Near Eastern treaties and the book of Revelation. Perhaps the implications of the covenant motif for the theology of vengeance in the Apocalypse need to be further explored. The presence in Revelation of imagery and symbolisms common to both Old Testament and Near Eastern covenant contexts raises some interesting possibilities.

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<sup>87</sup>G. H. C. MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament," New Testament Studies 7 (1961):101-109.

<sup>88</sup>K. A. Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form in the Book of Revelation," Andrews University Seminary Studies 21 (1983):251-264.

<sup>89</sup>W. H. Shea, "The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches," Andrews University Seminary Studies 21 (1983):71-84.

<sup>90</sup>J. du Preez, "Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Book of Revelation: Possible Links," Religion in Southern Africa 2 (1981):33-43.

Studies by H. D. Betz<sup>91</sup> and Staples<sup>92</sup> on the vindication formulary found in Revelation are insightful. They, too, give some welcome light on the theme.

Two things have happened in the course of this review of literature. First, I have discovered new insights into the problem which is addressed by this dissertation. Those insights gleaned from scattered sources have been set in a certain pattern in relationship to each other.

My second major discovery from this literature review is that there is a great need for developing theological/thematic studies dealing with the book of Revelation. This dissertation attempts to make a contribution in this direction, too.

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<sup>91</sup>Hans Dieter Betz, "Zum Problem des religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnisses der Apokalyptik," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 63 (1966):391-409.

<sup>92</sup>Staples, "Rev 16:4-6 and Its Vindication Formula".

## CHAPTER II

### BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUNDS TO "VENGEANCE"

The Hebrew term, *nāqām*, and the broader concept of vengeance expresses a very important but often misunderstood theological motif. Vengeance and revenge would appear to be negative ethical concepts, whether they come from God or man. It is, therefore, necessary to examine the biblical data as a basis for arriving at sound theological conclusions.

Some scholars have concluded that the primitive desert institution of the blood feud was a social characteristic of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> This understanding is due in part to the assumption that the story of the conquest represents a gradual historical process from nomadic to sedentary life. The classical treatment of blood feud by Merz has not been seriously challenged by recent scholarship. Merz stated:

There have been scholars who denied almost indignantly that the custom of blood vengeance ever was characteristic of the Hebrews. . . . Today scholarly work is freed from those tendentious presuppositions. It has recognized that the Israelites did not emerge

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<sup>1</sup>Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), pp. 10-12.

into history from the beginning with an ideal culture, but rather had to go through a long development which led them from primitive beginnings to their later brilliance. Therefore it is obvious that at some specific stage of the process the institution of blood vengeance was at home, which can be established for all other peoples of earth.<sup>2</sup>

L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner define *nāqām* as "take vengeance," and "avenge a person of," "fall to one's vengeance," "revenging of blood."<sup>3</sup> As may be noticed, other lexica furnish a similar range of meanings for *nāqām*.<sup>4</sup> A more rewarding approach is an examination of the biblical usage of the term and an investigation of the broader concept of vengeance. Vengeance needs to be understood in the light of its Old Testament setting as an aid to a clearer understanding of its meaning in the New Testament.

The primary idea of the root, *nqm*, is that of breathing forcibly.<sup>5</sup> However, a comparison of this root

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<sup>2</sup>Merz, 20:1.

<sup>3</sup>"*Nāqām*," Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros (1951), p. 633.

<sup>4</sup>W. Gesenius, Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament (1949), p. 565, defines *nāqām* as "to revenge," "to take vengeance," "to be angry," "to rebuke," "to punish," and "to breathe forcibly." The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew Aramaic English Lexicon (1981), pp. 667-668, defines it as "avenge," "take vengeance," "requittal." A look into a number of other lexicons seems to lead to similar uninformative and very limited definitions. Clearly, it is not the primary function of lexicons to provide theological meanings of words. Yet, because lexical meanings are the basis of theological concepts, lexicons are a good starting place in this investigation.

<sup>5</sup>Gesenius, p. 565.

meaning and actual usage in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East suggests that this primary meaning may have receded into the background and eventually fallen out of usage. What remained was the secondary idea of executing vengeance. We may surmise that there was a gradual shift from a physical forcible breathing (perhaps under the emotion of anger) to the metaphorical sense of "venting out" wrath to redress past injury or hurt.

#### Nāqām in the Ancient Near East

In the Ancient Near Eastern documents we do not have a systematic description of the attitude towards vengeance as an act of self-help by a private member of the community. From the sketchy indications we have, the blood feud may best be described as a private war which was never compatible with any highly organized social system. Wherever there existed an adequate legal structure, personal vengeance was not the characteristic way of regulating disputes, although every community has had some who have applied this method.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, there seems to be no word in the Ancient Near East which designates the blood feud as an acceptable social institution. The words usually rendered "vengeance" and "avenge" occur in mythology or politics.<sup>7</sup> This suggests a specialized meaning.

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<sup>6</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 70.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 70-71.

In ancient pagan texts, vengeance is an act carried out by the highest political or religious authority. A brief examination of the Hebrew/Canaanite root *nqm* helps to bring into clear focus the fact that Israel has to be viewed as the dominion of Yahweh. Yahweh is the source of both religious and political authority. As Mendenhall has noted, of all the attested uses of the root *nqm* from the Execration Texts to pre-Islamic Arabic, only two occurrences could have any connection with the blood feud. These are Gen 4 and a fragment quoted from one of the Mari Letters, whose context is unknown.<sup>8</sup>

*Nāqām* is one of the small collection of West Semitic words attested in the Middle Bronze Age. As early as the Execration Texts, the root occurred in proper names like *nqmwpc*i (possibly linked to the Ugaritic royal dynastic name, *Niqmepa*).<sup>9</sup> There is a clear pre-biblical association of this term with the actions of deity. Thus, Horus is the "avenger" (*ned*) of Osiris, and Marduk is the "avenger" (Akkadian, *gimillam turrum*) in the Creation Epic. The gods address Marduk thus: "O Marduk, thou art indeed our avenger. We have granted thee kingship over the universe entire. When in assembly

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. See also Georges Posener, *Princes et pays d'Asie et de Nubie* (Brussels: Fondation égyptologique rein Elisabeth, 1940), p. 65.



thou sittest, thy word shall be supreme."<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that it was on the basis of his being the avenger that Marduk was granted supreme authority over the whole universe. Could it be that this suggests an essential link between vengeance and authority? Does vengeance as a Near Eastern concept involve the exercise of a divine imperium? This same association of vengeance with divine authority can be demonstrated by such theophoric names as Niqmad and perhaps the Hurrian deity, Niqmis.<sup>11</sup>

Mendenhall concludes that the actions associated with the root nqm "are primarily if not exclusively prerogatives of the king and state, and it is true that a very large percentage of proper names which include the root are those of royal personages."<sup>12</sup> But, significantly enough, there is not a single occurrence of a personal name in biblical Hebrew that is composed of this root. Could it be that such an absence indicates that among the Hebrews, the source of vengeance was understood to be so clearly divine that no human being could rightly bear a name with such a root? In any case, Nqm, rather than being the vestige of a primal, lawless society, lies

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<sup>10</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 73.

<sup>11</sup>James B. Pritchard, ed. Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 2nd ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 75.

at the very foundation of religio-political authority. The Semitic *nāqām* has to do with the legitimate authority to act.

According to R. Düll, the *Vindex* (from which we derive both "vindicate" and "vengeance") was an officer who was empowered to settle disputes between contenders. Even in pre-Israelite Palestine, *nāqām* had to do with the exercise of an imperium by the highest authority, and that, in situations of peril where there was no other source of legitimate help.<sup>13</sup> *Nāqām* is used in circumstances that required the use of force because one of the parties would not submit to the normal legal institutions of a given society. The concept refers to executive rather than judicial action carried out by the legitimate power. *Nāqām* cannot, therefore, be equated with self-help.<sup>14</sup>

The Amarna Letters provide good evidence for extra-biblical use of *nqm*. In one of the letters, Biridiya says: "But let the king rescue [li-iq-qi-im-mi] his city lest Labayu seize it."<sup>15</sup> Four times in the letter, Biridiya describes Labayu's intention to "take," "seize,"

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<sup>13</sup>R. Düll, "Vom Vindex zum Iudex," Zeitschrift der Savigny Stiftung für Rechtgeschichte 54 (1934):98-136; 55 (1935):9-35.

<sup>14</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," pp. 76-77.

<sup>15</sup>Jørgen Alexander Knudtzon, Die El-Armana-Tafeln mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen Herausgegeben (Aalen: Otto Zeller Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 1:244, lines 25-29.

or "destroy" the city. The request is that the king will use his executive power to deliver the city from peril.

In another letter Suwardata, king of some city of the South, writes: "Let my king my lord send archer troops in great numbers that he may rescue me/deliver me [yi-qi-im-ni/ia-zi-ni]."<sup>16</sup> After a careful analysis of the usage of the root *nqm* in the Amarna corpus, Mendenhall concludes that "it is never used except as an act of force carried out or authorized by the highest authority."<sup>17</sup> It is significant that the idea of rescue and deliverance is uppermost in these usages. From the point of view of the threatened subject, vengeance is primarily deliverance and rescue, though punishment may not be totally excluded. On the other hand, from the perspective of the aggressor, vengeance may be seen as primarily punitive. Thus, in the Amarna documents, the exercise of vengeance is usually directed against an aggressor who attempts to use illegitimate authority.

Also, in the setting in these letters, it is important to recognize that *nāqām* implies the exercise of power by the highest authority for the protection of his loyal subjects. Indeed, *nāqām*, with the meaning of "rescue," is very frequently used in the Amarna letters in an almost formulary fashion, with only very slight

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<sup>16</sup>Knudtzon, 1:282, lines 10-14.

<sup>17</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 79.

variations. This use of the root in a formulary fashion indicates that the root had assumed a fixed religio-politico-legal meaning. If, as early as 1450-1350 B.C., the period of the Amarna letters, vengeance had assumed this connotation of the exercise of executive power and authority for the defense of loyal subjects, we may expect this to be the same in biblical usage.

The Amarna corpus does not furnish any material which describes the nature of suzerainty treaties in the lands of Egypt and Canaan. Other evidence reveals that such treaties did exist between the two areas.<sup>18</sup> After carefully examining the usage of the root *nqm* in the Amarna letters, one is led to the conclusion that there vengeance is a treaty (covenant) concept in which "hostility against the 'servants' of the king is later equated with hostility against the king himself."<sup>19</sup> The situation revealed in the letters is that of the presence of an illegitimate and oppressive power which threatened the safety of subjects, and the solution lay in the call for and exercise of vengeance. Such aggression called for the use of physical force by the highest power, for the aggressor had rejected or ignored due legal process. War and law are two aspects of the exercise of the same *imperium* by a legitimate authority.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 81-82.

We may summarize the results of this very brief investigation of the usage of the root *nqm* in the Amarna letters by observing that *nāqām* is used in the context of international relationships in tension-filled situations involving an unlawful aggressor. There is often a treaty (covenant) between the legitimate power and the victim of aggression. The highest authority must use his imperium to redress the wrong perpetrated against his own subjects. This involves the use of force on the enemy. These points have important implications for the biblical meaning of vengeance.

Vengeance, Curses, and Protection  
in Suzerainty Treaties

A study of the Ancient Near Eastern treaties has shed much light that is helpful for Old Testament studies. Considerable work has been done to show that the form and even the language of Hittite vassal treaties are closely related to the covenants of the Old Testament. The similarities have been fully discussed by Mendenhall in two articles that were also published subsequently in booklet form.<sup>20</sup> The treaties were protected by final clauses of malediction and benediction. The curse-formula protected the integrity of the written copy of the treaty. It also protected the position of boundary

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<sup>20</sup>G. E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

stones, showing the king's obligation to each subject.

In the Ancient Near Eastern treaties in general, the curse is pronounced against the disloyal subject. The range of the terminology used for breach of treaty is worth noting. It includes "not to honor," "breaking off," and "not fulfilling."<sup>21</sup> The treaties of Assyrian King Esarhaddon suggests the idea of changing, neglecting, transgressing, and erasing.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the curse is an integral part of most of the Hittite vassal treaties too. It is interesting to note here the function played by the malediction in the treaty.

The kudurru-inscriptions (pertaining to some Babylonian boundary stones which were used for marking boundaries of land given to loyal subjects, from the second half of the second millennium to the first half of the first millennium B.C.) contain similar curses against anyone who removes the boundary stone of another. These curse-formulae were for the protection of private property. The concept of vengeance was to be applicable for the protection of the individual, not just as a matter of redress in international politics. A second observation is that the gods were the source of punishment for the wrong-doer in these inscriptions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Pritchard, pp. 205-206.

<sup>22</sup>Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction," p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Donald John Wiseman, The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon (London: Harrison and Sons, 1958), p. 27.

The imprecations on the kudurru-inscriptions were to include curses against the person of the transgressor. He was to be killed or to have no posterity.<sup>24</sup> This is the opposite of the covenant blessing to Abraham, who was to have countless offspring (Gen 17:5-7). Other curses were to include illness and leprosy, exposure of the corpse of the transgressor, the wandering of the transgressor like an ass, and the destruction and desolation of his dwelling place. The ruins of his city would be inhabited by wild animals, and natural calamities were to fall on the enemy of the king's subjects. Joy was to be found no more in the midst of the enemy.<sup>25</sup> The vengeance against Babylon in Jer 50-51 and Rev 18-19 needs to be understood in the light of these treaty maledictions, for Babylon is to be seen as the ultimate aggressor against Yahweh's subjects.

It is an established fact that imprecations were a common feature all over the Ancient Near East, and that they were to be found in the context of treaty/covenant relationships. This is an important key to understanding vengeance as a biblical concept. In the light of the

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<sup>24</sup>F. C. Fensham, "Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and kudurru Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah," Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 75 (1963):158.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 158-172.

foregoing discussion we may conclude that the malediction is equivalent to the concept of vengeance and that vengeance is a covenant or treaty concept.

The breach of the treaty or covenant brings the malediction into effect. The casuistic style is often used to indicate the breach and show the punishment to follow. This curse may involve material loss, personal destruction, and loss of treaty privileges. On the other hand, the blessing involves protection and continuance of treaty or covenant privileges. The treaty between Suppiluliuma and Mattiwaza includes the blessing of an eternal kingdom to the obedient vassal.<sup>26</sup> It seems that the Great King has the responsibility of protecting the vassal and also punishing the disobedient vassal. It appears that the clauses of protection and the curses fit into the concept of vengeance. When the king punishes or curses his own subjects, this is equivalent to the concept of vengeance in which Yahweh punishes Israel for their stubborn disdain for the covenant. (This aspect is discussed later.)

The maledictions are not just against disobedient subjects. They are also directed against those who attack loyal subjects. There are no differences in the nature of the calamities to befall either disloyal subjects or foreign aggressors. In the vassal treaties the

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<sup>26</sup>Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction," pp. 5-7.



malediction cannot be reversed. The object of the curses is either a subject who has broken the covenant or an aggressor who has threatened the rights or privileges of the king's subjects. There is either a direct or an indirect link with the covenant. Vengeance, therefore, comes on those who have become unfaithful to the covenant or on those who have become enemies to a covenant party.

#### Vengeance in the Old Testament

The term *nāqām* and its derivatives are used in some seventy-eight passages in the Old Testament. The verb first occurs in Gen 4:15. It is in the hophal imperfect and the source of the vengeance is not stated. But since God is the speaker it appears likely that he is its source.

God's concern for the innocent (10) is matched only by his care for the sinner. Even the querulous prayer of Cain had contained a germ of entreaty; God's answering pledge, together with his mark or sign (the same word as in 9:13; 17:11)--not a stigma but a safe-conduct--is almost a covenant, making him virtually Cain's go'el or protector.<sup>27</sup>

Within this same Cain/Abel episode there is the deeper theological theme of vengeance. The theme emerges in God's confrontation of Cain after his murder of Abel. God raises the question, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying (*šiqim*<sup>Ca</sup>) to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground,

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<sup>27</sup>Derek Kidner, Genesis (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 76.

which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen 4:10-11). The word *ša<sup>c</sup>aq* denotes strictly the cry for help and, particularly, for redress or vengeance.<sup>28</sup> The idea that blood exposed on the ground calls for vengeance recurs frequently in the Old Testament (Job 16:18; Isa 26:21; Ezek 24:7-8; 2 Kgs 9:26). In this case it is the shed blood of Abel which is pictured as drawing God's attention to Cain's crime and to the need for his vengeance. H. C. Leupold claims that the participle here denotes what continues in the present and keeps repeating itself. Thus, the blood is seen as crying out persistently.<sup>29</sup>

The language of this passage is both emotional and powerful. The very same term, "cry out," is often used in the Old Testament of the appeal of the poor, the oppressed, or the fatherless. It is used of the cry of the Egyptians to Pharaoh for food (Gen 41:55); of the appeal of the indebted son of the prophet's widow to Elisha (2 Kgs 4:1); of the cry of the oppressed widow or the orphan to God, who would certainly hear (Exod 22:23); and of the cry of the wandering and distressed people of God (Ps 107:6). It is interesting to note that in all four of the foregoing passages the cry is not directed to

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<sup>28</sup>Donald Guthrie, The New Bible Commentary (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 86.

<sup>29</sup>H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), p. 205.

a powerful friend or neighbor to step in and help. Rather, it is directed to the legitimate authority: in the first two instances to a legitimate human power, Pharaoh as king of Egypt and Elisha as the director of the schools of the prophets; and in the last two passages, to God. In both latter two passages God is pictured as one who hears and responds to such calls.

Thus, in the biblical examples, as in other Ancient Near Eastern literature, the appeal goes out to the highest authority that deals with the particular situation of peril or injustice. There exists between the parties either an implied or an explicitly stated relationship which may be defined as covenantal. Pharaoh, as king, is covenanted to protect his people, just as they are covenanted to serve him and give him loyalty. Elisha, too, stands in a covenant relationship as director of the schools of the prophets and as God's representative. These two levels of the covenant concept also apply to kingship, for it is God who sets up and removes kings. It is on the basis of this relationship that the call for vengeance or vindication is made. As Meredith G. Kline observes on the Cain/Abel episode, "Martyr blood invokes the vengeance of God as covenant Protector."<sup>30</sup> Life and blood in the Old Testament belong

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<sup>30</sup>Meredith G. Kline, Treaty of the Great King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 108.

together, and both belong to God. The unjust shedding of innocent blood results in the blood making an appeal to God himself. G. von Rad points out that spilt blood cannot be silenced by being shoveled underground; "it cries aloud to heaven and complains directly to the Lord of life." The cry is "the most genuine and mature faith in God as the protector and guardian of all life."<sup>31</sup>

It is noteworthy that after the flood, God made a covenant with all living things (Gen 9:1-17). Therefore, God has a temporal covenant relationship with all his creation, and on the basis of that covenant he is the protector. In the Noachic covenant God promises to avenge any innocent human blood that is shed, and even any animal blood that is shed to no purpose (vss. 5-6). We need to recognize, too, that this promise to avenge innocent blood is here given in the context of covenant-making. While the term *nāqām* does not appear in this passage, nevertheless, the concept is present. This covenant perspective of vengeance needs to be kept in proper focus as this concept is examined in both the Old and New Testaments.

The term *nāqām* occurs also in Gen 4:24, where it is used in a similar form to that in 4:15. In vs. 24 the source of vengeance is, however, more difficult to determine. The speaker is Lamech, not God, and the use

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<sup>31</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 102-103.

of the passive form of the verb without a stated subject makes the task of determining the avenger very difficult. Lamech's taunt-song, ending as it does on a note of bravado, serves to show the rapid spread and corruption of sin, and the very disproportionate comparison between the provocation and the retaliation serves to place in sharp focus the need for justice.<sup>32</sup>

The third occurrence of *nāqām* in the hophal is in Exod 21:21, where the setting is that of a master who has beaten his slave to death. The ruling was that if the slave lived a few days after being beaten, the master was not to be avenged for that death. Again, the source of the forbidden vengeance is not stated. But it is to be noted concerning all three passages thus far considered that even where there is no specific mention of the source of vengeance, it is by God's authority that the command or prohibition was made. Therefore, we may at least conclude that God was the regulator of vengeance.

*Nāqām* occurs also three times as a qal infinitive. The first occurrence is in Exod 21:20, the case of a master who struck and killed his slave.<sup>33</sup> "When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the

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<sup>32</sup>Alan Cole, *Exodus* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 168.

<sup>33</sup>Kidner, p. 78.

slave dies under his hand, he shall be punished." Though there is no indication of the source of vengeance, God was the source of the command. In this setting, vengeance is to be seen as being instituted to provide protection for the weak and the defenseless. The slave had no avenger of blood (*go'el hā'dam*) who would seek redress for him, and God himself commanded vengeance on the slave's behalf. In fact, the slave probably did not even have someone to convene the court or indict the murderer. In such special circumstances involving persons having the legal status of slavery, the concept of *nāqām* has special significance. As Mendenhall has pointed out, "In such cases, the executive authority of Yahweh himself is the basis for community action against the slave-owner, but only after the necessary court enquiry."<sup>34</sup>

Mendenhall further points out that while neither the slave nor the master is the logical subject of *nāqām* in this passage, the main point is that the covenant community is charged with exercising the executive authority of Yahweh to punish the murderer, and thus give redress to the dead slave. Under the covenant, if the community failed to take action against the murderer, it assumed the guilt of the murder, and thus would risk the consequences of Yahweh's wrath under the curse formulas of the

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<sup>34</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 90.

covenant.<sup>35</sup> The source vengeance was Yahweh's lordship.

### Nāqām in Leviticus

In Leviticus there are two passages in which the term *nāqām* occurs. At 19:18 God makes the strong prohibition: "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." This command not to take vengeance is here connected with the command to love one's neighbor as oneself. It is significant that vengeance by man is seen as contrary to the supreme ethic of love. It needs to be noted, too, that this command is put in the setting of the covenant, for the statement ends in that characteristic covenant formula, "I am the LORD." And not only is the prohibition against vengeance repeated in the New Testament but the accompanying command to love is repeated there, too.

A closer look at Lev 19:18 shows that the command given had a special application within the covenant

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-91. One of the most significant illustrations of corporate responsibility and guilt is the story of the Levite and his raped and murdered concubine (Judg 19-20). Whereas only a few lawless men committed this evil, the whole town was the target of the attack. And whereas only the Levite was wronged, all Israel took up their swords to avenge the town of Gibeah for the crime committed in Israel (20:10). When the Benjamites would not release the culprits, they all became the object of vengeance. It is noteworthy that God directed the order of attack against the Benjamites. Therefore, the concept of vengeance as a means of maintaining right and righteousness was basic to Israel's understanding of its covenant relationship to God.

community. It was against "the sons of your people" that vengeance was prohibited. There was, of course, the broader, more universal application of this principle in that God acted as the judge of all flesh.

This same text gives the earliest written prohibition against personal vengeance in the Old Testament. This does not mean that there ever was a time when vindictiveness was condoned. On the contrary, among both the Israelites and all other Near Eastern sedentary societies, self-help, as a way of redressing wrong, was never socially approved.<sup>36</sup>

The second passage in Leviticus where *nāqām* occurs is 26:25. In this verse we have the first mention of the vengeance of Yahweh against Israel. This is a very important usage, and we must attempt to uncover its theological content. The issue is Israel's covenant relationship to Yahweh. The chapter begins with covenant blessings if Israel would obey the Lord's commandments (vss. 1-13). The blessings include rain at the right time (vs. 4), abundant harvest (vss. 4-5), security in the land (vs. 6), military success against enemies (vss. 7-8), confirmation of the covenant (vs. 9), and God dwelling among the people as their covenant Lord to keep them free (vss. 10-13).

The second section of the passage deals with

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 70.



covenant curses for breaking the covenant (vss. 14-39). It is within this context that we find the expression, "the vengeance of the covenant" (vs. 25). This section presents a gradation process in God's relationship with Israel. It also seems to bring out most fully the purpose and intent of God's vengeance. Because this is a key passage, we deal with it at some length.

This chapter opens with the covenant as the central guiding principle for Israel's life, if Israel was to be worthy of God's blessings. Vss. 1-2 present a summary of the covenant stipulations as a reminder to the nation that only Yahweh was to be its God. After the brief outline of Israel's covenant obligation, a description is given of the rich blessings that the people would enjoy if they remained true to their covenant Lord. There would be material blessings (rain and abundant harvests), social security (victory over invading enemies), and spiritual fulfillment (God, abiding and walking in their midst). An unusual form of the verb *hālak*, "to walk," is used in vs. 12. In this hithpael form it often bears the sense of "to walk up and down" or "to walk about."<sup>37</sup> This word is used of the patriarchs' walk with God in Gen 5:22, 24; 6:9; 17:1; 24:40; and 48:15. In the covenant, the people were to walk humbly before God, and he was to walk among them. The result is a full

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<sup>37</sup>Gesenius, p. 225.

expression of the covenant as man walks with God.

The promised blessing envisages multiplication and fruitfulness of the nation as a constant fulfillment and establishment of the covenant of Gen 17:4-7. In the fulfillment of these promises there was not merely the preservation of the covenant but its continual and ever-enlarging realization. Thus, in the process of fulfillment, "the covenant itself was carried on further and further towards its completion. This was the real purpose of the blessing. . . ." <sup>38</sup> God's walking in the midst of Israel did not denote simply accompanying them in their exodus from Egypt. Rather, it referred to his dwelling in their midst in Canaan and performing all the works of the covenant for Israel.

#### Vengeance of the Covenant

In the section on curses, the converse of the blessings is mentioned. We may note that the covenant curses occupy a larger space than the covenant blessings. This seems to be the usual pattern in the Old Testament and in vassal-treaties of the Ancient Near East. <sup>39</sup> This is not to suggest that the covenant relationship consists more in curses and threats than blessings. Rather, this

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<sup>38</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 5:470-471.

<sup>39</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, The Book of Leviticus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 328.

disproportionate length of curses serves a positive didactic purpose. As Wenham observes, it is very easy to take for granted the blessings of rain and plenty, peace and communion with God, but it "is salutary to be reminded in detail of what life is like when his providential gifts are removed."<sup>40</sup>

The vengeance of the covenant begins with the lack of rain. This is the removal of that first blessing which God had promised to obedient Israel. The vengeance of the covenant involves the absence of God's blessings. But it undoubtedly involves more than the mere removal of blessings. God says, "but if you will not hearken to me, and will not do all these commandments, . . . but break my covenant, I will do this to you: I will appoint over you sudden terror, . . . and cause life to pine away" (26:14-16). It seems that in the vengeance of the covenant God goes a step beyond the withholding of blessings. He actively brings about his retribution on disobedient Israel, causing evils to come upon them in ways that are quite unnatural.

#### Progression in Vengeance of the Covenant

There is an observable development in intensity in the vengeance inflicted on Israel for the breaking of the covenant. In this context we should observe that

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid. p. 330.

the vengeance of the covenant is not a punishment for a single sinful act; it is a retribution for stubborn and continued contempt and breach of the law of God, for rejection of both the lordship of Yahweh and the terms of his covenant. In response to Israel's breaking of the covenant, God metes out his vengeance in five successive stages, noted briefly here.

1. God would first appoint terror over Israel. This would include disease, invasion of the land by enemies and the defeat of Israel by enemies, and drought that would result in Israel's sowing to no purpose (vss. 14-17). Notice that this is a reversal of the blessings promised in vss. 3-10. While God would unleash these evils only with the greatest of reluctance, he nevertheless could not remain passive in the face of such flagrant disdain for the covenant.<sup>41</sup>

2. The second stage would be reached when Israel, in the face of God's punishment, would still not listen. In response to this determined resistance, God would cause a severe drought to afflict the land. While it was mentioned in the first stage, it now comes with a seven-fold intensity. God would break down Israel's stubborn pride and bring them to nothing (vss. 18-20). Whatever they planted would fail.

3. The third stage would involve sending beasts

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<sup>41</sup>A. Noordtzij, Leviticus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 266.

of prey against Israel to destroy their cattle. God would cause Israel to diminish in number because of barrenness. The punishment for their sins would again be seven-fold (vss. 21-22).

4. The fourth stage would be reached in God's turning the sword of avenging of the covenant against Israel (vss. 23-26). Keil and Delitzsch point out that the vengeance of the covenant "was punishment inflicted for a breach of the covenant, the severity of which corresponded to the greatness of the covenant blessings forfeited by a faithless apostasy."<sup>42</sup> This principle is fundamentally the same as Jesus' teaching that to him to whom much was given, more stripes will be applied as a punishment for disobedience (Luke 12:47-48). Thus, stubborn disdain for the proffered blessings of the covenant results in severe punishment. At this stage God would remove Israel's livelihood. If they retreated from their enemies into their fortified cities, God would send a plague over them. Again, the punishment would be seven-fold.

5. The fifth stage would be the most severe. As a result of continued disobedience, Israel would come to such straits that some would eat human flesh (vss. 27-33). At this stage all idolatrous abominations would be destroyed (vs. 30), towns and sanctuaries would be

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<sup>42</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, 5:474.

destroyed (vs. 31), the land would be devastated (vs. 32), and Israel would be dispersed among the nations (vs. 33).

At this juncture we should notice a number of points that have emerged with regard to the vengeance of the covenant. First, particular vengeance is here directed only against those who stand in a covenant relationship to Yahweh. Those who stand outside this relationship are not the object of this divine activity. We may therefore conclude that vengeance of the covenant is the proper and inevitable divine response to the broken and disdained covenant.

Second, the vengeance of the covenant is not merely the absence of covenant blessings. As Ronald E. Clements has pointed out: "In no sense do these evils represent a failure on God's part to defend his people; rather they would be a judgment brought about by him."<sup>43</sup> Thus, in the vengeance of the covenant, God actively afflicts his people.

Third, a closer examination of the five stages of punishment reveals a most important factor which helps to bring our understanding of this concept into sharper focus. Each stage is prefaced with the conditional statement: "But if you will not hearken to me . . ."

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<sup>43</sup>Clifton J. Allen, ed., The Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 2:70.

(vs. 13); "And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me . . ." (vs. 18); "Then if you walk contrary to me, and will not hearken to me . . ." (vs. 21); "And if by this discipline you are not turned to me, but walk contrary to me . . ." (vs. 23); "And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me . . ." (vs. 27). Vengeance of the covenant only comes in response to man's refusal to submit to his covenant Lord. Each succeeding stage is reached as a result of man's refusal to yield to the preceding demand. It appears that there is a redemptive dimension to the vengeance of the covenant.

It is interesting to note that the five stages of the vengeance of the covenant which come upon the violators correspond in very rough form to the foreign policy of nations like Assyria who treated those who violated their treaty agreement in similar fashion, with progressively severe punishments.<sup>44</sup>

Vss. 40-42 bring out the redemptive dimension very clearly. If, as a result of the vengeance of the covenant, Israel confesses her sin, God would remember the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he would also remember the land. Thus, the God of vengeance is also the redeemer God of the covenant. The primary

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<sup>44</sup>The clearest examples of this may be found in the annals of Ashurbanipal, and the annals of Sargon II (Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, pp. 299-300). See also D. R. Hillers, Treaty-curses and the Old Testament Prophets (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institution, 1964), pp. 86-87.

purpose of his vengeance is to bring the covenant community to repentance. The vengeance of the covenant, seen in this light, is an act of grace on God's part towards his people. Yahweh, the Lord of the covenant, is unchangeable and faithful. The vengeance of the covenant ends with restoration and the renewal of the covenant. "In this way the judgments would eventually turn to a blessing, if they [the Israelites] would bend in true repentance under the mighty hand of their God."<sup>45</sup>

#### Vengeance of Yahweh in Action

There is another aspect of divine vengeance. Num 31:1-54 gives an account of a fierce battle fought by the Israelites against the Midianites as a punishment for their sin of seduction at Pe'or. At the time of the seduction itself God had sent a plague among the Israelites as a punishment for breaking the covenant. This may be classified as a case of the vengeance of the covenant, for it was a punishment for disdainning their covenant relationship with their Lord. It was only after Phinehas had slain one of the offenders--an Israelite prince--that the plague was stopped (Num 25:6-9). Thus, at the time of the offense, God's vengeance was directed against the members of the covenant community who had, by their sin, broken that covenant and dishonored the Lord.

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<sup>45</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, 2:478-479.



It may be helpful to observe the parallels that are found between the Baal-Pe'or episode and the earlier golden-calf apostasy. In both, the revelation of God was followed by a blatant violation of basic covenant principles. Thus, the giving of the decalogue and the making of the covenant at Sinai were followed by the making and worship of the golden calf (Exod 32), while the oracles and blessings of Balaam were quickly followed by the seduction and sin at Pe'or (Num 23-25). Both episodes had to do with the worship of other deities (Exod 32:8; Num 25:2).

According to the Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties, the unfaithful vassal was to be subjected to the maledictions of the treaty. In these two episodes it was Israel, the unfaithful vassal, that must be subjected to the maledictions of the treaty (vengeance of the covenant). In both instances the wrath of God was expressed in the destruction of those involved (Exod 32: 26-28; Num 25:7-8). In both instances the vengeance of God was first directed against the covenant breakers. Those who break faith with God must suffer the vengeance of the covenant.

The campaign of Israel against the Midianites is called "the vengeance of Yahweh." This should be considered in the light of the fact that in the books of Exodus and Numbers Israel was threatened with extinction on several occasions on account of breaking the covenant

(Exod 32:9-10; Num 11; 14:11-12). Disobedience and unbelief always resulted in God's vengeance. What this campaign reveals is that God's response of vengeance is directed against both faithless Israel (the disloyal subject) and the seductive or attacking nations (the aggressive enemy).<sup>46</sup>

In the expression "vengeance of Yahweh" the word "vengeance" (niqāmāh) stands in construct with "Yahweh." It is a genitive construction, apparently--a genitive of source. As such, it carries the idea that God is the source of vengeance. Vengeance arises out of, and proceeds from, his character. But it is this very association of the concept of vengeance with God that raises a theological problem. Can love and vengeance be reconciled?

It is noteworthy that vengeance here takes the shape of a religio-socio-political action against the Midianite offenders. The seduction of the Israelites had been a socio-political offensive launched on the moral front. Yahweh's response was in the form of a military expedition. The whole expedition was Yahweh's vengeance,

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<sup>46</sup>It seems significant that throughout the Old Testament, vengeance on Israel always came before that on their enemies. Thus Israel suffered God's vengeance by being taken into exile by Assyria and Judah by Babylon. Yet vengeance against these nations only came long after that of Israel. We may suggest that redemptive vengeance takes precedence over retributive vengeance. This order may be observed in the final judgment of the world too.

even though it was carried out by Israel. A thousand men were chosen from each tribe to go out as Yahweh's agents of vengeance. Yahweh even used a storm to inflict his vengeance on the enemy. We should note the prominence given to the punishment of the five rulers and Balaam--the political and religious leaders in the seduction of Israel (Num 31:8).

The thoroughly religious nature of vengeance is underscored by the fact that the leader of the expedition was a priest, Phinehas, who had earlier demonstrated his zeal for Yahweh's covenant by slaying one of the covenant-breaking rulers. Thus, the one who had played a significant role in bringing to an end the vengeance of the covenant was now to lead out in inflicting the vengeance of Yahweh on the Midianites (Num 31:6). In this unique role played by Phinehas, the strong relationship between redemptive and retributive vengeance is placed in sharp focus. These two are to be seen as aspects of the same divine attribute. While the action taken might well be the same, the purpose is slightly different. In the first instance, the aim is to bring the unfaithful subjects to repentance, while in the second the aim is to punish the enemies of the covenant community.

It needs to be pointed out that the battle was vengeance in behalf of Israel, for Israel had been led to break the covenant, with the result that the vengeance of the covenant came in the form of a plague that took

24,000 lives (Num 25:9). The instigator of covenant breaking must be punished for his role in the rebellion or apostasy. But the battle was also vengeance for Israel's God, for seduction had ultimately resulted in the infringement on the honor and sovereignty of God. It needs to be remembered that in the Ancient Near East, war between two nations was seen as being in reality a war between their gods. Therefore, it was necessary that God, as sovereign Lord, vindicate both himself and his covenant community.<sup>47</sup>

Swartzback observes that the theme of vengeance has a deepened meaning "in the light of a dominating doctrine of election and covenant." Vengeance implies that God is operative in history. He is both Lord of history and Lord of the covenant. This concept leads to the conclusion that "the enemies of God also turn out to be the enemies of Israel, and vice versa; the despisers of Israel are the despisers of God."<sup>48</sup> Many of the studies done on vengeance do not examine this theme in the light of the covenant. Swartzback has correctly concluded that "if we are to believe in the biblical God at all, then we must take seriously his active work against sin, his vengeance, and his wrath."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>A. Noordtzij, Numbers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), pp. 270-271.

<sup>48</sup>Swartzback, 6:451-457.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

In summary, from the biblical passages noted earlier, it is clear that vengeance is a divine attribute which shows itself in both redemptive and retributive dimensions, both of which are rooted in the covenant concept.

#### Vengeance in the Song of Moses

The book of Deuteronomy is a record of Moses' farewell discourse to Israel. In this speech Moses recounted the way in which God had led Israel during all the years of their wandering up to the point of entering Canaan. The covenant motif became the one great organizing center. It is in the context of the covenant that the whole Exodus was reviewed. The covenant stipulations were also repeated along with covenant curses and blessings. Of the books of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy is by far the most covenant-centered. It comes close to being a covenant-renewal document, and it is in this broader context of covenant that one needs to approach the motif of vengeance in the Song of Moses as recorded in Deut 32.

#### The Rib Pattern

Much light has been shed on the meaning of this Song of Moses by studies on the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East. Two literary forms were used when a suzerain confronted his erring vassal. In one form the document ended with a declaration of war on the vassal, and in the other form the suzerain presented an ultimatum

to the vassal who had shown signs of breaking the treaty. This second form, which is attested in the Mari letters of the second millennium B.C., became known as the rib-pattern (Hebrew, rib, "lawsuit"). It begins with an appeal to the vassal to listen to what was to be said. Heaven and earth are called upon to witness the court case. Accusations follow. The past benefits of the suzerain to the vassal are contrasted with the vassal's ungrateful response. Then comes the declaration of the vassal's guilt and a warning of judgment.<sup>50</sup>

This pattern is observable in Deut 32. We may outline it as follows:

- A. Heaven and earth as witnesses (vss. 1-4)
- B. Implied accusation of Israel (vss. 5-6)
- C. God's past mighty acts for Israel (vss. 7-14)
- D. Direct accusation of Israel (vss. 15-18)
- E. The sentence and threat of judgment (vss. 19-25)

At vs. 26 the pattern is broken. A new theme which is not found in the political rib-pattern is introduced. It is the message of hope (vss. 26-38).<sup>51</sup> In this word of promise Yahweh pledges himself to be covenant Lord and Guardian of Israel. He stands as the Protector of the covenant community, the one who will surely avenge the

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<sup>50</sup>J. A. Thompson, Deuteronomy (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 296.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 296-297.

evil done on his people. Thus, vengeance and protection are here set forth as covenant concepts.

We should take special note of the new elements of hope and trust that are introduced in vs. 30-43. This creative change seems to suggest that our understanding of biblical concepts must not be entirely limited to paralleling concepts in extra-biblical usage. There is here a new creative element which rises above and beyond the social and political and moves into biblical usages.

In the preamble, God is introduced in treaty-fashion as the God of truth and Israel's Father (32:4-6).<sup>52</sup> In this position God reveals his faithfulness, justice, and purity. The Song is a theodicy, and it views divine vengeance in the light of God's character. As the suzerain, God had required undivided devotion from his people. In the Song, Moses shows how Israel had continually proved unfaithful to the covenant (vss. 15-18). In the light of such disloyalty, Moses repeated the cove-

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<sup>52</sup>Kline, p. 139. In this farewell song Moses reviews the leadings of God in Israel's wilderness wanderings. In Ancient Near Eastern international treaties the defection of a vassal resulted in a covenant lawsuit. The structure of such a communication followed the general pattern of the original treaty, with such modifications as were necessary to turn the original treaty into an indictment. In line with this ancient rib pattern, God is the Great King, Moses is his messenger, and Israel is the vassal. As messenger, Moses plays the role of the spokesman who announces the king's charges and judgment. The title, "the man of God" (33:1), is equivalent to the treaty title, "the man of X," a title used for the great king's messenger in the lawsuit. It is in this capacity that Moses calls heaven and earth as witnesses of the court scene.

nant curses of pestilence, sword, and famine. Israel would be exiled by enemies (vss. 23-25).

The evils that would befall Israel bear a striking resemblance to the vengeance of the covenant in Lev 26. Famine, pestilence, sword, exile, and the threat of extinction are common to both passages. There is a covenantal basis for the vengeance in both. In both passages the redemptive purpose of vengeance is uppermost. The two passages are a revelation of Yahweh's vengeance of the covenant. In the present passage God's vengeance on the community of the covenant is described in language borrowed from the matrimonial relationship. God, as the husband, is provoked to jealousy by Israel's illicit relationship with the no-gods of the nations (32:15-19). Even in this picture of vengeance in the context of the husband-wife relationship, vengeance is rooted in the broken covenant. Vengeance as a divine attribute is thus best understood in the context of covenant love and faithfulness.

Vss. 26-35 are of primary importance for the understanding of the whole Song. Von Rad has pointed out that the Hebrew word 'marti must be understood in the sense of self-deliberation. This section introduces a new element involving a detailed deliberation in the heart of God. As von Rad has concluded:

A new description of coming events does not start again until v. 36. This section is therefore an



interlude which takes us out of the turmoil of historical processes and allows us to overhear a soliloquy within the depths of the divine heart.<sup>53</sup>

Yahweh had resolved to make an end of Israel (vs. 26), but he recognized that if he utterly destroyed Israel, the nations would think that the destruction of Israel was attributable to their own gods (vss. 27-33). These nations were, after all, without understanding of the true workings of Yahweh. Thus, in the process Yahweh would be robbed of his honor and glory. Vss. 28-30 are a description of the enemy nations and not Israel. Robbing Yahweh of his glory is a basis for the vengeance that the prophets later directed against the nations.

Vss. 35-36 are an answer to a very basic issue, which von Rad has verbalized as follows: "Why then has Yahweh in spite of such grievous offences nevertheless not cast off his people?" The reply "states that this did not happen for Israel's sake, but for the sake of Yahweh's honor, which ought not to be exposed to any humiliation from the nations."<sup>54</sup> After a period of self-deliberation Yahweh has announced the results of his evaluation. In vss. 34-36 he calls attention to his office as Avenger and Judge of his covenant community. That office belongs to him alone, and by virtue of it he

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<sup>53</sup>Gerhard von Rad, Deuteronomy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 198.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

will judge those nations.<sup>55</sup> God has kept on record the cruel deeds of the enemies of Israel (vss. 33-34). They can only be likened to cruel asps and serpents.

G. Ernest Wright has noted the difficulty that has become associated with the concept of vengeance, pointing out that whereas the contemporary concept of vengeance is that of "requital out of an angry and vengeful spirit," the Hebrew *nāqām* "designates the zealousness of God in his just dealing with people and nations."<sup>56</sup> Wright then mentions the two aspects of vengeance:

To those who are his enemies God's vengeance is his righteous judgment or punishment for their wickedness. To the repentant and oppressed this vengeance means salvation, and is thus something for which God is to be praised. Hence there is a double-sidedness to the Hebrew word that is not accurately rendered by the English "vengeance," though there is no other single term which can be used.<sup>57</sup>

Wright further observes that both in its pre-Israelite usage and in the Old Testament there are several occasions when this word "vengeance" could only mean "to save," or "salvation." The term encompasses two aspects of God's character--judgment and grace. Often, particular passages may stress one or the other of the two aspects.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> G. Ernest Wright, "Exegesis of the Book of Deuteronomy," The Interpreter's Bible (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1953), 2:524.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

By contrast, this Song of Moses presents vengeance as being both redemptive and retributive. Careful note should be taken of three important points that emerge in vss. 35-36:

1) Vengeance is a divine prerogative (vs. 35). This is expressed in the words, "vengeance is mine." While God has at times used nations and individuals to avenge, God is the only legitimate source and subject of vengeance. In Old Testament thought this seems to be rooted in part in the moral order of the universe, for "The Lord is a God of recompense, he will surely requite" (Jer 51:56). Thus, if God is the moral arbiter of the universe, to deny him vengeance would be tantamount to denying his ultimate sovereignty.<sup>59</sup>

2) Vengeance is stored up in God's treasury. This seems to suggest the accumulation of divine zeal in response to the accumulation of human sin. Justice calls for a punishment that suits the crime. It is the just zeal of God that is stored up for the time of judgment.

3) Vengeance is sealed up for an appointed time (vs. 35). The association between vengeance and the appointed time becomes part of a theological development. From this early beginning the concept of "the day of vengeance" or "the day of Yahweh" assumed ever-widening

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<sup>59</sup>R. J. Hammer, "Reward, Recompense, Vengeance, Avenge," A Theological Wordbook of the Bible (New York: MacMillan Co., 1950), pp. 200-201.

dimensions, especially at the hands of the prophets.<sup>60</sup> To repentant persons the day of vengeance issues in deliverance and salvation, but to the unrepentant rebel or enemy it means punitive judgment.

"Vengeance" (nāqāmāh) and "recompense" (silem) in vs. 35 are complementary terms. The two are not synonymous, but share a common broad meaning. The Hebrew silem is the usual word for "retribution." It has a negative connotation here, since it designates what is given as a reward for evil deeds. S. R. Driver has pointed out that the purpose of this statement, "Vengeance is mine," is not primarily to forbid self-help as a form of vengeance, but to reassure Israel, the oppressed and powerless people of the covenant, that after all, there is a sure source of help for them.<sup>61</sup> "Vengeance is mine" is, in fact, the opposite of self-help, for it is never legitimately claimed by a human being in the Bible. It means that the legitimate realm for the execution of vengeance

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<sup>60</sup>During the period of the prophets Israel had become an established monarchy, though its fortunes were not very stable. The messianic concept began to be more clearly articulated. God's kingdom was going to be ushered in by the Messiah who would avenge the enemy and vindicate the true remnant. To express the reality of the messianic hope in the face of apparent existential hopelessness, the concept of "the day of Yahweh," and "the day of vengeance" emerged as a central concept in the prophetic messages.

<sup>61</sup>S. R. Driver, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 374.

lies with God alone. In this Song of Moses the central thought is that of the certainty of God's dealing with sin. Keil and Delitzsch see this, not just as an announcement of some quality founded in God's nature, and residing in him, but as an expression of the presence of a divine energy which will soon be revealed as an active principle.<sup>62</sup>

In vs. 36 the purpose of vengeance is stated as being the vindication of the covenant people. The verb *din* ("vindicate") is used in the same sense as the word *šāphaṭ* ("judge"). It denotes the rendering of justice or the procuring of right.<sup>63</sup> A significant parallelism in vs. 36 sheds light on the broader concept of vengeance. Thus *din* ("vindicate") is set parallel to *nāhām* ("have compassion"). The legal act of vindication brings about deliverance, which is a manifestation of compassion.<sup>64</sup> God will eventually vindicate his people, having compassion on them. Vengeance is, therefore, a balanced revelation of both mercy and justice.

Another element of vengeance that is in evidence in this passage is that of the chronological order of its phases. This aspect has already been mentioned, but is of such special significance as to deserve further

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<sup>62</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, 5:487.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Thompson, p. 303.

mention here. Redemptive vengeance seems always to come before retributive vengeance. The covenant community is always the first target of God's judgment. It may be observed that in both the Old and New Testaments judgment begins at the house of God. In the end, both the wicked and the righteous pass through some aspect of the vengeance of Yahweh.

Significantly, the opening statement of vs. 35 is quoted in two places in the New Testament. Its usage there, indicating its new context, will be examined below, but it should be noted here that the freedom with which it is used in the New Testament should be seen as evidence of the broadness of its scope. Thus, in Rom 12:19 this statement is quoted to indicate that Christians must not take revenge--must not repay evil for the evil which is done to them. In the Song of Moses, this is not the point at issue. Indeed, Israel is not even capable of avenging itself on the enemy, for Israel has become totally powerless through the process of God-sent disasters and foreign oppression. In Heb 10:30 the statement is quoted as an assertion that the Lord will render judgment against any member of the covenant community who "profanes the blood of the covenant." The context is that of the unfaithful member of the community. Thus, all three contexts are different.

In Deut 32:37-40 Yahweh asserts his own sovereignty over all gods. He challenges the no-gods of the

nations to arise, if they can, and demonstrate their power to deliver their subjects. The no-gods prove to be completely impotent. Yahweh, and he alone, controls the ultimate fortunes of both men and nations. God himself uses the oath formula, "As Yahweh lives," in affirmation of the vengeance on the enemies. By this oath he offers to his people the highest evidence that he is Lord of the covenant and will stand as the faithful Protector of the covenant community. It seems, then, that vengeance forms a strong basis for the trust and security of those who are in a covenant relationship with Yahweh.

In vss. 41-42 there is a vivid portrayal of the gravity of Yahweh's vengeance. He is pictured as holding his flashing sword, arming himself for battle. He seizes judgment as though it were a weapon of war, to bring his judgment upon the adversaries of his people. The figures of "arrows drunk with blood" and "sword devouring flesh" vividly suggest scenes of carnage. It appears that when Yahweh finally rises up in vengeance against the enemy there is no more mercy.

Vs. 43 is a call to the nations to sing praises to Israel's God, for he has delivered his people through his righteous vengeance. Vengeance is carried out on account of the blood of God's servants.

The call to the nations to praise God on account of his vengeance becomes a recurring theme in the Old and New Testaments. For example, Deut 32:43 reads, "Praise

his people, all you nations; for he avenges the blood of his servants, and takes vengeance on his adversaries, and makes expiation for the land of his people"; and 2 Kgs 9:7 reads: "And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD." And in Rev 19:1-2 we find a similar statement indicating the connection between innocent blood and God's vengeance. We may conclude that the blood of God's servants is of prime concern for him. And on account of his covenant role of "Protector," God has bound himself to avenge the blood of his servants.

An important element emerges in Deut 32:43 in the use of the word *kipper* ("make expiation"). Wright points out that this word is most frequently translated "to atone" or "to make atonement." He further observes that it comes from the vocabulary of sacrificial worship, in which forgiveness and reconciliation are the result. In this passage God is the subject of this verb, and by his vengeance he atones for the land and brings in full reconciliation. As Wright notes, "Through his righteous acts or vengeance he [God] himself not merely forgives, but actually cleanses or purges away the guilt."<sup>65</sup> The Hebrew word draws attention to the fact that "atonement is more than forgiveness. It deals with guilt that

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<sup>65</sup>Wright, p. 252.



reconciliation may be effected."<sup>66</sup>

If righteousness is to prevail, sin must be justly punished. Even when a foreign nation is used as an agent of vengeance, justice demands that that nation be answerable for its evils. Ultimately, all sin must meet its just punishment.

In the process of avenging the blood of his servants, God removes their guilt and clears the land of its pollution. As mentioned above, God is the subject of the verb *kipper* in Deut 32:43. It is he who does the final work of removing sin from his universe. In that final act of righteous vengeance, even the adversaries are to recognize the rightness of God in his dealing both with the covenant community and with their enemies. Thus, the final call to praise God for the mighty revelation of his vengeance closes the Song. And it is of interest to note, further, that the sub-themes raised in the Song--the blood of his servants, the time of vengeance, and the call for rejoicing over the avenged enemies--become significant themes in connection with the concept of vengeance in the book of Revelation.

Turning to Josh 10:13, one meets another episode in which vengeance occurs. In this passage Israel is the immediate instrument of vengeance on the Amorites, but it was God who made the sun to stand still in the valley of

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

Aijalon, with the express purpose of helping Israel to inflict that vengeance. God also used hail as part of the vengeance on the enemy. Hail was often an instrument of God's judgment.<sup>67</sup> We may conclude that the ultimate source of vengeance here was Yahweh himself.

The treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh 9:3-15) reveals other aspects of this vengeance. By that treaty Israel became the suzerain and Gibeon the vassal. The battle of Aijalon came as a result of an appeal by Gibeon that it was being attacked by its enemies. The threat was not against the nation of Israel, but against its vassal state. Thus, in line with Ancient Near Eastern treaties, the suzerain must avenge his vassal. In this case vengeance takes on the form of a military expedition. But the basic concept is the same: The Great King owes his subjects covenant protection--as both a legal and moral responsibility. This is, obviously, very different from revenge arising from a vengeful spirit. The fact that Joshua honored his covenant obligation to protect the Gibeonites, even though the covenant had been made by trickery, shows the solemn nature of covenant obligations both in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament.

During the period of the judges, the concept of vengeance appears in the episode of Jephthah's return

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<sup>67</sup>J. Woudstra, The Book of Deuteronomy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1978), p. 267.

from fighting against the Ammonites (Judg 11:36). Here, it is Jephthah's daughter who says that Yahweh had avenged her father on his enemies. The subject of the verb is God. He is thus the source of vengeance here, and the object is the aggressor and enemy of the covenant people.

Perhaps more difficult to evaluate is Samson's threat to avenge the killing of his wife's family (Judg 15:7). It seems clear from reading the story of Samson that God's plan was not of primary importance to Samson's actions. It is therefore a debatable point whether vengeance here had its source in God or even whether this sort of vengeance embraces the biblical concept. After his capture, Samson prayed for one more opportunity to avenge himself on the Philistines, for their having put out his eyes (16:28). It would seem that even though at a more personal level Samson may have acted from a vindictive spirit, God still used Samson in avenging Israel on its enemy.<sup>68</sup>

#### Vengeance in the Days of the Monarchy

King Saul presents another example of vengeance--one which is difficult to evaluate. Faced with the Philistine army, Saul pronounced a curse on any Israelite

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<sup>68</sup>It seems logical to conclude that Samson's vindictive spirit was not endorsed by God and does not form part of the biblical concept.

soldier who would eat any food on that day "until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies" (1 Sam 14:24). The verb *nāqām* is in the niphal and has no stated subject. However, in the theology of Israel it was generally understood that vengeance in the context of military expeditions resided in Yahweh. In Israel most of these expeditions were made in highly religious settings. In this pericope, one can see the oath of Saul as "an act of false zeal, in which Saul had more regard to himself and his own kingly power than to the cause of the kingdom of Jehovah. . . ." <sup>69</sup> Thus, while his theology was correct, his motivation was wrong. Such a wrong motive does not discredit the correctness of the biblical concept. Vengeance is still God's prerogative, even when evil men misuse it and make false claims.

A similar usage is found in 1 Sam 18:25. A trap is set for David by Saul through marriage to his daughter. Saul requires a hundred foreskins of Philistines as a bride-price from David "that he [Saul] may be avenged of the king's enemies." Saul had so distorted his relationship to God that his concept of vengeance did not represent the biblical meaning at all; in this case he even hoped that David would be killed by the enemy.

In 2 Sam 24:12 David places judgment and vengeance in the hands of Yahweh. Saul had made several

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<sup>69</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, 4:142.

attempts on his life, and David had had an opportunity to kill Saul while he slept in the cave. David was even urged by some of his supporters to kill his enemy, but he would not. David's reply was, "I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me upon you; but my hand shall not be against you." God had chosen and anointed David as king and was in a covenant relationship with him. Thus, God was David's protector and would take responsibility over his life.

David here shows a deep understanding of the meaning of vengeance. He displays a mature religious faith and prefers to leave his case in the hands of Yahweh. Indeed, it is in the context of innocent suffering that this divine attribute stands out most clearly, for it was only after proving his innocence that David invoked Yahweh to act as both judge and avenger between him and his adversary.<sup>70</sup> David concluded by quoting an old proverb which implied that only an evil man would wish to avenge himself (vs. 13).

Earlier on, Jonathan had entered into a covenant with David in which Jonathan had pronounced a benediction on him. Part of that benediction was that Yahweh would take vengeance upon David's enemies (1 Sam 20:16). Thus, Jonathan too realized that this was a prerogative of God

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., pp. 236-237.

and that only God could legitimately exercise it. That is to say, vengeance is not merely the ability to inflict punishment on an enemy; it involves the exercise of the divine imperium in punishing the covenant breaker or the aggressor against a covenant community.

In the episode of Nabal, Abigail, and David (1 Sam 25:23-31), Abigail states that the Lord has prevented David from taking vengeance against Nabal. Taking such vengeance would have involved David in bloodguilt (vs. 26). In this passage, vengeance is mentioned twice, but in each case it is the divine restraint against it that is referred to (vss. 26, 31).

Personal vengeance brings bloodguilt, grief, and pangs of conscience (vs. 31). The source of biblical vengeance must always be God himself. The word *nāqām* does not appear in this passage, but the concept is clearly present.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>David's claim to a portion of Nabal's property raises the question of legitimacy. Did he have any right to Nabal's property? Also, did he have any right to inflict vengeance on Nabal? It ought to be remembered that David had watched over the flocks of Nabal without any reward for his services. Even though there was no formal covenant between the two, there was an understanding of mutual dependence which bordered on covenant. Nabal was obliged to reciprocate kindness to David. In his refusal Nabal challenged the legitimacy of David's claim to some of his property. Mendenhall observes that the fact that David and his men did not have a socially recognized status of power may account for the fact that the root *nqm* is not used in this whole passage. *Nāqām* has only been used in contexts that have to do with the exercise of authority--which in Israel was derived from Yahweh. Since David was not yet the official king of Israel he had no authority to exercise that imperium

In 2 Sam 4:8, there is an account about two young men who had murdered Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, and who had brought his head to King David, claiming that the Lord had avenged David on his enemy's son. They hoped to receive a reward for their deed and used "vengeance" as a cover-up for their murder. It was a false claim on their part, and David saw through their wicked and greedy motive. He immediately ordered that they be slain for their evil act. Theirs was not biblical vengeance, and God had nothing to do with it. It was necessary that David clearly dissociate himself from such assassins and show decisively that he would not condone the unlawful acts of even those who did evil for the purpose of benefiting him. Still, it should be noted that even in their false statement these two young men reflected a correct theology of vengeance, for they attributed it to God.

In this episode David as king was now faced with the central issue of vengeance, which here was the call for justice when these wicked men had brought suffering and death on the innocent Ishbosheth. As George B. Caird notes, "Unavenged blood cries from the earth (Gen 4:10) until the murderer is destroyed from the earth."<sup>72</sup> David, as representative of Yahweh, must exercise the

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which belonged to kingship. See Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," pp. 94-95.

<sup>72</sup>George B. Caird, Psalms, The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 2:1068.

imperium to bring about justice and to redress the evil that has been committed. Failure to act in executing the vengeance might have been viewed as complicity in the shedding of innocent blood.

Hans W. Hertzberg observes that "the expressions 'wicked' (rāsā<sup>c</sup>) and 'righteous' (ṣaddiq), used here [in 2 Sam 4:8], come from the legal sphere, and mean the one who is in the right and the one who has done wrong towards him."<sup>73</sup> Thus Ishbosheth is described as being righteous, not in the moral sense, but as one who has done no wrong in this particular case. It is this concept of right and wrong that helps broaden the concept of vengeance.

Another interesting occurrence of vengeance is in David's song of victory after he had been delivered from all his enemies who wished to destroy him (2 Sam 22). David sings to "the God who gave me vengeance and brought down peoples under me" (vs. 48). There is no element of

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<sup>73</sup>Hans W. Hertzberg, I & II Samuel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 265. See also John T. Willis, First and Second Samuel (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing Company, 1982), p. 308; and Keil and Delitzsch, 4:311. This is the sense in which right and wrong are used in the Amarna letters. Thus the one who is viewed in the right or in the wrong is not to be understood in the sense of being morally right or wrong, but in the sense of social and legal rightness. It is in this sense too that these words are used in the vassal-treaties of the Ancient Near East. The concept of vengeance is to be found, in its religious setting, in the deepest level of social, legal, and religious justice. Vengeance is a religio-politico-legal concept.



vindictiveness in this song. It is clear that vengeance is deliverance "from men of violence" (vs. 49). Thus, as in the Amarna letters, it is deliverance from the evil and illegitimate aggressor that is signified by vengeance. In this episode it was not David who procured the vengeance on his enemies; rather, it is God who gave the vengeance (vs. 48).

This song has raised two areas of concern for the modern reader. The first has to do with the apparent self-justification in vss. 21-25, which seems to constitute an arrogant claim to sinlessness. The other is the apparent gloating over fallen enemies. David F. Payne has noted that "the whole psalm must be read in the light of the covenant relationship which existed between Israel and the God of Israel."<sup>74</sup> Thus, the vengeance of God is to be seen here as the deliverance of Israel, the vassal of Yahweh, from the foreign aggressor, and the punishment of that aggressor. It seems beyond doubt that vengeance, in this passage, is a covenant concept which can best be understood in the context of covenant protection of the vassal by the covenant Lord.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>David F. Payne, I & II Samuel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 269.

<sup>75</sup>Ben F. Philbeck, Jr., Deuteronomy, The Broadman Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 3:140, has taken the position that the words of this song do not apply to any man, certainly not to David. Philbeck thinks that they are to be seen as an outgrowth of a theology which held that the righteous God of Israel always rewarded good and evil in this world. According

In the books of Kings there is an interesting and noteworthy connection between unpunished murder of the prophets by the state and subsequent curse and drought, as indicated by the narrative in 1 Kgs 17:1 (cf. 18:4). This theme of vengeance on account of the blood of God's servants also comes out clearly in 2 Kgs 9:7. In this latter passage, a young prophet was commissioned by Elisha to go and anoint Jehu as the new king who would strike down the house of Ahab as a vengeance of God against the family that had killed the prophets of God in the days of Jezebel. It should be noted that it was God who took the responsibility for avenging the blood of his servants on their enemies. It is also interesting to observe that God appointed a man to the royal office before asking him to avenge the blood of the prophets. Thus, it is evident that the king stands in a special relationship to God and to Israel, and that it is this unique position that enables him to act on behalf of

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to this view, the song has overstated the true position of David, for David was not such an innocent man. The rejection of the words of this song as a description of David's experience may result from a refusal to acknowledge the efficacy of true repentance and the reality of the divine forgiveness. If God really forgave the sin of David, then it is no wonder that David could state his innocence as a basis for the vindication of Yahweh. Moreover, the innocence of which David speaks is that of his faithfulness to the kingship covenant. David asserts that he has been a faithful vassal to the Great King and therefore deserves to be protected under the terms of the kingship covenant. Seen in this context, David's innocence has to do with vassal-treaty faithfulness between suzerain and vassal.

Yahweh.<sup>76</sup> This was David's position.

Mendenhall notes a striking similarity between 2 Kgs 9:7 and Deut 32:42, in that the setting of 2 Kgs 9:7 is one in which it was impossible for the normal process of law to provide the redress. It was against the state itself that vengeance had to be carried out.<sup>77</sup> Also, it will be noted in both passages that Yahweh is the source of vengeance on the enemies, and that Yahweh avenges on account of the blood of his servants. In both cases there is no legitimate political power that could redress the wrong, both passages being set in the context of persecution of God's people. In both instances there is, as well, an overtone of defiance to the lordship and legitimacy of God, and of an attachment to false gods. These similarities have a distinct bearing on the call for vengeance in the book of Revelation, for it is when this sort of Old Testament background is given its due weight that a clearer concept of vengeance in Revelation is developed.

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<sup>76</sup>The covenant relationship can be noticed between God and Israel, between God and the king of Israel, and it is on the basis of this covenant relationship that God or king becomes the guardian of the peace and welfare of the other. It is in this context of covenant and kingship that the whole concept of vengeance must be understood. Thus, in situations where the safety and security of the covenant community was threatened God's own integrity as lord of the covenant was called into question, and it became necessary that God eventually clear his name by vindicating the innocent.

<sup>77</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 92.

Vengeance and Imprecations in the Psalms

Another Old Testament document in which the idea of vengeance and the vindication of God's people is very common is the Psalms. In Ps 8:2 it is the enemies of Israel that are called the avenger, and God is able to stop that avenger in his tracks. The use of the term "avenger" here is rather unusual. Whereas God has been viewed as the avenger par excellence, here it is the enemy who is regarded as the avenger. This passage may represent some form of self-help which was disguised as vengeance.<sup>78</sup> This is perhaps not an example of true biblical vengeance.

The Psalter contains a number of "imprecatory psalms." These psalms have raised theological problems. As Barnes commented a century ago,

Perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writers seem to manifest.<sup>79</sup>

An imprecation is an appeal to God for judgment, calamity, and curse against one's enemies or the enemies of God. An imprecation must have at least two elements--an invocation or address to God and a request that one's

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<sup>78</sup>Albert Barnes, Notes on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 5:68.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., pp. xxv-xxvi.

enemies or God's enemies be judged and punished.<sup>80</sup> While many imprecations are found in the Psalter, it is those psalms in which the imprecation forms the chief element that are called "imprecatory psalms." Leupold states that the term "imprecatory psalms" is used for "those psalms in which the writer prays that God may afflict the evildoer and punish him according to his just deserts."<sup>81</sup> R. K. Harrison observes that these psalms are a reply to Israel's national enemies and that God will intervene in judgment.<sup>82</sup> Though opinion varies as to the number and identity of imprecatory psalms, the following are generally agreed on as belonging to this category: 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, and 139. In these psalms it is quite apparent that the whole argument of the psalmist revolves around the element of imprecation. It will also be noted that all of these psalms except 83 and 137 are attributed to David.<sup>83</sup>

The basic problem for the modern mind with regard to imprecatory psalms is an ethical one. As J. G. Vos has asked, "How can it be right to wish or pray for the

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<sup>80</sup>Laney, p. 36.

<sup>81</sup>H. C. Leupold, The Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 18.

<sup>82</sup>Roland K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), p. 997.

<sup>83</sup>Laney, p. 36.

destruction or doom of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms?"<sup>84</sup> How is one to reconcile this apparent spirit of revenge with the spirit of Jesus and the New Testament: "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44)? Laney asks whether these heart cries for vengeance and retribution can be as inspired as the other portions of the psalms that elevate the character of God.<sup>85</sup> The ethical problem raised by these psalms is the same as that raised by the calls for vengeance in the book of Revelation. Is vengeance ever ethical?

#### Suggested Solutions to Imprecatory Psalms

A number of solutions to this problem have been proposed. One is that the psalms belong to the dispensation of law, not grace. But this solution is an imposition on the Scriptures, for there is no evidence that the Scriptures are divided into such dispensations.<sup>86</sup> One also notices that the theme of divine grace is so common in other psalms that this sort of a distinction has no biblical basis on the very grounds of the Psalter itself.

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<sup>84</sup>Johannes G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," The Westminster Theological Journal 4 (1942):124.

<sup>85</sup>Laney, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup>Vos, pp. 124-125. See also Laney, p. 38.

A second suggestion is that the imprecations are not prayers but merely predictions of what was sure to happen to the evildoer. The problem with this solution is that the biblical evidence for imprecation is so clear that it cannot be thus explained away.<sup>87</sup>

A third solution suggests that the imprecations are to be understood only in a spiritual or figurative sense. According to this view it is spiritual enemies, not human beings, that are the object of imprecations. But there are clear indications (e.g., Ps 109:6-9) that these enemies are real human beings and not simply demonic powers.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the New Testament applies Ps 109 to Judas Iscariot as the object of vengeance (Acts 1:20). Thus, this third suggestion is not an adequate explanation for these psalms.

A fourth suggestion is that the imprecations are really the words of the enemies of David against him.<sup>89</sup> This approach requires some emendations to the text, involving the insertion of such expressions as "he said" or "they said." Such a solution has no textual or grammatical support and must be seen as being too far-fetched.

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<sup>87</sup>Vos, pp. 125-126. See also Laney, p. 39.

<sup>88</sup>Vos, pp. 126-127. See also Laney, p. 39.

<sup>89</sup>J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," Presbyterian and Reformed Review 8 (1897):491.

A fifth view is that these psalms express David's personal sentiments and not those of God. This view is shared by G. Kittel, who attributes these psalms to mean-spirited individuals who only thought of conquest and revenge. If David had been a better man, he would not have uttered such strong negative sentiments.<sup>90</sup> Such a view totally overlooks the biblical record of David's character as one who shunned any personal revenge, even against those who sought his life (1 Sam 24:1-7; 26:5).<sup>91</sup>

John Bright suggests a somewhat similar solution; namely, that these psalms are the human spirit of the psalmist who is "God's wholly-committed man, yet a man who is estranged from God's spirit." He argues that the psalmist expresses sentiments which are "unworthy and sub-Christian."<sup>92</sup> It seems, however, that such a solution does not take seriously the interplay of the divine and human in the phenomenon of revelation/inspiration.

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<sup>90</sup>G. Kittel, The Scientific Study of the Old Testament, p. 143, quoted in G. S. Gunn, God in the Psalms (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1965), p. 102.

<sup>91</sup>Laney, p. 38.

<sup>92</sup>John Bright, The Authority of the Old Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 238. Bright has used this approach in his treatment of Psalm 137. It seems that even though he has treated only this psalm he would use the same approach to interpret other imprecatory psalms.



### The Purposes of Imprecation

Laney has taken some significant steps towards a more satisfactory solution than any of the foregoing. He begins by focusing his efforts on developing the ethical and revelational purposes of imprecatory judgments. He enumerates six purposes:

1. One major purpose of divine judgments against the wicked is to establish the righteous. In the process of judging the evildoers, God safeguards the security and inheritance of the righteous. "A concern for righteousness and the righteous is foundational to the imprecation found in Ps 7:6-11."<sup>93</sup> God's righteousness is revealed in the way in which he deals with those who are in covenant with him and are faithful to that covenant.

2. A second purpose is the glory of God which comes to him as a result of his delivering the righteous (Ps 7:17; 35:18, 28). When the psalmist sees this vindication taking place he rejoices (Ps 58:10).

3. A third purpose of imprecation is that as men see the judgments of God against the wicked, they will come to recognize God as Judge over the earth (58:11). Both the righteous and the wicked will know that God is concerned with justice and truth.

4. A fourth purpose is to demonstrate to everyone

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<sup>93</sup>Laney, p. 41.

that God is sovereign. David prayed that the wicked enemies of Israel might be destroyed so that men from the ends of the earth might know that God rules in Jacob (59:13). It is important that his sovereign authority be established in his domain.

5. Imprecations indicate an exclusion of the wicked from enjoying the same ultimate blessings as the righteous. This thought runs through the whole history of revelation and stands as a consolation to those who must suffer for their obedience to God.

6. A sixth purpose of the imprecations is to cause the wicked to seek God. Asaph prayed that the wicked might be judged and humiliated so that they might thereby be led to seek his face (83:16-18).<sup>94</sup>

Laney points out that "these purposes of the imprecations give a divine perspective to the seemingly human cries for judgment." This divine perspective is of great significance to our understanding of imprecations and vengeance. As Laney further points out, "It would appear that the high ethical and revelational purposes of the imprecatory psalms clear them of the charge of being sourced in the bitter spirit of a bloodthirsty, carnal man."<sup>95</sup> It may be noted that imprecations and vengeance are not anthropocentric but theocentric.

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

Covenantal Ground for  
Imprecation

The basis on which imprecations on Israel's enemies may be justified is the covenant. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3) promised blessings on those who blessed Abram and his descendants, and curses on those who cursed them. Because of the unconditional nature of this covenant, the promises remain valid for the covenant community throughout the duration of that covenant. On the basis of his faithfulness to the covenant promises, Yahweh bears the responsibility of fulfilling his role to his people.<sup>96</sup>

The king in Israel occupied a special position in relationship to God and the nation. The Lord was recognized as the supreme ruler in Israel who appointed each king as his vassal. A covenant was made between God, king, and people (2 Kgs 11:12-19), and the enthronement ceremony began in the temple and ended in the palace. As a result of anointing, the king became sacrosanct (2 Sam 1:14, 16). God made an everlasting covenant with David that his dynasty would be established forever (2 Sam 23:5; 7:8-15; Ps 89:19-37). The Davidic king was to be "son" of God (2 Sam 7:14). This divine sonship was not based on a divine procreation. Rather, his sonship was expressed through an adoption formula, "You are my son,

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., pp. 41-42.

today I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7).<sup>97</sup>

In this unique position as son of God, the king stood as the representative of the nation before God. In his official functions he was the embodiment of Israel. He bore moral and covenantal responsibility for his people. If the king sinned, there were repercussions for the whole nation, and when he was obedient to God the whole nation often stood to benefit.<sup>98</sup> When David offered his imprecations it was as Israel's covenantal representative that he appealed to God for vengeance. On the basis of the Abrahamic covenant the enemies of Israel deserved to be cursed. David as the nation's covenantal representative was simply calling the covenant Lord to implement the protective clauses of the covenant.<sup>99</sup>

It is significant that David never prayed that he might be given power to overthrow his personal enemies, but always that God might be the avenger. The appeal was that Yahweh might arise against his enemies (Ps 7:6; 35:1; 58:6; 59:5). In all of David's calls for vengeance the authority for avenging always resided with God. The

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<sup>97</sup>S. Szikszai, "King," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (1962), 3:14-15.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Laney, p. 42. The act of anointing also made the priests and prophets sacrosanct. We may therefore see the priest and prophet as occupying a similar office as representing the people. All three offices called for anointing, but the king differed in that he had executive power.

call for vengeance was also always centered in God's glory, not David's vindictiveness. David himself demonstrated repeatedly that he held no feelings of hate and vindictiveness against his personal enemies (see, e.g., 2 Sam 16:11; 19:16-23), yet he was deeply stirred by those who did evil, even when they appeared to favor his own cause. In his imprecations David pleaded that justice be done and that right be vindicated. This concern for vindication of justice and defense of righteousness is present in the New Testament, too (2 Thess 1:6-7).<sup>100</sup>

It must be noted that David's calls for vengeance are directed against the enemies of Israel. What makes the enemies to be objects of imprecation is not their sinful, godless lives; rather, what is of concern in this context is their attitude and relationship to Israel and/or to its God. General sinfulness calls forth God's wrath, but persecution of the covenant people calls forth vengeance. The enemies of David are Israel's enemies and ultimately Yahweh's enemies. There is an interesting parallel with the New Testament here, too. The enemies of David and Israel in the Old Testament are equivalent to the enemies of Christ and the Church in the New Testament.

#### Nāqām in the Psalms

The special use of the term "avenger" for the

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-43.

enemy in Ps 8:2 has already been discussed. The same usage of the participle is made in Ps 44:16. In both passages "avenger" is linked to the substantive "enemy." It is not clear in the contexts of these psalms why the psalmist has made this reverse usage which occurs only in these two passages in the whole Old Testament corpus. We must turn to the other usages of *nāqām* to seek the theological content.

A typical example of the usual meaning of *nāqām* is Ps 18:47, which indicates that it is God who avenges. In this passage vengeance is viewed primarily as an act of deliverance from enemies. The lines of vs. 47 and 48 are in synonymous parallelism. Thus, the first line in vs. 47 ("It is God that avenges me") is parallel to and synonymous with the first line in vs. 48 ("he delivers me from my enemies"), while the second line in vs. 47 ("and subdues the people under me") is also parallel to and synonymous with the second line of vs. 48 ("You lift me up above those who rise up against me"). When read in this relationship, the lines give vengeance the meaning of deliverance and the establishment of a vassal by the suzerain.

Ps 58:10-11 expresses the joy of the righteous over the judged wicked, for Yahweh is seen to be the judge of the whole earth, who rewards the righteous. Ps 149:7 expresses the same sentiment of rejoicing over the vengeance upon the enemy of Israel. It is this element

of rejoicing that becomes a key problem in the interpretation of the calls for vengeance in Revelation, as we shall notice below in the discussion of that book.

Ps 79:10 makes a call for vengeance on account of the blood of the servants of God. This seems to be a central theme in the development of the concept of vengeance. The call is that God would deliver his people for the glory of his name. Again, deliverance is seen to be at the very core of the concept of vengeance. But the sovereignty of Yahweh is a key concern, too: "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of thy servants be known among the nations before our eyes" (79:10). The taunts of the enemy are to be repaid sevenfold (vs. 12). There appears to be a parallel thought between this passage and Rev 18:6-7. In both passages the covenant people have been persecuted and the enemy is to receive a multiplied measure of punishment. This parallel thought is dealt with later.

One also notices that the theme of vengeance on account of the blood of the servants of Yahweh is set forth in Ps 79:10, as in two previous passages (Deut 32:43 and 2 Kgs 9:7). The designation "servants of God" seems to be used in a very fluid sense. While in Deut 32 it is the nation, in 2 Kgs 9 it is prophets. The "servants" are those legitimately under his protective agreement, whether that agreement is explicit or implicit. In

all the "blood-of-his-servants" passages, the theme of the vindication of God's people is uppermost. The link between suffering and vengeance is very important as a key to understanding the ethical rightness of this divine attribute. Seen in the context of innocent suffering and the protective clauses in the agreement between God and his people, vengeance is not an unethical attribute, either on the part of the saints who call for it, or on the part of God who renders it. This background of suffering of the covenant community provides an important backdrop against which to view vengeance in the book of Revelation, where judgment is seen to be good in the context of the persecuted saints who are later vindicated by the judgment of God.

#### Vengeance in the Prophets

The concept of vengeance is very common in the writings of the prophets. Beginning with pre-exilic prophets this theme occurs quite frequently. We commence our investigation with the earlier prophets and do not belabor points that have already been established earlier in this study. Our goal here is simply to demonstrate the presence of the idea and to point out any special insights that may have a bearing on this vengeance theme as it occurs in the book of Revelation.

#### Vengeance in the Minor Prophets

In the minor prophets the root **NQM** occurs only



twice. It is found in Mic 5:15: "And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance upon the nations that did not obey." This declaration of vengeance against the disobedient nations is set in the larger context of the theme of restoration and the remnant. Israel had keenly suffered the vengeance of Yahweh because she had fallen into de facto covenant with the gods of the foreign nations. In the face of this mounting apostasy Yahweh declared that his ultimate purpose was not to be determined by man's faithlessness, but by his grace. It is in this setting that God declares that there would be a remnant who would enjoy the covenant promises. Yahweh as Israel's God had a right to punish Israel for her sin, but what right had he to punish foreign nations who did not obey? Micah implies that Yahweh is God even over the nations. He rules over them even when they do not recognize his sovereignty. In their ignorance they have broken the covenant terms of life--namely, obedience. But since he was in fact their God, he could avenge in connection with the evil nations.

The larger context of this promise of vengeance upon the nations is the promise of the birth and reign of the Messiah in the midst of troubled and distressed Zion (5:1-2). Thus, as the King of Zion reigns, the enemies of Israel receive vengeance. The remnant are those who remain in, or are brought back to, a covenant relationship with Yahweh. While restoration takes place among

the remnant, punitive vengeance takes place among the nations who are characterized by disobedience. Perhaps the disobedience of the nations is to be seen as consisting in failure to acknowledge the covenant relationship between Israel and her God and oppressing her as if she had no covenant Lord.<sup>101</sup>

The second occurrence of *nāqām* in the Minor Prophets is in Nah 1:2, where Yahweh is declared to be a God of vengeance towards the enemies of Israel. There is in evidence here, again, a bright side for Israel and a dark side for the nations. Vengeance is seen in terms of deliverance for Israel and destruction for her enemies.

It is significant, however, that these Minor Prophets passages that deal with the motif of divine vengeance contain a noticeable proleptic dimension. The prophets most frequently speak of the wrath of Yahweh, not as something that had already passed or was already present, but either as being imminent or following in the wake of the day of the Messiah. This proleptic dimension of vengeance defines Yahweh's wrath, not as an impulsive and uncontrolled outburst of emotion on God's part, but as a controlled and directed divine reaction against

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<sup>101</sup>Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, one vol. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), pp. 1153-1154.

sin.<sup>102</sup> Yahweh's wrath will ultimately destroy sin.

### Day of Yahweh

While the word *nāqām* does not occur frequently in the earlier prophets and among the minor prophets, the concept itself is very common. The theme of vengeance is often involved in such expressions as "the day of the LORD." One notices that that day was conceived as the day of deliverance for the remnant and the day of judgment for the enemies of the covenant people.<sup>103</sup> It is likewise to be noted that the terminology surrounding the expression "the day of the LORD" involves words of war. Thus, in Ezek 13:5, Jer 46:10, and Zeph 1:16, the day of the Lord is directly associated with the concept of warfare. While the idea of war is present, there are also in evidence other important dimensions which do not appear to be associated with war at all. These have an important bearing on the total concept of the day of the

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 1158.

<sup>103</sup>Von Rad connects the concept of the day of Yahweh to the ancient Israelite tradition of the holy war. He proposes that that day had no eschatological significance, but was a traditional expectation of the prophets that the enemies of Israel would eventually be defeated by Yahweh (Theologie des Alten Testaments, [1960], 2:133-137). One wonders whether such a limited application of this expression is really true to the historical development of Israel. It may be more correct to see a primary understanding of this term as being the historical dimension without totally denying the presence of the eschatological outlook. From the very beginning the religion of Israel had a strong orientation for the future although that future's otherworldly nature was not at first clearly perceived.

Lord and need further examination.

In all cases, the day of Yahweh is a day in which he comes to the guilty or hostile forces. Often God comes in the setting of a dispute to punish the guilty party and vindicate the innocent. In these settings judgment and punishment are viewed as one divine act. It is to be observed that the day of Yahweh has a double character--judgment and punishment, on the one hand, and blessing and bliss, on the other. Fensham suggests that this double character of Yahweh's day of vengeance is based on the covenant, "because according to military clauses in the ancient treaties we know that the main partner promises protection against enemies."<sup>104</sup> It is to be observed, further, that in Ancient Near Eastern texts and the Old Testament if a vassal or a minor partner broke the covenant the suzerain or major partner could invoke the curse of the gods and undertake a punitive expedition. This breach of covenant on the part of the vassal may be the basis of the war concepts in the Old Testament.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>F. C. Fensham, "A Possible Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord," Biblical Essays (1966):92.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid. Fensham further indicates that the usage of the terms "LUGAL. TUR" (small king) and "LUGAL. GAL" (great king) as used for Hattusilis and his brother "clearly indicates a covenant-relationship between them." The unfaithful minor in Hittite treaties was thus often punished by ordeal of battle, and the ultimate goal of the punishment was to inflict on the transgressor all the curses of the treaty.

There are some indications in the prophetic writings that a breach of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh was regarded in the same manner as a rupture of the treaty in international relations.<sup>106</sup> Thus, when Israel broke covenant with her God, a similar kind of ordeal by war was expected from the Lord against Israel. Under such circumstances the day of the Lord was a day of visitation on the unfaithful. Often a foreign nation was an instrument in such a struggle.

This does not explain the terminology of unusual phenomena associated with the divine ordeal by war, such as is found in the emphasis on the darkness of the day and the turning of the moon into blood in Amos 5:18-20, Joel 3-4, Isa 13:10, and many other passages. But a close examination of a variety of Ancient Near Eastern texts shows such phenomena to be a prominent part of the curses directed against a transgressor who breaks a treaty. In the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon the curse of darkness is closely followed by a battle against the unfaithful vassal.<sup>107</sup> This same pattern is followed in

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<sup>106</sup>Fensham, "Possible Origin," p. 93. See also Fensham, "Common Trends in Curses," pp. 155-175, and Hillers, pp. 42-79.

<sup>107</sup>Fensham, "Possible Origin," p. 94. Within the description of some of the events associated with the day of the Lord are to be found physical or natural phenomena which have nothing to do with the usual execution of human warfare. These phenomena include the darkening of the sun, moon, and sky, and the presence of earthquakes. These unusual phenomena were regular features of holy

Joel 2:1-5. Though this pattern is not followed in other curse passages it should be pointed out that the concept of darkness has a curse-background. Whether warfare was involved or not, the day of the Lord was a day in which the covenant curses took effect.

In the Ancient Near Eastern curse-materials there are gods who bring about the treaty curses. Thus, Shamash brings darkness, Ninurta war, Adad drought, and Marduk serious punishment.<sup>108</sup> In the Old Testament Yahweh has the power to bring about all the curses of the covenant. The unfaithful in Israel are placed by the prophets in the same position as the enemies. The same curse-material is directed against the treaty breaker and the foreign aggressor. The day of the Lord is a day of both reward and punishment. The innocent are vindicated; the guilty, whoever they are, are punished.

An analysis of the material presented above on the concept of vengeance, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, presents the same elements of vindication and punishment as found in the present study of the day of the Lord in the prophetic corpus. Even such phenomena as war, drought, and other calamities are common to both concepts. The element of covenant relationship is common to both, too. It seems, therefore, that an equation of

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wars, and further underscore the the involvement of deity in the implementation of vengeance.

<sup>108</sup>Wiseman, pp. 61-62.

the two concepts as being one and the same is justified. Yahweh comes on the day of his vengeance to vindicate his covenant people and to punish those who have either broken covenant with him or who are enemies of his people. The prophets sharpened the concept of "the day" and identified some of the accompanying phenomena more precisely.

#### Vengeance in Isaiah

The concept of vengeance is common in the oracles of Isaiah. In 1:24 vengeance is rendered against the enemies of God. In the process of avenging himself on his foes Yahweh cleanses them. Isaiah is the first biblical writer to connect vengeance explicitly with cleansing. Thus, after God has avenged himself Zion becomes a clean and restored place (vss. 25-27). In fact, the enemies in this instance are Israelites who have refused to repent. Two contrasting pictures are painted here--the terrible destruction of the sinners, and the glorious restoration of the righteous (vss. 27-31). Even in this case, however, the goal of vengeance is restoration to covenant faithfulness.

Isa 34:8 brings in the concept of "the day of vengeance." All the evils of Edom are to be avenged on the day of vengeance, the year of recompense. The Lord brings Edom to trial (Heb. *rib* is used here) and takes

his sword to inflict punishment.<sup>109</sup> The words "day" and "year" simply mean an appointed time in which Yahweh will avenge all that has been done against his covenant people. There is no malice on the part of God. Vengeance "is a quality that in God is divine and praiseworthy and in the execution of which God is honored and glorified. Furthermore, it is a day and a year that exists for the cause of Zion."<sup>110</sup> In the act of vengeance God prospers the city of Zion. "Throughout the years Zion has had a legal cause with the heathen nations. Her rights have completely been trampled in the ground. Her case has gone unheard. Now, however, her God intervenes on her behalf."<sup>111</sup> The concept of destruction by fire is introduced by Isaiah into the theme of vengeance.

Isa 35:4 places vengeance in the setting of coming deliverance for the covenant people. Even the fearful of God's people are to look up and rejoice. In fact, there is no mention of what this will do for the enemy. Vengeance is seen as primarily salvation of the covenant community. Even the restoration of the land is included in this description. The day of vengeance is a day of physical and spiritual renewal for the faithful

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<sup>109</sup>R. E. Clements, Isaiah 1-39, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 273.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.



ones.<sup>112</sup> As such, it holds no fear for them.

Isa 47:3 is directed against Babylon, the arch-enemy of Israel. The vivid portrayal of the humiliation and desolation of that city is taken "to a revolting extreme" as an assurance of the deliverance of Israel.<sup>113</sup> The outward pretensions of Babylon are now uncovered and her shame is made plain. Babylon meets one who is more than a match. Israel's deliverance is assured. Verse 4 shows a joyous response from the covenant people as they witness God's vengeance on their enemy. It is this note of rejoicing at the punishment of the enemy that has raised a number of theological concerns. But it must be observed here that Israel's rejoicing is not based on the intensity of the suffering of the enemy, but rather on the might of their covenant Lord, who has prevailed and upheld his covenant promises.<sup>114</sup>

The garments that God puts on reveal an interesting contrast (59:17). On the one hand, he puts on righteousness as an armor and a helmet of salvation. On the other hand, he puts on garments of vengeance and a robe of jealousy. The first two reflect the redemptive aspect of vengeance, while the last two display its

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<sup>112</sup>E. J. Young, The Book of Isaiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 450-451. Even the land which was formerly a desert enjoys renewed life.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

retributive function. It seems evident that the concept of protection (salvation) for the people of God is inseparably linked to that of punishment for their enemies.

In 61:2 "the day of vengeance of our God" forms a parallel to "the year of the LORD's favor." The positive aspect of vengeance comes to the forefront in this passage and the punishment of the enemies fades almost completely out of the picture, as in 35:4. "Year" and "day" occur in parallel relationship elsewhere in Isa 34:8, which we have already noted, and also in 49:8 and 63:4. And as is the case in 34:8, so also here in 61:2 and these other passages (49:8 and 63:4), the reference is not to one particular day or year but to the time when God will manifest his favor for his people and punish their enemies.<sup>115</sup>

The purpose of the proclamation in Isa 61:2 is "to comfort those who mourn." This indicates a context of suffering that needs to be explored further in as much as it brings into focus the meaning of vengeance for those who are suffering. The present unit of thought begins with a grim picture of the apostasy of Israel. There was a general disregard for the sabbath and an empty formalism of outward fasts and ceremonies (58:1-14). The covenant with God had been broken repeatedly. Truth and righteousness were utterly cast down, and there

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 461.

was no justice in the land (59:13-15). On account of these evils God would not deliver his people from oppression and calamity (59:1-2). As a result of their sin the people suffered.

In the midst of their suffering, however, they remembered their God and turned to him in repentance. Isa 59:9-15 presents a corporate confession of sin (vss. 12-15), as a sequel to a vivid description of the gloomy situation (vss. 9-11) which had come about as a result of the nation's state of sin. R. N. Whybray observes that there are elements present in this corporate confession which are parallel to confession passages in the Psalms and the Lamentations. These include the free admission of guilt, as opposed to maintaining one's innocence. The speakers describe their present misery and ascribe it to their own sinfulness.<sup>116</sup>

#### Suffering as a Background to Vengeance

The background of suffering in this unit of thought is of extreme significance for the declaration "the year of the LORD's favor" and "the day of vengeance of our God" in 61:2. The prophet here speaks of the Spirit of the LORD as coming upon him with the purpose of enabling him to proclaim deliverance to the oppressed and

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<sup>116</sup>R. N. Whybray, Isaiah 40-66, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1975), p. 223.

to inspire hope in them (61:1-2). The two expressions "the year of the LORD's favor" and "the day of vengeance of our God" in this Servant song correspond to "a time of favor" and "a day of salvation" in 49:8. The proclaiming of liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison in 61:1 correspond to the call to the prisoners to come forth in 49:9. Thus, this Servant song seems to open and close on a strong note of Yahweh's saving act for those who are in the midst of suffering.

We have already noticed that the expression "those who mourn" is indicative of suffering, but other designations used for those who constitute the target audience of this Servant song also reveal a context of suffering. These people are "the afflicted," "the brokenhearted," "the captives," and "those who are bound," as well as "those who mourn" (61:1-3). Israel's suffering had come as a result of her breaking the covenant with God. The curses of the covenant followed, and the result was that the nation came into desolation. But when Israel turned to God in repentance he reversed their lot. God not only removed the curses, he even brought abundance of blessing (61:4-7; cf. 40:1-2; 49:19-20; and 54:1-4).

The only mention of the enemies is in their new service to Israel. The aliens were to feed the flocks of Israel and to be their plowmen and vinedressers (60:5). In this setting the day of vengeance is not primarily a

day for the devastation of the enemy. Destruction of the enemy was only mentioned as it contributed to a picture of the full deliverance of the covenant people (63:1-6).

We may conclude that in Isaiah vengeance is primarily the deliverance and salvation of the people of God. The year of Yahweh's favor is "a time when Yahweh especially shows his favor to those in distress."<sup>117</sup> As such, the primary direction of the vengeance of God is in behalf of the covenant people. Note that vengeance upon the nations is only pronounced on account of the hateful or aggressive behavior of those nations to God's people. When a nation is punished for its moral depravity apart from persecuting the covenant community, the term "vengeance" does not occur.

The redemptive dimension is uppermost in the mind of the prophet. Even where he pictures the reversal that comes as a result of the wrath of Yahweh against the nations, his main focus is not the devastation of the enemy but the resulting relief that comes to God's people. Isaiah's chief concern is the honor of Yahweh in relation to his perceived lordship over Israel and in the vindication of his people. As Mendenhall points out, "'the day of vengeance' has nothing to do with violent punitive actions against an enemy. The imperium rather is the ground for the events most needed by those who are

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid.

in the greatest misery. . . . [loyal subjects]"<sup>118</sup>

The beautiful description of once-rich Edom as a desolate place inhabited by doleful creatures finds striking parallels in Jeremiah's descriptions of Babylon. This picture is later captured by John in his description of mystical Babylon. It seems that this description is reserved for those powers that stand most decidedly in opposition to the covenant people. These major prophets thus draw a picture against whose backdrop John portrays the persecuted covenant community of Revelation.

#### Vengeance in Jeremiah

There are a number of occurrences of "vengeance" in the book of Jeremiah. These fall into two categories: (1) those occurrences that are directed against the people of Israel; and (2) those that have foreign nations as the target. We begin by examining those passages that refer to punishment of the covenant community.

#### Vengeance on Jeremiah's Enemies

Jer 5:9 is a statement of Yahweh in which he reiterates his determined intention to bring vengeance to the nation of Israel: "Shall not I punish them for these things? says the LORD; and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?" This statement of Yahweh's intention is repeated verbatim in 5:29 and 9:9. In all three

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<sup>118</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 100.

occurrences, indictment is spoken against impenitent Israel, following a catalog of its sins and reference to its persistent covenant-breaking. Israel's sins fall into two classes: covenant-breaking and injustice to members of the covenant community; namely, the poor and the orphans.<sup>119</sup> Here, Jeremiah also draws a contrast between the sovereignty of Yahweh over nature and the utter confusion found among the gods of the nations. On the one hand, Yahweh has set bounds for the land and the seas; on the other hand, the Baal cult has a continual conflict between the restless sea and the god over control of the earth.<sup>120</sup>

In a number of passages, Jeremiah prays that God might avenge him of his adversaries or persecutors (11:20; 15:15; 20:12). Jeremiah's enemies were primarily the princes and other political leaders in Jerusalem who felt threatened by his prophetic oracles. These men not only opposed his messages but even resorted to physical abuse, arrest, and imprisonment. In addition to the official leaders, the men of his own village, Anathoth, plotted to take his life. It was with this sense of rejection by his own people that he called on God as righteous judge to avenge him against his enemies. He requested that God might bring his enemies to court and

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>120</sup>Lawrence Boadt, Old Testament Message (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), 9:50.

start legal proceedings against them.

In this present cluster of usages it is interesting to note that there is no call against foreign nations. Vengeance is pronounced or called for against some members of the covenant community who have become enemies of the prophet--and thus also of Yahweh, who commissioned the prophet.

One usage of *nāqām* by Jeremiah's opponents is reflective of a purely human and vindictive concept of vengeance. They say, "Denounce him! Let us denounce him! . . . Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him" (20:10). However, Jeremiah's response is a call to Yahweh for a just judgment and the resulting vengeance. The contrast is clear. His enemies want to take their own revenge. They make no appeal to Yahweh as the highest authority, or even to the king; Jeremiah, on the other hand, commits his case into the hands of God and waits for God's vengeance (20:12). Biblical vengeance, as in Jeremiah's appeal, is always theocentric. Whenever a man of God calls on God to redress the evil done to himself, it is with the purpose of establishing the reality of God's justice--a justice which vindicates the innocent.

Vengeance Against Israel's  
Enemies

The use of *nāqām* in 46:10, and in chaps. 50-51, has reference to foreign nations who stand in some



antagonistic relationship to Israel. In 46:10 vengeance is pronounced against Egypt. This seems to refer to the defeat of Necho by Nebuchadnezzar. In this instance Yahweh has used one nation (Babylon) to be an instrument of his vengeance upon another (Egypt). The occurrences of *nqm* in chaps. 50-51 anticipate the desolation of Babylon by Medo-Persia. In two passages (50:28; 51:11) the destruction is identified as "the vengeance for his [Yahweh's] temple." This seems to be a parallel expression to that found in the covenant code of Lev 26:25. But here in Jeremiah "the vengeance of his temple" has a direct reference to the destruction and desecration of the Jerusalem Temple by Babylon. As Charles Feinberg has correctly pointed out, "Clearly God is reckoning with Babylon for having burned his temple in her capture of Jerusalem (vs. 28). The escapees from Babylon will announce in Zion that the Lord has avenged the destruction of his temple (cf. 51:11)."<sup>121</sup> To disregard and dishonor Yahweh's temple is to provoke his vengeance.

The significance of Babylon's relationship to the people of God in the Old Testament is of great historical importance, for it was Babylon that led to the demise of Judah. The covenant people were brought to shame as a result of the destruction of their city and of God's

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<sup>121</sup>Charles L. Feinberg, Jeremiah: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 320.

temple. Their political identity was largely erased, and their economic foundations were shaken. But the great sin of Babylon was its defiance of God in the person of his covenant community. It is on the basis of Babylon's treatment of Judah that God makes the treaty maledictions pertaining to the destruction of that ancient power.

### Conclusion

We may conclude that in Jeremiah there are two main usages of *nāqām*:

1. Jeremiah calls for vengeance on his persecutors. This is very similar in spirit to the call by the souls under the altar in the book of Revelation. The background of religious persecution and innocent suffering of the faithful is common to both. In both the call is made by the victim and is addressed to God as the supreme authority. The concept of God as the "righteous judge" is used as part of the appeal in both books.

2. God threatens vengeance against the enemies of his people, most notably Babylon. It is in this usage that the covenant concept emerges as the basis of Yahweh's treatment of the enemy. This usage sheds light on the fate of mystical Babylon in the Revelation. By virtue of his position as covenant-lord, God bound himself with the covenant obligation of avenging his subjects.<sup>122</sup> There is probably a conflation of both usages

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<sup>122</sup>There are some very striking parallels between Jeremiah's maledictions against ancient Babylon and those

in Revelation, for Jeremiah seems to stand as an embodiment of the faithful remnant who cry to God.

#### Vengeance in Ezekiel

Ezek 24:8 has a further occurrence of *nāqām* in the *qal* infinitive. Here, Jerusalem is the object of the vengeance and God is the source of the vengeance. Jerusalem has broken the covenant with Yahweh. As a result, it must must suffer under the vengeance of the covenant. But in the very next chapter (25:12-17), God turns his vengeance on the Edomites for having executed his vengeance on the Israelites. He acknowledges that Israel deserved the punishment it received from Edom, but still he goes on to outline the vengeance that he will render to the Edomites. It appears that the covenant community enjoys preferential treatment and special protection from Yahweh. The enemies of Israel are also Yahweh's enemies. To attack the covenant community is to attack that community's Lord.

#### Vengeance in Daniel

The book of Daniel is particularly rich in its treatment of the theme of vengeance. Although the Hebrew word *nāqām* and its derivatives do not occur even once in the entire book, the theme itself is of great importance and bears a particularly keen resemblance to the same

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of John against mystical Babylon. These parallels are treated in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

theme as addressed in the book of Revelation. It must be remembered that the two books belong to the same literary genre--namely, apocalyptic.<sup>123</sup>

Daniel is set in the historical context of hard times. Judah's political identity and the structures of its religious institutions had been shattered by Babylon. Thus, the book opens in the setting of political and religious upheaval. This setting of the book is of crucial importance to the present theme. Among the captives brought to Babylon were some innocent sufferers who had remained faithful to their God. It is this suffering of the innocent that raised the question of the sovereignty of God and of his attitude to those who suffer.

In the first chapter of Daniel the four Hebrew young men--Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah--represent a faithful remnant who stood for the honor of Yahweh even at personal peril. They were faithful to the covenant terms with respect to diet (Dan 1:8-14) and worship (3:12). But despite their faithfulness they suffered persecution. Thus, the issue of vindication of God's people came to the fore with a "new twist." Formerly, it was the faithless who had suffered for their

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<sup>123</sup>For a treatment of apocalyptic as a literary genre, see among others, C. Rowland, The Open Heaven (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982); Paul D. Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Klaus Koch and Johann M. Schmidt, Apokalyptik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

apostasy; now it was the faithful who suffered. Their sufferings were couched in the determination that come what may, they would be faithful to their Lord.

Joyce G. Baldwin's introductory observation is apropos here:

The predominant message [of Daniel] is that God's people will experience suffering and be threatened with extinction, but that will not be the end of the story because their God is the living and all powerful God who will get glory by vindicating his name and who will save them. . . . From the point of view of an Old Testament writer this assurance of ultimate deliverance was a marvellous revelation . . . to him and to believers who had to go through times of persecution.<sup>124</sup>

Baldwin thus calls attention to the two essential components of the theme of vengeance--namely, suffering and vindication. These components, in fact, play a dominant part in the entire book. Baldwin further points out that this dominant theme is developed on two levels, the earthly political level and the heavenly dimension: "Behind the struggle on earth, however, is a vital conflict taking place at a cosmic level 'in the heavenlies,' and the visions reveal the reality of the fight in which angelic beings have their part."<sup>125</sup>

In the historical portion of the book (chaps. 1-6) we are furnished a series of accounts of how God delivered his servants and thereby vindicated them. (1) He

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<sup>124</sup>Joyce G. Baldwin, Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), pp. 66-67.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

vindicated them in the matter of diet (2:8-14). (2) There was the intervention of God in connection with the king's dream (2:12-28). (3) He delivered them in the golden-colossus crisis (3:19-30). Finally, (4) there was the deliverance of Daniel in the lions' den ordeal (chap. 6).

It is, however, in the setting of the heavenly tribunal of Dan 7, in the prophetic portion of the book, that the theme of vengeance becomes particularly predominant. The fourth beast--and especially, its little horn--is characterized as a persecuting power (7:7, 19-21) which caused great suffering among God's people. Some elements indicate that this was religious persecution: (1) blasphemy is ascribed to the little horn; (2) mention is made of its waging war "against the saints" of the Most High (vs. 21); and (3) it attempts to change times and laws (vs. 25). Thus we may conclude that the cause of suffering and persecution was a religious one.

It is clear that God is the subject of the judgment (7:9-10, 13, 21-22), but who is the object? Is it the saints or is it the little horn? Contextual evidence seems to lean in favor of both the saints and the little horn as being the object of that judgment, but from differing perspectives. In the style of Ancient Near Eastern treaties, the little horn is the aggressor and the saints are the loyal and innocent subjects. The opened books (vs. 10) must have both a record of the

covenant bond and covenant loyalty of God's subjects who have become the object of the little horn's attack, and a record of the persecution and blasphemous words of the aggressor.

A consideration of the verdict of this tribunal seems to indicate that that verdict clears the saints and implicates the little horn (vs. 22). Arthur J. Ferch sees the basis for this verdict as the covenant loyalty of the saints.<sup>126</sup> The verdict was rendered in favor of the saints (vs. 22). The central question was that of the sovereignty of God. The earthly powers had assumed power by their crafty and treacherous dealings, but in God's verdict the kingdom was given to the saints. The saints who had been humiliated and persecuted were delivered and honored while the little horn that had exalted itself and exercised aggressive power was dethroned and destroyed. It is interesting to note these reversals. God as Judge passes a verdict which reverses the judgment of earthly courts and in the process vindicates his loyal subjects. This is at the core of the Biblical concept of vengeance.

The Aramaic expression (w<sup>e</sup>dina y<sup>e</sup>hib l<sup>e</sup>qaddiše) has been variously rendered as "and judgment was given

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<sup>126</sup>Arthur J. Ferch, "The Judgment Scene in Daniel 7", in The Sanctuary and the Atonement, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshar (Washington D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981), p. 167.

to/for/concerning."<sup>127</sup> The weight of evidence seems to favor the interpretation: "and judgment [the verdict] was rendered in favor of the saints."<sup>128</sup> One of the main thrusts of chap. 7 is portrayal of the sovereignty and justice of God. Daniel paints a picture of the heavenly assize as a grand and public process (vss. 9-10). This is meant to underscore the justice and fairness of God's dealings with both friend and foe. The verdict results in the taking away of dominion from the beasts and transferring it to the one like the son of man, and ultimately to the saints (vss. 12-14, 18, 22, 26-27).

The activities of the little horn in chap. 7 are directed primarily against the saints, while in chap. 8 the little horn fights against the Lord of the saints (vs. 11) and against the covenant institutions (vss. 11-13), such as the sanctuary, the truth, and the daily. This power was against both the covenant community and the covenant institutions. It is in the context of God's covenant lordship that his judgment of the beast and the little horn may best be understood. Why does God bring the beasts into judgment? Because they

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<sup>127</sup>John Joseph Owens, "Daniel", Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 6:427; and Arthur Jeffery, "Daniel," The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 6:464-465.

<sup>128</sup>Baldwin, p. 145; Ferch, p. 167; Raymond Hammer, The Book of Daniel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 79; Owens, p. 427; and Jeffery, 6:464-465.



have caused suffering on members of the covenant community. Therefore Yahweh, as Protector of his loyal subjects, must avenge their blood on their enemies. A summary of God's indictment of the beast kingdoms only deals with how they have blasphemed and acted against the covenant community and its institutions, not the sinful practices they engaged in prior to their contact with the covenant people. Here, once again, it is noteworthy that it is in a context of covenantal relationship that the vengeance/vindication concept functions.

The connection between the covenant and judgment in Daniel can further be demonstrated by the stated activities of the king of the North in chap. 11. That king would set his heart against the holy covenant (vs. 28) and take action against the covenant, giving favors to those who forsook the covenant (vs. 30). His forces would profane the temple, take away the daily, and finally set up the abomination of desolation (vs. 31). In spite of his apparent power and triumph over the covenant community and its covenant institutions, the king of the north would have an appointed end (vs. 45).

The appointed end of the evil king is ushered in by the "standing up" of Michael, the great Prince, who brings deliverance and vindication to the people of God (12:1). This heavenly figure appears at crucial times throughout the book of Daniel. He appears to protect the three Hebrew worthies in the fiery furnace (3:24-25). He

comes in the clouds of heaven at the heavenly assize which results in the judgment of the beast kingdoms and the rendering of the verdict in favor of the saints (7:13-14, 18, 22). He comes to confirm the covenant with his people for one week. In the middle of that week he ends sacrifice by his being cut off. The result is that the decreed end of the desolator will be poured out (9:26-27). Finally, he stands up for the ultimate deliverance of his people (12:1-2).

We may note in conclusion that in Daniel's intercessory prayer in chap. 9 the concept of covenant relationship is central. The basis of the prophet's appeal was God's covenant commitment to Israel (9:4).<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Daniel saw the exiled state of the nation as a clear and direct fulfillment of the covenant curses (vengeance of the covenant) made through Moses in Deut 32 (Dan 9:9-14). And in Daniel's appeal for forgiveness, the basis was the covenant institutions and God's covenant name shared by Israel (9:17-19). It is significant, furthermore, that the very sequence established in Deut 32 is also followed here in Dan 9. First comes the vengeance of the covenant against the disloyal community,

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<sup>129</sup>Maxwell, 1:229-239, has a fascinating discussion on the covenant as a basis for judgment. He speaks of covenant promises upon which man's salvation is based. He has coined the expression "kingdom promises" to express this concept. Public judgment is the criterion for justice in the God's dealings with his creation, and God has laid himself to the scrutiny of his community so that his justice may be demonstrated to all.

followed by vengeance against the enemy. Historically, the desolation of Jerusalem and Israel was followed by the judgment of the enemy, resulting in the vindication of the faithful remnant.

We may conclude that in the book of Daniel the concept of vengeance is closely tied to times of crisis for the people of God. At such times the people have appealed to their Lord for help and deliverance. They have passed through much suffering, but at an appointed time God has vindicated them. This vindication has often been mediated by a heavenly being (the Son of Man or Michael). Thus, suffering and vindication are related concepts.

#### Chronological Table of Nāqām

A chronological table showing the distribution of the word **nāqām** and its derivatives in the Old Testament is very helpful at this point. Table 1 indicates the biblical passages in which **nāqām** appears, and the source and the object of that vengeance. In forty-six of the fifty-eight passages where **nāqām** occurs, God is the source of vengeance. In five of the remaining cases, man is the immediate source, but God is the implied ultimate source of vengeance. In another five occurrences **nāqām** describes the action of the enemy, and in these a definite indication of disapproval for such a course of action is indicated. In one usage, **nāqām** is used in a proverb, and describes the action of an angry man, in the

one remaining occurrence, **nāqām** is used as an imperative of prohibition. Thus, according to the biblical data, vengeance is a divine prerogative.

TABLE 1  
USAGES OF **NĀQĀM** IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Text	Source of Vengeance	Object of Vengeance
Gen 4:15	God	Individual
4:24	God	Individual
Exod 21:20	God	Individual
21:21	God	Individual
Lev 19:18	Prohibition	
26:25	God	Israel
Num 31:2	God	Midianites
31:3	God	Midianites
Deut 32:35	God	Nations
32:41	God	Nations
32:43	God	Nations
Josh 10:13	Israel (God)	Amorites
Judg 11:36	God	Ammonites
15:7	Samson	Philistines
16:28	Samson	Philistines
1 Sam 14:24	Saul	Philistines
18:25	Saul	Philistines
24:12	God	Saul
2 Sam 4:8	God	Saul's son
22:48	God	Nations
Ps 8:2	Enemy	Israel
18:47	God	Enemies
44:16	Enemy	Israel
58:10	God	Enemies
79:10	God	Enemies
94:1	God	Enemies
99:8	God	Israel
149:7	God	Nations
Prov 6:34	Man	Enemy
Mic 5:15	God	Nations
Nah 1:2	God	Nations
2 Kgs 9:7	God	Ahab's family
Isa 1:24	God	Nations
34:8	God	Nations

TABLE 1--Continued

Text	Source of Vengeance	Object of Vengeance
Isa 35:4	God	?
47:3	God	Babylon
59:17	God	Nations
61:2	God	?
63:4	God	Nations
Jer 5:9	God	Enemies
5:29	God	Enemies
9:9	God	Enemies
11:20	God	Enemies
15:15	God	Enemies
20:10	God	Enemies
20:12	God	Enemies
46:10	God	Egypt
50:15	God	Babylon
50:28	God	Babylon
51:6	God	Babylon
51:11	God	Babylon
51:36	God	Babylon
Lam 3:60	Enemy	Israel
Ezek 24:8	God	Babylon
25:12	Edom	Israel
25:15	Philistines	Israel
25:17	God	Nations
Esth 8:13	Jews	Persians

#### Vengeance in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The concept of vengeance is present in the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and follows Old Testament usage. In a number of passages Gentiles sought to avenge themselves on Israel (1 Macc 3:15; 6:22; Jdt 1:12; 2:1). The Maccabean revolt was seen as Israel's avenging itself against the Gentile enemy--as revealed, for example, in the death-bed speech of Mattathias (1

Macc 2:67). Jonathan and Simon were seen as avenging the blood of their brother (1 Macc 9:42). There is also an instance of a priest who prayed that God might avenge himself against Nicanor for threatening to destroy the temple (1 Macc 7:38)--a prayer reminiscent of Ps 79:10. The promise of God to avenge the blood or souls of the righteous (1 Macc 2:67) expresses the same concept as that in Deut 32:43 and 2 Kgs 9:7.

A further example of the concept of vengeance in the Apocrypha is in Jdt 16:17, where God pronounced vengeance on the nations who rose up against his people. The author of Sirach even describes the agents used as part of the vengeance against foreign enemies. The Almighty will use fire, worms, hail, sword, winds, and other natural phenomena on them (Sir 39:28-29), and they will weep with pain for evermore.<sup>130</sup> The time to prepare for vengeance is now (Sir 18:24). Vengeance awaits the arrogant (Sir 27:28). The giving of the covenant on Horeb was viewed as "the judgments of vengeance" (Sir 48:7). Finally, taking of personal vengeance was forbidden: "He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin"

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<sup>130</sup>All quotations from the Apocrypha are from the Jerusalem Bible (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968). As will soon be noticed, the Old Testament Apocrypha echoed the Old Testament. The writers tried to express the prophetic voice of the ancient faith. Consequently, there are no great departures from the old Israelite traditions.

(Sir 28:1).<sup>131</sup> This is in keeping with Old Testament.

The apocalyptic fourth book of Ezra wrestles, with pathos, with the question of why has God delivered his people into the hands of their enemies.<sup>132</sup> What puzzles the author is that Yahweh should permit the oppressor to prosper while Israel (who is not more wicked than the enemy) should be left to perish (3:30, 32). His ultimate answer is that the ways of the Lord are inscrutable (4:1-12). Thus, 4 Ezra raises the same apocalyptic question found in Rev 6:9-11. The author puzzles: "How long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil?" (4:33). The souls of the righteous also ask: "How long are we to remain here [in the chambers of death]? And when will come the harvest of our reward?" (4:35). The answer of the archangel is, "When the number of those like yourselves is completed; . . . and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled" (4:36-37).

Second Baruch, too, looks forward to the day of vengeance and vindication when God's name and the faithful will be cleared (5:2; 48:27; 85:9). There is a

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<sup>131</sup>The immediate passage deals with the motif of forgiveness among the covenant community. He who will not forgive his neighbor cannot expect to receive the same from God. Sirach 28:1-9 reads much like Matt 6:12-15.

<sup>132</sup>All quotations from Jewish apocalyptic documents are from James H. Charlesworth, ed. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1983).

time set for such a judgment (83:2-7; 22:1-8), and the number of the righteous must first be fulfilled (23:4-5).

First Enoch contains in an even higher pitch the same cry for vengeance. Three of the chief angels observe that there was much blood being shed and much oppression on the earth. The souls of men are sending their plea for judgment before God. In the appeal, God is referred to as "Lord of the potentates," "Lord of lords," and "God of gods" (9:1-4, 10). It is noteworthy that the plea is couched in the setting of the sovereignty of Yahweh. The cry is seen as an extension of the cry of Abel against Cain and his descendants (22:5-7). In the Enoch literature there is, moreover, a call for vengeance that closely approximates the call in Rev 6:10 (cf. 1 Enoch 47:1-4). In Enoch, however, the souls do not stop their plea until it is heard.

Apparently, the apocrypha do not set new directions in the theology of vengeance. Vengeance is based on the covenant, and the covenant community cries to God for vindication. God is the protector of the covenant community. He binds himself by covenant agreement to vindicate his people. Blood and suffering are the springboard from which the plea of the saints rises to God, and the covenant is its basis. Apocalyptic literature adds a note of persistence and urgency to this call, as the questions of an appointed time and of a set number come to the fore.



Vengeance at Qumran

At Qumran, vengeance was viewed as God's prerogative. In the Damascus Document it is treated twice.<sup>133</sup> First, it appears in a commentary on Lev 19:18 ("You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your people"). "Any member of the covenant" who accuses his companion without first rebuking him before witnesses, denounces him, or reports him to the elders to make him look contemptible is counted as taking vengeance into his own hands (9:2-5). The second occurrence is in part of a description of the princes of Judah who had become traitors and had taken vengeance against their brothers (8:4-5).

The Qumran documents view God as being avenged in the final war. This may be seen from the names on the war trumpets in the War Scroll, "Formations of the Divisions of God for the Vengeance of his wrath on the Sons of Darkness," and "Reminder of Vengeance in God's Appointed Time" (1QM 3:6-7). The inscription on one of the battle standards reads, "Vengeance of God" (1QM 4:12). A hymn at the end of the Manual of Discipline reads, "I will not grapple with the men of perdition until the Day of Revenge" (1QS 10:19). The Levites

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<sup>133</sup>Quotations from the Qumran documents are all from Geza Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls in English (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970).

(guardians of the covenant) are to curse the men of Belial, who are to be delivered over to vengeance (1QS 2:6,9).

Vengeance remains a divine prerogative in the Qumram literature and is reserved for the final war. Moreover, the covenant plays a key role in the protection of the members of the community, both from their brethren and from the final war of vengeance.

#### Vengeance in the New Testament

There are fourteen occurrences in the New Testament of the Greek word *ekdikeō*, "avenge." The relevant passages in the Gospels are all found in Luke. We begin our survey with a passage that makes an interesting omission. In the inaugural address of Jesus recorded in Luke 4:16-19, the original Isaiah passage ended with "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa 61:1-2), omitted in Luke. Joachim Jeremias has argued that Jesus' omission of the "vengeance" phrase was an indication that he meant to detach the nationalistic idea of vengeance from the idea of redemption.<sup>134</sup> The point of detachment is a valid one, but one wonders whether the reason for omission was not the fact that vengeance belonged, not to the first advent, but to the second. Mendenhall thinks, in a different vein, that "the year of the Lord's favor"

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<sup>134</sup>Joachim Jeremias, Jesus' Promise to the Nations (London: SMC Press, 1958), pp. 41-46.

is equivalent to "the day of vengeance of our God," since a primary meaning of vengeance is deliverance.<sup>135</sup> Judaism had evidently come to misapply the whole vengeance concept in a narrow, divisive, and nationalistic sense, whereas Jesus did not thus distort the true biblical idea of vengeance.

The parable of the importunate widow (18:1-8) has an Old Testament flavor to it, "Vindicate me against my adversary" (vs. 3). The passage brings out the key Old Testament ideas--namely, that the saints (or their blood) cry out day and night, and that God will avenge them. In the expression "his elect," the covenant relationship is implied, for it was by the covenant that the "elect" had become his people and he had become their God (Jer 31:31-34).

Jesus used the expression "days of vengeance" in Luke 21:22 with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, pointing out that the fall of that city was a fulfillment of the threat of vengeance (the vengeance of the covenant) made through Moses (in Lev 26 and Deut 32). It is clear from this text, as well as from the parable of the importunate widow, that Jesus did not do away with biblical vengeance.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," p. 102. In this sense, there would be an intended direct parallelism of thought.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-103.

Vengeance in Rom 12:19-21

In a different vein, the Pauline admonition, in Rom 12:19-21, to leave vengeance in the hands of God has raised a question because of the accompanying reference to the heaping of coals of fire on the enemy's head. Krister Stendahl considers this as apparently an attitude of rejection and passive hate. He traces this attitude back to Qumran, where the ethic was neither to return evil for evil nor to turn away anger from the enemy. With resolute determination the Qumranite says, "But my anger I will not turn away from the men of deceit, and I will not be content until he [God] has established judgment" (1QS 10:17-20).<sup>137</sup> (There is this linking of hate and non-retaliation in the Qumran ethic.)

What then, is the Pauline ethic revealed in Rom 12:19 as it relates to vengeance? Stendahl concludes that Paul is in essential agreement with Qumran. The Pauline ethic (namely, deferring to God's impending wrath), says Stendahl, "is rather seen as the right attitude in an unfriendly world, and it is right and beyond human calculation since it is congruous to the attitude of God."<sup>138</sup> Stendahl's thesis does not seem to fit into the larger Pauline ethic of love.

The point of this investigation is not to discuss

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<sup>137</sup>Krister Stendahl, "Hate, Non-Retaliation, and Love," The Harvard Theological Review 60 (1962):343-355.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 355.

the Pauline ethic per se, but to discover whether there was room in it for divine vengeance, and what constituted that vengeance. Some points stand out in this passage:

1. The Christian should not avenge himself (vs. 19)
2. Vengeance must be left in the hands of God (vs. 19)
3. God claims vengeance as his, and he promises to repay (vs. 19)
4. The Christian response to evil treatment is always to be good deeds (vs. 20)
5. Such a response results in the heaping of burning coals on the enemy (vs. 20)
6. The Christian must always confront evil with good (vs. 21), for this is God's example (Matt 5:44-48)

William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam favor the probability of "burning coals" meaning "pangs of repentance." They see this as the only interpretation that takes seriously the biblical ethic of loving forgiveness. Thus, they reject the equating of "burning coals" to the fires of God's final vengeance for this would impute an untenable motive to Christlike Christians.<sup>139</sup> John A. Witmer takes a similar position and refers to the Egyptian repentance-rite of carrying a pan of burning charcoal on the head as a possible background for the

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<sup>139</sup>William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), pp. 364-365.

passage.<sup>140</sup> But is this really Paul's background?

One problem in the passage is the identification of "the wrath" to which the Christian is to give place. Several views have been advanced. One is that the wrath is that of the adversary. But the wrath of the enemy does not seem to be a contemplated factor in this urge to vengeful retaliation. The wrath of the enemy is not discussed at all in this passage. A second view is that it is the wrath of the wronged Christian that is intended in this passage. But this would be in direct contradiction to Eph 4:27. A third view sees this as the wrath of the civil magistrate mentioned in Rom 13:4-5 in connection with the execution of justice against wrongdoers. This would have some contextual support, but lacks conclusive evidence. A fourth view is that it is the wrath of God that is referred to here.<sup>141</sup> Paul's use of "wrath" or "the wrath" is almost exclusively the wrath of God (Rom 2:5,8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; etc.). In all these other passages it is quite clear that Paul keeps a balance between the love and wrath of God. Indeed, it is because of this very balance that Christians need not take vengeance for themselves.

Most interpreters take the position that "the

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<sup>140</sup>John A. Witmer, The Bible Knowledge Commentary (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), p. 490.

<sup>141</sup>John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 140-141.

coals of fire" are the pangs of remorse or repentance. The interesting thing is that many of them base this on "commonly held explanations."<sup>142</sup> A survey of studies done on the background passage, Prov 25:21-22, shows that even here scholarship is widely divided on the meanings--remorse, repentance, and retribution.<sup>143</sup> It seems, then, that one needs to evaluate the "notorious crux interpretum"<sup>144</sup> (Rom 12:19-21) in the light of Paul's line of thought and the overall love ethic of the New Testament.

As one examines Rom 12:14-21, the allusions to the Sermon on the Mount are obvious. Dodd observes that vs. 21 forms a summary of that Sermon and crystallizes the New Testament teaching on non-resistance.<sup>145</sup> The concept of conquering through suffering is to be found in Jesus' injunction to pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44), to turn the other cheek to one who smites you (vs. 39), to go a second mile, and to give over your cloak to

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<sup>142</sup>Among those who hold this view are Sanday and Headlam, Witmer, Murray. C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), pp. 200-201, is not sure that this represents the original meaning of Prov 25:22, but concludes that it renders accurately Paul's meaning. Even Luther, following Augustine, espoused this view. See Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 465-467.

<sup>143</sup>See William Klassen, "Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?" New Testament Studies 9 (1962-63):337-350, for a summary of major attempts at exegesis of this passage.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>145</sup>Dodd, p. 201.

one who takes away your coat (vss. 40-41). The book of Revelation also presents the Lamb as one who triumphs through suffering (Rev 5:6-10). Thus the Christian is to overcome evil by fighting it back with good.

One thing is noticeably absent in the passages just mentioned, as well as in Rom 12:14-21. There is no explicit reference to a resulting repentance of the enemy.<sup>146</sup> The result of the Christian's response is obviously not the primary concern here. Paul's chief concern, then, was not the conversion of the enemy, but the believer's proper ethical response to persecution and wrong-doing. It seems to me that Stendahl is close to the correct meaning of the text.

The issue raised by this interpretation is that of the motivation for good works on the believer's part. Does he feed the enemy so as to pile up higher the forthcoming vengeance? The New Testament provides no other motivation for good deeds than love. The Christian does not draw love from man in order to give it to man. Rather, he draws from Christ so as to give it unconditionally to all mankind. The results of non-retaliation and loving deeds, whether vengeance or repentance, are not the Christian's chief responsibility.

Jesus offered forgiveness even to those who did

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<sup>146</sup>One possible exception is 1 Cor 7:13-17), but even here we only find a parallel thought.



not accept it. He and Stephen both prayed for the forgiveness of their persecutors (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). The believer cannot operate from hate, only from love, knowing that God, as sovereign Lord, avenges his people. In his gracious response to the enemy, the Christian wishes and hopes for the enemy's conversion and salvation. But both Jesus and Paul draw the line between what the believer must do and what he must leave to God. The believer treats his enemy well, precisely because he believes in the righteousness of God and lives his life in an atmosphere of forgiveness. The question of divine vengeance has to do with the implications of covenant lordship in a moral universe, not with the human desire for revenge and retaliation for injury suffered.

One must note that part of Paul's quotation is from Deut 32:35, a passage which underscores God's retribution against the Israelites and later against the enemies of Israel. Paul is much more indebted to the Old Testament backgrounds than to Egyptian practices of symbolically carrying a pan of coals on one's head as a sign of repentance. But it may be that his admonition was primarily a pragmatic ethic for the believer in a hostile world. Perhaps it is not a question of pangs of remorse, repentance, or vengeance. After all, vengeance is deliverance to the penitent and retribution to the impenitent. For Paul, then, vengeance is a divine attribute and a divine prerogative. If coals of fire are to come

upon the head of the enemy, it is God who places them there, and in so doing he is carrying out his appropriate responsibility. It appears that Paul has not added materially to the Old Testament concept of vengeance, apart from bringing in the eschatological dimension ("Rejoice in your hope," vs. 12).

The same passage from the song of Moses (Deut 32:35-36) is also quoted in Heb 10:30. The focus here is not vengeance against the enemy, but vengeance against the covenant people who have "profaned the blood of the covenant." The strong association of covenant with vengeance is (as we have seen) quite characteristic of the Old Testament.<sup>147</sup> In Deuteronomy the statement is an assurance that God will vindicate his people against their enemies. The same thrust is evident in Rom 12:19. But in Heb 10:30 the focus is the certainty of vengeance on those who become disloyal to their covenant Lord. It is significant that the author here refers not to the old covenant, but to the new covenant. It is those who break their new-covenant relationship by spurning the Son of God (10:29) who become objects of covenant vengeance. As Theodore H. Robinson points out, the gospel essentially has a serious and fearful side. It is good news, but it is also terrible news. It brings deliverance to the one who accepts it, but retribution to the one who ultimately

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<sup>147</sup>F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 262-263.

rejects it.<sup>148</sup> Barclay notes that it is not merely the breaking of law, but breaking with Jesus that elicits such a terrible outpouring of vengeance on those who once were God's people.<sup>149</sup>

For the writer of Hebrews, sin had become doubly serious because of the knowledge of God's will which Jesus had brought to light. Thus, if apostasy under the dim revelation of the old covenant was punishable by death, how much more so the apostasy that enters under Christ's new covenant revelation. "At the heart of Christianity there remains forever a threat. To remove that threat is to emasculate the faith. . . . No man can evade the fact that in the end judgment comes."<sup>150</sup>

Other New Testament passages that deal with the concept of vengeance make a contribution similar to that made by the Old Testament prophets, with vengeance set in an eschatological context. Many of the parables of Jesus present the last day as a day of vengeance and vindication. In the same category are the frequent warnings of Jesus which conclude with portrayals of the end-time day of judgment in which there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus' appeals for salvation often

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<sup>148</sup>Theodore H. Robinson, The Epistle to the Hebrews (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), pp. 148-149.

<sup>149</sup>William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 123-126.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

included mention of a relationship (covenant) with him; those whom he does not know will be the objects of his vengeance (Matt 25:11-13).

The eschatological day of vengeance in the Gospels is set forth as both a day of reward for the saints and of retribution for the wicked. Luke brings in the social classification of the righteous poor and the self-sufficient rich to show their contrasting positions in the day of vengeance (Luke 16:19-31). Jesus and the Apostles emphasized the need for moral/spiritual preparation for the end-time vengeance.

#### Summary

Vengeance is a common concept in Ancient Near Eastern treaties. It was the duty of the suzerain to protect his loyal subjects and to punish the disloyal. When under threat by a foreign aggressor, the vassal could call for, and expect, exercise of vengeance on the part of the suzerain. This general meaning of vengeance is also reflected in the biblical concept.

In the Old Testament, Israel became the dominion of Yahweh through the covenant. God, as the supreme authority, undertook to protect the interests of his people and to punish their enemies. This was explicitly stated in the covenant with Abraham (Gen 12). The holy wars of the Old Testament and the unusual natural phenomena were part of this vengeance.

God is the only legitimate source of vengeance. At times he has delegated it to man, but still he is its source. Thus, there is no room for vindictiveness in the Old Testament. Any self-styled vengeance by man is contrary to the ethic of love. The Old Testament avenger of blood was empowered and regulated by God to maintain a measure of justice in a loosely structured society.

The prophets clearly indicate that vengeance has both redemptive and retributive dimensions. The day of light and rejoicing for the remnant is a day of darkness for the enemy. Daniel, in particular, reveals a background of severe suffering as the locus of divine vengeance. In the great heavenly assize God will publicly review and overturn the unjust judgments of persecuting earthly powers, and in the process he will vindicate his people. The ultimate vindication will be the giving of the Kingdom to the saints of the Most High. The call for vengeance is repeated a number of times, "How long. . . ?" The answer is always wrapped up in the activities of the Son of Man.

The Apocrypha and non-canonical apocalyptic documents merely heighten the concern and the call for vengeance. There is no radical departure from the Old Testament view. The motive for calling for vengeance gets a radical twist in the Qumran corpus, however, where hate is the basis for non-retaliation.

The New Testament does not add materially to the Old Testament concept. A heightened feature is the eschatological locus for divine vengeance. The elements of reward and retribution are still equally present. It is with this rich background that we approach the theme of vengeance in the two key passages of Revelation.

### CHAPTER III

#### PERSECUTION AND SUFFERING AS THE CONTEXT FOR THE CALL FOR VENGEANCE AND VINDICATION

##### Introduction

An investigation of the concept of vengeance and its usage in the Ancient Near East has revealed that this concept often occurs in the context of suffering brought on by an aggressor.<sup>1</sup> Very often the aggressor was a foreign enemy who came to exercise illegitimate power or in some way to cause suffering on another. In the setting of Ancient Near Eastern treaties it was the duty of the great king to protect his loyal vassals.<sup>2</sup> This background of suffering and the protection clauses can be observed in the Old Testament, too. When Israel suffered at the hands of its enemies and called on Yahweh to deliver, he would avenge the blood/suffering of his covenant people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fensham, "Clauses of Protection," pp. 135-138. See also Mendenhall, "Vengeance of Yahweh," pp. 77-82, for a detailed discussion of this theme in the Amarna letters.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, "Clauses of Protection," pp. 135-138.

<sup>3</sup>Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction," pp. 1-9. Fensham has demonstrated that these protection clauses occurred not only in Old Testament legal materials, but

The present chapter investigates the evidences for the presence of persecution in the New Testament era, with particular reference to the book of Revelation. The purpose of such an investigation is to establish the socio-political atmosphere that prevailed for both the author and the readers of this book. Why are there such frequent allusions to the blood of the saints? Why is there such a sense of urgency in the whole book? Is this book, indeed, a tract for hard times? This chapter takes the form of a brief survey rather than attempting an exhaustive treatment of the data, inasmuch as for our purpose only an overview of the general contours and nature of the persecution setting is needed.

#### Definition of Persecution

The Greek verb *diōkō* is translated "run after" and "pursue," as well as "persecute." *Ekdiōkō* means "drive away," "persecute severely," while *katadiōkō* means "search for" or "hunt for." The noun *diogmos* is translated "persecution." In Classical Greek literature *diōkō* is probably linked with the Homeric *deimai* "flee," and there it means literally "to chase," "pursue," "run

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also in more general relationships. In a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy of The Johns Hopkins University, and now published by the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Hillers demonstrated that the treaty curses in the Ancient Near East are equivalent to vengeance in the Old Testament prophets. See his Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets for a full discussion.



after," "drive away." It was used figuratively for "to pursue something zealously," "prosecute."<sup>4</sup> It includes the general idea of harassing, molesting, or causing to get into trouble. Basic to this concept is the element of hostility as its motive.<sup>5</sup>

In the LXX diōkō, along with ekdiōkō and kata-diōkō, is primarily used of pursuit by hostile soldiers (Exod 15:9), or pursuit by anyone with hostile intentions (Gen 31:23). It is frequently used in a broader sense to refer to any acts or circumstances that cause suffering (Ps 7:1; Jer 15:15; 20:11).

It is noteworthy that the idea of prosecuting is included in the concept of persecution. Jesus connected the idea of being persecuted with being brought before rulers and being arraigned for one's witness (Matt 10:17-19; Luke 21:12-17). This background of a legal process against Christians has a bearing on the calls for vengeance in Revelation.

#### Persecution in the Old Testament

The first human death recorded in the Old Testament was a result of religious persecution. Abel died at the hands of Cain, his brother, because of religious differences (Gen 4:5-8). The enslavement of Joseph was

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<sup>4</sup>G. Ebel, "Persecution," The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (1978), 2:805-806.

<sup>5</sup>J. H. Thayer, "diōkō," The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (1979), p. 153.

also a form of persecution (Gen 37:23). Israel was subjected to persecution in the form of enslavement and the killing of baby boys (Exod 1:10-22). Once in Palestine, the Israelites were repeatedly attacked by their neighbors on account of their land and their possessions.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the occurrences of the concept of vengeance in the Old Testament are set in the context of the oppression and suffering of Israel. This is reflected in the song of Moses (Deut 32), for in this song God allows foreign nations to defeat Israel in war and to bring much suffering and death among the covenant community. In the midst of this suffering Israel turns to God in repentance and cries for deliverance. Yahweh responds in covenant-love and avenges the blood of his servants (32:42-43). Divine vengeance, in the sense of deliverance of God's people, comes in response to suffering.

Some Old Testament prophets present classic examples of suffering persecution. Jezebel killed many of the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:4,13) and later tried to do the same to Elijah (1 Kgs 19:1-14). Jeremiah records the killing of the prophet Uriah by Jehoiakim,

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<sup>6</sup>While the raids into Israel's territory by its neighbors were for obtaining land and material possessions, such confrontations were considered as religious issues, for, after all, the land and material prosperity were bound up with the covenant with Yahweh. Besides, faithfulness to the covenant would ensure Israel of victory in every battle, for Yahweh would fight for it. It is because of these religio/politico/social interconnections that wars against Israel are seen as persecution.

king of Judah (Jer 26:20-23), and the chronicler reports the murder of Zachariah ben Jehoiada, a prophet, by King Joash (2 Chr 24:17-22). Jeremiah was subjected to mockings, beatings, imprisonment, and other forms of persecution (20:2; 37:15; 38:1-6). In the Old Testament the persecution of prophets had come to be seen as a regular reality of Israel's history (Jer 7:25-26; 25:4; Lam 2:20; Neh 9:26). The New Testament repeatedly refers to the persecution of the prophets in the Old Testament (Matt 23:29-36; Mark 12:1-12; Acts 7:52; Heb 11:36-38).<sup>7</sup>

A comparison of Israel's troubles and deliverances, and the persecution of the prophets brings to light a clear set of sequences which is of vital importance to the understanding of the concept of vengeance as it is articulated in the book of Revelation. For Israel the sequence is as follows:

1. Covenant-breaking by Israel
2. Vengeance of the covenant (Israel's blood is shed.) This involves Israel's defeat, persecution, and oppression by foreign powers who are temporarily victorious.
3. Repentance and call for deliverance
4. Vengeance of Yahweh on the enemy (enemy's blood is shed on account of Israel's blood)

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<sup>7</sup>See a brief but illuminating discussion in William C. Weinrich, Spirit and Martyrdom (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 1-11.

For the prophets the sequence was similar but different in one respect--there was no covenant breaking. With respect to the persecution of the prophets, the sequence is as follows:

1. Giving of God's message (witness)
2. Persecution on account of righteousness
3. Call for vengeance (Jer 20:12; Dan 3:17)
4. Implied or stated promise of vengeance

It is noteworthy that while there are slight but consequential differences in the sequences, the divine response to both calls is the same--the Lord avenges the blood of his people (Deut 32:41-43; 2 Kgs 9:7). One point is clear; the Lord will rescue the needy who cry out to him. He will rescue them from violence and oppression, "for precious in the sight of the LORD is the blood/death of his saints" (Ps 72:12-14; 116:15).

#### Persecution in the New Testament Era

Along with references to the persecution of the prophets, Jesus warned his disciples of impending tribulation. He repeatedly stressed the price believers were to pay for following him (Matt 5:11,44; Mark 4:17; Luke 11:49; 21:12). Suffering was to be part of the experience of every believer who faithfully bore witness to the gospel. Jesus drew attention to his imminent suffering and death as an expected pattern for the disciples (John 15:18-21).

### Legal Basis for Persecution

It is interesting to note that in the predictions of Jesus the persecution was to take a legal form (Matt 10:17-20). Although the priests accused Jesus of blasphemy, they charged him with subversion before Pilate (John 19:12). Thus, while the Jews wanted to kill him for religious reasons, they needed some other charge that would provide a form of legality to their action. As W. S. Reid has pointed out, this legal process became a pattern for the persecution of Christians.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus was first arraigned before the Sanhedrin and eventually before a Roman governor (John 18:12-19:16). As Reid notes, much of the legal action taken in Jesus' trial "was illegal according to both Jewish and Roman law."<sup>9</sup> Reid further observes that "this [the unjust legal process] also characterized much of the Early Church's experience of persecution."<sup>10</sup>

### The Church in Jerusalem

After Christ's crucifixion the disciples had at first hidden themselves behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. On the day of Pentecost a new boldness came over the disciples and they went forth to

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<sup>8</sup>W. S. Reid, "Persecution," The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, (1975), 4:705.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

witness with conviction (Acts 2). This resulted in persecution (Acts 4). The Church in Jerusalem faced its greatest opposition and persecution from Judaism. The first recorded incident was the arrest and trial of John and Peter before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4).<sup>11</sup> On later occasions the disciples were beaten and imprisoned (5:18,40). The seizure, trial, and execution of Stephen, and the beheading of James by Herod (Acts 12) were part of a growing religio-political tendency. With the death of Stephen, there followed a more general and systematic persecution of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

In the concerted persecution that followed, many men and women were imprisoned, while others sought refuge in flight. Luke records that Saul "was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). The purpose of bringing Christians to Jerusalem (22:5) was to have them tried by the Sanhedrin, with a view to passing the condemnatory verdict. Luke also mentions that when Herod Agrippa I killed James and struck some

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<sup>11</sup>It is interesting to note that the same Jewish officers, Annas and Caiaphas, who had arraigned Jesus, presided over the trial of Peter and John. Again they were faced with what to do with the prisoners in light of the favorable attitude of the populace. The populace continued to play an important role (for or against) in the persecution of the Church.

<sup>12</sup>Up to this point the persecution of the Church had been largely directed against vocal leaders. It was spasmodic (Reid, p. 705) and had not resulted in death. But at this time Saul came into the picture and organized persecution into a systematic enterprise (Acts 8).

blows against Church leaders, his action "pleased the Jews" (Acts 12:3). This implies that the general attitude of the populace was hostility to the Christians.<sup>13</sup>

#### Persecution in the Apostolic Church

Paul and his companions suffered much persecution at the hands of both Jewish opponents and Roman authorities. The book of Acts reports a number of incidents in which this occurred. Paul often had to flee for his life (Acts 9:23-25, 29-30). In Paul's missionary journeys, persecution often arose at the instigation of the Jews (Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 21:27-36). Even his first trial was before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:10). But these Jewish stirrings often led to the Roman court. It was Jewish accusations that finally led Paul to Rome, but it was a Roman Emperor who ultimately condemned and executed Paul.

The fact that the persecution of Christians was so often associated with a legal process that pronounced a condemnatory verdict on them underscores the relevance of the call for a retrial by a judge who is holy and

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<sup>13</sup>Perhaps the most decisive point of separation between Christianity and Judaism came about at the time of revolt of the Jewish nation against Roman authority in Jerusalem. At that time Christians did not fight side by side with fellow Jews, but, following Christ's counsel, left the city and fled to safety. This move was seen by fellow Jews as a demonstration of an unpatriotic spirit. See F. W. Beare, "Persecution," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (1962), 3:736.

true. In this context, the call for vengeance by the souls under altar is an appeal to a higher court, in the face of a gross miscarriage of justice that resulted in their condemnation and death.

#### Persecution by Roman Authorities

As we have seen, during the early period the Church had to contend with popular hostility, but seldom with police measures. On most occasions the Roman administrators acted for the protection of Christians against mob violence.<sup>14</sup> Roman policy allowed freedom to local religions as long as these did not threaten the Pax Romana or undermine state religion.<sup>15</sup> But when it became clear that Christianity presented another lordship and was prone to cause popular riots, Roman policy began to become more restrictive and hostile.<sup>16</sup>

Our primary sources for this period are the book of Acts and the Pauline Letters. We have already surveyed the book of Acts in connection with the experience of the Jerusalem Church and that of Paul and his

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<sup>14</sup>Beare, pp. 736-737. The book of Acts shows this to have happened frequently (19:35; 21:31-33; etc).

<sup>15</sup>L. H. Canfield, Early Persecutions of the Christians (New York: Columbia University, 1913), p. 18. See also J. Marquardt, Romische Staatsverwaltung, vol 3 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel 1885).

<sup>16</sup>The frequent riots instigated by Jewish opponents against Christians in many cities seem to have predisposed Roman authorities against Christianity. Legislation against it was only a small step away.



companions. We now turn to the Epistles.

To Paul, no less than to other early Christians, the experience of persecution was an existential reality. Frequently, he referred to his sufferings which were precipitated by his apostolic mission. "No one should be shaken by these afflictions. . . for, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation" (1 Thess 3:3-4).<sup>17</sup> Paul speaks of his own sufferings most extensively in 2 Corinthians. He faced opposition from those he sarcastically called "superlative apostles" (2 Cor 11:5; 12:11). These "apostles" never physically persecuted Paul, but the intense mental agony he experienced as a result of their denial of his spiritual gift was a form of persecution.

In 2 Cor 5:17-6:10 he linked his sufferings to the suffering of Christ. Paul saw his life as both a continual situation of death and a continual manifestation of the life of Jesus, characterized, as it was, by suffering (2 Cor 4:8-10). He spoke of the beatings and stoning at the hands of both Roman authorities and Jewish opponents (2 Cor 11:24-25). The prison letters are a further evidence of the personal suffering of the apostle. His last letter to Timothy showed his impending execution. Again, the importance of the legal process

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<sup>17</sup>The book of 1 Thessalonians is considered to be possibly the earliest New Testament document. It is interesting that so early in the life of the Gentile Church persecution had become a reality.

ending in a condemnatory verdict must not be overlooked, and we need to examine a bit further the general experience of the Apostolic Church.

The Thessalonian congregation had had their share of persecution, for they had "received the word in much affliction" (1 Thess 1:6). Perhaps this has reference to the problems caused by the stirrings of unbelieving Jews at the time of Paul's first visit to the city (Acts 17:5-9).<sup>18</sup> This congregation must have suffered persecution for a rather long time, for even in the second letter, Paul still makes reference to their suffering. He comforts them with the hope of the vengeance of God, who would avenge all who had suffered and would bring them rest (1 Thess 1:5-10).

Peter's community, too, must have suffered persecution. In his first epistle he uses the innocent sufferings of Christ as a ground for the hortatory sections (1:18-21; 2:21-25; 3:18-4:1, 13). He wishes to set forth Jesus as the great pattern of suffering and admonishes believers to follow his example. In 1 Pet 4:12-13 he acknowledges that the believers were passing through persecution ("Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you") and urges

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<sup>18</sup>This letter was written from Corinth while Paul was still on the same missionary journey. Memories of the Jewish resistance and the troubles that came upon Jason and other believers were still fresh in his mind.

them to see it as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

In Peter's conclusion to his first letter, he reminds his hearers that persecution is not unique to them. He wants them to know "that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world." God is mindful of their suffering and will restore and establish them in the end (5:9-10). Even Peter's use of the name "Babylon" (5:13) is seen as a veiled reference to Rome as a persecuting power.<sup>19</sup> In his opening paragraph the apostle indicated his intended audience as being scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This gives an indication of the extent of the persecution.

It is significant that Peter's message of impending judgment comes in the context of suffering believers (1 Pet 4:12-19). Thus, while judgment must begin at the household of God, its greatest terror comes upon those who are outside that relationship. Judgment and covenant are closely linked concepts. Peter concludes this section with a reference to the concept of vengeance:

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<sup>19</sup>Alfred Wikenhauser, New Testament Introduction (New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), pp. 506-507. "Babylon" was the pseudonym for Rome used by both Jews and Christians. As a symbolic name it represented the capital of the Roman Empire as the enemy of God's people. This was the view also of the Early Church (Eusebius H.E. 2.15.2); and it is so used in the apocalyptic literature, in Baruch 67:7 ("the king of Babylon [Titus], who has now destroyed Sion"). The prophets associated the time of the fall of Babylon with the day of salvation (Isa 21:9; Jer 28:4).

"Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (4:19).

### The Neronian Persecution

The Church at Rome suffered inhuman treatment by the decree of Emperor Nero, following the great fire which broke out in July of A.D. 64 and destroyed most of the poorer quarters of the city. Because the populace suspected Nero of the arson, Nero sought to divert attention by accusing the Christians of the crime. He procured false accusations so as to facilitate prosecutions. The result was that multitudes were convinced that Christians were "haters of humanity."<sup>20</sup> Though the charge of arson could not be proved, the popular hostility provided sufficient excuse for the severest measures against the Christians. The legal basis for persecution must have been some charge of treason or violence.<sup>21</sup>

It seems likely that the action taken was an exercise of police powers (*coercitio*) rather than a formal decree (*Institutum Neronianum de Christianis*). Thus the Neronian persecution was fierce but limited in time and place. However, the long-term effects of Nero's action must not be overlooked. As W. H. C. Frend has correctly observed, one result was that the populace was

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<sup>20</sup>Tacitus, Annals XV, 44.

<sup>21</sup>Beare, p. 737.

left with a nameless hostility against Christians, and the Church was left on the wrong side of the State.<sup>22</sup> A. N. Sherwin-White has shown that Nero's action afforded a precedent to which appeal could be made by any who sought to damage the Church's interests.<sup>23</sup> And even when the Christians were persecuted simply as a result of popular hostility, there was still necessity for a legal process. This blatant breach of true justice veiling itself in a garb of pseudo-legality heightens the need for the call for vengeance and vindication.

#### Persecution under the Later Emperors

In the thirty years following Nero's persecution, Rome followed a similar policy against Christians. There was no general law against Christians, but the magistrates could take legal action as they saw fit or as the populace demanded. Often, popular hostility was not based on purely religious grounds but, as was the case at Ephesus, on economic fears (Acts 19:23-41). It seems to have been on this basis that Christians suffered under the Flavian emperors. This is a debated period of Christian history, and it would be naive to pretend to

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<sup>22</sup>W. H. C. Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 166-167. This is a thoroughly researched work that still stands as a standard in this subject. The author provides a very useful and comprehensive bibliography.

<sup>23</sup>A. N. Sherwin-White, "Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," Journal of Theological Studies, n.s., 3 (1952):199-213.

have easy and definitive answers to the issues.<sup>24</sup>

Domitian came to the throne in A.D. 81. In his attempts to build up a needed military image for himself he instituted repressive measures against any apparent opponent. To facilitate these measures, he developed the system of the common informer and the law of treason which resulted in the condemnation of many.<sup>25</sup>

Among the Emperor's political victims were Christians. Because of his sharp eye for treason and his keen interest in developing the Caesar-cult, he became a

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<sup>24</sup>Th. Mommsen's landmark article, "Der Religionsfrevel nach römischen Recht," Historische Zeitschrift 28 (1890):389-429, sparked a lively debate which resulted in three positions with regard to the basis of the Church's persecution by Rome in the early centuries. The first position, held by most French and Belgian scholars, was that there was a general enactment which precisely forbade the practice of the Christian religion. A classic example of this position is C. Callewaert, "Les premiers chrétiens, furent-ils persécutés par édits généraux ou par mesures de police?" Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique 2 (1901):771-797; Callewaert, "Les premiers chrétiens, furent-ils persécutés par édits généraux ou par mesures de police?" Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique 3 (1902):5-15; 324-348; 601-614; The enactment is generally attributed to Nero or Domitian. The second position, championed by Mommsen himself, is the theory of coercitio, the exercise of police power derived from the governor's imperium. This position is generally adopted by British scholars. A good example is E. G. Hardy, Christianity and the Roman Government (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925). The third position is that Christians were prosecuted under individual offenses such as incest, magic, illegal assembly, treason or the introduction of an alien cult. Sherwin-White, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup>Beare, p. 737. See also Frend, pp. 197-201. It seems that there was great publicity given to the trial of Christians. This may have been intended as a deterrent to other people who might have been inclined to become Christians.

systematic persecutor. Irenaeus ranks him with Nero and indicates that the Apocalypse was written during his reign.<sup>26</sup> Domitian's suppressive measures extended even to the household of the Emperor himself, for some persons of that household had become Christians.<sup>27</sup>

Our first concrete extra-biblical evidence for measures taken against Christians for no other offense than the confession of the name "Christian" comes from the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98-117). The correspondence of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, is generally regarded as having been written at this time, on his way to Rome to face his trial and eventual martyrdom.<sup>28</sup> Moreover correspondence between Pliny the Younger, Governor of

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<sup>26</sup>Irenaeus Against Heresies 5.30.3.

<sup>27</sup>E. M. Blaiklock, "Domitian," The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1975, 2:155.

<sup>28</sup>Canfield does not think that there is enough evidence in the early sources to support a persecution under Domitian (Canfield, pp. 72-73). He doubts the accuracy of the testimonies of Tertullian, Melito, and Dio Cassius because they wrote at a much later date. There is some effort on the part of historians to portray a better image of Domitian by suggesting that he was merely the victim of propaganda by later writers who did not like him for a variety of reasons. It seems to me that the testimonies of Melito, Tertullian, and Dio Cassius should be taken as of some validity, especially since we have concrete evidence very soon after Domitian's reign in the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan. In the epistle of Clement (from Domitian's time we have additional allusions. Clement first refers to the time of Nero and then adds, "For we are in the same arena, and the same conflict is imposed upon us" (Clement I, Pope, Sancti Clementis Romani ad Corinthios epistulae versio latina antiquissima [Epistle to the Corinthians 7] [Oxoniae: J. Parker, 1894]).

Bithynia and Pontus, and Trajan provides indisputable evidence for persecution of Christians. Several points stand out in one of Pliny's letters to Trajan:

1. Pliny has sentenced some Christians to death.
2. Christians are not guilty of the offenses charged against them.
3. They are guilty of illegal association for an unauthorized religion.
4. Those executed had stubbornly held to their faith.
5. The way out was to renounce their faith and offer incense to the emperor.<sup>29</sup>

It seems, then, that our sources for this period give ample evidence for the presence of persecution in the reign of Domitian. This picture seems to fit in well with that which is painted by John in the Apocalypse.

#### Evidences for Persecution in Revelation

The Apocalypse of John has been referred to as a martyrological document.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the book there are repeated references to the persecuted and the martyred dead. In 1:9 John identifies himself as "your brother, who shares with you in Jesus the tribulation and the

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<sup>29</sup>These points emerge in a comparison of Pliny's letter and Trajan's response. See Pliny Letters X, pp. 96-97.

<sup>30</sup>Ernst Lohmeyer, "Die Idee des Martyriums in Judentum und Urchristentum," Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie 5 (1928):247; A. Brekelmanns, Martyrerkranz: Eine symbol-geschichtliche Untersuchung im frühchristlichen Schriftum (Rome: Universita Gregoriana, 1965), p. 21.



kingdom and the patient endurance" and states that he "was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." A point that immediately stands out is that John himself was subjected to persecution precisely because of the word of God; in other words, the persecution was a religious one.<sup>31</sup>

Other members of the Church were also undergoing persecution for the same reason. The Church at Ephesus is commended for its patient endurance (2:2-3), an indication of standing up under trial. The Church at Smyrna was undergoing tribulation, being subjected to slander, and was soon to suffer imprisonment and death (2:9-10). In fact, Antipas had already been killed for his testimony (2:13) at Pergamum. The Church at Thyatira is commended for its patient endurance even as Jezebel caused trouble in it (2:19). The Church at Philadelphia too, had exercised patient endurance. Soon there would be a severe time of trials coming upon the world, but God would protect the Church. In the letters to the seven Churches there is, thus, internal evidence that at least four of the seven Churches had suffered or were to suffer some kind of persecution.

Woven in with this evidence however, are promises

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<sup>31</sup>This does not agree with Canfield's contention that it was because of tax-collection problems. If we take John seriously, both he and his fellow believers were persecuted on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

of God's protection of his people (Rev 2:10-11, 25-27; and 3:5, 10).<sup>32</sup> This feature reminds us, of course, of both the Ancient Near Eastern Vassal Treaties and the Old Testament covenant formulations in which the faithful vassal enjoys his Lord's protective clauses.

The second septet, that of the seals, uses language and imagery of great suffering. Each of the first four horse riders has something to do with war and suffering (6:1-7). The nature of that suffering may not be entirely clear, but whatever it was, Christians were part of the crisis. It is the fifth seal in the septet, however, that first refers directly to martyrs who had been slain for the word of God.<sup>33</sup> While the evidence does not indicate the time of their martyrdom, it nevertheless puts them in focus as an important group.

The innumerable multitude of 7:14 are those who have come out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. It is clear that

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<sup>32</sup>Charles saw martyrdom as the experience of all Christians before the parousia. So at the parousia only the martyrs will be recalled to life. Charles's case rests primarily on his interpretation of chaps. 13-14. He also argues that at the first resurrection, only one class is mentioned, the martyrs (20:4) Charles, The Revelation 1:361-370. Charles admits that such a view is contrary to that expressed in Rev 1-3. So his solution is to consider those first three chapters as having been written during the reign of Vespasian and therefore not reflecting the fully developed, final outlook of the Seer (Charles, The Revelation 1:37-47).

<sup>33</sup>The meaning of this seal is the main thrust of this dissertation and is dealt with in chap. 4.

the great tribulation is a great persecution. Charles, by taking *erchomenoi* as an imperfect participle, interprets this scene as one in which the martyrs are still arriving from the great persecution.<sup>34</sup> However, the participle should be understood in the general sense of "such as come." Moreover, the aorist in vs. 13 (*elthon*) makes it very unlikely that they are still arriving. The larger context favors a point in time when all those redeemed stand before God to receive eternal blessings.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the prophet, by using the definite article, has in view the eschatological tribulation.

Chap. 11, in an interlude in the trumpet septet, takes up the theme of persecution (vss. 3-33); but it seems that in this interlude the reference is not to the suffering of members of the Church, but rather, it is to the suppression of the prophetic word of God. In the seventh trumpet itself (vss. 15-18) there is a transfer of sovereignty from the world to God. The raging of the nations is checked by the wrath of God. The time for the dead (the martyred servants of God) to be vindicated has come, and this is announced with hymnic celebration.<sup>36</sup>

Chap. 12 presents the dragon as coming down in

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<sup>34</sup>Charles, The Revelation, 1:213.

<sup>35</sup>Mounce, p. 173.

<sup>36</sup>This is done in the context of the covenant because the next victorious vision (11:19) is a view of the ark of the covenant.

great wrath to persecute the Woman and her male child. In his frustration at not being able to destroy them, the dragon makes war with the Woman's offspring who are characterized as keeping the commandments of God and having the testimony of Jesus (12:1-17). Paul S. Minear observes that in this chapter the ultimate antagonists are the dragon and the Woman. He points out that the warfare begins with the heavenly arena as its locus (12:1). The scene then shifts to the wilderness (12:7). There is another shift back to heaven, and a final shift to earth (12:8-17). Minear concludes that John's aim is to portray the Lamb and his followers as victors because in fact John's community is involved in this conflict.<sup>37</sup> When the dragon is cast down there is rejoicing in heaven because the accuser has been cast down (12:10), but there is a woe pronounced on the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down in wrath to them (12:11-12). Mounce notes the rich exodus typology which is present in this chapter. Thus, the pursuit of the Woman is similar to Pharaoh's pursuit of the children of Israel (Exod 14:8), while the two eagle's wings with which the Woman escapes are reminiscent of God's words from Sinai, "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself"

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<sup>37</sup>Paul S. Minear, I Saw a New Earth (Washington D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968), pp. 115-118.

(Exod 19:4).<sup>38</sup> The eagle's wings given to the Woman are symbolic of divine deliverance and enablement. In the time of persecution God stands as protector for his people. They will ultimately be victorious over their enemies. While the Woman is ultimately the victor, that is not portrayed in chap. 12. The chapter ends with the dragon still in pursuit of her seed. In this chapter the divine aid is not direct vengeance taken on the dragon; rather, it is protection from him by sheltering the Woman in the wilderness.

Chap. 13 introduces the sea-beast who receives power, authority, and the throne from the dragon (13:1-10), and an earth-beast who makes an image to the first beast (13:11-18). Both beasts are agents of persecution and pursue the course which was initiated by the dragon himself. It is not necessary in this study to look for the identity of the beasts, though some striking resemblances to the beasts of Daniel may be noted. In both Daniel and Revelation, the beasts symbolize powers that possess an attitude of hostility to God's people. The anti-Christ thus turns out to be that power that derives its principle or authority from the dragon and in the process reflects Satan's hatred against the Lamb and his

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<sup>38</sup>Mounce, p. 245. The presence of the rich exodus motif in the book of Revelation not only suggests strong ties between this book and the Old Testament but also brings into sharper focus the covenant theme which undergirds the exodus history.

followers.<sup>39</sup> The anti-Christ is the persecutor.

Several pertinent points emerge from a careful consideration of the two beasts. First of all, both beasts speak blasphemy against God (13:1, 6-7, 11). In the second place, the first beast makes war against the saints (13:7), and the second beast forces all to worship the first beast on pain of death (13:15-17). Persecution here seems to have assumed universal proportions and to be prefixed by a death decree. And finally, even in the midst of the description of suffering there is a reminder of the vengeance of God. This is introduced with the formulary: "If any one has an ear, let him hear" (vs. 9). Then in casuistic style comes the warning, "If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain" (vs. 10).

The casuistic style of vs. 10 has led to several scribal emendations to clarify the meaning. Some

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<sup>39</sup>Barclay has made an interesting comment on this topic in his article, "Great Themes of the New Testament: Revelation xiii," Expository Times 70 (1958-59):260-264, 292-296. He observes that while the attitude towards the state had been positive and cordial in Paul and Peter's generation, by John's time it was the State that caused suffering and death on the people of God (p. 260). Gone were the days when Roman officials had been the defenders of the persecuted faithful. Thus, Barclay sees a shift in the attitude of the Johannine community against Rome. That which had stood as a legitimate power whose authority derived from God was now perceived to be an illegitimate power whose source of authority was the devil.

manuscripts have the verb *apagei*, "leads."<sup>40</sup> This makes both couplets refer to the persecutors of the Church. Thus, the verse would mean that those who become agents in leading the Church to captivity (persecution and imprisonment) will themselves receive vengeance in the form of being led to captivity.

Codex Alexandrinus interprets both couplets as referring to the saints, by having the second verb as a passive infinitive so that the statement reads, "If anyone is to be killed by the sword, he must be killed by the sword."<sup>41</sup> This stresses the inevitability of persecution and death for the faithful. Charles argues that this interpretation suits the tone of the whole book and is supported by Jer 15:2 and 43:11.<sup>42</sup>

Codex Sinaiticus reads, "If any man shall kill with the sword, with the sword he must be killed."<sup>43</sup> This corresponds to the words of Jesus in Matt 26:52, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." Caird lists four persuasive reasons for accepting the reading of Codex Sinaiticus: the charge of vs. 9 is elsewhere used of the Church, the threat of prison is meaningful to

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<sup>40</sup>See the apparatus in United Bible Society text, p. 868, and B. M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: UBS, 1975), pp. 749-750.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Charles, The Revelation, 1:355-356.

<sup>43</sup>Metzger, A Textual Commentary.

the prospective martyr, the words echo Jesus' warning to his disciples in Gethsemane (Matt 26:52), and the call for endurance and faith (vs. 10) is directed to the Church.<sup>44</sup> I concur with the last position. In a similar vein, Mounce concludes: "The first couplet teaches that the believer must accept what God has ordained, and the second warns against any attempt on the part of the church to defend itself by use of force."<sup>45</sup> This attitude of humble submission in the midst of suffering and persecution is the patient endurance and faith of the saints. Thus, the call to the persecuted to leave vengeance in the hands of God echoes both the Old and New Testaments.

The second half of the book of Revelation does not have as its focus the persecution of the people of God. Rather, it portrays the divine response to the persecution of the Church. The enemies of God's people, symbolized by the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, and the impure Woman, come into judgment amid songs of rejoicing in heaven (Rev 17-18). Reference is made to their being drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6; 18:24) and their war against the lamb (17:12-14). While these evil powers are completely desolated, those who had

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<sup>44</sup>Caird, The Revelation, pp. 169-170.

<sup>45</sup>Mounce, p. 257.



been beheaded for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus reign with him a thousand years (20:4).

Incidentally, the overview of Revelation given above reveals a progression in the idea of vengeance as one proceeds through the book. In chap. 7 John portrays those who have come out of the great tribulation, but no mention is made there of the vengeance against those who caused the tribulation, only the reward of the saints is dealt with. But in chaps. 15 and 16, there is, on the other hand, only a brief reference to the martyrs, along with partial vengeance in the form of the seven last plagues on the persecutors. Finally, a complete reversal of the picture occurs in chaps. 17 and 18, where the reference is almost entirely to vengeance on the opponents and persecutors of the saints, with hardly any mention of the martyrs.

The brief overview given in the present chapter of this dissertation also reveals that the experience of persecution and suffering was anticipated by Jesus and was part of his own life. Jesus warned that it was inevitable that the world should hate both him and his followers. This hatred would lead to both his and their arraignment before earthly powers. Jesus was the martyr par excellence, subjected to the most extreme injustice; and persecution was also the experience of the Church.

At the time Revelation was written, the Church seems to have been undergoing severe persecution from

both Jews and the Roman Empire. The constant calls to endurance and the apocalyptic nature of the document favor this conclusion. For John, as well as for his community, trial and hardship were daily realities. It is in this context that Revelation must be read and interpreted.

The survey of this present chapter only covers evidences for persecution up to the time of Trajan. This is not intended to reflect a preterist interpretation of the book of Revelation. As already mentioned in chapter 1, I subscribe to the historicist school of interpretation which places the events of the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11) in the Reformation era. However, three important considerations have constrained me to follow the present procedure. Firstly, a different approach would have necessitated a lengthy documentation of the historicist aspect of Revelation. Secondly, a demonstration of the presence of a persecution *Sitz im Leben* for the author underscores the relevance of the the motif for the author and his immediate audience. Thirdly, since the present treatment is a thematic study, it is the theme that is most important, and not its chronological placement in history. In view of these considerations, the investigation of the evidences for persecution have been limited only to the apostolic and early post-apostolic eras.

## CHAPTER IV

### VENGEANCE IN REVELATION

The concept of vengeance as it is found in the book of Revelation has raised much theological discussion and debate. It is on the basis of the etnical issues raised that the book has been excluded by some from the canon of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> The survey of the concept of vengeance in the Old and New Testaments has revealed that this is a broad biblical theme. The present chapter provides a thematic investigation of this concept in the Apocalypse. The aim is not to address every possible reference to this subject, but to trace the broad outline of this theme and to evaluate the implications of its biblical backgrounds on its interpretation.

#### The Fifth Seal and the Concept of Vengeance

An examination of the second septet in the Apocalypse, the seven seals, reveals the same elements common to other apocalyptic literature--war, bloodshed, famine, and pestilence. However, there is also an added dimension--the ecclesiological dimension. In the midst

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<sup>1</sup>Reference has been made in the introduction to a number of authors, such as E. Vischer, Walter Bauer, W. Bousset.

of all this suffering and death there is the question of the position of the Church and its ultimate destiny. Attention is first given to the broader context of the seals, then more particularly to the fifth seal.

The series of seals may be divided into two units consisting of the first four and the last three. Some characteristics common to the first four are noteworthy: each of the four is initiated by a command from one of the four living creatures (6:1, 3, 5, 7). Each command releases a horse and its rider (6:2, 4, 5, 8). The color of the horse and the object carried suggest the character of the mission. Each rider is given a particular power. Minear suggests that "these literary clues indicate that the work of all four riders should be dealt with together as various descriptions of a single set of consequences released by the Lamb's victory."<sup>2</sup> He further observes that the brevity of these first four is an indication that John's primary focus was with the last three, which are longer.<sup>3</sup>

In these first four seals there is no direct mention of the Church. By contrast, the last three are longer and focus on the martyrs and the future of the

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<sup>2</sup>Minear, I Saw A New Earth, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. One wonders, however, at the validity of the use of the length of a passage as the measure of its importance. This does not seem to be demonstrated in the book of Revelation.

Church. There are no horse riders and no calls by the living creatures in the last three seals. The background for the first four may well be the vision of Zech 1:7-17, in which there are horse riders standing among myrtle trees in readiness for action. With a few minor differences this same vision is repeated in the vision of Zech 6:1-8, wherein there are four chariots pulled by horses whose colors correspond to the four horses of Rev 6:1-8. In all three passages the horses have a heavenly origin and symbolize the working of a supernatural power in the world.

Hengstenberg has noted this Old Testament background to the whole series of seals and suggests that in both visions (Zech 1:7-17 and Rev 6:1-8) the first horse rider is Christ in his role as conqueror and leader.<sup>4</sup> Hengstenberg has not determined whether the rest of the horse riders also represent Jesus. He proposes that whatever the riders represent, they play a vital role in Christ's mission of judgment.<sup>5</sup> Mounce sees the relationship between the seals and the Zechariah visions as being only in form, not in subject matter. He

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<sup>4</sup>Hengstenberg, 1:250-252. One needs to avoid any methodology that attempts to attach some theological significance to every little detail in this book. Like a good drama, there are elements that are not essential to the plot but that are included for special effects. This seems to be the way to view apocalyptic literature.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

concludes that John has made use of the Old Testament imagery, but intends to communicate the eschatological discourse of Jesus (Luke 21:9-17; Mark 13:7-13; Matt 24:6-13). The woes of Luke (tumults, wars, nation rising against nation, famines, great earthquakes, pestilences, great signs from heaven, and persecution) are similar to the woes of Rev 6.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that John was indeed drawing from multiple backgrounds, including others beyond those just mentioned (as, for instance, Dan 5 furnishing background for the third horseman, and Ezek 14 as providing imagery in connection with the fourth horseman). It would, therefore, seem inappropriate to adopt one background to the exclusion of others. Rather, what one needs to do is to give primacy to the overall biblical perspective of the book of Revelation, remembering that the Old Testament was John's Scriptures and that Jesus' teachings were part of the religious heritage cherished by John's community.

One common interpretation of the first four horse riders is that they constitute the conquest of Christ through the gospel and the judgments that follow man's response to the gospel. Another common view is that they represent the socio-economic conditions that

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<sup>6</sup>Mounce, p. 152. This view is also expressed by Charles, The Revelation, 1:158-160. Hanns Lilje sees the background to be the colorful chariot races at the inauguration of the Emperor's reign, The Last Book of the Bible (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), pp. 123-124.

surrounded the Church in John's day and a little after.<sup>7</sup> Isbon T. Beckwith sees a connection between the woes of chap. 6 and the woes common in apocalyptic literature in general. He identifies these woes with the divine visitations to be sent on the earth at the end-time.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the eschatological woes are part of the vengeance which God renders at the end--the eschatological maledictions on the "enemy."

The four horses in Zechariah are on a divine mission to survey what is taking place on the earth and bring back a report to the Lord of the whole earth. It is interesting to note that the context in Zech 1 is God's call for and/or response to the repentance. God's explanation of the horses is a revelation of his jealousy over Jerusalem. God has been angry over the city for a little while, but now he has turned his wrath against the city's enemies.

In the Zechariah vision, three elements stand out: vengeance, vindication, and restoration. The question "How long?" is raised by the suffering of Jerusalem, which has suffered for seventy years (1:12). The parallel with the seal vision of Rev 6 is evident, for in the

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<sup>7</sup>Mounce, p. 156, indicates that those who see a reflection of John's time often refer to the order by Domitian in A.D. 92 to have half the vineyards in the provinces destroyed. The order was so strongly resisted that it was rescinded.

<sup>8</sup>Isbon T. Beckwith, The Apocalypse of John (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), pp. 515-516.

latter passage the question "How long?" also follows the mission of the four horses. In both visions the saints address God as their Lord and present their case before him. In both there is a divine response of wrath against the enemies. In both visions God vindicates his people, and in each case that vindication is a future reality.

The fifth seal introduces a change in the imagery. There are no longer any horse riders in action but souls under the altar. It is this seal, as mentioned earlier, that has presented the greatest difficulties to interpreters of the Apocalypse and has become one of the main passages coloring their theological stance for the whole book. Because of the importance of this passage to the theology of the book, some careful theological investigation is necessary.

#### Identity of the Altar

Much discussion has centered around the identity of the altar under which the souls of the martyrs are located. Was it the altar in Jerusalem or a heavenly one? Most scholars agree that it was not the Jerusalem altar but a heavenly one, since the Jerusalem temple would be of little relevance to non-Jewish Christians.<sup>9</sup> This is undoubtedly a correct position, for when the

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<sup>9</sup>Some examples are Charles, The Revelation, 1:172; Beckwith, p. 524; Mounce, p. 157; Lilje, p. 128; etc.



Apocalypse was written, the temple in Jerusalem and its altars had been destroyed. (I am assuming the generally accepted Domitian period for the writing of the book, although there are some arguments for a pre-A.D. 70 date.) Nowhere in the book is a detailed description of the earthly temple given.

A further issue is whether the altar mentioned is to be understood as the altar of incense or that of burnt offerings. Some scholars have argued that since it is only the altar of incense that is mentioned in the heavenly throne-room vision of Rev 4, it is under that altar that the souls are to be found.<sup>10</sup> However, it is rather the Old Testament background for this imagery that furnishes the key to a correct interpretation.

The Old Testament altar of burnt offering provides the basic concept of sacrifice. On that altar the sacrificed animals were presented as an offering to God. That altar was also, thus, the locus of the sacrificial service. Indeed, this altar was the most essential apparatus, the irreducible minimum, needed for a sacrificial service. Prior to the tabernacle erected at Mount Sinai it was the one basic fixed apparatus. Wherever Hebrew patriarchs offered sacrifice, altars of burnt offering

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Mounce indicates that those who see here the altar of incense derive this interpretation from the fact that the souls are viewed as making a petition. Since it is the altar of incense that is the place of prayer, (so they conclude) it is there that these petitioning souls are located, p. 157.

were built, with the rest of the items found in the tabernacle/temple being additions which came with the later developments.

In the ritual of sacrifice, the blood was poured at the base of the altar of burnt offering. "The rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering which is at the door of the tent of meeting" (Lev 4:7). This command is repeated in vss. 18, 25, 30, 34, and a number of other places. The base of the altar of burnt offering was, thus, the designated place for sacrificial blood. In a number of other passages blood was to be poured around the altar (Lev 1:11, 15; 3:8, 13, etc). In Hebrew thought, life resided in the blood. Therefore, when the blood of the victim was poured at the base of the altar, it was the life of the victim that was poured out (Lev 17:11).

It is interesting to note that only blood was to be poured at the base of the altar, and, furthermore, that it was only sacrificial blood that was thus to be poured out. In the Old Testament there is no record of either human blood being thus poured out or of animal blood calling out for vengeance. The apocalyptist has made an interesting imagery transference which begins by viewing martyrdom as sacrifice and then proceeds to portray the martyr's blood as crying from beneath the sacrificial altar.

In view of this phenomenon of imagery transfer,

perhaps the specific identity of the altar is not really the matter of prime significance, since it is the sacrifice metaphor that is borrowed. Thus, the souls are not literally calling from beneath the altar. Rather, John is borrowing from the rich biblical and historical heritage a powerful symbol and using it to produce some special effects. Thus, the identity of the altar helps only to produce or heighten those intended special effects. The main focus is the principle that whenever innocent blood is shed, there is a call for vengeance.

#### The Altar and Judgment

Moreover, the altar imagery as used in the fifth seal ties into the concept of judgment. In the Old Testament setting, the tabernacle was frequently associated with divine judgment. At the altar of burnt offering, God declared, as it were, his judgment on human sin by demanding the death of an animal substitute. In this sense, the altar symbolism conveys a very rich and vivid judgment connotation.

In addition, the Day of Atonement centered around the tabernacle and was primarily a day of judgment. This broader association of temple and judgment comes into focus in Lev 16 and 23, where descriptions of the activities of the Day of Atonement are given in detail. A number of studies have been undertaken on the subject of the Day of Atonement, and these shed light on the

presence of the judgment concept.<sup>11</sup> Among the activities of the Day of Atonement revealing a judgment dimension was the transference of sin and its accompanying judgment (Lev 16:21-22). Further evidence of the judgment motif is found in the fact that there was to be a searching of hearts on the part of all Israel, with those who did not care to be right with God being cut off (Lev 23:26-32).

Besides the judgment implications from the activities and language of the Day of Atonement, there are other specific instances in Israel's experience when judgment proceeded from the sanctuary--instances which further demonstrate the association between judgment and the sanctuary. For instance, when God wished to vindicate Moses' authenticity as his spokesman, he summoned the rebels to the sanctuary and there vindicated him.

This vindication-at-the-sanctuary theme is, indeed, strongly evidenced in the Old Testament. David's appeals for vengeance and vindication are frequently directed to the heavenly temple. In his call for deliverance in Ps 43:1-4, he prays that God might bring him to

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<sup>11</sup>Alberto Treiyer, "Le jour des expiations et la purification du sanctuaire," (Dissertation, Strasbourg University, May 1982) has done an exhaustive study of the day of atonement and shows the implications for judgment in that day. See also G. F. Hasel, "Studies in Biblical Atonement I: Continual Sacrifice, Defilement/Cleansing and Sanctuary," in Sanctuary and Atonement, ed. A. V. Wallenkampf and W. R. Leshar (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981), pp. 87-114, and "Studies in Biblical Atonement II: The Day of Atonement," also in Sanctuary and Atonement, pp. 115-133.

his altar in his dwelling place and vindicate him. In Dan 7, the suffering and persecution of the saints finds its resolution in the setting of the sanctuary judgment.

Thus, in the Old Testament, there is a connection between the sanctuary and judgment, with the concept of vindication as an important element. This Old Testament background provides a backdrop against which the temple motif in general, and the altar in particular, occurs in the Apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> As has already been suggested, the

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<sup>12</sup>There are eight occurrences of the word "altar" in Revelation. While some of the occurrences refer to the altar of incense and the others refer to the altar of burnt offering, all eight occurrences are connected with the motif of judgment. The first is 6:9, which we have here been considering--the vision of souls under the altar calling for judgment and vindication. There is, we have seen, a clear indication here that the altar image heightens the appeal for a juridical process. In Rev 8:3-5, the next occurrence, the context is the introduction to the seven trumpets, and the prayers of the saints may be of the same nature as the calls of the souls under the altar in 6:9-10. In vs. 5 the action of the angel at the altar suggests a progression from intercession to judgment. The action is somewhat parallel to that of Ezekiel's vision of Ezek 10:2-7. The altar in 9:13 occurs in the setting of the sixth trumpet judgment. Again, John shows that the prayers of the saints "play an active role in the eschatological drama" (Mounce, p. 200). Rev 11:1 is the next reference to the altar, and the symbolic measuring here has an Old Testament background which includes the ideas of protection and judgment. Ford lists four explanations of the symbolic measuring: (1) rebuilding or restoring, (2) destruction, (3) preservation from any physical harm, and (4) preservation from spiritual harm (Ford, p. 176). The real point is the significance of judgment in the supreme court of the universe. The seventh occurrence of "altar" (14:18) is in the setting of the eschatological harvest. The angel who comes from the altar announces that the time for the harvest has arrived. This passage is modeled after Joel 3:13-14. There is a double figure represented by the two harvests. The grain harvest symbolism was frequently used by Jesus to represent the

altar referred to in Rev 6:9-11 is the altar of burnt offering, for it is that altar which accommodates the metaphor of sacrifice that is clearly in view in the vision of the souls under the altar.

As one examines the setting of the altar in Rev 6:9-11, one discovers the juxtaposition of the altar and judgment. The souls cry from under the altar, and their cry is a call for divine judgment. The Judeo-Christian concern for justice finds expression in this call for vengeance.

The altar also occurs in the context of the third plague (Rev 16:5-7), which is a clear answer to the call of the souls under the fifth seal. The setting is a judgment doxology in praise of the rendering of vengeance on those who had shed the blood of the saints. As is noted later, there are some very close correspondences between the two passages. Here, it is the altar that speaks. Thus, as Mounce has concluded, "The principles of sacrifice and judgment are inextricably interwoven."<sup>13</sup>

This blending of the concepts of sacrifice and

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end-time judgment, with the grain (often corn) standing for the redeemed (Matt 13:1-30). The vintage in the Old Testament often represented the outpouring of divine wrath in judgment. Thus, in Isa 63:3 God as warrior returns from judging Edom with his garments stained as one who has been treading the winepress. The two harvests represent deliverance and retribution. The eighth occurrence of "altar" is Rev 16:5-7, which is discussed in the main body of this dissertation.

<sup>13</sup>Mounce, p. 296.

judgment helps to underscore the nature of the cry of the souls under the altar. Each occurrence of "altar" comes in the setting of a call for judgment (see note 12 in this chapter). In this connection the altar may be seen as the place of justice and judgment. Indeed, the altar becomes the most appropriate position from which an appeal to God for justice may be made. It may be noted that not only does the call for vengeance and judgment come from the altar, but the doxological responses too.

#### Martyrdom as Sacrifice

We may note at the outset that the martyrdom-as-sacrifice motif treated here does not imply salvific sacrifice, but only the metaphor.

#### Martyrdom as Sacrifice in the Old Testament

The association of martyrs with the altar (Rev 6:9) is a common figure in the Old Testament. Abel, the first martyr, was slain in the setting of a sacrifice (Gen 4:2-8). Later it was his shed blood that made an appeal for vengeance from the ground (4:10). Another example is the Psalmist's appeal to God for deliverance: "Nay, for thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Ps 44:22). The Psalmist raises the question, "Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?" (vs. 24). Peter Craigie says that this call was rooted in the covenant between Israel

and Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> The martyrs belonged to Yahweh's dominion.

Jeremiah complained, "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jer 11:19). In the very next verse he calls on Yahweh, who judges righteously, with the plea that he might see the vengeance of God. Jeremiah proceeds to ask the question, "How long?" (12:4). He anticipates the day when the great Judge will carry out a reversal, bringing to the slaughter those who had led him to the slaughter (12:3). The close association between Jeremiah's being led as a sheep to the slaughter and the call for vengeance which results in a reversal of evil human decision is noteworthy.

#### Martyrdom in Judaism

How did the death of Christians come to be viewed as sacrifice? The brief survey of the Old Testament has provided a partial answer. Attention is given to the development of this concept in Judaism before we examine the New Testament. In pre-Christian Judaism, the belief that martyrs were a sacrifice was already current, as in 4 Macc 6:29, for instance, where the dying words of the martyr Eleazar are recorded: "Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs." Thus, the blood of this martyr was understood to effect atonement for Israel (see also 4 Macc 17:21-22).

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<sup>14</sup>Peter Craigie, Psalms 1-50, Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), p. 334.



The Babylonian Talmud also has a number of references to martyrdom as sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> A mother whose seven sons faced martyrdom said to the last one just before he was killed, "My son, go and say to your father Abranam, 'Thou didst bind one [son to the] altar, but I have bound seven [sons to the] altars'" (Gittin 57b).<sup>16</sup> In Judaism the idea of souls under the heavenly altar also developed, as can be seen from Shabbath 152b: "the souls of the righteous are preserved under the throne of glory." Rabbi Akiba says:

He who is buried in lands other than the Holy Land is as though he were buried in Babylonia. He who is buried in Babylonia is as though he were buried in the Land of Israel. He who is buried in the Land of Israel is as though he were buried under the altar: for the whole Land of Israel is fit to be the site of the altar. And he who is buried under the altar is as though he were buried under the throne of glory.<sup>17</sup>

In the Tosephta on Menachoth 110a, it is said that Michael sacrifices upon the heavenly altar the students of the law.<sup>18</sup> In light of this and other

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<sup>15</sup>All quotations and citations from the Talmud are from The Babylonian Talmud (London: Soncino Press, 1936). Though this source was written during the Christian era, it reflects some pre-Christian traditions.

<sup>16</sup>Charles, Lectures, p. 173, notes that the belief that the souls of the martyrs are under the altar developed to the idea that all the souls of the righteous are under the altar. Thus what was once the place of the martyrs later became the place of all the faithful.

<sup>17</sup>Aboth de Rabbi Natan, xxvi, English translation, The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), chap. 26, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup>Adolf Jellinek, ed., Beth ha Midrash, n.p.,

evidence we may conclude that in Judaism the concept of martyrdom is expressed in sacrifice imagery which involves picturing martyred souls as under the altar.

Martyrdom as Sacrifice in  
the New Testament

Death as sacrifice reaches new heights in the symbol of the messianic Suffering Servant of Isa 53. He too is led like a lamb to the slaughter, but the new element is the vicarious nature of his sacrificial death. This death-as-sacrifice imagery occurs in the New Testament (Acts 8:32) as a powerful expression of the gospel.

The death of Christ had the fullest association of death and sacrifice. All the Old Testament sacrificial types anticipated the death of Jesus. He was the true paschal Lamb (1 Cor 5:7) and the Lamb to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Christ was sacrificed for the sins of the whole world (Rom 3:25; Heb 7:27; 9:26,28; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Because of its very substitutionary nature it is easy to see how Christ's death was viewed as sacrifice.

Paul used the imagery of martyrdom as a sacrifice in his letter to the Rom 8:36, quoting Ps 44:22. This quotation "For thy sake we are being killed all the day

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n.d., 3.137. It must be admitted that some of these sources are late, but they do not represent borrowing from Christianity, and may well represent some earlier oral tradition.

long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" is in the context of tribulation and persecution, and Charles Cranfield sees its main effect as being to show that the tribulations which face Christians are not new or unexpected, but have been the lot of God's people throughout the ages.<sup>19</sup> In the preceding verse, Paul mentions seven different types of persecution suffered on account of God, and it is interesting that he uses the imagery of "sheep for the slaughter." In 12:1 he urges the Christians to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, thus connecting the thought of saints and sacrifice.

From his prison cell in Rome Paul wrote, "Even if [ei] I am to be poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil 2:17). He was probably alluding to his possible execution, with ei being used here in a concessive clause, corresponding to a first class conditional clause.<sup>20</sup> Paul speaks of his life-blood as being "poured out" (*spendomai*), using the same verb that he uses in 2 Tim 4:6, where he is clearly referring to his impending execution. In the latter passage he urges Timothy to come quickly, for the time for him to be "poured out" is near. The verb used in both cases seems to allude to the

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<sup>19</sup>Charles E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 440.

<sup>20</sup>E. D. Burton, Moods and Tenses of New Testament Greek (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), p. 284.

priestly act of pouring blood or a drink offering at the base of the altar.<sup>21</sup>

In Revelation there is a close association between witness and death. Frend has argued that in the Apocalypse martyrdom has already become an integral part of *marturia*.<sup>22</sup> He points out that in the gospels the term *marturia* is used in the general legal sense of giving a witness before a law court. But in the epistles there is a growing shift with the expectation that the *eschaton* is here. The growing hostility of the Roman government, however, accompanied by a sense of a delay in the *parousia*, seemed to bring about a cleavage between the Church and the persecuting state. Thus, the suffering of Christ was viewed as a pattern of what was to befall his followers. Frend concludes that in Revelation "*marturia* is used in the technical sense of being a blood-witness, the sense it was to retain from now onwards."<sup>23</sup>

But Allison Trites, after doing a semantic study of the words *marturion*, *marturia*, *marturein*, and *martus*, concludes that "*martus*, as used in Revelation, is clearly

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<sup>21</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 807.

<sup>22</sup>Frend, pp. 66-69.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

moving towards the fourth and fifth stages of its semantic development [the complete identification between verbal witness and martyrdom], but it is still questionable whether the martyrological understanding has become part of the dictionary definition of the word."<sup>24</sup> The weight of evidence in Revelation is in favor of Frend's position, for martyrdom had become a frequent experience of the Church.<sup>25</sup>

To understand martyrdom as sacrifice, one must evaluate the language used in Revelation in connection with the death of Christ. For instance, the verb sphazō, which is used of Christ in Rev 5:6, is often used of the killing of animals for sacrifice. Thus, the slain Christ and the martyred Christians have shared the same misjudgment at the hands of evil rulers and will sit on the same throne as part of their vindication.

There is an interesting blending of imagery in Rev 5:6. Jesus is represented by the Lion and the Lamb. Thus, while the lion image projects the qualities of power and sovereignty, the lamb image focuses on the

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<sup>24</sup>Allison Trites, "Martus and Martyrdom in the Apocalypse," Novum Testamentum 15 (1973):80; idem., The New Testament Concept of Witness.

<sup>25</sup>The symbolism of sacrifice characterizes martyrdom. A key idea in sacrifice is the element of innocence. Every occurrence of the symbolism of martyrdom as sacrifice in both Testaments carries the idea of innocent death as its vital element. Furthermore, the language of the death of Christ in Revelation is that of sacrifice. However, only Christ's death, not that of martyrs, is set forth as vicarious sacrifice.

element of sacrifice. Therefore, Jesus is portrayed as one who has obtained victory through sacrifice. But even in this portrayal of Jesus as the slain Lamb, the Lamb is seen as now standing, though it had been slain. The use of the Greek perfect participles *hestekos* (having taken his stand) and *esphagmenon* (having been slain) in Rev 5:6 suggests the lasting benefits of the Lamb's sacrifice and victory. The Lamb who bears the marks of death is also the omnipotent and omniscient victor. Thus, the Lamb has become the victor precisely because he submitted to death.

While Rev 5:6 deals primarily with the experience of the Lamb--his suffering and victory--Rev 6:9 focuses on the experience of the Lamb's followers. The martyrs are portrayed as being under the altar in 6:9. The altar here denotes not a physical location for the souls but a characterizing experience of the martyrs. There is no suggestion here of conscious entities that are awaiting reunion with their bodies. The martyrs have all been judged, formally or informally, and condemned unjustly. All of them have the new covenant relationship and experience and have chosen to be loyal to their covenant Lord, even when it meant their death. The followers of the Lamb have also submitted to death and have become victors. God, as Lord of the covenant, has pledged them protection.

There seems to be no intention on John's part to limit the martyrs to any historical period. Perhaps the absence here of the specific designation, "the testimony of Jesus" ("the testimony which they held" occurs instead), was intended to make "those who had been slain for the word of God" an all-inclusive expression. As Caird points out, the cry "How long?" is an echo from the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the martyrs could well include all of the saints--past, present, and future--slain for the word of God and the testimony which they hold.

The question arises as to why the martyrs and not all Christians who have suffered in some way are the center of attention. Alan Johnson suggests that John is referring to all who so faithfully follow Christ as to form a group that may be characterized as "the slain of the Lord." He says: "They may or may not actually suffer physical death for Christ, but they have (like John) so identified themselves with the slain Lamb that they have in effect offered up their lives ('because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained')." <sup>27</sup> Through their experience of suffering on account of the word of God they have become "the slain of the Lord." It is not

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<sup>26</sup>Caird, The Revelation of St. John, p. 84.

<sup>27</sup>Alan Johnson, "Revelation," The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 474-475.

necessary to adopt Charles's conclusion that at the end time all the saints will die a martyr's death.<sup>28</sup> All who have suffered unjustly on account of the word of God will be part of the group that must be vindicated.

#### Reasons for Martyrdom

According to Rev 6:9-11, the martyrs were put to death "for [dia] the word of God and the witness they had borne." The preposition dia should be translated as "on account of" or "because of."<sup>29</sup> It is often used to indicate the reason why something happens. Thus, the disciples will be hated because of the name of Christ (Matt 10:22). Persecution arises because of the teaching (Matt 13:21), because of unbelief (vs. 58), and because of tradition (15:3).

The same preposition is at times used to indicate guilt, in juridical contexts, as in the case of Barabbas "who had been thrown into prison for (dia) insurrection and murder" (Luke 23:25).<sup>30</sup> It seems very likely that we have this sort of a juridical use of dia in Rev 6:9. The martyrs were accounted guilty and on the basis of this "guilty" verdict they have been slain. As Walter Scott

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<sup>28</sup>Charles, The Revelation, 1:361.

<sup>29</sup>Justin A. Smith, An American Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1957), p. 102.

<sup>30</sup>Walter Bauer, "dia," A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 181.



points out, "The Word of God when faithfully declared in its incisive claims on man's conscience ever stirs into action the hostility of the world, and its most faithful exponents in life and public testimony must seal that witness with their blood."<sup>31</sup>

#### The Role of Juridical Process in Martyrdom

In chapter 3 of this dissertation, evidences for persecution of the early Christians were examined. As we noted there, usually a legal process was associated with the condemnation of martyrs. Jesus was subjected to a trial by both Jews and Romans (Matt 26:57-27:26; Mark 14:53-15:15; Luke 22:54-23:25; John 18:1-19:16) and condemned to be crucified. The trial and condemnation of Jesus became the pattern for his followers. They too were subjected to trial and condemnation. Jesus warned that the disciples would be brought before rulers, governors, and kings to give a defense of their faith in court settings (Matt 10:16-36). He warned that they would suffer even death, but in the very same breath he promised that God would be their protector (vss. 28-31).

The book of Acts mentions several legal trials of the Christians. Peter and John were frequently arraigned before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-21; 5:18-21, 26-33). The

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<sup>31</sup>Walter Scott, Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1948), p. 154.

condemnation and death of Stephen was the result of a legal process which included the use of witnesses (6:12-14). Paul and his companions were taken to court. They faced city authorities and magistrates in Philippi (16:20-24) and Thessalonica (17:6-9); and they appeared before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (18:12-16), and the city clerk in Ephesus (19:38). Paul also had hearings before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:10), before Felix (24:1-25), before Festus (25:6-12), before King Agrippa (25:23-26:32), and twice before Nero--the second time resulting in his execution.

John was on the Isle of Patmos because he had been condemned for the word of God, and members of his community had suffered as well (Rev 1:9). While there have been many agents of persecution, the ultimate enemy of the people of God is the devil. Represented as a dragon in Rev 12, he persecutes the Woman and her male child; then he makes war with her offspring (12:1-17). He gives power to the beast that comes out of the sea (13:7-10) so that he (the beast) makes war with the saints. The first beast passes power on to the second beast which comes out of the land (vss. 15-18) and pronounces the death decree on all who refuse to break their loyalty to the true God.

Rev 12:10 offers an important insight into the role played by the devil in persecution and martyrdom. A voice proclaims from heaven that salvation and power and

the kingdom now belong to God. The reference here is to God's sovereignty which had been brought into question by the devil, for he is the unlawful aggressor who must be brought to justice. But what is the nature of his unjust aggression? The last part of the verse provides an answer: "for the accuser of our brethren, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been cast down." Bauer points out that the word *kategoror*, "accuser," is not a loanword from Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>32</sup> It occurs only here in the New Testament. The participle *kategoron* is used for bringing legal charges against someone before a judge. It is so used in human settings in Acts 28:19; 2 Macc 10:13; Luke 6:7; and Acts 25:5. It is used of pressing charges before God's tribunal in 1 Macc 7:6; 2 Macc 10:13; Rev 12:10; etc.<sup>33</sup> The noun *kategoria* denotes the legal accusation itself and is so used in 1 Tim 5:19; Luke 6:7; and Titus 1:6.<sup>34</sup>

It needs to be reemphasized that the larger picture of Rev 12 is a legal contest. Here, the Judge is God, the plaintiff is Satan, and the accused are the saints against whom charges are made day and night. The

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<sup>32</sup>Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 423. See also the brief but illuminating discussion by Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Die Brief des Neuen Testaments und die Offenbarung Johannis erlautert aus Talmud und Midrasch (Münich: Beck, 1926), p. 814.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

language is reminiscent of Zech 3:1-10, where God's servant, Joshua, was arraigned before God, with the devil as plaintiff. In the Zechariah vision Joshua was "standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?'" (Zech 3:1-2).

John D. W. Watts observes that Joshua, as one who was plucked from the burning, represents those who had come through the affliction of the exile experience and were now the objects of Yahweh's mercy and grace.<sup>35</sup> The role played by Satan was to point out the past sinfulness of God's people so as to demonstrate that they deserved their past sufferings, and were unworthy of God's blessing.<sup>36</sup> This same context of suffering and accusation is present in Rev 12. Watts further indicates that in the Zechariah vision the phrase "before the LORD" refers to the practice of bringing both the plaintiff and the accused into the temple so that God's verdict might be ascertained. There, the charges were made, and the accused also made a statement in self-defense. The one

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<sup>35</sup>John D. W. Watts, The Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: The Broadman Press, 1972), 7:320-321.

<sup>36</sup>"To Resist," [Zech 3:1], The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 4:1092-1093.

pronounced guilty had to make a statement declaring the justice of God's judgment.<sup>37</sup> In the judicial scene in Zech 3, the charges made against Joshua are not with respect to his private, personal sins, however; the sins are those of the nation of which he is high priest.<sup>38</sup>

Merrill F. Unger points out that on the basis of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness to his elect, "Satan's attack [on Joshua] was exposed as utterly groundless and unreasonable."<sup>39</sup> Thus, the accuser becomes the accused, as the divine Judge overturns the unjust charges of the enemy of his people. "The words 'Jehovah rebuke thee' are a standing formula for the utterance of the threat of a divine judgment. . . ."40

While there are no ostensible direct literary parallels between this passage and Rev 12, there are some significant thematic affinities. In both passages there is a war background (the war of Babylon, and the war in heaven). In both, the devil is the accuser of the people of God, and the accusations are made before God, the Judge. In both instances, too, the devil loses the case and the saints are vindicated.

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<sup>37</sup>Watts, p. 320.

<sup>38</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, The Minor Prophets (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), 2:251.

<sup>39</sup>Merrill F. Unger, Commentary on the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), pp. 1976-1977.

<sup>40</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, The Minor Prophets, 2:251.

Another example of the devil's function as a prosecuting attorney is given in Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-6. In these two passages he appears in the heavenly council to press charges against both God and Job. He charges God with undue protectionism and Job with a false integrity that is based only on self-interest. In these two episodes, the only way God can vindicate Job is by allowing him to suffer. But in the very vindication of Job, God vindicates himself, too. Job's acceptance of suffering is the evidence needed to discredit Satan's charges. Thus, the vindication of the saints and the clearing of God's name cannot be separated.

In the New Testament and in rabbinic writings, the devil retains his legal duties as prosecutor, frequently with Michael as the Counsel for the defense (1 Pet 5:8; Jude 9; 1 Tim 3:6; Berakoth 46a; Yoma 20a). Michael has charge of the people of God (Dan 10:21; 12:1; Yoma 77a). Caird's observation is insightful: "Thus, although John depicts the battle between Michael and Satan in military terms, it was essentially a legal battle between opposing counsel, which resulted in one being disbarred."<sup>41</sup> Caird sees this legal battle as being fought in two spheres. On the earth Satan apparently won; for Christ, though pronounced "not guilty," was

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<sup>41</sup>Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, pp. 154-155.

condemned and executed. In the heavenly sphere, however, Satan loses his case in the divine court of final appeal.<sup>42</sup> Thereafter, he has no legal recourse.

There is also the battlefield imagery that is to be found in Rev 12. In line with the war terminology, God comes to the aid of Michael in battle. The result is that Satan loses the contest. This may be reminiscent of Dan 7 which emphasizes the authority of the Lord's Messiah. But even in this war language the victory of Michael and the saints is a form of vindication of the saints by their Lord. Let it be carefully noted that they overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, not loving their own lives unto death (Rev 12:11). By the decision that the saints have made in relation to the cross, they have been judged by the gospel and found worthy of eternal life. Thus, the instrument of defeat for Satan is the instrument of victory for the saints.

Satan's defeat at the cross, however, does not signal the end of his opposition to God; Rev 12:12-13 shows that the intensity of Satan's hostility, anger, and persecution against the Church is the sure sign that he has lost the case in heaven. There is, moreover, a relatively short time between his defeat in heaven and his

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

final judgment.<sup>43</sup> He "comes down" in great wrath precisely because he knows he has a short time (vs. 12).

It is in light of the fact that the martyrs died as a result of an unjust juridical process sponsored by Satan and carried out by evil earthly powers that the significance of the call for vengeance as a juridical call comes into sharp focus. Thus, part of the essence of the call for vengeance is a plea that God, as Judge, make a legal ruling which will vindicate his loyal subjects.<sup>44</sup>

#### The Cry of the Martyrs

Having established the importance of the juridical process in the persecution of the saints, we must now establish the bearing of that process on the call of the souls under the altar of Rev 6:9-11. It is clear from the foregoing evidence that the martyrs had faced legal charges. The charges were unjust, but the martyrs had

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<sup>43</sup>It is not the length of time but the availability of suitable time that threatens the devil. The word used in vs. 12 is not *chronos* which means the duration of time, but *kairos* which means suitable time. See Morris, p. 163. So the devil, after his forensic defeat, does not have a lot of suitable time for his deceptions.

<sup>44</sup>The salvation history placement of Rev 12:7-9 is of interest. There are four possible interpretations: (1) the battle in heaven before the creation of the world (Ezek 28:12-19; Isa 14:12-18), (2) the battle at the cross (John 12:31-32), (3) the battle in the lives of the saints of the Middle Ages (this fits in with the the historicist school of interpretation of this passage), and (4) a blending of the battle theme drawn from all three backgrounds. While this is an interesting issue, it is not germane to the present study.



been condemned and executed. On earth Satanic powers have apparently always won the legal case. But the hope for and trust in a reversal of verdict by the heavenly supreme court still remains. As should be clear from the evidence thus far presented, precisely this hope and trust element furnishes the proper setting for the cry of the martyrs in Rev 6:9-10. But at this juncture we must analyze in a bit more detail this facet of our subject.

The cry of the souls under the altar seems to many scholars, as we have observed earlier, to be at variance with the general Christian ethic of forgiveness and loving care for one's enemies. Both this cry and the song of rejoicing recorded in Rev 19:2 call for careful investigation of the theological intent of the two passages and of the whole book--an investigation which requires a constant interaction with the Old Testament backgrounds.

We noted that in Rev 6:9 John saw the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they bore. The identification of the souls under the altar who cry out is of great importance, for it determines the nature of our theological problem. If the souls are seen as conscious departed entities, the question would seem to be the ethical justification for the personal attitudes of the persecuted towards their persecutors. On the other hand, if the souls here are only a symbolic representation, then we are dealing with

a different problem--vengeance as a theological motif without the issue of personal attitude toward personal injury.

In addressing the question of the nature of the souls under the altar, Kraft says that the word "souls" in the Apocalypse does not carry the usual Hebrew sense of *nepheš* or the meaning of *psyche* in the regular Greek setting. "It is the sum of one's behavior and is considered an immaterial aspect of man which is the basis of personal continuity beyond physical death. The soul is considered the subject of human actions."<sup>45</sup> While Kraft has recognized the problem of equating "souls" with conscious disembodied entities, he rejects the primary source (the Old Testament) as a background for John's usage of *psychai*.

The Hebrew term for *psyche* is *nepheš* which occurs 755 times in the Old Testament. *Nepheš* is most commonly a designation for life, breath, or the total person. The same term is also used of the desires and emotions of a living person.<sup>46</sup> In the Old Testament man is never viewed as an abstraction. As Edmond Jacob concluded

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<sup>45</sup>Kraft, Die Offenbarung, p. 119. While this definition seeks to avoid that understanding of soul which makes it a conscious entity apart from the body, it has not gone far enough in really identifying the nature of the soul. It may be that what John meant to convey was simply a graphic representation.

<sup>46</sup>Edmond Jacob, "*Psyche*," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964), 9:608-631.

after a careful evaluation of the Old Testament data:

Older distinctions between dichotomy and trichotomy must be abandoned so far as OT anthropology is concerned. Israelite anthropology is monistic. Man is always seen in his totality, which is quickened by a unitary life. The unity of human nature is not expressed by the antithetical concepts of body and soul but by the complementary and inseparable concepts of body and life.<sup>47</sup>

In the New Testament psyche is rendered "life" some forty times. It is rendered "soul" or "souls" some fifty-eight times, with most of them meaning "person" or "persons". At times it refers to the desires, emotions, or the will of man. It also refers to the mind.<sup>48</sup> There is no New Testament usage that clearly implies a conscious entity apart from the body.

The evidence presented above against the identification of "souls" as conscious disembodied entities is necessarily brief, for it is not germane to the thesis of this dissertation. John tried to present not "souls" but "souls under the altar," a colorful representation of the reality of persecution and martyrdom.

While most theologians raise the question of a violation of the Christian ethic of love presumed to be implied by the call of the martyrs, Maxwell poses a different question that is not usually raised: namely, does God care when his faithful servants are afflicted by

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 631.

<sup>48</sup>"Soul," [Matt 10:28], Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, 5:379.

the enemy? Maxwell proposes that only when God, at some point in time, responds by protecting the interests of his faithful ones can he be vindicated as a caring God.<sup>49</sup> Maxwell also raises another issue which is connected with the martyrs' cry: If God is sovereign, how can he allow the death of innocent saints at the hands of their enemies?<sup>50</sup>

### How Long?

The query "How long?"--a significant element in the martyrs' cry--is reminiscent of occurrences of the same question in the Old Testament and in Jewish apocalyptic literature. First, we survey the long history of this call. (The historical material is necessarily somewhat repetitive of certain details already treated in chapter 2.) Next, we evaluate the apparent marked contrast between this call and the prayers of Jesus (Luke 23:24) and Stephen (Acts 7:60). Finally, we examine the function of the cry "How long?" as it occurs in Revelation.

In the Cain-Abel episode, Abel's blood makes a call, though its words have not been recorded. God says, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). It should

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<sup>49</sup>Maxwell, 2:186-187.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

be noted here that it is not the conscious disembodied soul of Abel that cries out, but his blood. This point is extremely important to the whole issue of vengeance.

The cry of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt came to Yahweh's attention and evoked a divine response to human injustice (Exod 3:9-10).

Thus far the specific cry of "How long?" has not occurred, but in further cries for divine help it begins to take prominence. As the first example we may note Ps 6:3-4: "My soul is sorely troubled. But thou, O LORD, how long? Turn, O LORD, save my life; deliver me for the sake of thy steadfast love." Similarly, in Ps 13:1-2 the psalmist cries out, "How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" He repeats the same call for vindication also in Ps 35:17, with the same question, "How long?" In Ps 74:9-10 the very same question is once again repeated, for it seems that the enemy has triumphed. Later in that psalm (vss. 20-21) the covenant is cited as the basis for the call for vengeance and vindication: "Have regard for thy covenant; for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. Let not the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and the needy praise thy name." It is of importance to note here the connection between violence in the land and the call for Yahweh to

regard the covenant. The cry for vindication obviously has a covenantal basis here.

In the psalm of lament for the destruction of Jerusalem, the question is repeated--"How long?" (79:5). The enemy had brought destruction and bloodshed upon the Holy City. They had even defiled the temple. But the motivation for vengeance is not retaliation. Rather, it is "for the glory of thy name . . . for thy name's sake" (vs. 9). This point is put in the form of a question in vs. 10: "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of thy servants be known among the nations before our eyes."

A similar picture emerges in the prophets. Isaiah raised the same temporal question when faced with the desolation of the land (Isa 6:11). Jeremiah raised the question in connection with the destruction of the Philistine enemies (Jer 47:6). Habakkuk asked it when faced with Babylon's bringing distress upon the people of God (Hab 1:2). And Zechariah uttered the cry, "How long wilt thou have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these seventy years?" (Zech 1:12).

The cry of the martyrs is common in the Old Testament Apocrypha and Jewish apocalyptic. In 4 Ezra 3:28-36 the author raises the question why God preserved and protected those who were not his people even when their

sins were much greater than those of the Israelites:<sup>51</sup>

Then I said in my heart, Are the deeds of those who inhabit Babylon any better? Is that why she has gained dominion over Zion? For when I came here I saw ungodly deeds without number, and my soul has seen many sinners during these thirty years. And my heart failed me, for I have seen how thou dost endure those who sin, and hast spared those who act wickedly, and hast destroyed thy people, and hast preserved thy enemies, and hast not shown to any one how thy way may be comprehended. Are the deeds of Babylon better than those of Zion? Or has another nation known thee besides Israel? Or what tribes have so believed thy covenants as these tribes of Jacob? Yet their reward has not appeared and their labor has borne no fruit. For I have traveled widely among the nations and have seen that they abound in wealth, though they are unmindful of thy commandments. Now therefore weigh in a balance our iniquities and those of the inhabitants of the world; and so it will be found which way the turn of the scale will incline.

While the call here is essentially the same as in the canonical books, there are a few significant differences. In the Old Testament it is God's gracious election of his people and his covenant faithfulness that forms the basis of the cry, but in this passage it is Israel's faithfulness. In the Old Testament books the answer is wrapped up in God's ultimate redemptive purpose, but in this passage the answer is that God's ways are inscrutable. Finally, whereas the questions raised by the author of 4 Ezra have a legalistic rationale, the

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<sup>51</sup>The question "How long?" is repeated in Psalms: 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3-4; etc. See also Feuillet, L'Apocalypse, pp. 65-66, who notes that the Apocalypse constantly borrows from Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, as well as from Psalms, Genesis, and Exodus. Relying on the text of Westcott and Hort, he finds between 278 and 404 Old Testament allusions in the Apocalypse.

biblical characters call on the basis of God's mercy.

Beckwith sees such a strong parallelism between this passage and Rev 6:10 that he suggests the possibility of a common origin for both. He sees in both the protest of righteousness against iniquity, not just a desire for personal revenge. Beckwith concludes that in Rev 6:10 it is the cry of the whole Church for the speedy coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>52</sup>

In 4 Ezra 4:35, the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask, "How long are we to remain here?" A similar question appears in 1 Enoch 9:3,10: "And now, holy ones of heaven, the souls of people are putting their case before you pleading, 'Bring our judgment before the Most High.'" "And now behold, the Holy One will cry, and those who have died will bring their suit up to the gate of heaven. Their groaning has ascended into heaven, but they could not get out from before the face of the oppression that is being wrought on earth." The cry is repeated in 1 Enoch 22:5-7 and 47:4 where it is associated with the spirit that left Abel and continues to sue Cain before God until God avenges. It is therefore to be understood as a call of the afflicted for justice.

The cry "How long?" must have been repeated even in New Testament times. It has always been a cry of

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<sup>52</sup>Beckwith, p. 526.



those who were undergoing suffering that they did not deserve and longed for the day when God would step in and right the record. But it needs to be made clear that in Revelation this cry is not recorded as being made in the lifetime of the saints. Neither is it the saints themselves making it. Rather, it is their blood which calls. Martin Kiddle suggests that the shedding of the innocent blood of the saints is the sure basis for the terrible judgments, and it heralds the coming end.<sup>53</sup>

#### Despotēs as a Title for God

The term *despotēs* ("Lord") used in Rev 6:10 is used seventeen times in the Septuagint, with most of the references being to God.<sup>54</sup> It is translated from the Hebrew *Adonai*. Many of the usages are in contexts in which a request is being presented to God, or in which vengeance is the subject. In the New Testament, *despotēs* is used of God in Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24, 29; and Rev 6:10. It is used of Christ in 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4; and 2 Tim 2:21. And it is used of human masters in 1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:9; and 1 Pet 2:18. In all these occurrences the

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<sup>53</sup>Martin Kiddle, The Revelation of St. John (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), p. 119.

<sup>54</sup>See Gen 15:2,8; Josh 5:14; Job 5:8; Prov 6:7; 17:2; 22:7; 24:33; 29:25; Isa 1:24; 3:1; 10:33; Jer 1:6; 4:10; 14:13; 15:11; Jonah 4:3. Only the occurrences in the canonical books of the Old Testament are referred to here. In these books all occurrences, except those in the book of Proverbs, refer to God.

context is that of master/servant relationships. Thayer states that "despotēs was strictly the correlative of slave, *doulos*, and hence denoted absolute ownership and uncontrolled power."<sup>55</sup> Bauer says that it denotes ownership.<sup>56</sup> Karl H. Rengstorf notes that the word developed from the domestic to the political sphere with the sense of unlimited authority being uppermost.<sup>57</sup> Thus, when the souls refer to God as *despotēs* they thereby acknowledge his absolute rule over them and their position as his slaves. The call is not a demand, but an appeal. It is an appeal in the context of a relationship in which the Master has the authority to protect and avenge the blood of his servants.

In light of both the covenant context and the special meaning of *despotēs*, we may conclude, therefore, the call for vengeance in 6:10 is to be understood in the light of the covenant motif, wherein the suzerain is obligated to bring redress and justice when a vassal is attacked and injured. Perhaps the use of the term *despotēs* may even imply that the servants of God had been slain by a false "despot" while engaged in the service of their true Lord.

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<sup>55</sup>Thayer, p. 130.

<sup>56</sup>Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 176.

<sup>57</sup>Karl H. Rengstorf, "Despotēs," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964), pp. 244-249.

Lord, Holy and True

Furthermore, the double epithet "holy and true" adds another dimension to the vengeance theme. Betz has shed some welcome light on the vindication formulary which is used in a number of passages in the Old Testament.<sup>58</sup> The vindication formulary is introduced by the formula: "Righteous art Thou." The double epithet, "holy and true," is used in Rev 6:10 as an introduction to a vindication formulary passage. But rather than belonging to the apocalyptic genre (as Betz tried to demonstrate), it is more prevalent in a prophetic-theocratic *Sitz im Denken*.<sup>59</sup> In fact, a closer look at the passages that Betz used as the basis of his conclusions reveals that none of them occur in a definitely apocalyptic *Sitz im Leben* except those in Daniel and the Apocalypse.<sup>60</sup> Betz sees these formulary passages as serving the judicial function of "judgment doxology,"<sup>61</sup> but Staples identifies the same passages as vindication formulary passages.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Betz, pp. 391-409. His aim was to establish evidence for a link between the vindication formulary of Rev 16:4-6 and Old Testament and Apocryphal sources with a view to supporting the thesis that apocalyptic thinking arose out of contexts of Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism.

<sup>59</sup>Examples of this formulary can be found in Dan 9:14; Ezra 9:15; Neh 9:33; 2 Chr 12:6; Jer 12:1; Job 3:2; 3 Macc 2:3; etc.

<sup>60</sup>Staples, p. 283.

<sup>61</sup>Betz, p. 396.

<sup>62</sup>Staples, p. 284.

The vindication formulary generally appears in the Hebrew as *šaddiq 'tah* (Yahweh) and in the Septuagint as *dikaios ei* (kyrios). This formula is frequently preceded or followed by a Hebrew *ki* or Greek *hoti* clause indicating the grounds for stating or restating that God is indeed still righteous, despite any and all appearances to the contrary. Among Old Testament passages that make use of the formula are Jer 12:1 (within Jeremiah's passionate appeal that God bring the wicked to judgment); 2 Chr 12:6 (in a call by the Princes of Israel for deliverance from Shishak of Egypt); Ezra 9:15, and Neh 9:8, 33 (in covenant renewal ceremonies); and Dan 9:14 (in Daniel's prayer of confession and call for restoration). One feature common to all of these passages is the presence of a great crisis confronting God's people. In some instances there is a judicial setting (2 Chr 12:6 and Jer 12:1), which may justify use of the term "judgment doxologies" as a description for them.

The primary concern of all these passages is the age-old problem of theodicy. In each of these passages, the integrity of God seems to have been called into question by a real or perceived threat. As Staples puts it:

In the majority of these passages, an obvious question-mark has been placed against the (alleged!) righteousness of God. At such times, a faithful spokesman (spokeswoman) invariably arises in order to reassert the fact that God is still righteous; despite all the (obvious!) evidence to the contrary. . . . Such a statement, like the so-called Priestly Oracle of Salvation, invariably involved the implication that God could act again in history as, indeed,

it was believed he had done in the past, in order to put an end to the current crisis which superficially appeared to put even the righteousness of God in question.<sup>63</sup>

The same vindication formulary is used in the cry of the souls under the altar in Rev 6:10. They cried out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true. . . ?" The double epithet *ho hagios kai alēthinos* ("holy and true") is applied to Christ in 3:7.<sup>64</sup> As regards the meaning of *alēthinos*, Fenton J. A. Hort has correctly suggested that "it is misleading to think (here) only of the classical sense, true as genuine . . . but what is said of his ways and judgments." It is the Old Testament conception of truth which encompasses what is expressed in the divine word. It is a God who keeps his covenant word of promise for ever.<sup>65</sup> The epithet implies that God, as the true one, will fulfill his word or his commitment to his servants. The same idea (covenant faithfulness) emerges from the use of God's self-designation in Isaiah, "the Holy one of Israel." The emphasis is his covenant lordship and faithfulness to Israel and to the martyrs.

But perhaps the double epithet is also to be seen as a statement of a double divine attribute which has

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<sup>63</sup>Staples, pp. 284-285.

<sup>64</sup>Similar epithets occur in Isa 40:25; Acts 3:14; 1 Enoch 1:3; 14:1; 25:3; 84:1; etc.

<sup>65</sup>Fenton, J. A. Hort, quoted in Charles, The Revelation of St. John, 1:85.

significance to those who suffer for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. God is holy. He, therefore, cannot be identified with sin and all its consequences. He is thus not the author of suffering, especially innocent suffering. He is the wholly other, separate from sin. By virtue of his holiness he cannot let sin and evil go unpunished. By his very nature he must ultimately come into violent confrontation with the anti-God forces. Because God's nature is true, he must stand true to his character and word. The martyrs have died because they chose to be true to God. Would the "true" God prove untrue to those who have remained true to him unto death? As Hengstenberg has argued, if God is holy and true he is obliged to render vengeance to the wicked, for he cannot let sin go unpunished and still be a holy and true God.<sup>66</sup> Vengeance also clears the integrity of God.

An analysis of the usages of the words *dikaios* ("righteous"), *hagios* ("holy"), and *alēthinos* ("true") throughout the Apocalypse sheds additional light. Three of the four occurrences of *dikaios* (16:5,7; 19:2) are designations of God in vindication settings. The fourth is a character description of the redeemed (22:11). All ten occurrences of *alēthinos* (3:7,14; 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 9, 11; 21:5; and 22:6) are either designations of God or characterizations of his word or his ways.

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<sup>66</sup>Hengstenberg, 1:268.

Finally, the majority of the usages of *hagios* (nine of the twelve) are in judicial settings. Therefore, a major concern of Revelation where these texts occur is judgment and vindication. Their frequency and their contexts indicate as well this concern to be a major one for the entire book itself. This fact becomes more clear as this study progresses.

### Judgment and Vengeance

Turning to the central element of the prayer of the souls under the altar, one is faced with the basic question of the propriety of such a prayer. The souls call for judgment and vengeance on their enemies. Is such an apparently vengeful attitude compatible with the New Testament ethic of love and forgiveness of one's enemies? Any serious attempt to answer this question must investigate the meaning of the two key words of this prayer: *krineis* and *ekdikeis*. Our investigation begins with lexical, extra-biblical meaning, and then turns to biblical usage.

### The Meaning of *Krinō*

The basic meaning of *krinō* and its derivatives is "to sunder," "to part," "to sift," "to divide," or "to select."<sup>67</sup> By extension, it means "decide to. . . ." This meaning is attested in the Paris Papyri 26:37, the

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<sup>67</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, "*krinō*," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 10 vols. (1964), 3:922.

Oxyrhynchus Papyri 12. 1492:8, and the Tebtunis Papyri 1.55:4.<sup>68</sup> A closely related meaning is "choose."<sup>69</sup> In a more technical setting, the word means "the response of an oracle."<sup>70</sup> This brings the word into the realm of religion. Adolf Deissmann cites a prayer for vengeance found on a lead tablet, in which the goddess Demeter is asked to "give the right judgment."<sup>71</sup> It is interesting to note that it was the function of the goddess to give that judgment. In Greek religious thought, it was part of the responsibility of the gods to make justice to triumph.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to this meaning, the forensic sense of krinō is very common.<sup>73</sup> As a forensic term, it includes the idea of bringing to court, examining, and

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<sup>68</sup>James H. Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), p. 360.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Adolf Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), p. 117.

<sup>72</sup>Büchsel, pp. 933-934. Interestingly, there was no concept of eschatological judgment in Greek religion. The gods were to give rewards and punishments in the present life.

<sup>73</sup>John Pickering, A Comprehensive Lexicon of the Greek Language (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Company, 1848), p. 776. Cf. H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon. Revised and augmented by Sir Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1968).



giving a verdict.<sup>74</sup> James H. Moulton and George Milligan cite evidence for the gradual transition of *krisis* from "the process of judgment" to "the result of judgment."<sup>75</sup> Even when *krisis* means "the result of judgment," it still refers to the action that is taken as a result of the process or sentence of judgment.

### šāphaṭ in the Old Testament

Although the word *krinō* has its own history of usage in Greek culture and religion, its meaning in the book of Revelation is derived primarily from the Old Testament usage. In the Septuagint, *krinō* is most frequently a translation of the Hebrew *šāphaṭ*. Often, *krinō* is used where the judgment of God is spoken of, resulting in the vindication of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty (Deut 32:36; Ps 134:14).<sup>76</sup> This seems to be the usage in Rev 6:10, for it is the innocent martyrs who are asking judgment be made against their enemies.

Perhaps here an understanding of another aspect of Semitic thought and practice will help clarify the martyrs' call for judgment. Semites did not think of themselves as ruled or governed by laws, but by people. The administration of justice was vested in the

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<sup>74</sup>James Donnegan, A New Greek-English Lexicon (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler and Company, 1847), p. 779; and Liddell and Scott (1968).

<sup>75</sup>Moulton and Milligan, p. 360.

<sup>76</sup>Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 452.

patriarchal seniors.<sup>77</sup> Thus, in the Old Testament, *šāphaṭ* means "to act as ruler." This "rulership" might be done by the congregation of Israel (NUM 35:24), by individual judges (Deut 1:16; Judg 16:31; 1 Sam 7:16-17), by a king (1 Sam 8:5, 6, 20), or directly by God himself (Ps 96:13). In any case, God alone is always the ultimate ruler, for he is judge of the whole earth (Gen 18:25). Therefore, all other rulers derive their authority from God (Exod 18:13, 15; Deut 1:17).

Along with the idea of ruling, *šāphaṭ* also signifies "to decide cases of controversy as judge in civil, domestic, and religious cases."<sup>78</sup> In such situations, it was the judge's chief duty to judge with "justice" or "judgment" (*mišpāṭ*) (Deut 1:15-17; Ps 72:2-4); "they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked" (Deut 25:1). The officer charged with the responsibility of judging also had judicial and executive powers and could execute (or cause to be executed) the judicial decisions. Hence, David in his appeal to God as judge in his controversy with Saul declares, "May the LORD therefore be judge, and give sentence (*šāphaṭ*) between me and you, and see to it, and plead my cause, and deliver (*šāphaṭ*) me from your hand" (1 Sam 24:15). Such words as "deliver," "vindicate," "condemn," "punish," and "save" are all

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<sup>77</sup>Robert D. Culver, "*šāphaṭ*," A Theological Word-book of the Old Testament, 2 vols. (1980), 2:947.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 2:947.

legitimate translations of **šāphaṭ**,<sup>79</sup> and the forensic nature of this word-group is very strong.

This forensic element is probably best understood in the light of Old Testament society, wherein the king functioned as the judge. Because legal power rested in the king, it was his responsibility to render justice between rival parties. By extension, God as ultimate king was the judge pre-eminent. It was to him that the cries of the widows, orphans, the poor, and the oppressed were addressed, and it was he who would secure justice for them. In many of the passages in the Old Testament where the verb **šāphaṭ** or the noun **mišpāṭ** is used, the idea of litigation is in view (e.g., Isa 3:14; Exod 21:31; Deut 25:1; Josh 20:6; Job 22:4; Ps 143:2).<sup>80</sup>

The concept of "**mišpāṭ**" finds full expression in the covenant relationship between God and his people. It is the unanimous witness of the Old Testament that Israel came into nationhood as a result of coming into a covenant with Yahweh. In this covenant, Yahweh became both legislator and legal partner for Israel. Yahweh's **mišpāṭ** (׀ַפְּטִים ("judgments")) were simply the outworking of the

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 948.

<sup>80</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs find 204 occurrences of **mispāt** with the idea of legal litigation. See The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (1980), pp. 1048-1049.

covenant lordship.<sup>81</sup> The question of Abraham, "Shall not the judge of all earth do right (mišpāt)?" enables us to understand the close relationship between covenant and justice.

If the term mišpāt is related to the covenant, the most comprehensive meaning of mišpāt is contained in the pronouncement: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:12). Yahweh reveals himself most clearly as šōphēt (judge) when he acts to deliver his people from oppression. The covenant-judgment relationship has its historical setting in the Egyptian bondage (Exod 6:7). Thus, the poor and the oppressed are the object of Yahweh's mišpāt (Ps 103:6; 140:12). As Volkmar Hertrich points out, "The term mišpāt carries no fears for the poor and the oppressed. For them judgment means help and deliverance."<sup>82</sup>

The Septuagint almost always uses krinō as a rendering for šāphat.<sup>83</sup> The Apocalypse has borrowed the concept of šāphat and mišpāt from the Hebrew Old Testament either directly or through the Septuagint. In

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<sup>81</sup>Volkmar Hertrich, "The Old Testament Term mišpāt," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964), 3:925. Because of this covenantal basis of mišpāt, it was not conceivable that Israel could have a secular legal system. All law derived from Yahweh.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 930. Consult Hertrich's article cited above for a more comprehensive study of this concept.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 923.

either case, terminologically it is the same Septuagint **krinō** and its derivatives that are used in the Revelation. The conceptual freighting in the New Testament was undoubtedly primarily from the Old Testament, rather than from Classical Greek.

### **Krinō** in the Apocalypse

The Hebrew concept of rendering judgment and justice envisaged in the Hebrew term **šāphaṭ** and the Septuagint term **krinō** is carried over into the Apocalypse. All eight occurrences of **krinō** and its verbal derivatives in Revelation (6:10; 11:18; 16:5; 18:8; 19:2, 11; 20:12-13) have God as the stated or implied subject, and all but Rev 20:12-13 have a nuance of legal prosecution. In the substantival form, the noun **krisis** occurs four times (Rev 14:7; 16:7; 18:10; and 19:2). All four reflect Old Testament Hebrew thought. **Krima** is used three times in the Apocalypse (Rev 17:1; 18:20; and 20:4). The first alludes to Jer 50-51, the second and the third parallel Dan 7:22. **Dikaioma** in the sense of judicial sentence occurs once in the Apocalypse (Rev 15:4) and is reminiscent of Ps 86:9 and Mal 1:11.

Inasmuch as the background for the usage of **krinō** in the Apocalypse is to be found in the broader Hebrew concept of **mišpāt**, what we have in the prayer of the souls under the altar is a lawsuit to God--the judge--against the earthdwellers. This would suggest that the martyrs had been subjected to injustice, and that perhaps

a mistrial had taken place. The call is directed to the one who is "holy and true" to undertake a retrial and to bring about justice.

### The Meaning of Ekdikeō

The Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament concept of "vengeance" (nāqām) has already been dealt with in chapter 2. The same concept as used in the Apocrypha and in the New Testament has also been surveyed. However, an investigation of the meaning and usage of ekdikeō in non-biblical Greek literature is also pertinent for an understanding of its meaning in the Apocalypse.

The lexical meaning of ekdikeō is "to execute right and justice," "to punish," "to right," "to avenge," "to inflict vengeance."<sup>84</sup> Bauer lists as a first meaning, "avenge someone," and "procure justice for someone." He also includes such meanings as, "take vengeance for something," "punish something," "do justice to someone's official position."<sup>85</sup> The ekdikos is the avenger, or the one who carries out justice for another. Usage in the classical period seems to indicate that this was an

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<sup>84</sup>"Ekdikeō," The Analytical Greek Lexicon. Edited by Harold K. Moulton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 123. See also Thayer, pp. 193-194.

<sup>85</sup>Bauer, "Ekdikos," A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 238.

official or judicial position.<sup>86</sup>

Liddell and Scott define *ekdikeō* as "exact vengeance for," "decide a case," "avenge or vindicate a person, by taking up his cause," "act as *ekdikos*," "give satisfaction." The *ekdikos* is defined as "a public advocate or prosecutor," "legal representative."<sup>87</sup> G. W. H. Lampe defines *ekdikeō* as, "vindicate," "justify," "champion by taking up a cause," and "defend."<sup>88</sup> It seems that the official/legal element is dominant in the lexical meanings of *ekdikeō* and its derivatives.

#### The Etymology of Ekdikeō

It is altogether possible that the Classical Greek *ekdikos* ("judge") is an old loanword from Semitic languages.<sup>89</sup> The Akkadian word *diku* means "judge" and is used in such compound words as *dikuggallu* ("chief justice") and is a Sumerian loanword. And *deku* means the court summoner (often for taxes or national service).

In the Classical Period *ekdikazō* was used for "avenge." G. Schrenk thinks that it was by assimilation with *ekdikazō* that *ekdikeō* acquired the special sense of

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, "*Ekdikeō*, A Greek-English Lexicon (1968), p. 504.

<sup>88</sup>G. W. H. Lampe, "*Ekdikeō*," A Patristic Greek Lexicon (1961), pp. 426-427.

<sup>89</sup>"*Dikuggallu*," The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (1959), 3:128, 140.

"avenge," for it is only later that the words **ekdikeō** and **ekdikos** developed in this direction.<sup>90</sup> The varied use of **ekdikeō** in the papyri reveals a positive conception which is linked to the juridical exercise of **dikē**.

The prefix **ek** as part of the verb **ekdikeō** refers to what comes out of the action of **dikē**, that is, out of judgment. It would therefore mean the action that issues from trying and deciding a case. As the original **dikeō** meant "to judge," and **ek-dikeō**, "what issues out of that judgment," then **ekdikazō** would have developed as a specialized use of that meaning "to avenge." Later, the mother word, **ekdikeō**, came to assume some of the function of the daughter word, **ekdikazō**. Hence, the ordinary word for "judge" can also mean "avenge."

Schrenk concludes that the reference of **ekdikeō** in the papyri is always to legal action.<sup>91</sup> Schrenk further observes "that Rev. is closest to the OT usage [of **nāqām**]."<sup>92</sup> Paul too follows the Old Testament usage very closely.<sup>93</sup> The New Testament usage of **ekdikeō** has a clear link with the Old Testament Hebrew through the Septuagint's always rendering **nāqām** as **ekdikeō**.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>G. Schrenk, "Ekdikeō," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964), p. 442.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 442.



W. F. Howard points out that *ekdikeō* originated from *dikē* and was formed by prefixing the preposition, *ek*.<sup>95</sup> In this early developmental stage, *ekdikeō* and its derivatives meant being placed outside the limits of the law by an offense. Thus, *ekdikos* was the one who stood outside of the right, or "the outlaw."<sup>96</sup> Later, the sense of "defending the right" became the primary meaning. Still later, *ekdikeō* came to mean a legal process. Schrenk believes that these developments took place during the Attic and Ionic periods.<sup>97</sup>

Having followed this development of the word *ekdikeō* in its non-biblical usage, one must ask whether the Apocalypse reflects a similar usage. The legal setting envisaged in this term in its non-biblical usage is evidently present in the Apocalypse. However, there is the added dimension of the covenant setting which is drawn from the Old Testament usage of *nāqām*. Moreover, within that covenant context, God is portrayed as indicting the offender in a court setting, as has been demonstrated in the vindication song of Deut 32, Dan 7:9-27, and a number of other passages. In these heavenly assizes, God even calls on witnesses to witness the legal

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<sup>95</sup>W. F. Howard, A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Accidence and Word-Formation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929), p. 311.

<sup>96</sup>Schrenk, p. 444.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 445.

process and the divine sentence.

In addition to the Old Testament background, the word **ekdikeō** is juxtaposed with **krinō** (a clearly legal term) in both Rev 6:10 and Rev 19:2. These considerations lead to the conclusion that in Rev 6:10 and 19:2 **ekdikeō** has a legal implication. The two terms **krineis** ("judge") and **ekdikeis** ("avenge") appear to have a sequential relationship. First, judging is done and then vengeance follows. Thus the martyrs' cry in Rev 6:10 must be seen as a legal plea in which God is asked to conduct a legal process leading to a verdict that will vindicate his martyred saints.

#### The Cry of Innocent Blood

John's vision of the souls under the altar raises a central concern of the book of Revelation: justice and judgment. John picks up a theme that has found expression in a number of Old Testament passages. A connection has been established between the shedding of innocent blood and the call for vengeance. A review of some key passages is in order at this point. In Gen 4:10 it is the voice of Abel's blood that was crying from the ground. Abel was no longer alive, and there is no indication that a conscious entity from Abel was making this appeal. On the contrary, all indications are that what we have here is a piece of graphic imagery that vividly portrays a biblical principle: namely, that shed innocent blood results in divine intervention involving punishment

for the guilty one and vindication for the innocent.

This connection between innocent blood and vengeance reaches a new development in the Song of Moses in Deut 32:43: (1) There is a more precise identification of the blood, "the blood of his servants;" (2) there is the definite promise of God's vengeance on the enemies; and (3) there is the call for rejoicing on the part of the summoned witnesses. In this Song of Moses these related concepts are cast into a standard vindication formulary, a formulary repeated in later passages with slight variations.

In 2 Kgs 9:7 this formulary occurs, with one element missing: the call for rejoicing. The other two elements are present. The identifications here are quite precise: "And you shall strike the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge the blood of My servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD, at the hand of Jezebel." Thus, "the servants" in this passage are the prophets, while the adversaries are the house of Ahab. The background is 1 Kgs 18:4, where Jezebel ordered the persecution and killing of the prophets, and possibly also 1 Kgs 21:15, which records the murder of Naboth by Jezebel.

The vengeance formulary is repeated in a shortened form in Ps 79:9. The essential elements are present. There is the call for vengeance. The adversary is to be punished, while the innocent are to be vindicated.

There is also the resultant rejoicing of the redeemed (79:9-13). While the formulary is not repeated in Ec 94:1-2, the theme is present there. God is twice referred to as "the God of vengeance."

While the formulary finds expression in Rev 6:10 and 19:2, the theme of innocent blood is a much broader motif in the Apocalypse. It begins with Christ as the slain lamb. The word **arnion** is used twenty-nine times as a designation of the crucified Christ in the Apocalypse. Revelation uses the less usual word for lamb, in contrast to the **amos** of the rest of the New Testament. All the uses of **amos** in the New Testament (John 1:29, 39; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet 1:19) refer to the pre-crucified Christ. One occurrence of **amos** (Luke 10:3) refers to the disciples. One use of **arnion** refers to the Church. All the occurrences of **arnion** as a designation of Christ are found in Revelation, and all refer to the post-crucified Christ. By this specialized use, John has underscored the slainness of Christ as the Lamb. So Christ is the martyred Lamb whose experience of innocent suffering and death becomes the experience of the saints.

The word used in Rev 5:6 is **esphagmenon**, a perfect passive predicate participle of the verb **sphazō**.<sup>98</sup> Its association with **arnion** brings the element of

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<sup>98</sup>A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1933), 6:334.

sacrifice to the forefront. And a number of scholars see Isa 53 as the predominant background for the slain-lamb figure of Revelation.<sup>99</sup> If this assumption is correct, we have a clear indication of the centrality of innocent suffering on the part of the slain lamb.

John has connected the metaphor of the slain lamb to the idea of the martyred saints to formulate a theological point. Christ has died as an innocent lamb and has, by his sacrifice, won the victory over his foes. Thus, it is precisely because he suffered, and not in spite of it, that Christ has become the victor. And those who follow him have taken the same step of entering into innocent suffering. It is through suffering that they too become victors.<sup>100</sup>

While blood is not explicitly mentioned in the doxology of Rev 11:17-18, the key elements of judgment of enemies, vindication of God's servants, and the note of rejoicing are present. The context leads to the conclusion that judgment comes on account of innocent blood.

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<sup>99</sup>Kraft, Die Offenbarung, pp. 108-110. See also J. Comblin, Le Christ dans l'Apocalypse (Paris: Desclee & Company, 1965), pp. 23-43.

<sup>100</sup>This concept of victory through suffering must not be construed to imply a doctrine of meritorious suffering. The martyrs do not earn their salvation by suffering. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus. However, the Apocalypse is not addressing that issue. The point of focus is the tribulations upon the Church, both present and future, and how to bring hope in the midst of such suffering.

The Nature of Judgment

Naturally, the question of the nature of the judgment which the martyrs cry for and which is rendered by God must be considered. In this connection, it may be well to note Revelation's view of history: namely, that Christ is Lord of creation, time, and history. As such, he is in control both of the present existence and future triumph of the Church.<sup>101</sup> This lordship of Jesus finds expression in the nature of the judgment he renders.

With respect to the nature of the judgment called for by the martyrs in Rev 6:10, Caird has noted that the real issue in the cry is "public justice." Caird observes that the language of 6:10 is based on Hebrew jurisprudence in which there was no public prosecutor. He points out:

All cases were civil cases, in which a plaintiff must plead his own cause and the judge must decide whether he was in the right or in the wrong; so that any failure of the judge to vindicate the plaintiff was tantamount to a decision in favour of the defendant. The martyrs have been condemned in a human court of law, and that decision stands against them unless it is reversed in a higher court. But the heavenly judge cannot declare them to be in the right without at the same time declaring their persecutors to be in the wrong and passing sentence against them. Justice must not only be done; it must be seen to be done.<sup>102</sup>

Since justice must be seen to be done, God, as judge, must undertake an open investigation of the

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<sup>101</sup>Mathias Rissi, Time and History (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 22-54.

<sup>102</sup>Caird, The Revelation, p. 85. Emphasis supplied.

records of both the plaintiff and the defendant. But why would such an investigation be necessary? Clearly, such an investigation is not necessary for God, for he already knows the facts of the case. But since a mistrial or misrepresentation has taken place (and it is precisely on account of such a mistrial that the cry for vengeance has been made), a **judicial process** is necessary. Several considerations lead to this conclusion. Viewed from the context of treaty or covenant (which is a background for the judgment motif in Revelation), the rib-pattern calls for a public trial in which witnesses are required. Also, the law of malicious witness, which furnishes a background for the judgment call in Rev 6:10, requires that the judge make a diligent inquiry leading to a verdict. Finally, parallel passages dealing with the judgment theme in Daniel (7:9-27) suggest an investigation as part of the judicial process, for books are opened and witnesses are present.

If God as judge were to convene the court so as simply to pronounce a verdict, justice might not be seen to be done. Therefore, the investigation must be conducted in such a way as to answer the questions and counter-questions as they apply to both plaintiff and defendant. The attendants of the heavenly court--the twenty-four elders, the four beasts, and the angelic hosts--function as the witnesses whose judicial task is to take note of and proclaim the justice of God's

judgments. While the judgment does not determine for the first time the guilt of the beast and the innocence of the saints, it nevertheless establishes the judicial basis on which the witnesses make their proclamation of the justice of God.

The Judgments of God on Babylon

In his doxology, the angel of the waters says, "Just art thou in these thy judgments, thou who art and wast, O Holy One. For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink. It is their due" (16:5-6). A voice from the altar responds, "Yea, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are thy judgments" (vs. 7). The chief concern is clearly the blood of the saints that had been shed by the adversary. The whole book of Revelation seems to revolve around the question of the suffering of God's people.

There are some very significant correspondences between Rev 6:10 and 16:6-7, making the second passage an answer to the first. In both passages the altar is in some way involved in speaking. In the first it is the souls under the altar who speak; and in the second it is the altar itself which speaks. Possibly the souls of 6:9-10 are to be seen as the animating force of the altar in 16:6-7. And there is a small chiasm in 16:6-7:

- A - **Just** art thou in these **thy judgments** (judgment)  
 B - thou who art and wast, O Holy One (God's titles)  
 C - For men have shed the blood of saints and



prophets (blood spilt out)

C'- Thou hast given them blood to drink, it is  
their due (blood to drink)

And I heard the altar cry (identification)

B'- Yea, Lord God Almighty (God's titles)

A'- True and just are thy judgments (judgment)<sup>103</sup>

It is significant also that the two titles for God in 6:10, "Holy" and "True," are used again in 16:6-7. The first one is used as God's title at the beginning of the passage, and both are used adjectively to describe the nature of God's judgments. There is also a correspondence of "blood" between 6:10 and 16:6. In a very real sense, therefore, the third plague answers the question of the fifth seal. While 6:10 does not seem to reveal any chiasm, it may be noted that the elements present in it are to be found in 16:7, the last half of the chiasm:

Titles of God:	<b>despotēs</b>
Attributes of God:	holy and true
Time of judgment:	how long?
Reason for judgment:	judge and avenge our blood.

The parallels between the plagues in Rev 16 and the plagues on Egypt suggest the Exodus from Egypt as a suitable background for this vision. In the context of

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<sup>103</sup>This chiastic structure was suggested to me by Dr. William H. Shea, a member of my dissertation committee.

the judgments of God on Egypt as an act of righteous deliverance, the judgment doxology by the angel of the waters and the altar (Rev 16:5-7) is parallel to the Song of deliverance of Exod 15. The rejoicing is not on account of man's vindictiveness but on account of God's acts of salvation. Thus, the doxology is not anthropocentric but theocentric.

Rev 17 continues the development of the innocent suffering motif. The evil power is portrayed under a double imagery of "harlot" and "Babylon." John sees "the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. And when I saw her, I wondered greatly" (17:6). John's wonder appears to arise from seeing the evil power apparently so triumphant and so invincible that it seemed that the slaughtered saints could never be vindicated. Indeed, any attempt at interpreting the Apocalypse without taking into consideration the concern for bringing hope to suffering saints misses the central thrust of the book.

In marked contrast to the vision of Rev 17 is that of Rev 13. In 13:7, the leopard-like beast "was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation." But in 17:14, the Lamb makes war against the evil kings and prevails. The vindication of the saints is assured. Caird interprets the wine of fornication as being the gross idolatry which the evil power

spreads throughout the world, while the drunkenness with the blood of the saints refers to the persecution of those who refuse to participate in the idolatry.<sup>104</sup> John uses the same word *bdelygma* ("abomination") which is used in Mark 13:14, but which derives originally from Dan 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11. An examination of the Daniel passages reveals that both idolatry and persecution form part of the context for the original usage.

Rev 18 focuses on the judgments against the wicked power. In graphic imagery, John describes that power and unveils its evil character. Whereas the outward appearance is that of a woman clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, pearls, and precious stones, and riding on a magnificent beast (17:4,7), she is in reality a harlot. While she appears like a beautiful and powerful city (17:18), she soon becomes the dwelling place of unclean spirits and hateful birds (18:2). In the end, she is a burnt-out, desolate place. This is in contrast with the New Jerusalem of Rev 21. Thus, in the midst of Babylon's punishment, there is the call to the heavens, the saints, the apostles, and the prophets to rejoice, "because God has pronounced judgment for you against her" (18:20). Closely following is the mention of the fact that in Babylon "was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on

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<sup>104</sup>Caird, The Revelation, p. 214.

the earth" (vs. 24). The reversal motif is unmistakable.

The first part of vs. 20 is an echo of 12:12, the passage where heaven is called upon to rejoice over the defeat of the devil by Michael, while the earth and the sea are warned of the death-throe wrath of the dragon. Thus, while heaven rejoices, earth enters into a period of unprecedented conflict. In chap. 12 victory and joy are limited to the heavenly realm, for it is only there that the Lamb's victory has become a demonstrated reality. In chap 18, through the saints' martyrdom and vindication, the Lamb's heavenly victory has now become an earthly reality.<sup>105</sup> Now that satanic woes have passed, both heaven and earth may rejoice.

Caird notes that these two passages (12:12 and 18:20) are the two court-room scenes of the book.<sup>106</sup> In the first scene, Michael and Satan are involved in a legal contest, with Satan appearing in his traditional role as the accuser or prosecutor (12:10), who demands a death sentence to be passed on the saints. Satan loses both the case and his legal standing in heaven. As a result, he is driven out of heaven. It is theologically significant that the controversy must be fought and the victory won in the heavenly sphere before it is fought on earth. In this way, the Apocalypse places the spotlight

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

on the gospel by giving the terrestrial drama a celestial foundation. What happens to the saints on earth is to be seen as a reflection of what has already taken place in Christ. Thus, while the experience of the Church is built on that of Christ, it is also that experience of the saints which substantiates the victory of Christ.

The second scene (18:20) portrays a legal contest between the martyrs and their earthly accuser, Babylon. The last part of vs. 20 is difficult to translate. The literal rendering would be, "Because God has judged your judgment on her." Lohmeyer thinks that it is a condensed form of saying 'God has judged her and vindicated you,'<sup>107</sup> but it is not clear how he gets this from the Greek text. The Revised Standard Version seems to have **krima** as a cognate accusative, thus taking 'your judgment' to be equivalent to 'judgment for you against her.'<sup>108</sup> The New English Bible takes **krima** as the equivalent of the Hebrew **rib**, which can mean either a lawsuit or the cause which a man submits to the arbitration of a judge, 'in the judgment against her he has vindicated your cause.'<sup>109</sup>

There are two problems with the above renderings.

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<sup>107</sup>Lohmeyer, Die Offenbarung, p. 149.

<sup>108</sup>The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971).

<sup>109</sup>The New English Bible (The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1961, 1970).

The first is that **krima** is given the meaning "vindication," which it does not have anywhere else in the Apocalypse, the New Testament, or the Septuagint. In the New Testament **krima** has one of three meanings. It means the right to act as judge, as in Rev 20:4. It also means the judicial act of passing judgment, as in John 9:39. But in the majority of New Testament occurrences, it means the sentence passed by a judge. Friedrich Büchsel points out that usually the decision is an unfavorable one.<sup>110</sup> Only the last meaning will properly fit Rev 18:20.

In this passage, to **krima humōn** must mean either "the sentence passed by you" or "the sentence passed on you." But the first is untenable because God and not the martyrs is judge. Thus, the sentence here mentioned is that which was passed against the martyrs. Earlier in this chapter of the dissertation, reference was made to the significance of the legal process in the martyrdom of the saints. That legal process has great relevance for the present discussion. In 18:6 Babylon is to be paid back double what she had done. Verse 8 enumerates what she is to receive: pestilence, famine, and death by fire. But if she is receiving what she had done, we may conclude that she had caused pestilence, famine, and death by fire on the saints.

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<sup>110</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, "**krima**." Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964), 6:942.

There is here an interesting correspondence between the problems caused by the second, third, and fourth seals and the present passage. The three horse riders cause famine, pestilence and death.<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, it is these same judgments that come on Babylon in 18:8. Shea suggests that since the plagues of Rev 16-17 correspond roughly with the seven trumpets of 8-11, the judgments of Rev 18 may therefore correspond with the seven seals of chaps. 6-8. This seems to be a valid suggestion and lends support to the thematic similarity.<sup>112</sup>

Whatever relationship may exist between these two passages (Rev 6:3-8 and Rev 18), Rev 18:6-8 shows that the judgments of Babylon are simply a reversal of what she had done to the saints.

The phrase *ex autēs* of 18:20 may best be interpreted in the light of two Old Testament laws--the law of bloodshed and the law of malicious witness. The first declares: "I will require from a man the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds a man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen 9:5-6). The law of malicious witness says:

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<sup>111</sup>The correspondence may not only be thematic here, for the two passages also share a structural relationship in the overall chiastic structure of the Apocalypse.

<sup>112</sup>William Shea, "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," Andrews University Seminary Studies 20 (1982):249-255.

If a malicious witness rises against any man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days; the judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he meant to do to his brother; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you. And the rest shall hear, and fear, and shall never again commit such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Deut 19:16-21)

It is notable that both the religious and legal institutions were invoked in the law of a malicious witness, for the contending parties were to appear before the Lord, along with the priests and the judges. This suggests that the divine tribunal involves both legal and theological issues.

The beast power has brought malicious accusations against the saints, and the result has been their persecution and death. The martyrs' blood has appealed to the higher court of the Lord, Holy and True, for a new trial. Thus, in Rev 18 the Lord exposes Babylon, the malicious witness, for what she really is, and applies the law of malicious witness, by declaring: "Render to her as she herself has done, and repay her double for her deeds" (18:6). In this legal setting, *ex autēs* of 18:20 refers to the malicious judgment which Babylon had passed on the martyrs, but which is now passed back on Babylon. The sentence of God on Babylon is a reversal of a malicious sentence which results in punishment for the adversary and vindication for the saints.



Perhaps the following loose translation of Rev 18:20 may help articulate John's thought here:

Be joyful you who dwell in the heavens, and you saints of God, and you his prophets, and apostles, for at last, in response to your cry for judgment and vengeance God has judged Babylon, your enemy. He has taken the malicious judgment which she had passed on you and pronounced it on her.<sup>113</sup>

In this forensic context, it is easy to appreciate John's use of the term *martyrs* as a designation for the victims of persecution. While the term may have already reached the technical stage for "martyr," it had not, in the process, lost its forensic meaning of one who gives testimony in a law court. Very often, the law court lay on the pathway to martyrdom. Thus, while the term served a descriptive purpose, it also inspired hope in the prospective martyr, for the very malicious legal process which awaited him would be the necessary evidence for the reversal of the sentence.<sup>114</sup> As Caird rightly points out, "Babylon's malicious witness recoils on her own head."<sup>115</sup>

In a significant study on Rev 18 Strand has shown the two aspects of the judgment on Babylon. In the first aspect of the judgment there is a verdict because of the sinful conduct of Babylon against God and his people (18:20), and in the second aspect there is the execution

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<sup>113</sup>This is my own paraphrase.

<sup>114</sup>Caird, The Revelation, pp. 228-230.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

of that judgment (18:9-19).<sup>116</sup> Strand further suggests that the use of *krisis* (the execution of judgment) in 18:10 and the use of *krima* (rendering of verdict) in 18:20 falls within a chiastic pattern of the chapter and also helps to underscore the theological dimension of judgment in this chapter.<sup>117</sup>

The significance of these two aspects of judgment for the present study are obvious. The investigative-type judgment on Babylon which is implied by the appeal to the law of malicious witness in 18:20b is a response to the call of the souls under the altar (6:9-11) that the Lord who is Holy and True may bring their case for a retrial and that he might avenge their blood. Thus, not only was there a call for judgment but there was a divine judicial response to that call. It is this process of investigation of the deeds of Babylon that justifies the type of judgment (punishment) which God renders on her.

#### Vengeance on Babylon and Treaty Curses

In the second chapter of this dissertation, some parallels noted between Ancient Near Eastern vassal

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<sup>116</sup>Kenneth Strand, "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment Portrayed in Revelation 18," Andrews University Seminary Studies 20 (1982):53-60. See also Shea, "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," pp. 249-255. Strand's study of the chiastic literary structure of Rev 18 reveals John's use of two interludes within his schema as an appeal in view of the final judgment on Babylon.

<sup>117</sup>Strand, "Two Aspects," pp. 58-59.

treaties and the covenant curses pronounced by the prophets on covenant-breakers and foreign aggressors. In the book of Revelation there are some very significant parallels with those treaty-curses. Hillers has produced a landmark study on the parallels between treaty-curses and Old Testament prophetic oracles against foreign nations, and covenant-breakers.<sup>118</sup> But those same curses are found most clearly articulated in the lament over the fall of Babylon. Following are some treaty-curses and the parallel Revelation passages that articulate the same vengeance for the enemy or rebellious city:

**1. The dwelling place of animals.**

Treaty: "And may Arpad become a mound to [house the desert animal and the] gazelle and the fox and the hare and the wild-cat and the owl and the [break in text] and the magpie."<sup>119</sup>

Rev 18:2: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become the dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird."

**2. Removal of festive sounds.**

Treaty: "Nor may the sound of the lyre be heard

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<sup>118</sup>Hillers, Treaty-curses.

<sup>119</sup>André Dupont-Sommer, Les inscriptions araméennes de S'fire (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1958), pp. 47-48.

in Arphad and among its people."<sup>120</sup>

Rev 18:22: "and the sound of harpers and minstrels, of flute players and trumpeters, shall be heard in thee no more."

### 3. Burnt with fire.

Treaty: "Just as this wax is burned by fire, so shall Arphad be burned down."<sup>121</sup>

Rev 18:9,17-18: "And the kings of the earth who committed fornication and were wanton with her will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning."

### 4. Perpetual desolation of the city.

Treaty: The Hittite curse on a conquered city is that it would be perpetually desolate, and that wild animals would graze there forever.<sup>122</sup>

Rev 18:21: "So shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with great violence, and shall be found no more."

5. The use of the prostitute imagery in describing the enemy city is common to both.<sup>123</sup>

6. Passers-by would shudder at the extent of the

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>121</sup>Hillers, p. 18.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

desolation of the once prosperous city.<sup>124</sup>

#### 7. Removal of economic support.

Treaty: "May there be no noise of millstone. . . in your houses. May you experience a constant lack of grain for grinding."<sup>125</sup>

Rev 18:11-14 is a long list of items that are no more to be found in Babylon.

These parallels suggest some interesting and perhaps significant backgrounds to the themes of Revelation. The relationship might not be as a result of direct borrowing from Ancient Near Eastern treaties, but more likely has come through the Old Testament prophets. In any case, Babylon is the enemy city which has become the object of covenant (treaty) curses, and the cry for vengeance may be seen as having a treaty or covenantal basis rather than being a manifestation of a personal vindictive spirit.

#### Vengeance on Babylon and Restoration of Jerusalem

In another vein, the restoration motif sheds light on the vengeance theme in Revelation. Rev 17-18 draw heavily from the language, imagery, and themes of Jer 50-51. Both passages deal with the fall of the two

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>125</sup>Esarhaddon treaty, lines 443-445, in Hillers, p. 58.

Babylons. The similarities may best be demonstrated in a table of parallels (table 2).

TABLE 2  
PARALLEL PASSAGES DEPICTING HISTORICAL  
BABYLON WITH MYSTICAL BABYLON

Common Condition	Historical Babylon Jer 50-51	Mystical Babylon Rev 17-18
1. Babylon is fallen	50:15	18:2
2. God's people come out	50:4,5,19	18:4
3. Babylon not inhabited	50:13; 51:26	18:21
4. Babylon repaid double <sup>126</sup>	50:15,29; 51:24	18:6
5. Making nations drunk	51:7-8	18:3
6. God as mighty judge	50:34	18:8
7. Call to holiness	51:6	18:4
8. Stopping of commerce	51:44	18:11f.
9. God's people rejoice	51:10	18:20
10. Marvel of nations	50:46	18:10f.
11. Reversal of malicious witness	51:10	18:20
12. Inhabited by wild animals	51:37	18:2

The Jeremiah doom oracle is very clearly a message intended for the encouragement of the covenant people. At the time of the prophet's oracle, Babylon was a powerful city, with no indications of an imminent doom.

<sup>126</sup>In the Jeremiah passages there is no mention of doubling what Babylon had done, only a reversal.

But the restoration of Jerusalem depended on the fall of Babylon. One notices that the announcement of the fall of Babylon comes in the same breath as the announcement of the restoration of Jerusalem (Jer 50:2-5). Jerusalem will not be rebuilt while Babylon is in power. Thus, vengeance upon the enemy is inseparably connected with the restoration of the people of God. As in ancient Babylon it was necessary that the power and control of Babylon over Israel be broken before Israel could return to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple, so it is necessary that the power and influence of mystical Babylon be broken before God's people are set free and the New Jerusalem is established in their midst.<sup>127</sup>

In developing his theological perspective, John develops a three-level schema in which vengeance and restoration are implemented:

Level one: There is vengeance in heaven on the dragon and his anti-God forces waged in the form of a war in which Michael and his angels prevail and expel

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<sup>127</sup>John focuses on sovereignty over the universe. Whereas other New Testament writers see the issue in terms of the alternative between the lordship of Christ and that of evil cosmic powers (Col 2:15, 20; Eph 2:2), John interprets the question in somewhat more political terms. For him, the issue is the present apparent domination of evil political powers represented by the various beasts and horns, over against the sovereignty of God and his Christ. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Book of Revelation," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, sup. vol. (1976):744-746. See also E. Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

Satan and his hosts. The result is the restoration of peace and rejoicing in heaven (12:7-12). It is this level which becomes the basis for the second stage, for it is the blood of the slain Lamb that accomplishes the defeat of Satan.

Level two: In the next stage it is the followers of the Lamb who are pitted against the followers of the dragon. While the saints are martyred, they overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony (12:11). Vengeance on the evil power results in vindication for the saints. While earthly powers lament for Babylon's fall, there is a restoration of joy and the kingdom to the saints, and they reign with Christ. Inasmuch as it was necessary that the fall of ancient Babylon precede the freeing of Israel and the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple, the fall of mystical Babylon is a necessary prerequisite to the restoration of the saints. It is noteworthy that Rev 18:20 calls on both the heavens and the inhabitants of the earth to rejoice. By contrast, the call in 12:12 is for the heavenly hosts to rejoice, while those on earth are warned about the fury of the dragon. Perhaps in chap. 12 the rejoicing is limited to heaven because God's victory depicted there stands as a demonstrated reality only in the heavenly realm, whereas in chaps. 17-18 God's vengeance has become a universally visible and uncontested reality.



Level three The third level is the final vengeance of God on all evil powers. No longer is that vengeance limited to the expulsion of the devil from heaven or to the reversal of the beast's fortunes. The sovereignty is restored to God, and the kingdom is fully restored to the people of the kingdom. The evil usurper is cast out into the lake of fire, and complete peace and joy are restored. Rev 20-21 is a graphic description of this final process of vengeance and restoration.<sup>128</sup>

Call for Rejoicing in Rev 19:1-2

"After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.'"

This response of rejoicing at the judgment of the great harlot has raised the same theological problem as that raised by the cry of the souls under the altar. Is it ever right for Christians to rejoice at the judgment of their enemies? Once again, considerations must be given to the thrust of the whole book of Revelation.

In the first place, the book of Revelation does not portray specific individuals rejoicing at the

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid. Fiorenza's schema is somewhat different from the one presented here, but the basic outline is the same.

judgment of their personal enemies. The unanimous witness of the New Testament is that the Christian must love his enemies and do good to them (Matt 5:43-48; Rom 12:14-21); and the fact that in Revelation there are no explicit calls to love one's enemies (or indeed, one's neighbors) does not imply that brotherly love is optional in the theology of the Apocalypse. The focus of the book is different. Its purpose is mainly pastoral--the bringing of hope and comfort to a people in crisis.

Secondly, one is faced with the question of whether the supposed "attitude" of the Apocalypse is to be attributed to the Seer or the divine source of his visions. Is John projecting his own attitude and that of his community, or is he simply recording what he has been shown? This question goes beyond the issue on hand, to the presuppositions that one holds on the matter of revelation and inspiration.<sup>129</sup> If John is merely recording what God has shown him, then we are faced with a theological issue, not just an ethical one. It becomes a question of what this attitude says about God, not simply about John.

A third consideration is the projected notion of non-resistance which is portrayed under varying images in

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<sup>129</sup>The varied presuppositions on this broad topic are beyond the scope of this research, and will not be entered into here. This research presupposes that John has given a record of what was revealed to him, not a projection of his own personal attitude.

the book of Revelation. In the fifth chapter John hears that the Lion of the tribe of Judah is worthy to open the sealed book of destiny. But when John turns to see the strong lion, he sees a Lamb which had been slain. This is what Graeme Goldsworthy has referred to as a "verbal conundrum, so typical of apocalyptic,"<sup>130</sup> and it points out the book's central paradox--Christ's victory over the evil powers came in the form of his suffering and death. And by extension, the saints' victory is marked by suffering and martyrdom.

A further consideration is the absence of evidences of the saints' involvement in the wars of the Lamb against evil powers. Klassen has pointed out that John never presents the saints as following the Lamb in actual battle.<sup>131</sup> The key to history lies with the Lamb that was slain, not with warring saints. The closest John comes to saints at war is chap 17:14, where the ten kings make war with the Lamb. After this description, there is mention of those who are with the Lamb, who are "called and chosen and faithful." But in this passage it is the Lamb who conquers the kings. Charles takes the position that the martyrs here participate in the destruction of

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<sup>130</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, The Lamb and the Lion: the Gospel in Revelation (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), p. 22.

<sup>131</sup>Klassen, "Vengeance in the Apocalypse," pp. 306-307.

the enemies, though not from a vindictive motivation.<sup>132</sup> The facts, however, do not seem to give support to such a conclusion. The saints are portrayed as being on the Lamb's side, but never as participating in the actual battle. Thus, the Johannine ethic for the Christian in a hostile world is non-resistance. Those who become victors are the faithful unto death.

The Apocalypse almost always describes the Lamb's battle as a defensive war, with the evil powers taking the offensive. The verb *polemeō* ("to make war") is used of Christ only twice in the Apocalypse (2:16 and 19:11). The first is a reference to Christ's warning that he would fight the Church at Pergamum with a two-edged sword of his mouth. This is a conditional threat of divine judgment which would only be carried out if the Church refused to repent. The second is a portrayal of a war of vengeance and vindication. This war is a manifestation of the divine attributes of faithfulness and truth. And the twin activities of this campaign are judging and making war--both aspects of vengeance.<sup>133</sup>

The Lamb goes to war, but only in defense of his saints, his sovereignty, or his character. Clearly, the

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<sup>132</sup>Charles, The Revelation, 2:74. Such a view finds expression in the Jewish apocalyptic documents, where the martyr host of warriors participate in the destruction of the wicked (1 Enoch 38:5; 40:19; 41:12 etc).

<sup>133</sup>*polemeō* is often used of the activities of kings (17:14), beasts, and demons (12:7) in Revelation.

saints have no active part in the messianic wars. The war is in their defense, and their victory over the evil powers is based on the victory of the Lamb to whom they are faithful unto death. Over and over, the saints are identified as those who have patient endurance (2:2-3, 19: 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), and keep the commandments of Jesus. Thus, the Apocalypse reveals a very strong bond of commitment between the saints and their Lord. In the context of such a bond, the Lamb is the protector of his people. This sort of bond seems to parallel the vassal-treaties of the Ancient Near East, in which the vassal pledged loyalty to his lord in return for protection from hostile aggressors.<sup>134</sup>

The faithfulness of of the vassal is expressed in remarkably uniform language in the vassal-treaties. The Hittite treaties of Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub has the word "honor" and the treaty of Suppiluliuma and Mattiwaza use the word "fulfill." In the treaty between Mursilis and Niqmepa, written in Akkadian, the word "guard" or "keep" (from the stem *naṣāru*) is used. The very same word is used in the fragment of the benediction of the treaty of Sefire (*ysrw* from the stem *nsr*)<sup>135</sup>. In Deut 8:1 and 28:1 the word *šāmar* is used with the same meaning as *naṣar*, and in Deut 33:9 both words are used with

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<sup>134</sup>Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction," p. 6.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

reference to the faithfulness of the Levites to the covenant. The fact that the same word is used in treaty/covenant setting in the vassal-treaties and in the Old Testament covenant relationships, and its Greek equivalent, *tereō*, in saints-Lord relationships in the Apocalypse (1:3; 2:26; 3:8-10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15; 22:7,9) may suggest the presence of a treaty/covenant motif in the Apocalypse, similar to that found in both the Ancient Near Eastern treaties and the Old Testament.<sup>136</sup>

That there may be some parallels between Ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaties and the book of Revelation has been suggested by at least three independent studies in recent years. One study by Shea analyzed some apparent structural parallels between the vassal-treaties and the letters to the seven Churches of Revelation. Shea saw each of the seven letters as a covenant renewal message occurring at different points along the New Israel's history.<sup>137</sup> The centrality of the covenant motif in Revelation is further indicated by the only

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<sup>136</sup>For an examination of some studies in this direction, see K. A. Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form in the Book of Revelation," pp. 251-264; W. H. Shea, "The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches," pp. 71-84; and J. du Preez, "Ancient Near Eastern Vassal Treaties," pp. 33-43.

<sup>137</sup>Shea, "The Covenantal Form," p. 83.

occurrence of the word "covenant" at 11:16.<sup>138</sup>

A further step was taken by Kenneth A. Strand in a study that explored the vassal-treaty form as a possible constitutive pattern for the whole book of Revelation. Strand observed that in the apocalyptic framework of Revelation, the covenant stipulations often come in the form of "pictorizations of covenant loyalty within the conflict setting that is the constant backdrop to the book's portrayals."<sup>139</sup> The Suzerain's prior goodness and continuing care are paralleled by Christ's past blessings and present care under persecution and suffering.<sup>140</sup> In this setting, the covenant motif sheds light on the theme of vengeance in the book of Revelation.<sup>141</sup>

With these preliminary considerations in mind, it is necessary to return to a consideration of the basic ethical issue of Rev 19:1-2--the propriety of rejoicing over the judgment of your adversary. The jubilation of Rev 19:1-7 is in marked contrast to the lament of Rev 18. There is here a reversal of attitudes. The once mourning

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>139</sup>Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form," p. 252.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid., pp. 254-257.

<sup>141</sup>Because it is outside of the scope of this dissertation to prove the covenantal structure of Revelation, no such attempt will be made at this point. In fact, it is not crucial to the thesis of this study that a covenantal structure be demonstrated. It only needs to be shown that the covenant motif is present in the book.

saints are now rejoicing, while the once rejoicing Babylon is now in the midst of lamenting.

It is interesting to note some elements which are suggestive of the Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds to this atmosphere of rejoicing. An overview of the "rejoicing" passages in Revelation will reveal the presence of a pattern. First, one sees that in chap. 11 John portrays a picture of the hostility of the earth-dwellers towards God and his witnesses. The beast kills the two witnesses for having proclaimed God's message and exposes their unburied bodies to shame in the sight of all men (11:7-9). This act of the beast causes jubilation and festivity among the earthdwellers (vs. 10). Therefore, the beast and the earthdwellers are not entities ignorant of the gospel, but on the contrary, are those who have not only rejected the gospel but also have actively opposed the saints and rejoiced at their persecution.

Interestingly, the first song of rejoicing in the book is the Song of Moses and the Lamb (15:3-4). The song recalls the Exodus from Egypt motif and draws from the spirit and theme of Israel's song by the Red Sea. In that song of Exod 15 there is abundant rejoicing, for it is Yahweh who has triumphed gloriously. Vengeance on Pharaoh was an evidence of Yahweh's sovereignty and the proof of his faithfulness to the protection clauses of the covenant. But vengeance was more than just the



evidence; it was the very means by which Israel could be delivered. Thus, the song of rejoicing (Exod 15) was the highest expression of worship for a redeemed community who understood what their Lord had done for them. Yahweh's act against the oppressor was, in fact, his act for Israel's deliverance.

A further noteworthy allusion to the Old Testament deliverance-from-bondage motif is seen in the use of the word *hallelujah* in 19:1-8. *Hallelujah* is a Hebrew liturgical term which occurs four times in this passage. It is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. It is reminiscent of the *Hallel Psalms* (113-118) which were sung at the three pilgrim festivals of Jerusalem. The first two (113, 114) were sung before the Passover meal, and the rest were sung after the meal.<sup>142</sup> The Psalms which are alluded to here are the Exodus/Passover (deliverance) Psalms that celebrate God's triumph over stubborn oppressors. The typological implications here are intriguing. The ancient leader, Moses, has given place to the new leader of the people of God, the Lamb. The meekest earthly man gives place to the Meek and lowly One. The ancient oppressed but eventually delivered Israel gives place to the formerly persecuted but now delivered saints. And the ancient stubborn Egypt has now given place to mystical Babylon. Therefore, there is

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<sup>142</sup>Beasley-Murray, The Book of Revelation, pp. 270-271.

room for a new song (Song of the Lamb), but it is based on the old theme--deliverance (Song of Moses).

However, the association of the doxological hallelujah with the execution of vengeance on the enemy was not a new Johannine development. The Midrashic sources also unanimously associate the Hallel Psalms with the destruction of the wicked in the same way as does the Revelation passage.<sup>143</sup> This is in line with common usage in the psalter, as an examination of Pss 113-118 reveals.

Furthermore, the last hallelujah (19:6) is used in the context of kingship and sovereignty. The great multitude utters the hallel in words reminiscent of the great kingship psalms (93:1; 97:1; and 99:1) which portray the sovereignty of Yahweh as Israel's King. In their doxology the multitude praise God because he has begun to reign. The Greek verb *ebasileusen* ("reigns") is an ingressive aorist and may best be rendered "has begun to reign." The last pockets of resistance to God's reign have now been flushed out, and faith and fact meet in the doxology of the heavenly host and the redeemed multitude. The foreign aggressor had laid claim to God's territory and subjects, but his illegitimate claim has been disproved in a public trial. The Apocalypse ends with a

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<sup>143</sup>Eric Werner, The Sacred Bridge: the Interdependence of Liturgy and Music in Synagogue and Church during the First Millennium (London: Dennis Dobson, 1959), pp. 151, 158, 302-303.

view of God reestablishing his sovereignty and restoring the kingdom to the saints.

Finally, it is interesting to note that it is not just the martyred saints who rejoice at God's vengeance. In 12:12 there is rejoicing in heaven over the casting out of the devil. In 15:3-4 it is the victorious multitude who praise God for the manifestation of his mighty works of judgment. In 16:5-7 it is the angel of waters and the altar itself that praise God for his judgments against the power that had killed his servants. In 18:20 it is heaven and the prophets, apostles, and saints who rejoice on account of the avenging of their blood. Then in 19:1-8 it is the multitude in heaven, the martyrs, the twenty four elders, the beasts, and all the redeemed. This is, therefore, not the rejoicing of those who have been personally wronged. Rather, it is a theocentric doxology--the expression of supreme pleasure at the fact that by his righteous act God has established his throne and his reign.

These varied groups that are portrayed as being at the judgment of Babylon and rejoicing reveal another tie of the book with the Old Testament and the Ancient Near Eastern treaties. In the vassal-treaties there was a call for witnesses to witness the trial of the foreign aggressor or the disloyal subject. For example, in the Sumerian and Akkadian bilingual texts heaven, earth, stars, mountains, sea, and other natural phenomena are

invoked as witnesses of the treaty. These witnesses were to be present at the trial of an unfaithful vassal or the foreign aggressor and to participate in the execution of the curses.<sup>144</sup> A similar feature is seen in the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1) in which heaven and earth are called upon as witnesses.<sup>145</sup> In Revelation the heavens, the inhabitants of the earth, the saints, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders are all witnesses in the trial of Babylon. In their song of rejoicing they are affirming the fairness of God as judge and covenant Lord.

The last call to rejoicing (19:7) focuses on the consummation of God's purpose as the cause for rejoicing. John uses two verbs together which occur together only in one other place in the New Testament. The verbs *chairein* and *agallian* ("rejoice and be glad") are used together in Jesus' promise to the persecuted (Matt 5:12). In that passage Jesus urged the persecuted to rejoice on account of their great reward in heaven. It may be noted that in Matt 5:12 the call to rejoicing on the part of the persecuted saints is an imperative. This is the case in Rev 19:7. Evidently, Jesus saw rejoicing as a viable attitude for the persecuted.

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<sup>144</sup>Erich Ebeling, "Sammlungen von Beschworungsformeln," Archiv Orientalni 21 (1953):357-428.

<sup>145</sup>W. L. Moran, "Some Remarks on the Song of Moses," Biblica 43 (1962):317-319.

In John 16:20-22 Jesus warned his followers that they would have a period of lamenting and sorrow while the world was rejoicing. But their sorrow would be turned to joy, and no one would take that joy away. In the light of these promises and the development of the book of Revelation, the rejoicing that results from the vengeance on Babylon is an eschatological proclamation of the fullness of God's reign. The saints rejoice, but not on account of their vindictive spirit. Their shout of praise is an eschatologically conditioned liturgical celebration. Thus, what we have here is not an ethical issue but an uninhibited expression of boundless loyalty to the one who loved them and saved them by his blood.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Summary

The concept of vengeance is a central theme in the book of Revelation. This theme, as it occurs in the book, has raised theological and ethical problems. It has been argued by some scholars that the vengeance motif as it is found in the Apocalypse is a reflection of the Jewish sources that John used. Several factors have led to this sort of conclusion. First, there is the prayer of the souls under the altar that God might judge and avenge the blood of the martyrs on their enemies (Rev 6:9-11). This desire for vengeance seems to be contrary to the forgiving example of Jesus and Stephen, as well as to the general New Testament ethic of loving forgiveness for one's enemies.

A second factor is the spirit of rejoicing at the judgment of the enemy power, Babylon (18:20; 19:1-2). It is this attitude of rejoicing at the judgment of the enemy that has intensified the charge that the Apocalypse is a reworked Jewish "hate" document. Third, judgment and vengeance is central to the theological framework of the whole book. In the light of these factors, how is

the vengeance motif to be interpreted in Revelation?

In chapter 1 of this investigation a statement of the problem, along with a review of literature, is set forth. The review of literature reveals the current status of investigation on this theme to be inadequate and unsatisfactory. Since Merz's 1916 monograph in German, no complete work has appeared on any major facet of the subject. Moreover, Merz's study covers only the Old Testament and also is limited to the perspective of the *Religionsgeschichte* School, so that his work furnishes but a partial background to the vengeance concept as it occurs in Revelation. In the English language Mendenhall's "The Vengeance of Yahweh" (in his The Tenth Generation, published in 1974) is the most thorough treatment of the subject; but its main focus, also, is the Old Testament, with the Apocalypse receiving extremely sketchy notice. On the other hand, Klassen gives the most thorough treatment of the theme in Revelation itself, but his short article does not draw from the Old Testament background. Other literature reviewed has confirmed the need for a careful investigation of the concept of vengeance in the Apocalypse, an investigation which takes into due account the rich Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern backgrounds.

The second chapter of this study investigates the Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament backgrounds to the concept of vengeance. Chapter 2 commences with an

analysis of the usage of the Hebrew term **nāqām** and its derivatives. In ancient non-biblical texts the root **nqm** occurs most frequently in kingship settings, as, for example, in the Amarna Letters, where it occurs in treaty contexts. Several times in these letters **nāqām** is used in pleas by vassal rulers for rescue from foreign aggressors. Clearly, the Amarna usage involves such concepts as deliverance and rescue from a foreign power illegitimately attempting to take or seize control. It implies the exercise of executive power by the highest authority for the protection of loyal and threatened subjects. With the meaning of "rescue," **nāqām** is used several times in a formulary fashion which suggests a highly developed religio-politico-legal meaning. In the Amarna corpus, there is clear indication that vengeance is a treaty/covenant concept. Another inescapable conclusion from this corpus is that hostility to a king's loyal subjects is viewed as hostility to the king himself: The integrity of the suzerain is at stake when his vassals are under the threat of an illegitimate foreign power.

The root **nqm** also occurs in the Execration Texts in proper names like **Niqmepa** and **Niqmadd**, which are possibly royal dynastic names. There are also clear pre-biblical associations between this root and the actions of deity. Significantly, there are no Hebrew proper names that are built on this root. Perhaps this suggests that since the Israelites understood Yahweh to be the



supreme source of vengeance, vengeance being such an exclusively divine function that no human being could legitimately bear a name implying the exercise of such a function.

In the Ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaties, vengeance takes the form of treaty maledictions which are part of the treaty document and are directed against the disloyal subject or the unlawful aggressor. The range of terminology used for the breach of treaty includes "breaking," "not honoring," and "not fulfilling." In the Assyrian vassal-treaties there is the idea of changing, neglecting, transgressing, or erasing. This is the same type of terminology that is used in the Old Testament to describe breach of covenant between God and Israel, and in the Apocalypse between God and the believers. Indeed, the curse is an integral part of the treaty.

In the **kudurru-inscriptions** the vengeance (malediction) is pronounced for the protection of both private and public property. The suzerain has the treaty obligation of protecting the faithful vassal against attacks. Thus, in these treaties vengeance has its basis in an established relationship and agreement. Interestingly, even the language of the treaty maledictions is very similar to the vengeance terms of both the Old Testament and Revelation, as may be seen by a comparison of the **kudurru** imprecations, the vengeance statements in Jer 50 and 51, and the vengeance portrayed with respect to

mystical Babylon in Rev 18.

A second major part of chapter 2 traces the biblical usage of **nāqām**. In the majority of occurrences of the term, the subject of **nāqām** is God himself. In most of the remaining cases, man might be the subject, but God is the source of vengeance. The object is always evil man. In the Pentateuch the evidences for a covenant basis for vengeance are very clear. The Song of Moses marks a significant point in the development of the vengeance motif, for here that motif reaches a formulary stage which is repeated with slight variations in later passages (2 Kgs 9:7; Ps 79:10; Rev 6:10; 16:5-7; 18:20 and 19:1-2).

In a chronological analysis of the occurrences of **nāqām** in the Old Testament text, there is an observable shift from frequent use of the term against covenant-breaking Israel in the earlier period to more frequent applications to Israel's foreign enemies in the later period. In the prophetic period, the usage reflects a close association of vengeance with the covenant. It appears that this application of "vengeance" against the enemy has become a standard usage in Revelation.

Some basic conclusions that have emerged from this analysis of the use of the term **nāqām** and the broader concept of vengeance in the Old Testament are: (1) that vengeance against the covenant community has a primary redemptive purpose, and it is only in the absence

of "an obedience response" that vengeance is applied and intensified against the covenant-breakers, (2) that vengeance against the enemies revolves around the honor and integrity of Yahweh's name. It is on account of having brought dishonor to his name that the enemies receive vengeance, and it is on account of honor for his name that Yahweh protects repentant Israel. The integrity of God's name as a basis of the calls for vengeance is a common feature, especially in the Psalms (Ps 79:10).

Vengeance is a predominant theme in the Imprecatory Psalms and raises similar questions to those raised in Revelation. A covenantal basis for the imprecations has been suggested by Laney. In the context of Israel's kingship theology, it was as Israel's representative that David invoked God to implement the terms of the Abrahamic covenant: "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you" (Gen 12:3). Vos, in dealing with the New Testament material, has taken a somewhat different solution. He argues that the call for vengeance is a Christian duty, for it is included in the Lord's prayer. Vos interprets the statement, "Thy kingdom come" as a radical call for vengeance, for the kingdom of God cannot be set up on earth without the destruction of Satan's kingdom, and the destruction of Satan's kingdom involves the destruction of the wicked. Thus, according to Vos, the call for vengeance and rejoicing in its execution lies at the heart of the religion of Jesus and is an

integral part of Christian ethics.

In the book of Daniel the concept of vengeance is linked to the concept of restoration of the kingdom to the people of God and the reversal of the misjudgments of the beast power (a reversal-and-restoration motif that is to be found in Jer 50-51, as well). The element of suffering as the background for vengeance is highly developed, but there is a new development which continues through the intertestamental period and into the Early Church. Whereas Israel had formerly suffered on account of her sinfulness and prospered when she was faithful, now it is the faithful who experience great suffering on account of their unwillingness to break covenant with their God. Thus, the added dimension which starts with Daniel and reaches full expression in Revelation is the question, "How long?" How long will God allow the innocent to suffer? The Apocalypse proposes to answer this question by interpreting the history of the Church in the light of eschatological judgments.

In the Apocrypha vengeance is primarily directed against the enemies of Israel. A degree of self-righteousness is evident here on the part of the apocryphal writers. This same sort of attitude prevails at Qumran, with the added dimension of intensified hatred for the enemies of the community. Thus, while vengeance must be left to God, the rationale for such deference is the belief that God will avenge more rigorously than any

man can. There appears to be no room for loving forgiveness of the enemy of the community in the Qumran ethic.

The New Testament follows the Old Testament usage of vengeance. The concept of *nāqām* is transferred to the New Testament *ekdikeō* through the Septuagint. There is, however, a greater emphasis of loving forgiveness in the light of Christ's saving event. This love ethic, however, does not do away with the concept of vengeance. On the contrary, some of the strongest passages on the severity of divine judgments on the wicked come from the lips of Jesus (Matt 24:29-25:46).

Chapter 3 examines the evidences for persecution in the New Testament and especially in the book of Revelation, inasmuch as the persecution of Christians is a backdrop against which to interpret the calls for vengeance in the Apocalypse. From the teachings of Jesus, the history of the Church in Acts, references to Christian suffering in the Pauline and Petrine writings and, especially, in the Apocalypse, it is evident that persecution was part of the existential reality of the Church. At first, persecution came at the instigation of Judaism, as the book of Acts amply reveals. Later, a growing animosity and intolerance on the part of Roman authorities developed. In the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64, a precedent was set for the exercise of police powers (*coercitio*) against Christians, a precedent which was followed by a number of succeeding emperors.

As far as the basis for the persecution of the Church is concerned, Mommsen's landmark article, "Der Religions-frevel nach romischen Recht," sparked a lively debate which resulted in three positions: (1) a general enactment which precisely forbade the practice of the Christian religion, (2) the exercise of police powers based on the governor's imperium, and (3) prosecution of Christians under individual charges. It may well be, however, that all three bases were used under varying circumstances.

Turning to the Apocalypse, one discovers that the book has many references to persecution and martyrdom. There are references to the martyrs, the blood of the martyrs, and the agonizing prayers of the martyrs. This background of suffering and death provides the backdrop against which the theology of Revelation must be understood. If the context of suffering is removed from the book, it becomes almost impossible to construct a viable theological framework. The actions of the dragon, the beasts, the earth-dwellers, and Babylon are malicious against the followers of the Lamb. In the context of the Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament covenants, the persecution may be seen as an unjust war against a loyal vassal, and God must step in as protector of the covenant community. Thus, the calls for vengeance in Revelation are to be seen as appeals made by loyal subjects to their faithful Lord to vindicate them.

Chapter 4 examines the vengeance motif as it occurs in Revelation itself, within the context of the Ancient Near Eastern and biblical backgrounds treated in the preceding chapters. A special focus is Rev 6:9-10 where juridical language includes the words *krinō* and *ekdikeō*, and where the judgment/sacrifice imagery of the altar implies a court setting for the call for vengeance. It is evident that the question of the state of the dead is not the issue here, for the Old Testament background does not suggest the call of conscious souls but the principle of the vindication of innocent blood. Rev 19:2 also receives special treatment.

In the same chapter there is an examination also of the two court scenes of 12:7-12 and 18:20. These scenes, too, reveal that a juridical setting is very important as an underlying factor in the vengeance motif. The similarity of the vengeance against Babylon in Rev 18 with Old Testament curses against ancient Babylon and the Ancient Near Eastern treaty maledictions against foreign aggressors suggests the presence of a covenant theology as part of the larger context of vengeance in Revelation.

#### Conclusions and Implications

The call for vengeance in Revelation has as its background the Old Testament covenant relationships which fall within the larger setting of the Ancient Near Eastern vassal-treaty alliances. God stands as the Suzerain and his people are his dominion who are bound to him by

the covenant. His covenant people have the covenant obligation of loyalty to him, which loyalty includes faithful observance of Yahweh's rules or stipulations. God, on the other hand, has the covenant obligation of protecting his loyal subjects--a thought which finds expression in a number of Old Testament passages such as: "Then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries" (Exod 23:22); and "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). Interestingly, both passages occur within larger covenant pericopes.

The martyrs depicted in Rev 6:9-11 have been subjected to unjust human trial and have been condemned in the earthly courts. The appeals of the souls are a legal plea for the heavenly Judge, who is Holy and True, to retry their cases and to render a verdict that will vindicate them and demonstrate the integrity of God as Lord and Protector of the covenant community that has unjustly suffered. Thus, the call of the souls raises a legal and moral question upon which hinges the perceived validity of God's righteousness and indeed the reality of the victory of the Lamb over evil powers. To remove the vengeance motif from Revelation is to do away with those external visible evidences of God's salvific mission; for if God is holy, true, and righteous, he must be seen to be such in his dealings with his loyal servants.

In the scenes of rejoicing at the execution of



vengeance and in the associated doxologies, there is an evident absence of a vindictive attitude. The rejoicings and the doxologies are theocentric, not anthropocentric, and they reveal a juridical/liturgical focus. The heavenly host and the saints rejoice primarily because God's kingdom has become a universal reality and the enemies of God have finally been brought to justice. In the context of this rejoicing, the law of malicious witness (Deut 19:16-19) finds its expression in God's judgments on Babylon. God reverses the unjust judgments of earthly courts and restores to the saints the kingdom. Babylon's judgment on the saints has become her own fate. With respect to the vengeance theme as viewed more broadly throughout the Revelation, it may be observed that just as Rev 6:9-11 raises the cry of the martyrs, the rest of the book portrays, essentially, the development of an answer to the issue at stake in this cry. The answer is encountered in several prominent stages: the defeat of the dragon and restoration of joy and peace in heaven (Rev 12-14; see especially 12:7-12), the destruction of Babylon and restoration of joy and peace to the saints (Rev 17-19), and the utter destruction of the devil's kingdom and the restoration of the heavenly kingdom to the saints (Rev 20-21).

Finally, inasmuch as Revelation is a document intended to bring hope and encouragement to God's people in all ages, its vengeance motif has implications for all

who must suffer for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. To all such, Revelation declares that their covenant protector and Lord has not forgotten them. He will vindicate them and reverse the unjust judgments of the enemy; he will clear his own name and restore unity and the kingdom to the rightful heirs.

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