

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD:  
EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 12:19 WITHIN CONTEXT

BY

PONTIEN NDAGIJIMANA BATIBUKA

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate  
School in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Theology in Biblical Studies  
(New Testament)

JUNE, 2003



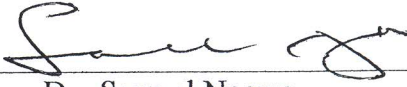
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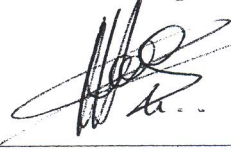
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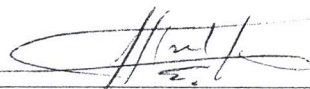
STUDENT'S DECLARATION

LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD:  
EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 12:19 WITHIN CONTEXT

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to  
any other College or University for academic credit.

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the Nairobi Evangelical  
Graduate School of Theology or the examiners.

(Signed)



Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka

June, 2003



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the concept of ‘leaving vengeance to God’ as stipulated by Paul in Rom. 12:19. This purpose consisted in a threefold endeavor: (1) to examine why vengeance--which is in fact a negative act--stands prohibited for the believer but accepted if God is the one who executes it; (2) due to the fact that Paul infers his words from Deut. 32:35, it has been necessary to examine the concept of ‘leaving vengeance to God’ in the Old Testament, but also in other contexts that are deemed to have had a certain influence on Paul, i.e., the Near Eastern culture, Judaism, and the Greco-Roman culture; (3) to draw the theological teaching that Paul is making in commanding the believer to leave vengeance to God.

The approach used in the study comprised syntactical analysis, relative word study, and socio-historical use of the concept. The study was a literary research. Thus the method adopted has fostered an interaction of the writer and library resources, i.e., books and articles of journals.

The study has revealed that all the contexts examined have a tendency to take for granted the punishing of evil deeds, and that God (god) is the primary avenger. This fact that vengeance is the prerogative of God is especially emphasized in the biblical account. In the Old Testament, the God of Israel is a personality who avenges himself, avenges his people and mandates his servants to exercise vengeance. God appears as the source of any legitimate vengeance. As a God approved practice, vengeance in the Hebrew Bible had a noble purpose. Education was its primary aim. Because of this educational aim, vengeance was then enacted publicly. Private vengeance was strongly prohibited. It was the civil organs that had God’s mandate to punish those who had wronged the right and dignity of other people. It is noted that the Old Testament shares most of these traits on vengeance with other cultures that had a historical connection with the Bible. Therefore, in Rom. 12:19 Paul perpetuated a concept of divine vengeance that was already rooted in the cultures that influenced his life. But a joint study of Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:19 showed that the apostle draws a specific theological teaching. His point is that God stands as the avenger of the believer because all evil is primarily against God, even if it is done against the believer. He perceives an identification between the believer and God: persecuting a believer equals persecuting his/her Lord (Acts 9:4). But beyond this identification, the context of Rom. 12:19 gives to non-vengeance a kerygmatic importance. Paul places abstinence from vengeance at the heart of the fight between good and evil. Non-vengeance stands as a weapon for overcoming evil and bringing evildoers to God. In Paul’s thought, repaying good for evil is a powerful act that can stir in the evildoer a painful feeling of shame that can bring him/her to repentance. But abstaining from avenging one’s right is not an easy attitude. From the context of Rom. 12 and Romans in general, the apostle gives the foundation on which non-vengeance stands: The power of repaying good for evil resides in the fact that it is a self-giving act (Rom. 12:1) done to one’s enemy, which exemplifies the self-giving love of Jesus (Rom. 5:8, 10). So it requires a special relationship with God. For, only a person transformed by God (Rom. 12:2) and endowed with his strength can put in action Paul’s injunction of leaving vengeance to God.



To

my distinguished companion in life, Bernadette

our daughter Rose and

our sons Innocent, Julius, Vincent and Daniel



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First of all, my thanks are addressed to God. “You granted me a sound health, it pleased you to call me into your service, and you orchestrated everything that helped to complete this study. Lord, make now my MTh degree to be a reminder of your grace unto me, and therefore make it spur my mercy to those who wrong me.”

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

In Rom. 12:19 Paul writes, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (New International Version). This passage conveys an exhortation against vengeance. Since the passage contains an ethical idea, at first sight the assertion appears to be clear. Yet it raises a number of questions worthy of investigation.

First, the passage seems to present a contradictory view concerning vengeance. On the one hand, vengeance is presented as wrong. God prohibits it from his people (v. 19a). Yet on the other hand, the verse holds that He, God, will exert it (v. 19c). Such a dichotomous view on vengeance needs to be examined. In fact it is puzzling that the same aspect of conduct stands unaccepted for men and yet accepted if God is the one to do it. If vengeance means the same thing for men and God, then the text of Rom. 12:19 carries contradictory ideas. In a more specific way, the problem to investigate can be expressed as follows, “Is there a different connotation between human vengeance (v. 19a) and God’s way of doing it (v. 19c)?”

This question constitutes the central problem in the passage. But it entails some associated questions. Paul supports his idea from the background of the Old Testament by quoting Deut. 32:35. This requires special attention. The intelligibility of Rom. 12:19 depends greatly on a good grasp of the sense of the term ‘*vengeance is mine*’ in Deut. 32:35. The problem to investigate at this stage may be stated in the form of the following question, “What connotation does God’s declaration ‘*vengeance*

*is mine*' carry in Deut. 32:35?" An appropriate answer to this question calls for a careful investigation that will lead to the meaning of the declaration '*vengeance is mine*' in its original context of Deut. 32. This requires an in-depth examination of Deut. 32:35 but also a survey of the concept of divine vengeance in the Old Testament in general.

But examining Deut. 32:35 and the Hebrew Bible does not exhaust the contribution that history can bring to the comprehension of the idea of God as an avenger. Because of the link that exists between the Old Testament and the Ancient Near Eastern literature, this latter will also be surveyed. Examining divine vengeance in the Ancient Near Eastern thought will shed light on the use of this concept in the Old Testament, which was used by Paul. Also it will be necessary to look at the intertestamental use of the concept of divine vengeance. It can rightly be assumed that any New Testament concept that originated from the Old Testament came through the intertestamental socio-religious setting before it figured in the New Testament. Therefore it would be necessary to examine the idea of 'God as an avenger' in Judaic<sup>1</sup> thought. This will help not only to see the relationship between the Jewish connotation of divine vengeance and that of the Old Testament, but also to find out which of the two settings constitutes the tradition that Paul is following. Another background that is crucial to any study of Paul's concept is the Greco-Roman thought. Paul lived during the Roman era. Certainly the Greco-Roman system exercised a great bearing on his life and thought. Hence a good understanding of Paul's idea of divine vengeance requires us to have a look at the use of this concept in the Greco-Roman view as well.

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<sup>1</sup>The period of Judaism as a section of the history of Israel is mostly known as "the time roughly from the fourth century BC to the second century AD." See Nicholas T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 147, footnote 1. It is assumed that Jewish writings that preceded Christianity have influenced Paul's thought.



Another problem that rises from Rom. 12:19 is ethical. Paul embeds the idea of leaving vengeance to God in a section that deals with morality. A moral principle is stated. Non-vengeance is unmistakably Paul's point. Yet in terms of practicability, Paul's command of leaving vengeance to God presents a difficulty that needs to be addressed. The difficulty may be stated through the following question, "Is it passivity that Paul teaches in Rom. 12:19?" In other words, "Does the apostle Paul urge the Christian to observe complete inaction towards those who would harm him or her?" At first sight, the terms that Paul uses seem to suggest that the Christian should remain unmoved and endure passively the effects of the violence imposed on him by evildoers. But Paul himself was not so inert when he was confronted by evil.<sup>2</sup> He was a man of action. So Paul's teaching embedded in God's words '*vengeance is mine*' requires a careful study.

### **Significance of the Study**

The first issue of significance is to attempt to solve the difficulty that emerges from the words that Paul used in Rom. 12:19. As we mentioned earlier, vengeance seems to be given two contradictory measures. It appears to be good if God executes it but bad if the believer does it. The study will attempt to solve this puzzle by blending elements from literary and historical-social considerations. So this study is expected to make a helpful contribution towards the clarification of Rom. 12:19.

Ultimately, the significance of this study flows through to its application. Vengeance has a serious effect on human life. It is with regard to such effects that this study about vengeance gains great importance. In practice, the principle of '*leaving vengeance to God*' seems to have earned little allegiance so far. The tendency of

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<sup>2</sup>In fact, this apparent appeal to passivity requires us to consider whether Paul and other New Testament leaders behave passively or actively against those who ill-treat them. The question is whether the New Testament generally teaches passivity as the approved attitude towards the unjust treatment of evil people.

modern society does not show that vengeance is subsiding. On the contrary, acts of vengeance are escalating. This situation is particularly acute in Africa where wars and various antagonisms are increasing. As violence and atrocities become commonplace, vengeance also takes on uncontrolled proportions. The worst side of the problem is the fact that taking vengeance entices both unbelievers and believers as well. Indeed, violence does not distinguish a Christian from an unbeliever. The Bible insists that no one, not even Jesus the Son of God, is exempted from man's aggression (e.g. Jn. 16:30-33). All people are prey to suffering because it is an integral part of this world in which they live. But it is supposed that Christians should react to violence in a way that differs from that of the wicked. Now that vengeance has become a common denominator between those who have God's truth and those who ignore it, expounding Paul's words on vengeance is a necessity. It can help the believer to understand what vengeance is and why it is in conflict with the Christian faith. It is expected that this study on vengeance will make a helpful contribution by attempting to establish a line of demarcation not only between the actions of the Christian and the unbeliever, but also between human vengeance and God's vengeance.

Paul postulates that vengeance should be left to God. If believers really understood the teaching that Paul intends to communicate in Rom. 12:19, there would be far fewer cases of taking vengeance by Christians. It appears that avoiding vengeance is not an easy concept to put into practice. Biblical ethics stem from God's counsel and wisdom (2 Pet. 1:20-21; Isa. 40:14; Prov. 8:14). They are indeed destined to be applied by man and Moses makes it clear that God's commands are not beyond man's capacity (Deut. 30:11; cf. 1 Jn. 5:3). But the Bible is the revelation of God's nature and will to man, and not the reverse. Because of this peculiarity of biblical truth, God's word has some concepts that seem unpalatable to the human mind. In this fallen world, leaving vengeance to God does not naturally fit into man's thought and



life. This study will be significant as it purports to examine the value that the concept of no-revenge should have in a believer's life.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Paul does not make a contradiction in designating vengeance as prohibited for men and yet as fully acceptable for God to take. God's vengeance and human vengeance-- whether a believer or an unbeliever takes it--do not have the same connotation. God's perfect act cannot be equated with the imperfect act of man. Retaliation in its nature is incompatible with God's character. So, even though Paul uses the same word vengeance for both man and God, he means two different things. The purity of both God's act of vengeance and of the motivations from which it stems must be radically different from the vengeance that originates from man's defiled mind.

2. Inertia, or the attitude of receiving violence with entire passivity, is not part of what Paul is teaching in Rom. 12:19. Paul does not intend to say that the Christian should take no action at all to counter the violence imposed on him as an individual or on the church as the body. A teaching of inertia is incompatible with the teaching of God's word. In fact, Paul and the New Testament writers in general dispense a Gospel of action and not of passivity. Jesus himself, the founder of the New Testament message, is constantly found in active battle against evil. The task at hand now is to use careful exegesis in order to find the kinds of actions that, according to Paul, are authentically Christian and thus should replace vengeance.

### **Assumptions**

1. Vengeance can be classed as sin because it denotes a lack of love, patience and forgiveness, which are marks of the Kingdom (Col. 3:12-14). Thus vengeance should not characterize Jesus' followers. It belongs to the wicked since they are not yet

enlightened by the Holy Spirit. If some believers continue to take vengeance, it can be assumed that a vital part of Paul's teaching in Rom. 12:19 remains unnoticed.

2. Non-vengeance is a principle that permeates the Bible. The Old Testament mentions it (e.g. Gen. 50:15-21; Lev. 19:18; Prov. 24:29; cf. Ezek. 25:15-17). But Jesus also underscores it (Mt. 5:38-41; Lk. 23:34) and his immediate and later followers do so as well (Acts 7:60; Rom. 12:14, 17-21; 1 Pet. 2:19-23; 3:9; cf. 1 Cor. 13:5; 2 Thes. 1:6-7).

3. Paul is the author of the epistle to the Romans. Not only does the book itself claim it (Rom. 1:1), but modern scholars almost unanimously ascribe the authorship of Romans to Paul.<sup>3</sup>

4. Old Testament background is needed in order to understand Paul. This is particularly indispensable when analyzing a text like Rom. 12:19 in which the apostle makes reference to an Old Testament text. There is the assumption that Paul envisages some point of similarity between the context of Deut. 32:35 and that of Rom. 12:19.

5. Paul was influenced by word usage and thought patterns found in the intertestamental period. The apocalyptic overtone embedded in Rom. 12:19 is reminiscent of the intertestamental expectation of divine vindication. It may be assumed that the same thought bears influence on the apostle as he composes the idea found in Rom. 12:19.

### **Delimitations**

This study purports to be an exegetical, theological work. In effect it will be based on library, literary research that will be conducted in the theological libraries operating in Nairobi. It is not field research, though indeed it was motivated by

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<sup>3</sup>See for instance James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, no. 38a (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), xxxix; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1.

personal experiences. The scenes of vengeance that prevail in these days have constituted the motivating factor that aroused the author's desire of searching out the truth about vengeance. Particularly the intertwining of believers with unbelievers in exercising vengeance has aroused his interest and concern. Nonetheless the study is not field-oriented work. It is designed to be a literary work that purports to elucidate the meaning of the concept of '*leaving vengeance to God*'. The approach will mainly follow the exegetical pattern. Towards the end, the study will have a section that will discuss the theological implications that Paul conveys as he teaches his hearers to leave vengeance to God. Even at this level, however, we do not intend to analyze and evaluate practical events related to vengeance. The intention is not to evaluate the opportunities and difficulties that the church faces in implementing the principle of non-vengeance. Such a field-oriented work may be undertaken in the future. Only for the sake of illustration will reference to practical situations be made when deemed necessary.

The text of Rom. 12:19 and its immediate syntactical block (vv. 9-21) and unit (vv. 17-21) will constitute the basis of the exegetical analysis. The citation of other Old Testament and New Testament texts will occur because of the input that they provide toward the elucidation of Rom. 12:19. In terms of importance they will remain subordinate to Rom. 12:19. However, among the Old Testament passages that will be resorted to, the text of Deut. 32:35 will be looked upon as crucial to the meaning of Rom. 12:19 since Paul quotes his words from Deut. 32:35. For this reason it will be as intensely analyzed as Rom. 12:19 itself.

### **Methodology**

This study pertains to the category of biblical Studies. Therefore it is intended to be an exegetical examination of a biblical concept, namely, the question of leaving



vengeance to God. It is towards the end [at the fifth chapter] that the principles resulting from the analysis will be used to make a theological reflection. So biblical exegesis will be essential to the approach intended for this study. In effect, the following methods will be used:

1. Word Study. Because of the prominence that the word ‘vengeance’ carries in this study, the Hebrew and Greek terminologies will be given attention successively when we examine vengeance in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

2. Grammatical and contextual analysis. Grammatical features and syntactical links will be considered carefully in relation to the immediate context. But also effort will be made to understand the concept in the wider context. For this reason, the historical background and usages of God as avenger will be focused on. The canonical aspect is another element that will not be overlooked. Thus other New Testament authors’ views concerning God’s vengeance will be considered as valuable. In other terms, attention will be paid to any necessary relation of Rom. 12:19 with other biblical passages, especially the texts written by Paul.

### **Literature Review**

*Syntopical*<sup>4</sup> reading has helped to discover that vengeance has various uses. Thus there are different ways in which this concept can be approached. Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour bring out the colloquial sense of vengeance when they say, “in current usage, to avenge is to punish an offense by returning evil for evil.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense it can even be vengeance when the retributive evil has less intensity than the initial evil. But a difference emerges when vengeance is looked upon in terms of

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<sup>4</sup>Syntopical reading is the method of reading--by comparing and interacting--two or more books written on the same subject. See Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, revised and updated ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 309.

<sup>5</sup>André Darrieutort and Xavier Léon-Dufour, “Vengeance,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised and enlarged, 626.

*talion*.<sup>6</sup> *Talion* implies something more than just returning evil for evil. According to Boecker it embodies “the principle of strictly comparable compensation for damage,”<sup>7</sup> in other words the principle according to which some violations of one’s right are “punishable harshly and uncompromisingly.”<sup>8</sup>

So at least two nuances emerge within the word vengeance. The researcher may choose to put his emphasis on one of them. But in this study we do not intend to foster such distinction. We hold the assumption that any form of human vengeance is sin. So we prefer to approach the concept of vengeance generically, i.e., drawing insights from any trend it might involve.

Regarding the rendering of the Hebrew נָקָם (*naqam*) by ‘vengeance,’ Wright and his co-authors have expressed the following doubt: “The difficulty with the translation ‘vengeance’ for the Hebrew word (*naqam*) is that to us vengeance means almost solely requital out of an angry and vengeful spirit. This is not the proper connotation of the Hebrew word.”<sup>9</sup> The point that these authors seem to be defending is that vengeance--angry requital--should not stand for the Hebrew *naqam*, which is used concerning God. From the exegetical point of view, the idea sounds fortuitous. They seem to make the fallacy of interpreting a biblical concept by bringing into it--so eisegesis--their own spiritual conviction about God. It is not because vengeance means hateful retribution for us that it cannot apply to God altogether. Rather the question to investigate is, if with men vengeance means ‘eye for eye’, what does it mean in God’s sphere of action? Biblically, how can God’s vengeance be described? What

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<sup>6</sup>*Talion* is classical term from which the word retaliation derives.

<sup>7</sup>Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 171.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>9</sup>G. Ernest Wright, Henry H. Shires, Pierson Parker, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 524.

peculiarity does it hold? How does it stand apart from man's vengeance?

Still on the hermeneutical level, various authors have ideas that stir reflection. Hays for instance postulates that Paul's hermeneutical attitude towards the Old Testament is chiefly characterized by using echoes of an original text rather than decoding it line for line.<sup>10</sup> This is an important contention. It provokes an investigation into whether Paul is making such a use of Scriptures when he quotes the Old Testament passage of Deut. 32:35 in Rom. 12:19. In fact, the interpretive method that one applies conditions the meaning that will result. If it can be granted that the apostle makes simply an allusive relationship between the words of Deut. 32:35 and what he teaches in Rom. 12:19, then there is the possibility that vengeance does not necessarily mean the same thing in the two texts. But only by examining the two texts can a judgment be made.

Moo argues that prohibition of vengeance is found both in the Old Testament and Judaism, yet with the tendency of being confined to relations with co-religionists.<sup>11</sup> In effect to this, if Paul's resort to the Old Testament is to make sense, then his preoccupation in Rom. 12 ought to be an inter-church affair. In other words, Paul would be exhorting the believer to abstain from avenging against a fellow believer who hurts him. The wonder is whether the persecutors that Paul speaks about are necessarily church members themselves. In fact, this is the type of thing that needs to be studied.

When Sperling addresses the subject of vengeance in the Ancient Near East, he argues that the blood avenger, by killing the murderer of his relative, was taking back the blood of the community because the outsider had misappropriated it in murdering a

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<sup>10</sup>Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 155.

<sup>11</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 787.



member of the avenger's community.<sup>12</sup> At this moment, we can leave for later discussion the semantic puzzle that Sperling creates by mixing the sense of *go'el* (an avenger in the sense of one who sets free) and *naqam* (an avenger in the sense of one who punishes). Nonetheless, his suggestion that Ancient Near Eastern culture has a link between redeeming and vengeance is stimulating. It motivates over to find out whether the Ancient Near East shares with the Old Testament some traits concerning vengeance. Also the extent to which such ideas contribute to the meaning of Rom. 12:19 deserves attention.

Driver remarks that the concept of divine vengeance "is commoner in the later prophets (especially those of the exile) than in the earlier ones."<sup>13</sup> This observation is interesting. First the truth of the idea needs to be proven. If it is accurate, then it raises further interesting points that call for analysis. For instance, the period of the last prophets is too distant from Paul to think that their worldview came down to Paul's time without interruption. But the last prophets' period was immediately supplanted by Judaism. It can logically be assumed that Judaism drew the thought of vengeance from the exilic prophets and perpetuated it. Since Paul was born and taught in Judaism, it is probable that he may have picked up the idea of divine vengeance from Judaism. But, how did Judaism itself treat the idea of divine vengeance? Could it be that the idea had become proverbial (customary) during Judaism and that Paul used it in that pattern? Here is something that calls for careful verification. The particular query can be, "why would Paul deem it necessary to resort to Deut. 32:35 if Judaic customary use of vengeance is what he adapts?"

<sup>12</sup>S. David Sperling, "Blood, Avenger of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), 763.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, International Critical Commentaries, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., eds. Samuel R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 374.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE VENGEANCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The teaching of the apostle Paul is strongly rooted in the Old Testament. This makes it necessary to consider the concept of divine vengeance in the Old Testament before proceeding further. The Old Testament roots of Paul's thinking are clear in the Bible. Paul grew up and was trained in the Jewish worldview in which the Torah was the central symbol that regulated all other national symbols (Temple, land, and racial identity).<sup>1</sup> In fact the Scriptures reveal that Paul was a committed Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). Since the study of the Law was the core activity of every serious Pharisee,<sup>2</sup> there is no doubt that the Hebrew Bible was the permanent source of Paul's reflection. In addition, at the time of Paul's conversion, the Old Testament was the only written word of God. As the Bible of that time, the primitive church and Paul used it intensively. As a result, it can be asserted with less doubt that the Old Testament influenced Paul's thought to a great degree. Therefore no consistent grasp of Paul's understanding of divine vengeance can be reached without examining the way this concept is defined and used in the Old Testament context. This step is necessary inasmuch as not only the Old Testament is the stem for the New Testament, but also the term 'vengeance,' which constitutes the core of our study, is far more frequent in

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 228.

<sup>2</sup>They devoted themselves to regular scrutiny of the Law for they believed that it was the best means that would enable them to fulfil their goal, i.e., to exercise great care in matters of ritual purity, food laws, the Sabbath law and the like. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, Galilee ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 72-73.

the Old Testament than in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> A look at the use of “vengeance” in the Hebrew Bible will provide the basis necessary to proceed to look at the Pauline view of vengeance.

### Terminology

There is a broad range of words that are translated as ‘vengeance’ in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> We cannot analyze all of them here. Our study will be based on three roots, namely the roots נָקַם (*naqam*), גָּאֵל (*ga'al*), and יָשָׁא (*yasha'*). *Naqam* and *ga'al* are selected because they are the most frequent words rendered as ‘vengeance.’ *Yasha'* is also found very important because of its great focus on liberation, which seems to play an important part in Paul’s concept of leaving vengeance to God.

#### The Root נָקַם (*naqam*)

Most occurrences of the word ‘vengeance’ are the translation of the Hebrew verb *naqam*<sup>5</sup> and its derivatives. Concerning its definition, the root *naqam* means ‘to avenge, take vengeance, punish.’<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this word seems to imply great rage and

<sup>3</sup>A glance at the words vengeance, revenge, avenge, requite and their derivatives shows that the idea of vengeance is expressed 99 times in the Old Testament and 21 times in the New Testament; cf. James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, compact ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 90, 840, 844, 1096. Indeed the low frequency in the New Testament is not an indication that the concept has less meaning there. The importance of a term in a context is not always a function of how much it occurs in that section. However, this statistical note shows how significantly the concept of vengeance is embedded in the Old Testament.

<sup>4</sup>Besides *naqam*, *ga'al* and *yasha'*, the other words for ‘vengeance’ are *rab* (usually, ‘to take to court’, e.g. 1 Sam. 25:39), *hesib* (usually, ‘to bring back, requite’, e.g. 2 Sam. 16:8), *sillem* (usually, requite, recompense), *daras* (usually, ‘to seek, require’), *gemul* (usually, ‘to deal with’), *nathan* (usually, ‘to give’, e.g. Num. 31:3), *paqad* (usually, ‘to visit, care for, punish’, e.g. Hos. 1:4), *Shaphat* (usually, ‘to judge’, with *miyad*, ‘to set free from the hand of’, e.g. 2 Sam. 18:19), *para'* (usually, ‘to set free, make loose’, e.g. Judg. 5:2). See Wayne T. Pitard, “Vengeance,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), 786; *The New Strong's Guide to Bible Words: An English Index to Hebrew and Greek Words* (1996), 18; and *New Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (1987), 25.

<sup>5</sup>This word is crucial for our purpose for it stands for vengeance in Deut. 32:35, which is the text that Paul quotes in the passage of Rom. 12:19 that constitutes the focal point of this study.

<sup>6</sup>*Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (1980); also Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1997), s.v. “נָקַם.” *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon* (p. 668)



fury.<sup>7</sup> But its central meaning is different. In fact two connotations seem to emerge as being more regular in the use of this root *naqam*. Pitard notes:

The verbal and nominal forms normally translated as ‘to avenge, vengeance, etc.’ fall into two categories of definition: (1) the rendering of a just punishment upon a wrongdoer or the recompense given to the victim of the wrongdoing; (2) vindictive revenge inflicted by wicked people upon the innocent.<sup>8</sup>

With the first category of use, the word *naqam* carries a positive nuance. The second category points to the vengeance that springs out of the wicked impulse of someone who maliciously wants to punish even when the wrongdoer had innocently harmed him. This is vengeance in negative way.

*Naqam* is used with various subjects. The variety of subjects probably has to do with its negative and positive uses. In some places it is Israel and her leaders who exercise vengeance against their enemies (e.g. Num. 31:2-3; Josh. 10:13; Judg. 16:28; 1 Sam. 14:24; Esth. 8:13; Ps. 149:7). In other occurrences it is the enemies of Israel who take revenge against God’s people (e.g. Jer. 20:10; Lam. 3:60; Ezek. 25:12, 15). God appears as the other character who exercises vengeance in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Old Testament, God takes vengeance in two ways. First, he avenges his people, defending Israel from the oppression of their enemies (e.g. Deut. 32:43; Nah. 1:2). Secondly, he avenges his covenant by punishing his own people when they transgress his law (e.g. Lev. 26:25; Ps. 99:8). The more interesting point about God, however, is the fact that he is the cause of the action in almost all the contexts where *naqam* occurs.<sup>9</sup> Thus the use of *naqam* provides an element of evidence that the Old

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indicates that *naqam* holds a range of uses varying with the shades. In *Qal* and *Piel*, it either means ‘avenge’ [denoting the act of vengeance] (e.g. *Qal*, Deut. 32:43, *Piel*, 2 Kgs 9:7) or ‘to entertain revengeful feelings’ [denoting the intention] (e.g. for *Qal*, Lev. 19:18). In *Niphal* and *Hithpael* it can be passive but also reflexive (e.g. Isa. 1:24 for *Niphal* and Jer. 5:9 for *Hithpael*). In Exod. 21:20 the *Niphal* use means ‘suffer vengeance’ [so the sense of receiving it].

<sup>7</sup>Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 25, 354.

<sup>8</sup>Pitard, “Vengeance,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 786.

<sup>9</sup>The action of the verb *naqam* is ascribed to God almost exclusively. In fact a concordance survey shows that the verbal form (without considering its derivatives) is used thirty-eight times. Almost all

Testament emphatically considers God as the primary avenger.

It is quite puzzling that a concept as negative as vengeance has God for its most recurrent subject. As Smick puts it, in the modern understanding, “Vengeance and revenge are ideas that would appear to have no good ethical validity whether coming from God or man.”<sup>10</sup> So we have here something that Marcion would stand on as sufficient ground for rejecting altogether the Old Testament and its God. But the word *naqam* implies a broader sense than what it appears to mean at first sight. Indeed the English word ‘vengeance’ mainly refers to malicious requital; as such it would not apply with God. The English word, however, does not bring forth the entire connotation implied in its Hebrew root.

The latter designates the zealousness of God in his just dealing with people and nations. To those who are his enemies God’s vengeance is his righteous judgment or punishment for their wickedness. To the repentant and the 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. Suffice it to say that in the pre-Israelite usage of the word, as in the OT (sic) itself, there are several occasions when it can only be translated ‘to save’ or ‘salvation’ (e.g. Isa. 61:2). While both judgment and grace are involved in it, as also in the ‘righteousness’ of God, particular passages may lay emphasis upon one or the other of its two aspects.<sup>11</sup>

Seemingly the Hebrew Bible takes God for the most regular subject of *naqam* because of its use which is prominently positive. Its Hebrew use does not primarily denote the angry and vengeful spirit that seeks to requite evil for evil. The word combines

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present God as doing the action. Only five instances (Jer. 50:15; Lam. 3:60; Ezek. 24:8; 25:12, 15) do not specify clearly if it is God or man; cf. *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 466. Thus Smick seems right when he argues: “A Study of the use of this root reveals that there are comparatively few cases where man is considered a proper source of vengeance. Often man is a secondary cause while God is the source (Ezek. 25:14). This is normally the case where the Israelites avenge themselves on their enemies (Josh. 10:13). In Num. 31:2-3, the Israelites’ wreaking vengeance on the Medianites (v. 2) is equivalent to the Lord’s doing so (v. 3).” cf. Elmer B. Smick, “נָקַם (*naqam*): Take Vengeance, Revenge, Avenge Oneself, Be Avenged, Be Punished,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980), 598.

<sup>10</sup>Smick, “נָקַם (*naqam*),” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 598.

<sup>11</sup>Wright, Shires, and Pierson, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2, 524.



judgment--in the sense of rendering justice--and salvation. Simply put, it is vengeance in God's view. Harming someone simply because he has also harmed is not the connotation. It is rather the expression of just punishment that involves holiness and mercy. Thus God exercises vengeance even upon his own beloved people when they disobey his laws (Lev. 26:24-25).

### The Root גָּאָל (*ga'al*)

Another important word for vengeance consists in the root *ga'al*. It can be defined as "to redeem, deliver, avenge, act as a kinsman."<sup>12</sup> Although *ga'al* is used of man, most of its occurrences are in connection with God. Frequently he assumes the action implied in the root, whether directly or indirectly. In fact, with God, this concept carries various uses<sup>13</sup> more than it does with man. This may explain why God plays more of a part than man.

The *ga'al* concept has a strong connection with the Jewish shame-honor motif. Its central idea is to avenge someone, in the sense of restoring his/her dignity when something happened that socially set him/her in jeopardy. The *ga'al* root applies in restoring a person from various social setbacks."<sup>14</sup> Thus the notion of vengeance conveyed in this word is basically an idea of intervening in favor of a person who is under the bondage of a situation, with the result that he is helped to recuperate dignity and enjoyment of life. Thus Wilson notes pertinently that the central meaning of *ga'al*

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<sup>12</sup>Nelson's *Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 317; see also *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 145; and *The New Strong's Guide to Bible Words*, 18, 216.

<sup>13</sup>For instance, God redeems individuals from death (Ps. 103:4; Lam. 3:58). Also with the root *ga'al* God redeems [lifts up] orphans (Prov. 23:10-11). Still *ga'al* is used when God delivers Israel from bondage (Exod. 6:6; Ps. 74:2), and from exile (Ps. 107:2; Isa. 43:1; Jer. 31:11; Mi. 4:10).

<sup>14</sup>The *Ga'al* actions were to restore the integrity, life, property, or the name of one's relative; See Ruth 3:13; 4:4, 6; Lev. 25:25, 48, 49. The root takes the sense of 'vengeance' more specifically when the context is that of redeeming the blood of a murdered relative. In case of a murder, the *go'el*..., 'an avenger of blood' (Num. 35:21), had to take vengeance for the clan by killing the assassin." cf. Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour, "Vengeance," in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.



is “to redeem, ransom, Lev. 25:49; hence in general, to deliver, set free, Gen. 48:16, Exod. 6:6.”<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to note that, with the root *ga'al*, rarely does vengeance point at an individual. In fact the problems often presented as the cause of the handicap that makes the victim need liberation [vengeance] are not usually a specific person. Mostly they are natural problems (e.g. widowhood, poverty, and calamities). Also life systems acknowledged by the society (e.g. loans, slavery) appear constantly among the problems that place somebody in a state of needing a *ga'al* action. Very few instances put responsibility on an individual. Thus vengeance rarely surfaces as an attack directed at a specific person; rather it is usually directed at a system. This constitutes a remarkable point of difference with vengeance as defined and applied today.

In the case of the *go'el hadam* (avenger of blood), however, an individual is pointed out as having victimized his fellow. In this particular case, vengeance (*ga'al*) emerges as an attack directed at a specific wrongdoer. At first sight it appears that here, vengeance puts more focus on the wrongdoer. But a closer look at it shows that even here the victim remains the focal interest of the action. First, the frequency of the use of ‘avenger of blood’ is quite small compared to the entire number of occurrences of *ga'al* and its derivatives in the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore better not to draw a hasty conclusion in thinking that the expression ‘avenger of blood’ does not share in the root’s general usage, which consists in focusing on the victim and his liberation. In fact, secondly, the semantic sense of the term ‘avenger of blood’ is consistent with the main connotation of the root. **גָּאֵל** (*go'el*) is the participle of *ga'al*.<sup>17</sup> So, in the

<sup>15</sup>*New Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*, 343.

<sup>16</sup>Indeed frequency is not a sure ground for making a conclusion on the value of a term. But one needs to note that ‘blood vengeance’ is mentioned only 12 times while the root *ga'al* occurs 90 times in the Old Testament; cf. *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 317-18.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (1981), s.v. “גָּאֵל.”

nominal shade, basically it should mean ‘the redeemer, the deliverer, the one who ransoms or sets free’.<sup>18</sup> The nature and tone of these terms are such that the focus of *go’el* has more to do with the victim than the wrongdoer. It is the victim who is being ransomed, or liberated, or redeemed. He constitutes the main focus of the action, though behind it there is something done to the wrongdoer as well. The focus on the victim seems to indicate a difference with the modern conception of vengeance.

### The Root **יָשָׁא** (*yasha’*)

One more term, namely the word *yasha’* needs to be considered because of its contribution towards the comprehension of divine vengeance. The verb root *yasha’*, sometimes translated as ‘to avenge’ (e.g. 1 Sam. 24:26, 31), seems to be noteworthy. Its primary sense is ‘to save, make safe or free (1 Sam. 25:26, 31, 33).’<sup>19</sup> The question here resides in understanding how the root for ‘save’ is on occasion translated ‘avenge’. At first sight the connection between the two connotations does not seem easy to establish. But a close look at the deep implication of *yasha’* renders it possible. In fact the basic idea in this root is to liberate or deliver someone from external evils and troubles, and thus give him victory<sup>20</sup> (e.g. Judg. 3:9, 15; 7:2; 1 Sam. 25:26; 2 Kgs. 13:5; Ps. 98:1; Isa. 30:15; 45:22; 59:16; Jer. 4:14; 8:20). The allusion to external evils and troubles makes it involve a sense of being freed from a bondage that someone or something had imposed. There is an idea that the victim was suffocating under a more powerful being. The victim’s right, freedom, and joy of life were taken

<sup>18</sup> The sense ‘avenger of blood’ is culturally made up, see citation 12.

<sup>19</sup> *The New Strong’s Guide to Bible Words*, 18; and *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> This idea of liberating from (and giving victory over) external evils is especially seen in the Niphal and Hiphil uses of *yasha’*. The sense in the Niphal is ‘be liberated, saved (properly, placed in freedom) from external evils; and in Hiphil it properly means ‘give width and breadth to, liberate.’ Cf. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 447.

into hostage by the powerful usurper.<sup>21</sup> By an act of liberation (*yasha'*) the victim gains the upper hand. He is enabled to repossess what the offender had taken from him. He has victory; now loss and shame shift to his enemy. Indeed a sort of vengeance can be seen within such reversal of positions.

Two important points emerge from the examination of the root *yasha'*. First, like *ga'al*, there is a great deal of focus on the victim and the good that he gains. The recuperation of his freedom appears as constituting the primary concern. The chief goal is to have someone recover his status of *sho'a*, i.e. one who is 'free, independent, noble of rank and character.'<sup>22</sup> In other words, the person's liberation [vengeance] is fully met if only he can really feel safety, welfare and prosperity.<sup>23</sup> From *yasha'*, it can be noted that any act of vengeance is deemed a failure if instead of peace it plunges the victim into a state of escalated fear and anxiety.

The second important point concerning the root *yasha'* is that the liberation (vengeance) that it implies constantly derives from someone other than the victim himself. The person who is in trouble does not gain liberty by himself. Indeed the root has a number of *Hiphil* uses which are translated by the reflexive 'saving oneself'

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<sup>21</sup>The idea of restoration seems to be the core of *yasha'*. Wilson rightly highlights it as he states: "יָשַׁע", 'to save, implying in the largest sense, deliverance, help, and victory'; it comprehends either the removal of evil and misery, or the restoration of good and former happiness." Cf. *New Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*, 367. The emphasis on the idea of restoration implies that action in *yasha'* takes place when the situation is that of serious break down. So it would be hard to condone the argument that "The idea of salvation (תְּשׁוּבָה) is that of preservation from a threatening, impending ... danger and suffering." Cf. *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 352. This idea that *yasha'* applies in anticipation of an impending suffering is interesting because it questions the connotation of vengeance itself, for vengeance cannot be spoken of if suffering has not occurred. But this root does not show that its action precedes the victim's trouble. The overriding connotation of the word *yasha'* presupposes that the victim is already in a situation of defeat when the liberator intervenes. Restoration constitutes all the concern. In fact it is also stressed by the Arabic root cognate to *yasha*, which means, "be capacious, make wide or spacious, make sufficient, be or live in abundance." Cf. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 446. These terms show that a situation of serious deprivation precedes the liberation involved in *yasha'*.

<sup>22</sup>*The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 447.

<sup>23</sup>In fact this is the sense implied in the noun forms (masculine *yasha'*, and feminine *yeshu'ah*); cf. *Ibid.*, 447.



(e.g. 1 Sam. 25:26, 31, 33). But such instances seem to be scanty. In most cases the liberating agent is not the victim himself, but a different actor who seems to be endowed with greater capacities.<sup>24</sup> It happens, like *naqam* and *ga'al*, that with this root God has a prominent part as the subject of *yasha'*. God is dominantly presented as the source of the deliverance that is implied in *yasha'*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, he not only frequently figures as the subject when the root is used, but some passages containing *yasha'* also emphasize that God has no competitor with regard to liberation. The Scripture affirms that liberation (vengeance) is done by God and not the sword (Ps. 44:6-7), nor any nation (Lam. 4:16-17), nor astrologers (Isa. 47:13), nor Assyria (Hos. 14:3), nor the gods (Isa. 45:20; 46:7; Jer. 2:28). Here is another piece of evidence that divine vengeance is given prominent attention in the Hebrew Scripture.

### **Characteristics of Vengeance in the Old Testament**

#### Vengeance as a Public Matter

In the Old Testament vengeance is constantly presented as a public, social matter. It stands as a social institution. Vengeance, as patterned in the Hebrew Scriptures, was not something that a person could enact at a time or a place of his own convenience. It was not a private matter that the individual could accomplish privately in expeditious way. Vengeance stood as a legal act. Public structures had the prerogative of granting it. This can be noted from the use of the root *naqam*. Pitard observes:

The term, *nqm*, appears to have developed its central meaning in the context of judicial language. Most of its occurrences are found in passages which have at least a vague legal theme, in which the 'vengeance' is viewed as the rectification of some misdeed. The root occurs 74 times<sup>26</sup> in some 49 passages in the Hebrew

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<sup>24</sup>If the liberator, *moshi'a*, is a human being, he/she is actually regarded as a heroic person (e.g. Judg. 3:9, 15, 31; 6:15; 7:2; 1 Sam. 25:26, 33; 2 Kgs. 13:5; Isa. 19:20).

<sup>25</sup>The root *yasha'* is mostly used of God. See details in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 446-47.

<sup>26</sup>The author writes the numbers in figures.

Bible. Of these passages 14 have an explicit legal context--*nqm* appears in some laws themselves (e.g. Exod. 21:20-21), as well as in prophetic oracles which have been cast in the form of speeches in court (cf. Isa. 1:24; 59:15-19; Ezek. 25:13-14).<sup>27</sup>

Vengeance in the Old Testament was judicially handled. So it fell under the responsibility of the community rather than isolated individuals. In fact when Moses prescribes the *talion* law (Exod. 21:12ff.; Num. 35:16ff.) he always makes it clear in the context that he is addressing the community of Israel as a whole (cf. Exod. 20:22; Num. 35:2, 9). Although the Bible insists in showing that it was an obligation to avenge a violated right (Exod. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21), “The execution of this obligation evolved in the course of history. Taken from the individual, it was conferred on society.”<sup>28</sup> Private vengeance does not seem to be permitted in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed the pattern of the custom of the ‘blood avenger’ appears to be so modelled after the ‘eye for eye’ principle that one wonders whether such instruction could not give way to a cycle of private, isolated requital. The command may be understood as if it allows immediate, private action against the murderer (e.g. Num. 35:19, 21, 27). However, it is noted that the practice was not as private as it appears on the surface. A great deal of the responsibility seems to have been in the hands of the communal ‘assembly.’ Apparently the avenger of blood was accountable to this institution, which seems to have possessed the prerogative to sanction his act as to how legally or illegally his duty was conducted.<sup>29</sup>

So the murderer had to die, but the process that led to that death was managed corporately. The matter was not abandoned to the will of one man. Retribution of a

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<sup>27</sup>See Pitard, “Vengeance,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 786 [there he gives more details on this public characteristic of vengeance in the Old Testament].

<sup>28</sup>Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour, “Vengeance,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 626.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Num. 35:24. The insistence on the necessity of not executing a person without the required witness certainly needed a structure (e.g. the assembly) to guarantee that it was followed.

murderer was decided and executed through a social framework.<sup>30</sup> The Scripture provides enough evidence. The *talion* instruction found in Lev. 24:17ff. is preceded by a case of stoning executed collectively. Similarly the *talion* in Deut. 19:21 is part of a passage that fosters the necessity of having witnesses in any judgment (cf. vv. 15ff.). Also witnesses are underscored even in the context of Num. 35:19, 21, 27, verses that seem to strongly allow private vengeance.

Undoubtedly, the importance of witnesses was to ensure that no punishment was effected expeditiously by individuals. Private vengeance would have opened the way to uncontrollable chaos. Very often when an individual exercises a requital action, hatred and anger constitute the primary motivating factor (cf. Deut. 19:6). The problem is that malice cannot solve malice. It rather sets a spiral of confusion and violence. Public justice was definitely preferred because the communal structure is able to properly regulate the vindication of the avenger's right without an excess of anger. Indeed, as in every society of humans, it cannot be denied that in Israel individuals sometimes precipitated vengeance before the case reached the public, official structures. However, the proper procedure required that vengeance--of blood or otherwise--be done publicly through social structures endowed with public authority and responsibility.

### Education as the Primary Aim

The present discussion complements what has just been said about the public nature of Old Testament vengeance. In fact this part purports to examine the reason why vengeance carried a judicial / legal character in the Old Testament. The objective of vengeance is the issue being considered here. "In current usage, to avenge is to

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<sup>30</sup>The cities of refuge were destined to thwart private vengeance. In these cities, someone who had accidentally killed a person found protection from the avenger of blood until the judicial authorities (the community) would determine his guilt or innocence (see Deut. 19; Num. 35:11, 22-28).



punish an offense by returning evil for evil.”<sup>31</sup> In such a perspective the punishment of the wrongdoer seems to constitute the core aim. Vengeance in the Old Testament, however, seems to target something beyond both the wrongdoer and the victim. Certainly both the victim and the wrongdoer find their part when vengeance is exercised.<sup>32</sup> But it is most likely that whatever is done to any of the two parties is not an end in itself but a means towards the achievement of something greater. The core aim of vengeance in the Old Testament appears to have been educational. It purposed to teach the society, that is, to pass on them a lesson that was intended to resettle orderly relationships in society when an individual had caused disruption by wronging somebody else.

It appears that the intention in exercising vengeance was more disciplinary than punitive as such. Peels’ focus on the divine part in the exercise of vengeance in the Hebrew Bible led him to argue:

God’s vengeance is usually disciplinary in nature and aims at the restoration of lawfulness and the covenant in order that Zion will turn into a ‘city of righteousness,’ a ‘faithful city’ (Isa. 1:24-26) again. God’s vengeance calls to a halt the wickedness and the crying injustice in Zion (59:17-18).<sup>33</sup>

A situation of violence breeds anger and distrust in those whom it affects. Chaos may follow unless there is disciplinary action to dissuade those who may be tempted to do the same. In the Old Testament, vengeance carried this dissuasive role (Deut. 19:20). Its public (judicial) framing certainly had to do with this social objective. It was

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<sup>31</sup>Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour, “Vengeance,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 626.

<sup>32</sup>We noted earlier that vengeance in the Hebrew Scripture focuses more on the victim than his enemy. But the latter also has a lot to do with vengeance, for he receives punishment. But the purpose of vengeance in the Old Testament does not end with only the victim and his enemy. It aims at clearing the social space that the conflict has jeopardized. It carries an educational value aimed for the larger community.

<sup>33</sup>Hendrick G.L. Peels, “נקם (*nqm*),” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (1996), 155.

deemed necessary that the entire<sup>34</sup> community be given the opportunity to view and learn from the severe judgment. In fact this point gives an idea as to the presence of *talion* prescriptions. The seemingly brutal ‘eye to eye’ principle recurs in all the four main legal books of Moses.<sup>35</sup> This raises a real question as to whether God in his grace had any good reason that led him to prescribe such harsh punishment. The educational motive seems to be the underlying reason. The Baker Encyclopedia argues, “The custom [of avenging blood] was rooted in the ordinance of God which required a life for a life in any case of intentional homicide (Gen. 9:6) ... The intent of the law was to impress upon humanity the sacredness of human life.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian may find it difficult to understand that God chose such severe teaching. Nevertheless it conveyed a timeless lesson, i.e. that human life is precious.

The truth that vengeance had an educational aim can also be realized by considering the place that vengeance has on the scale of morality in the Old Testament. Love of enemies has preeminence over vengeance in the Hebrew Bible. Among the passages that teach this priority is Prov. 25:21-22, which says:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;  
If he is thirsty, give him water to drink.  
In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head,  
And the Lord will reward you (NIV) [quoted in Rom. 12:20].

The word vengeance is not mentioned in this text. But it can be easily perceived through the word ‘enemy’. Naturally a person is expected to return evil to his enemy. But this portion of Scripture enjoins acts of love -- providing food or drink to one’s enemy. Vengeance has no place. In terms of Old Testament morality, the book of

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<sup>34</sup>This was particularly true in the cases of the ‘avenger of blood’ and other situations where vengeance implied death. There was no lesson for someone being executed. The act of *nqm* or *ga’al*, etc. required witnesses (i.e. public), which means that any way of rendering justice (vengeance) had one main goal, i.e. passing on a lesson to the community.

<sup>35</sup>Exod. 21:12-15, 20-25; Lev. 24:17-20; Num. 35:16ff; Deut. 19:19, 21.

<sup>36</sup>*Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1988), s.v. “Avenger of Blood.”

Proverbs is very important.<sup>37</sup> Its dismissal of vengeance with some degree of emphasis<sup>38</sup> is a sign that vengeance in the Old Testament is not morality as such.

Another great exhortation to do good to one's enemy is found in Exod. 23:4-5, which stipulates: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (NIV). These words are a great recommendation of showing love to the enemy. They dismiss vengeance so strongly that one might doubt finding other instance in the Old Testament where vengeance could be taken as a real ethical value. In fact, the list of Old Testament passages that underscore love to the expense of vengeance can be increased.<sup>39</sup>

As a result it is noted that, in the Old Testament, vengeance is not considered as an absolute good. It is not as high an ethical value as other moral characteristics like love, tolerance, help, etc. So on moral grounds, vengeance does not appear to be an end in itself. It serves where love lacked. Where love and pardon do their role, vengeance is not justified. But it can serve as an educational asset, because it is a necessary tool of rectifying a situation where love and pardon have been lost. This seems to be the connotation that vengeance holds in the Hebrew Bible.

There is a controversy surrounding the concepts of vengeance and pardon in the Old Testament. It is necessary to consider this controversy because to some extent it

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<sup>37</sup>Proverbs constitutes the major treatise of morality in the Old Testament. Buzzell depicts it in these terms: "Proverbs is God's book on 'how to wise up and live.' It is His treasure book of wisdom... The book of Proverbs showed the Israelites how their faith in the Lord and His Word should affect their daily lives." See Sid S. Buzzell, "Proverbs," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament ed., eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1985), 901.

<sup>38</sup>It has the word 'enemy' only 3 times and two of them (Prov. 24:17; 25:21) indicate a strong dismissal of vengeance. See Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, 306.

<sup>39</sup>Other examples are for instance Gen. 45:3-7; 50:19; Lev. 19:17-18; 1 Sam. 24:4f; 26:5-12; 2 Kgs. 6:21-23; the book of Jonas, and the concession found in Exod. 21:12-14.



affects the educational value of vengeance. Indisputably the Law contains a clear repugnance of vengeance (e.g. Lev. 19:17-18) and striking demonstrations of pardon.<sup>40</sup> Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour acknowledge these evidences of pardon in the Hebrew Bible. Yet they contend, “At any rate, the duty of pardon is limited to the brothers of the one race.”<sup>41</sup> Two examples served Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour as the basis for their argument. First, they consider that Solomon avenged David posthumously by killing Joab (1 Kgs. 2:5, 28-34) and Shimei (vv. 38-46). It is thought that Solomon enacted this vengeance because the two men did not share in his descent from Judah.<sup>42</sup> Second, they think that it is for the same reason of racial difference that the book of Judges does not reprove Samson’s self-vengeance against the Philistines.

In light of these elements, pardon has been thought of as being discriminatory in Old Testament revelation. But this idea seems too pressed. A careful examination of pardon discards discrimination. For instance, one needs to note that David pardoned Joab and Shimei some time before Solomon ordered their execution.<sup>43</sup> If Solomon did not pardon these men only because of their racial difference, certainly the same cause would have hindered David’s pardon as well. It appears that Solomon’s act had nothing to do with race. Likewise, it is a quick fix to think that the book of Judges keeps silence on Samson’s vengeance only for the reason that he decimated people who were different from his own race. The cause should be explained on another basis. Pitard realizes that “the authors [in the Bible] assume that it is fully appropriate

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<sup>40</sup>E.g. Joseph (Gen. 45:3-7), and David (1 Sam. 26:5-12).

<sup>41</sup>Darrieutort and Léon-Dufour, “Vengeance,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 626.

<sup>42</sup>Shimei was Benjamite (2 Sam. 16: 5-13). Joab’s lineage is uncertain. But according to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 7.1.3) his father might have been called Suri and seems to have resided at Bethlehem. So he might have been even Judahite, but no way to be conclusive. cf. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 1988 revised and updated ed., s.v. “Joab.”

<sup>43</sup>For Joab, see 2 Sam. 3:8-39; it is clearer with Shimei, see 2 Sam. 19:16-23.

for innocent victims to be avenged upon the guilty.”<sup>44</sup> His observation might solve the difficulty. It seems probable that it is this kind of motivation that led the author of Judges to be tolerant over Samson’s violent requital. In fact the Bible has many instances where vengeance is not criticized even when a son of Israel hurls vengeance upon a member of his own group.<sup>45</sup> It has been noted earlier that even God exercises vengeance over his chosen people, Israel. It is quite unwarranted to argue that vengeance and pardon are administered on the basis of relations. Vengeance carried an educational connotation. Since true education must not discriminate, it is fair to think that vengeance [punishment] as a correcting tool was used for any wrongdoer irrespective of his social links. And so was pardon as well. Scripture portions that speak about vengeance [redemption, punishment, etc.] mention Israel but also the alien (Lev. 24:21-22; 25:47-48; Num. 35:15).

#### Vengeance as the Prerogative of God

It appears that vengeance could meet perfectly its purpose of restoration and rectification if only God plays a very consistent part in it. In fact the Old Testament authors made vengeance almost an exclusive prerogative of God. Earlier the study of terminology showed that God is the dominant subject of the action of vengeance in the Old Testament. It appears that his role is not confined to those passages where the action is definitely divine. God overshadows this concept in nearly all its use. Even when the Israelites exercise vengeance among themselves, it appears that they act as God’s agents.<sup>46</sup> Thus Peels correctly remarks specifically with the root *naqam*: “In the

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<sup>44</sup>Pitard, “Vengeance,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 786.

<sup>45</sup>Illustration can be made with the episode of David and Nabal (1 Sam. 25:21-22, 34). These verses extol the extreme vengeful intention of David. The whole passage is favorable to the act. Yet Nabal pertained to the line of Caleb, so a descendant of Judah like David; cf. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Nabal.”

<sup>46</sup>Even ‘blood vengeance’ falls under God’s legitimation despite its violent nature. Indirectly God himself was avenging the blood when the kinsman acted. He acted as God’s agent (Num. 35:12, 19;

OT (sic), *nqm* is normally God's prerogative or that of people used by him as instruments (judge, king, court, people).<sup>47</sup> The Old Testament has God as the real cause that stands behind vengeance. Yet he uses men as his delegates to accomplish vengeance. He endows them with legitimacy. For the various cases that deal with the keeping of social order and justice in Israel, the instruments of vengeance that God uses are the heads of social structures. But when it is a question of exercising vengeance upon Israel for their unfaithfulness to the covenant, God uses even heathens, beasts, and catastrophies. The same means are used when he hurls vengeance against the nations who dishonor his name or oppress his people.

So in the Hebrew Bible, it is a consistent fact that God "reserves vengeance as the sphere of his own action."<sup>48</sup> In fact, God's faithful servants understood it. Instead of avenging themselves, they committed their cases to God, believing that God was considering their hardship as his own problem.<sup>49</sup> David's words are illustrative on this point. Instead of laying his vengeful hand on his enemy Saul, he handed the case over to God and declared:

May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you... May the Lord be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand (1 Sam. 24:12, 15, NIV).

David has a deep confidence that the Lord controls and will deal with the persecution that weighs heavily on his life. He is not the only one to believe that

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Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17). In fact, God had said that the shedding of blood profaned the Land where Yahweh dwelt (Num. 35:33f, Gen. 4:10; Job 16:18). So, God was himself actively preserving justice and purity over his land, though practically the kinsman did the action.

<sup>47</sup>Peels, "נקם (*nqm*)," in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 154.

<sup>48</sup>*Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. "To Avenge."

<sup>49</sup>E.g. Joseph in Gen. 45:3, 7; 50:19; David in 1 Sam. 24:4ff; 26:5-12; Jeremiah in Jer. 20:12; 11:20; 15:15.



vengeance pertains to God. There are several vengeful imprecations<sup>50</sup> in the Old Testament and their background seems to be the belief that the avenger is God. Sometimes one may wonder why God maintained harshly vengeful imprecations in his Word. It appears that they play a necessary part. They are a very important contribution because they “imply (in a situation of uttermost threat!) an abandonment of private revenge and a total surrender to him who judges righteously.”<sup>51</sup> Hence the imprecatory words demonstrate, in a consistent manner, the belief that vengeance is the prerogative of God. God’s people believed that vengeance must be left to the almighty God. The only thing they could do was to “cry out against injustice and call on the Lord to overthrow the wicked.”<sup>52</sup> That is what the imprecatory terms intend to express.

Another noteworthy evidence that vengeance is God’s sphere consists in the fact that not only the people of Israel believed it but also God himself pronounced some words that commend such a belief.<sup>53</sup> For instance the Scripture states:

The Lord said to Moses, Take vengeance on the Medianites for the Israelites... So Moses said to the people, Arm some of your men to go to war against the Medianites and to carry out the Lord’s vengeance on them (Num. 31:1-3).

These words are an example of God’s own claim that he is the ultimate source of vengeance. The action conducted against the Medianites stems from his command. In addition, Moses does not view it as Israel avenging herself but as the vengeance of Israel’s God in favor of his harassed nation. The idea then is that the war against

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<sup>50</sup>There are especially many in the Psalms, e.g. Ps. 10:15; 35; 55:15; 58:6; 68:2; 69:22ff; 94:2; 109:6-15; 137:7-9; but also elsewhere, e.g. 2 Kgs. 1:10; Neh. 4:5.

<sup>51</sup>Peels, “נקם (nqm),” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 155.

<sup>52</sup>Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1991), 349.

<sup>53</sup>In Deut. 32:35 for instance God says plainly, “It is mine to avenge ...” (NIV).

Israel's enemy is God's war although on the field it is Israel who actually wages it.

The men are fighting under God's mandate.

In fact in Israel--and other inhabitants of the Near East in general--a war of vengeance was conducted with the belief that through it God (god) judges the enemy of his worshipers. Peels writes:

In the ANE<sup>54</sup> (sic, 'Ancient Near East') war is frequently described by means of juridical metaphors and is considered as a 'lawsuit' in which the godhead passes sentence (cf. Judg. 11:36 [after v. 27]; 2 Sam. 18:19, 31; 22:48)... In that way Joshua (Josh. 10:12-13), Saul (1 Sam. 14:23,...), and the Israelites (Esth. 8:13) have their vengeance on their enemies.<sup>55</sup>

The belief that vengeance for Israel was God's duty was deep in the minds of the Israelites. Israel's kings and military commanders campaigned for the freedom of their nation knowing that they were acting under God's mandate. Any attempt at vengeance that was deemed to be out of God's mandate was considered illegitimate. It is in fact in such cases that the Old Testament speaks of vengeance as malicious, and a person who perpetrates such a vengeance is merely termed as an enemy (Ps. 8:2; 44:16; Lam. 3:60; Ezek. 25:12, 15).

### **The Basis for the Prominence of Vengeance as the Prerogative of God**

It is now important to find out what may have caused the prominent connection between the divine and the idea of vengeance as seen in the Old Testament. There is a need to ask why the people of Israel considered vengeance as primarily a divine matter. Man is basically prone to avenge himself as soon as he is wronged. It is not usual for a human being to commit his vengeance to an outsider while he himself has enough means to ensure that he would prevail over his adversary. There must be a

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<sup>54</sup>ANE is Ancient Near East

<sup>55</sup>Peels, "נָקַם (nqm)," in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 156.

strong motive for men like David to delay their action while they waited upon the divine avenger even though they had not only the power but also a ripe opportunity to kill their enemies and put an end to their turmoil. It is assumed that there was a consistent reason for ascribing the prerogative of vengeance to God to such an extent.

### God's Perfect Qualities

Concerning the causes that led the men of ancient Israel to rely so intensely on divine vengeance, one's attention turns first to the perfect qualities of God. The Old Testament presents God as a personality who is characterized by unequalled qualities, such as justice (Ps. 7:11; 11:7), love (Exod. 34:6; Isa. 63:9; Jer. 31:3), mercy (Ps. 103:9-10; 109:21; 145:8-9), grace (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 78:38), and truth (Ps. 105:8-9; 111:5). Man does not have such perfection. So man's vengeance cannot be matched with the righteous vengeance that God exercises. The people of God understood it in that way. In his attempt to echo their belief in God's perfect vengeance, Pitard writes:

Human vengeance may be either a private redressing of wrongs or public and judicial in nature. It may be perceived as either appropriate or inappropriate retaliation. Divine vengeance, however, is always presented as appropriate and is often requested by a petitioner when the latter is afraid that justice may not be done on a human level<sup>56</sup> (e.g. 1 Sam. 24:12).

Man's acts are always tainted with some degree of unfairness. Leaving vengeance to God was motivated by the belief that he was the only one who can judge rightly. His people knew that they "can turn to Jehovah (Lam. 3:58)... in the knowledge that that judgment will be according to deeds (cf. Isa. 59:18)."<sup>57</sup>

In terms of God's qualities, it is also necessary to note that the idea that vengeance belongs to God's sphere has a strong link to God's position as sovereign king and

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<sup>56</sup>Pitard, "Vengeance," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 786.

<sup>57</sup>R. J. Hammer, "Reward, Recompense, Vengeance, Avenge," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. by Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press, 1957), 201.



judge. For a long time Israel lived under theocratic rule (1 Sam. 8; 10:17-19). Even later on when the monarchy was instituted, God's people continued to hold a strong conviction that God was their king.<sup>58</sup> The idea of ascribing to God the prerogative of vengeance has much to do with the deeply rooted conception of God as the sovereign king.<sup>59</sup> In fact as a sovereign king, he was believed to be the supreme judge (Eccl. 3:17; Jer. 11:20) and undefeatable warrior (Deut. 20:1; 1 Sam. 14:1-22; 2 Kgs. 6:8-23). The belief in those qualities led Israel to consider Yahweh as the only one who holds the necessary capacity to exercise just vengeance whether he accomplishes it himself or uses human structures that he mandates.

### The Covenantal Ground

The covenant that God made with his chosen people remained a very important reference in the history of Israel. From Abram through Jacob to David,<sup>60</sup> God's various covenants keep one feature in common, i.e. the term of the compact, consisting itself in two points: obedience on the part of Israel and Yahweh's provision of welfare to his people. "Their obedience to the commands of the law was to be rewarded by

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<sup>58</sup>The Old Testament emphasizes the sovereignty of the God who rules over the entire creation that he made. E.g. Deut. 4:39, "The Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other." This conception is also deeply extant in later Judaism: "That God is the omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe, exalted above all his creatures, ruling in majestic splendor, and ultimately beyond human ken, is a common motif in the literature of the second temple and rabbinic periods." Cf. Shayer J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Library of Early Christianity, gen. ed. Wayne A. Meeks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 80. All the militant and revolutionary activity of the Jews (approximately from 164 BC to 135 AD) was based on the belief that there was 'no King but God'. Cf. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 302.

<sup>59</sup>Peels phrases the point in these words: "God's vengeance in the OT (sic) can be described as the punitive retribution of God, who, as the sovereign king--faithful to his covenant--stands up for the vindication of his glorious name in a judging and fighting mode, while watching over the maintenance of his justice and acting to save his people." Cf. Peels, "נָקַם (*nqm*)," in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 154-155.

<sup>60</sup>God's covenant with his chosen nation began with Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel (Gen. 12:1-3). It was renewed twice adding some new elements (Gen. 15; 17). Then a covenant (consisting in the Ten Commandments) was made with the people of Israel at Sinai (Exod. 20; 24:3; 34:28). The other covenant was made with David, which was but a specification as to how the blessings promised earlier to Abraham would be accomplished (2 Sam. 7).

God's constant care of Israel, temporal prosperity, victory over enemies, and the pouring out of His Spirit (Exod. 23:20-33)."<sup>61</sup> Clearly God promised, among other things, to be the defender of Israel. He said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). He repeated similar utterances to the patriarchs in the desert (e.g. Exod. 23:20, 27-28; 34:11). Also later God said in his covenant with David: "I have been with you ... and I have cut off all your enemies from before you... Wicked people shall not oppress them (Israel) any more... I will also give you rest from all your enemies" (2 Sam. 7:9, 10, 11).

As one may realize, this promise that God would champion Israel's welfare had to have results. These words were remarkable for Israel because they permeated the various stages of God's compact with the founders of their nation. Even more, these words were utterances of protection made by the God that Israel believed to be Almighty.<sup>62</sup> Therefore there is no doubt that this covenantal promise of defense influenced Israel in their approach to vengeance. It is no surprise really that the Old Testament tends to confine vengeance to God's control.

We noted earlier that God has a prominent link with the verbal roots that stand for the word vengeance. Such a divine link can be justified if the aspect of covenant is looked upon with due attention. This is particularly notable with the root *ga'al*. The action of repurchase or redemption implied in *ga'al* was chiefly a duty of the nearest of kin. Now, in terms of the covenant, the nearest helper and friend of Israel remained the God of their father Abraham. The bond between God and Israel, based on the covenant concept, was no less than a family bond.<sup>63</sup> In that sense, it is normal that

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<sup>61</sup>*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Covenant."

<sup>62</sup>The expression occurs many times in the Old Testament, e.g. Gen. 17:1; Ps. 46:7, 11; Isa. 1:9, 24; Mal. 1:4.

<sup>63</sup>For details, see Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 260-262. Here it might also be necessary to notice God's portrayal as Father and Israel as son, e.g. Exod. 4:22-23; Deut. 1:31; 8:5; Hos. 11:1.

God be ascribed the position and duty of the nearest redeemer. Hammer must be correct in saying: "... a man was avenged by his next of kin, if he suffered a wrong (e.g. murder) which he could not avenge himself (cf. Deut. 19:6, 12; Josh. 20:5,9). It is the rôle (sic) of 'avenger' that God takes upon himself, when he vindicates the righteousness of his servants."<sup>64</sup> Just as the kinsman had to redeem (avenge) his relative when the latter was unable to sort out his trouble, similarly the God of the covenant had to intervene for Israel, his beloved son (Exod. 4:22). In this way the Old Testament authors saw God as the redeemer (avenger) per excellence, hence his frequent function as the source of the action expressed by *ga'al* and the other terms for vengeance.

### Summary

The basic connotation of the Hebrew roots that stand for vengeance is broader than mere requital. Rather than the principle of 'eye for eye', the connotation of saving, liberating, or setting free dominates the sense of the term 'vengeance' in the Hebrew Bible. The word emphasizes a sense of saving and restoring someone from a situation of unhappiness and indignity. Thus the focus is not generally put on the evil (punishment) that is returned to the wrongdoer. What is accomplished for the victim is given greater prominence.

Private vengeance has very little value in the Old Testament. Vengeance was rather a public matter. It was accomplished publicly because its main purpose was to educate the entire community. Its aim was not just to requite a man for the evil he had committed. This socio-educational nature of vengeance did not originate from men. God commanded it so that it would serve as a means of keeping purity and justice in his land. But the aspect of commanding vengeance for order in the land is not the only

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<sup>64</sup>Hammer, "Reward, Recompense, Vengeance, Avenger," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 201.



link that the Old Testament authors saw between God and vengeance. The other points of connection reside in the fact that (1) God is the liberator (avenger) of Israel on covenant basis; (2) he is the only person who can exercise vengeance with equity. These links led Israel to view vengeance as being predominantly something that pertains to God's work.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE VENGEANCE IN THE EXTRA-BIBLICAL *MILIEUX*

More than one system of thought made an impact on Paul's life. The Old Testament does not constitute the only worldview that Paul knew. The period in which he lived put him in contact with Judaism and the Greco-Roman culture. Also it must be noted that the Near Eastern world was the life setting in which Paul grew up. The literature of that world is necessary for understanding Paul. In a study of Paul's ethical concept, the Ancient Near Eastern literature has a twofold importance. First, the Hebrew Bible influenced Paul but it had itself been influenced by the Ancient Near Eastern worldview. Apart from its influence that came to Paul through the Old Testament, the Ancient Near Eastern literature contains cultural values that transcended the question of time. Some of the things it conveys are not only of the very ancient age but followed the course of time. Vengeance is one of those Near Eastern cultural elements that transcended centuries up to Paul's time and, amazingly, survived even until today.<sup>1</sup> So the Ancient Near Eastern literature is an important source to understand Paul's reflection on vengeance. This chapter will attempt to examine the way the concept of divine vengeance was understood in each of these cultural contexts, that is, the Ancient Near East worldview, Judaism and the Greco-Roman outlook.

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<sup>1</sup>Unger notes that the retaliation for murder, i.e. the custom of "blood calling for blood" exists among Arabs today. See *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Blood, Avenger." Smick also stipulates, "Blood revenge is still a pattern which exists in the minds of Bedouin-oriented people in the Near East. The government of Jordan makes allowances for this frame of mind in its judicial processes." Smick, "נָקָם (*naqam*): Take Vengeance, Revenge, Avenge Oneself, Be Avenged, Be Punished," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 599.

## Vengeance in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The idea of vengeance was widespread among the peoples of the Ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> But our focus is on divine vengeance. Was the concept of divine vengeance used in this cultural setting? To begin with, the idea of not seeking revenge can be examined, since it prepares the ground for leaving vengeance to divine beings.

### The Idea of No-Revenge

Ancient Near Eastern literature contains several instances in which not seeking revenge is recommended with emphasis. Egyptian wisdom literature, for instance, conveys no-revenge in a remarkable way. It appears that ancient Egyptians regarded revengeful violence as something that could not settle matters. The king of Upper Egypt gives the following instruction to his son Meri-ka-re: “Be not evil; patience is good.”<sup>3</sup> The king’s statement gives no direct prohibition on revenge. But such prohibition is implied in the terms he uses. Patience and the avoidance of evil are antipodal with vengeance. Another rejection of revengeful violence can be observed in the instruction of king Ka-nakht to his son Amen-em-opet:

Do not say: ‘I have found a strong superior,  
For a man in thy city has injured me.’  
Do not say: ‘I have found a *patron*,  
For one who hates me has injured me.’  
For surely thou knowest not the plans of god,  
Lest thou *be ashamed* on the morrow.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>It is traceable not only to the Hebrews, as we saw earlier, but also to the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Akkadians, the Hittites, the Assyrians, the people of Eshnunna, and in languages like Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic. See *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “נקם,” 667-68; *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “To Avenge.” It is noted that the root *nqm*, ‘avenge, requite’ is wide-spread among the peoples of the west semitic region; see Peels, “נקם (*nqm*),” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 154.

<sup>3</sup>John A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 120. See also John A. Wilson, ed., “Instruction for King Meri-ka-re,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. with supplement, ed. by James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 415.

<sup>4</sup>John A. Wilson, ed., “Instruction of Amen-em-opet,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 424.



Very often people tend to use a third party in revenge, especially when the offended person feels powerless before the offender, or merely if the real perpetrator of the act seeks to hide behind another figure. Egyptian wisdom discourages even that indirect way of avenging oneself.

The idea that the best option was not vengeance but no-revenge is clearer in some statements that recommend people to show acts of love to an enemy. One Akkadian text, for instance, gives this important exhortation:

If a dispute involving you should flare up, calm it down.  
 A dispute is a *covered* pit,  
 A... wall which can *cover over* its foes;  
 It brings to mind what one has forgotten and  
 makes an accusation against a man.  
 Do not return evil to your adversary;  
 Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you,  
 Maintain justice for your enemy,  
 Be friendly to your enemy.<sup>5</sup>

In this word of wisdom, the Akkadian instructor inculcates a way of shunning vengeful impulses. First he exhorts his hearer(s) to calm the dispute as soon as it has broken out. The recommendation is not to take vengeful action but an action that pleases and cools the heart of the adversary. The instructor suggests some ways of acting towards the evildoer so as to make him feel loved in spite of what he has done. The instructor commends returning not evil but kindness to the wrongdoer, returning what is just for the evildoer's unjust act and showing him friendship though he had inflicted pain. All of these elements are intended to calm the tense situation. The point with this instruction is that violent vengeance is not the appropriate reaction towards someone who acted wildly. Good acts cool down an enraged enemy. They constitute a better option.

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<sup>5</sup>Robert D. Biggs, ed., "Akkadian Didactic and Wisdom Literature," in *The Ancient Near East, vol. 2: A New Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. by James Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 146 [italics are from the author]. See also Kerr D. Macmillan, ed., "Counsels of Wisdom," in *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. with supplement, ed. by James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 426.

It is not only in Akkadian culture that wisdom recommends that the enemy be shown actions of love instead of vengeance. Egyptian wisdom contains similar instructions. The word that Ka-nakht passes on to his son Amen-em-opet contends:

So steer that we may bring the wicked man across,  
For we shall not act like him,  
Lift him up, give him thy hand; ...  
Fill his belly with bread of thine,  
So that he may be sated and may be *ashamed*.<sup>6</sup>

This is another example that strongly advocates good acts towards an enemy after he had caused evil. The enemy's act puts the victim down, but this word of wisdom requires the evildoer to be lifted up. In addition, it asks that the opponent be given food. So the injured person, in spite of the painful treatment he received, is asked to demonstrate serious concern for his enemy's welfare. In such a thought, vengeance is totally set aside.

Mercy in Ancient Near Eastern literature is another element indicating that vengeance was not the best course of action. The avenger had the freedom to revenge or to inflict another symbolic but lighter punishment. This Assyrian code is an illustration:

If either a man or a woman has entered a man's [house] and has killed [either a man] or a woman, the murderers [shall be given up to the owner of the house]; if he chooses, they shall be put to death, (or), [if he chooses,] he may make a composition (and) take [any of their property].<sup>7</sup>

This code shows the existence of mercy in the ancient Near Eastern culture. The situation described the code is that of *talion* because the evildoer deserves retribution equivalent to the injury that he perpetrated. But a note of concessive mercy softens the code. The avenger is free to exact *talion* or to choose another punishment of lesser

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<sup>6</sup>John A. Wilson, ed., "Egyptian Instructions," in *The Ancient Near East, vol. 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 238.

<sup>7</sup>Assyrian code (number A10); see William H. McNeill and Jean W. Sedlar, eds., *The Ancient Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 157. The underlining is mine.

intensity. *Talion* was not construed as a necessary, good solution. Even the code of Hammurabi, which seems to involve more harshness than other codes, gives room to the avenger for exercising mercy if he wishes. For instance its code number 129 holds: “If the wife of a *seignior* has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject.”<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, this code shows that mercy could be used though a situation normally required *talion*. It appears then that, while *talion* was practiced, punishment that denoted more humanity and dignity was encouraged. The Ancient Near Eastern people gave room to mercy and knew that it was better, although vengeance was also accepted.

A derogation of a penalty of talion in Ancient Near Eastern literature is mainly linked with unintentional wrongdoings. It was a principle that accidental harms should not incur retaliation. Paragraph number 206 of the code of Hammurabi says, “If a *seignior* has struck a [nother] seignior in a brawl and has inflicted an injury on him, that seignior shall swear, ‘I did not strike him deliberately’; and he shall also pay for the physician.”<sup>9</sup> The puzzle here consists in that the striking occurs in a quarrel or fight and yet it is considered unintentional. That seems incomprehensible. However this law reveals that talion was not required once it was determined that the evil happened without deliberate, malicious intent.

In sum, talion served as a tool of limiting crimes. Apparently it was not an end in itself. A sense of loving and valuing human life seems to have taken precedence over vengeance. But there arises a question. In a context where vengeance was legalized, was there any chance for love, mercy, or concession to apply? Is there any

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<sup>8</sup>Meek, ed., “The Code of Hammurabi,” in *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, 152.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 162.



cultural asset that could make a path through a land in which talion seems to have dominated? The next points provide possible assets that could make love and mercy replace vengeance.

### Expectation of Divine Vengeance

Ancient Near Eastern Literature is permeated with the belief that a divine being is to effect vengeance. Often no-revenge appears to be in connection with the hope that god will avenge. Then the person is urged to surrender the offense to god's care instead of championing it himself. An example of this is the following instruction to Amen-em-opet: "We shall not act like him (the offender); ... leave him (in) the arms of the god."<sup>10</sup> Egyptian wisdom also recommends, "Sit thou down at the hands of the god; and thy silence will cast them down."<sup>11</sup> Implicitly such assertions consider god as the one who holds the right to avenge. A similar belief is expressed in Aramaic proverbs. For instance, we find there this kind of statement: "If a good thing come (sic) forth from the mouths of m[en, it is well for them], and if an evil thing come [forth] from their mouths, the gods will do evil unto them... [Bend not] thy [b]ow and shoot not thine arrow at a righteous man, lest God<sup>12</sup> come to his help and turn it back upon thee."<sup>13</sup> The first part of this thought shows clearly that the gods repay evil for evil. Implicitly it exhorts one not to commit evil against another person, not even against an evildoer, since the gods would punish every evil. Also the second part of the statement says that the divine being will shoot back at the one who shot the

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<sup>10</sup>Wilson, ed., "Egyptian Instructions," in *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, 238.

<sup>11</sup>Wilson, ed., "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 424.

<sup>12</sup>This Aramaic thought has both 'God' in capital and 'gods'. It seems strange since this people are now presented as being monotheistic and polytheistic at the same time. It seems that the author made a script mistake.

<sup>13</sup>H. L. Ginberg, ed., "Aramaic Proverbs and Precepts: the Words of Ahiqar," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 429.

righteous. Implicitly the righteous victim does not need to champion his cause himself since the gods are in charge of it. Here is another maxim that expresses it in a straight forward way: "If the wicked man seizes the corners of thy garment, leave it in his hand. Then approach Shamash: he will take his and give it to thee."<sup>14</sup> With no ambiguity, Shamash is depicted here as dealing himself with the aggression hurled at an innocent person. He is presented as the defender.

So like the Hebrews, other peoples of the Ancient Near East put an emphasis on expressing vengeance as the prerogative of the divine being. However, there is a substantial difference with the Old Testament. First it ought to be noted that god rarely appears in the instances where talion is spoken about. Hence vengeance in Near Eastern culture is ordained and executed by man. This seems a departure from the Hebrew Bible. This latter places God at the center of gravity where God not only stands as the one who ordains vengeance, but also as the one who regulates and controls its implementation.

In addition in Ancient Near Eastern literature, the expectation that god will handle vengeance does not explain clearly how god himself views that responsibility. The texts all seem to stem from the man who expects vengeance; god has no voice about it. In Near Eastern literature, a clear divine declaration such as, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay' (Deut. 32:35) seems peculiar to the Hebrew Scriptures and to Yahweh who revealed it.

Another major difference between Near Eastern literature and the Old Testament resides in the strictness of the biblical law. Some authors depict Hammurabi's code, among others, as being stricter than the Mosaic Law. Perkin goes on to support this view with these words: "In general, the Hebrew law exhibited a

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 430.

greater sense of humanity and a tendency toward leniency.”<sup>15</sup> But such a statement seems to denote a bias of personal piety. In fact, the Old Testament appears to be stricter. Hammurabi’s code number 195 may corroborate this point. It requires chopping off the hand of a son who has stricken his father.<sup>16</sup> But the Hebrew law goes farther. It requires death for such a crime (Exod. 21:15). Another example is Hammurabi’s code, paragraph 129, which gives the husband the choice of sparing his wife after she was caught in adultery.<sup>17</sup> On this matter the biblical law is without mercy. Stoning was the reward for a wife caught in adultery (Deut. 22:22).

There are some reasons why the Hebrew law is more rigorous than other laws of the Ancient Near East. The greatest reason is that “the Hebrews were to maintain a monotheistic religion in a polytheistic environment....”<sup>18</sup> The Hebrews and their neighbors did not hold the same religious worldviews. As a result, the laws of each side were governed by different perspectives. “The purpose of biblical law was more encompassing than that of other Near Eastern codes. Going beyond the maintenance of morality and justice, biblical law sought to develop a strong ethical sense and a faith in the one God....”<sup>19</sup> Extra-biblical thought sets vengeance (and the law in general) in a social perspective. Its scope is limited to human reality or social agenda. But in the Old Testament, vengeance--in fact all the teaching of the Torah--focuses on the Israelite’s life in his relationship (covenant) with God. Its foundation is more theological, though it has much to do with society as well. Its major objective is

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<sup>15</sup>Hazel W. Perkin, “Criminal Law and Punishment,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 549.

<sup>16</sup>Meek, ed., “The Code of Hammurabi,” in *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, 161.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>18</sup>Perkin expresses this as a wish when he has realized that the Hebrew was more lenient than other laws. See Perkin, “Criminal Law and Punishment,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 548-49. But he need not make it a wish; the Hebrew law was actually marked by their monotheistic distinctiveness.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 549.



purity<sup>20</sup>, which means more than just maintaining morality and justice. Because purity was its aim, the Torah was severe to the extent of demanding death even on moral and religious faults.<sup>21</sup> Moral trespasses are not sentenced with death in heathen settings. We may assume that all these distinctive characteristics of God and his revelation were important to Paul when he formulated his thoughts on divine vengeance.

### **Divine Vengeance in Judaism**

#### The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are of fundamental importance for the study of any New Testament concept.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as we endeavor to grasp Paul's thought on divine vengeance, we need to heed the way the Qumran community approached this concept. First of all it is necessary to note that vengeance seems to lack its proper force in the Qumran setting. The Qumran community was governed by scrupulous rules of unity, holiness and discipline. Malicious people could hardly rise from such a coherent environment and find opportunities of inflicting serious harm on their co-religious. So the kind of injuries that easily provoke the 'eye for eye' retribution would be hard to find at Qumran. Nonetheless one cannot rule out the possibility that at least minor offenses took place. No human entity remains immune to offense. The covenants were not perfect. From time to time they certainly rubbed against one another, though this might have been scarce. In addition to mutual offenses, the covenants, like other

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<sup>20</sup>In the Mosaic Law purity is indicated as the underlying reason when severity is required in repaying evil (Deut. 22:22, 24; Num. 35:33).

<sup>21</sup>The Torah requires death for moral and religious misconducts, e.g., trespasses related to idolatry (Exod. 22:20; Num. 25:5), sorcery (Lev. 20:6), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), Sabbath breaking (Exod. 35:2; Num. 15:32-36), sexual immorality (Deut. 22:20-24), and the rebelliousness of sons (Deut. 21:18-21). The extra-biblical laws are lenient for such faults.

<sup>22</sup>Sanders, among others, substantiates that "the Qumran literature reveals a kind of religion which is closer to what surfaces in Christianity than is any other form of Judaism." See E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 239.

Israelites, suffered the various outcomes of foreign rulers' oppression. It is worthwhile looking at the Qumran man's attitude towards wrongdoings.

What appears at first sight is that the community did not support vengeance. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain words that express repugnance to requital. The following portions can be taken as illustration:

I shall not repay anyone with an evil reward;  
With goodness I shall pursue the man;  
For to God belongs the judgment of every living being,  
And it is he who pays man his wages... (1QS, x, 17-18)

... for each to reprove his brother in accordance with the precept, and not to bear resentment from one day to the next.... (CD, vii, 2-3)

And what it says: Do not avenge yourself or bear resentment against the sons of your people. Everyone who entered the covenant who brings an accusation against his fellow, ... or brings it when he is angry, or he tells it to his elders so that they may despise him, he is the one who avenges himself and bears resentment. Is it not perhaps written that only he God avenges himself and bears resentment against his enemies? (CD, ix, 2-5).<sup>23</sup>

It is clear with these portions that the teaching of the Dead Sea Scrolls prohibits requital. Even the simple act of limiting one's vengeance to despising the wrongdoer is reprovved. Prohibition of vengeance goes even to the extent of discarding resentment.<sup>24</sup>

But rejection of vengeance does not mean that the Qumran covenanters never thought of any punishment of the enemies. That would be strange if one considers the time in which the sect existed.<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, they wished the wicked to suffer

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<sup>23</sup>Florentino G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), see the passages indicated.

<sup>24</sup>Here the Scrolls show an apparent contradiction since elsewhere they recommend hatred against the sons of darkness (e.g. IQS, i, 1-15; ii, 4-9; ix, 16-17, 21-22). However a close look shows that there is no contradiction. First, as the citation indicates, most specifically vengeance was prohibited within the community [see the adversary is depicted as 'one's brother', 'one's people']. Second, even to outsiders non-vengeance was commended. Hatred against the wicked did not stand on vengeful motive. The Dead Sea texts hold no command that urges a covenanter to go and kill a son of darkness. It remains a controversy whether their readiness to take the lead in the eschatological fight against the sons of darkness may have prompted some to take arms against Rome [For detail see Bruce, *New Testament History*, 121]. It is hard to prove that they fought. Separation from those who sin was more the agenda rather than engaging in violent action against the enemy. Cf. Wright, *Christian Origins*, vol. 1, 206.

<sup>25</sup>The Essenes could not absolve themselves from wishing that the wicked be repayed for his evildoing. Like other sects of Judaism (the Pharisees, Sadducees, etc.) they came into existence shortly after 164 BC and continued their activity when the nation suffered both religiously [seeing the religious



retribution for their wrongdoing. But they regarded this act of vengeance as pertaining to God's sphere.<sup>26</sup> The covenanters strongly believed that only God had the ability to champion their vindication. Vengeance was God's matter. While this can be seen in the texts that convey non-vengeance--as the ones we have just mentioned--God's prerogative on vengeance is also featured in the imprecatory pronouncements made against the sons of darkness. The following words are a good illustration:

And the Levites shall curse all the men of the lot of Belial. They shall begin to speak and shall say: Accursed are you for all your wicked, blameworthy deeds. May he (God) hand you over to dread into the hands of all those carrying out acts of vengeance. Accursed, without mercy, for the darkness of your deeds, and sentenced to the gloom of everlasting fire. May God not be merciful when you entreat him, nor pardon you when you do penance for your faults. May he lift the countenance of his anger to avenge himself on you (IQS, ii, 4-9).<sup>27</sup>

In this text, God remains the ultimate source of punishment. The vengeful curses are pronounced by men's lips, but their fulfillment is left to God. It is God who hands over the wicked to those who carry out acts of vengeance.<sup>28</sup> The scribe understands

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system as being ruled by usurpers' priests, the Hasmoneans, who had usurped it from the right priesthood of the Zadokites] and politically [being under the domination of the Greeks and then the Romans]. In such social setback the Essenes, like most Israelites, panted for a day of deliverance, i.e. a day when the enemy would be vanquished. See their worldview in Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 206.

<sup>26</sup>The citation 23 has words indicating constantly that vengeance pertains to God, i.e.: "I shall not repay anyone with evil reward... For to God belongs the judgment of every living being;" and "Is it not ... written that only he God avenges...?" For the Essenes, future vindication centered on God. This was what they believed: "the promises of restoration and redemption are yet to be fulfilled... Israel's God has begun to act. ... Soon he will send his anointed ones, a king and a priest, who ... will lead the Sons of Light in a great war against the Sons of darkness." Cf. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 206. The idea of leaving vengeance to God seems to have been stronger with the Essenes than other circles, because of their deep inclination to determinism. Cross says, "Josephus ... describes the Essenes as the most 'fatalistic' of the sects in Judaism... In a world captive to the powers of darkness, salvation is the gift of God to His elect, achieved by His new creation." Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 68.

<sup>27</sup>Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 4.

<sup>28</sup>These may be the two Messiahs--a king and a priest--that God would send to lead the Great War against the wicked (see Wright, note 104 above). But God's agents who carry out acts of vengeance may also refer to angels. The Essenes believed that God would use angels in war. According to Cross, the Essenes expected to march in battle "side by side with the 'holy ones,' the angelic armies of God (ref. to 1QM, xii, 1-10)." cf. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, 73.



that only God holds the evildoer's fate, whether punishment or remission. Thus he finds no other option but to petition God to withhold his mercy if the wicked implores it. On the basis of such elements it may be understood that, at Qumran, the punishment of the evildoer was perceived as the sphere of God.

### Judaism in General and Intertestamental Apocalypticism

The Dead Sea Scrolls are not the only Judaic source that might have influenced Paul's thought on divine vengeance. The Jewish culture and society from which both the founder of Christianity and the church (including Paul) arose "lay enshrined within the Talmud and various books of the Midrash."<sup>29</sup> Understanding Paul's thought of leaving vengeance to God requires the examination of the way rabbinical and other Jewish literature (e.g. Apocalypticism) dealt with this concept.

#### *The Presence of Vengeance in Judaism*

The first step one needs to see is if the idea of vengeance is traceable in Judaism. From the Talmud, a saying attributed to Hillel states: "... he [Hillel] saw a skull which floated on the face of the water, and he said, Because thou drownedst (sic), they drowned thee; and in the end they that drowned thee shall be drowned... As thou has done so it is done to thee."<sup>30</sup> There is no doubt that such a saying reflects *talion*. More about rabbinical thought on the retribution of evil appears in Sanders' words:

Often the reward fits the fulfillment or the punishment the transgression. ... [see *Rabbi Gamaliel ii: T. Baba Kamma* 9:30; *Shabbath* 151b]. Similarly, since the woman who committed adultery and is put to the test prescribed in Num. 5 began transgression with the belly and afterward with the thigh, the punishment is that the belly shall swell and the thigh fall. [consult *Sifre Num.* 18:22...; see also *Sifre*

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<sup>29</sup>R. Travers Herford, *Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), viii.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 48; with reference to *Pirke Aboth* 2:7. [*Pirke Aboth* is a collection of religious and moral instructions of Talmudic time].

*Num. 5:21*]<sup>31</sup>

The stipulation conveys the idea of a punishment fitting the transgression. This is quite reminiscent of the talion seen earlier in relation with the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature. It appears that the eye for eye principle did not remain an old notion confined to the most primitive Antiquity. It transcended centuries to the extent that Judaism inherited it. In fact Judaism carries several instances that embody talionic ideas. Apart the words cited earlier, the following is another noteworthy example. “The sages said: with what measure a man metes it is meted unto him... [consult *Mekilta Beshallah Amalek 2 ...*; also *Sifre Num. 106 ...*].”<sup>32</sup> Indisputably such talionic words show that Judaism took vengeance seriously. A similar talionic idea appears in *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. This document says: “By the very same things by which a man transgresses, by them is he punished (*Testament of Gad 5:10*).”<sup>33</sup>

Seemingly the strong concept of punishment characterizing the Old Testament moved to Judaism with all its force. It appears that a Jew could not commit any evil without expecting a punishment for it. This is expressed in *Sirach* in these words: “Whoever throws a stone up in the air is throwing it at his own head, and a treacherous blow means wounds all around. Dig a pit and you will fall into it, set a trap and you will be caught by it (*Sir. 27:25-26*).”<sup>34</sup> Punishment was taken for granted. For the Jew, it appears that evil and punishment stood in the pattern of a cause and effect relationship. The important question now is to know if Judaism allowed the individual

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<sup>31</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 118.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>33</sup>Benedikt Otzen, *Judaism in Antiquity: Political Development and Religious Currents from Alexander to Hadrian* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 79-80

<sup>34</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

to champion his vengeance arbitrarily, and whether God was regarded as one who avenges the believer.

### *Vengeance as a Public Matter*

It appears that Judaism perpetuated--even reinforced--the Old Testament pattern of considering the retribution of evil as not a private affair but something that social structures had to deal with. Murder can serve us as a case example since it is a typical injury that entails vengeance. Drawing their comment on some portions of *Sifre*, Kohler and Ginzberg note: "The hunting down of a murderer is no longer the business of the avenger, but of the state; accordingly, whether there is any relative or not, whether the relative lodges complaint or not, the state must prosecute the murderer (*Sifre*, Num.160 on xxv:19; Deut.181)."<sup>35</sup>

As one may realize, vengeance in Judaism took a new development. In the Old Testament, it held a public form, but a great deal of the responsibility lay on the clan of the person hurt. Without their complaint, the case could have been left without prosecution. Even once the murderer was sentenced to death, they were responsible of executing him. The part played by the state seems to have been limited to a level of supervision. Certainly this indicates that a political organ endowed with centralized authority did not operate as it is in modern time. But by the era of Judaism, it appears that the notion of the state had developed. The pole of responsibility for justice became substantially reversed from the clan to the state. The official authority, as the citation above shows, prosecuted the wrongdoer whether the victim's relative complained or not. Since there was a centralized power that seemed to guarantee retribution, certainly private vengeance was going to lose value.

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<sup>35</sup>Kaufmann Kohler and Louis Ginzberg, "Avenger of Blood: Rabbinical Literature," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901), 346.



The development of the public notion of vengeance is more remarkable in that the state cared now for both the victim and the wrongdoer. Contrary to Mosaic prescriptions that provided asylum only to one who murdered accidentally, Judaism commended every murderer to flee to the cities of refuge.”<sup>36</sup> The state’s concern for the wrongdoer was so serious that the avenger of blood incurred the penalty of death himself if he dared to assail the murderer in his asylum.<sup>37</sup> Amazingly, unlike the Mosaic instruction, the avenger was not permitted to attack the murderer even when the latter wandered away out of the city of refuge.<sup>38</sup> These points show how strongly the Jewish law limited the liberty of exercising one’s own vengeance. The *Mishnah Sanhedrin* substantiates that no punishment was to be executed without bringing the case to the Sanhedrin court and its being heard by at least three judges.<sup>39</sup> As one may see, Judaism, at least officially, gave no room to private vengeance.

### *Vengeance as the Prerogative of God*

Judaism recognized that God was the avenger par excellence. In spite of all the importance given to the role of the state (exercised through the Sanhedrin), the Jewish writings hold retribution of evil as God’s domain. The Sanhedrin carried out

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<sup>36</sup>In *Mishnah Makkoth* 2:6, Rabbi Jose bin Judah declares that, both he who killed ‘unwittingly’ and he who killed ‘wantonly’ are to flee to the city of refuge. For comment, see Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933; Reprint, 1983), 404.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. *Mishnah Makkoth* 2:6, also *Sifre, Num.* 160, xxv:25. For more detail see Kohler and Ginzberg, “Avenger of Blood: Rabbinical Literature,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 346.

<sup>38</sup>Kohler and Ginzberg, “Avenger of Blood,” 346. This point radically innovates the Old Testament instruction. While the Hebrew Bible allows the avenger to take the life of the murderer if the latter leaves the asylum (Num. 35:26-27 [note: someone who killed accidentally] ), some Rabbis insisted that no one be permitted to take the life of the man [note: even someone who killed deliberately], should he have left his asylum (cf. *Gemara ib.* 12a). Indeed some Rabbis like Akiba and Jose the Galilean opposed this modification. Instead they contended that the avenger of the blood and ‘the other men’--an addition to Moses’ instruction--are not guilty if they kill such a wanderer (see *Mishnah Makkoth*, 2:7 in Danby, *The Mishnah*, 405). But, despite the presence of the two positions, the prohibition of not assailing privately the murderer is a great modification that cannot go unnoticed.

<sup>39</sup>*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 1:1ff. For more detail see Danby, *The Mishnah*, 382-83.

retribution. As an institution it was preferred to an individual's action. However, it was as an agent<sup>40</sup> of God that it carried out this role. Judaism holds assertions that describe God as the main avenger. An example is this saying of Rabbi Jannai: "There is not in our hands either the security of the wicked or the chastisements of the righteous."<sup>41</sup> The saying sounds enigmatic. But the connotation seems to be that the reward of both the wicked and the righteous escapes man's control.<sup>42</sup> It is God's matter to reward everyone. *Sirach* echoes this thought as he says, "To him (God) belong both mercy and wrath, and sinners feel the weight of his retribution" (*Sir.* 5:6).

Vengeance as the sphere of God is also conveyed in apocalyptic writings. This is favored by the fact that the apocalyptic genre originated in horrible crises.<sup>43</sup> Antagonistic powers were destroying the lives and infrastructure of the Jews. Such an indignity raised a desire for retribution. But Israel and her leaders had been subjugated. God remained the only avenger left. The core instruction that apocalyptic texts communicated to their readers can be summarized this way: the situation is out of man's power, but God will rise sovereignly, and he will decisively punish those who are the cause of the tragedy that befell his people. It was not man but God who, according to Daniel's vision, would vanquish the beast and its terror and install his

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<sup>40</sup>The Sanhedrin was a political organism, but above all its authority was spiritual. In fact, this council was headed by the acting high priest (Mat. 26:3; Acts 23:2) and the high priesthood took part in it.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. *Pirke Aboth* 4:19. For more comment, see Herford, *The Ethics of the Talmud*, 114.

<sup>42</sup>One of the meanings given to these words is, "it is not in human power to allot the portion either of the wicked or the righteous; if it were, they would not have allotted security to the wicked nor afflictions to the righteous. Their lot is in the hands of God alone." see Herford, *The Ethics of the Talmud*, 114.

<sup>43</sup>The major apocalyptic texts are assigned dates that correspond with times of great turmoil. Thus for Collins, *Daniel* and *1 Enoch* were written in response to Antiochus Epiphanes' persecution (c. 168 BC; traditionally the 6<sup>th</sup> century for Daniel), and that *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* are the result of the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD). See J. J. Collins, "Apocalypse: an Overview," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), 334; also J. A. Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 242, and R. A. Horsley and J. S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 16-17. It is necessary to note that Paul also wrote out of a background of the persecution of God's people. It is possible that apocalyptic ideas inspired his thought (see for instance 2 Thes. 1:6-10).



kingdom (Dan.2:44; 7:13-14, 18, 27). For Baruch, the cause of the tragedy was the unfaithful Jewish leadership. For him also, the one who would judge them properly was not man but God (*Bar.* 53-74; also *Apoc. Abraham* 29-30). Esdras' vision focused on the end of the arrogance of Rome. There also the vengeance (deliverance) of God's people would not occur by ordinary man, but by God who would act through the lion of Judah (2 Esdras 11-12). In all these events, vengeance stands as God's work.

Now some factors seem to have laid the basis for considering God as the only effective source of vengeance for the Jews. First, one notes that nonviolence featured among the values of Jewish life. Juergensmeyer observes, "On an interpersonal level the absence of violence is applauded even in the face of provocation. If one is attacked, a fourth-century rabbi advised, 'let him kill you; do you commit no murder.'"<sup>44</sup> Behind these words one can easily see the rabbi exhorting people to leave their aggressors to God. Another strong evidence of leaving matters to God derives from what a rabbinical council issued in the second century A.D. Their recommendation was that even under the threat of death, one must refuse to commit murder.<sup>45</sup> The command to do nothing even under the threat of death is quite startling. It might compel one to examine how pacifistic the Jews really were. But for the sake of our purpose, we can now only be content with noting that the Jew shuns violence implicitly because he counts on God's retribution that is far more effective.

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<sup>44</sup>Based on *Pes.* 25b. Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer, "Nonviolence," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 465.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 465-66. This seems too pacifistic. One may wonder if Judaism preached passivity in the face of violence. Did it ignore the Old Testament emphasis on justice? Cohon observes: "The yearning for peace did not harden into a pacifist dogma... In Jewish teaching peace is not a dogma resting on an isolationist basis [so a difference from the NT]. Dependent as it is upon truth and justice, it is to be achieved by the necessary sacrifices in its behalf... [Paul agrees with this, but not injuring sacrifice] 'Resist not evil' never became a dogma in Judaism. Jewish tradition emphasized, rather, 'Thou shalt remove the evil from the midst of thee.' 'Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor.' 'Who sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed, ...' cf. Beryl D. Cohon, *Judaism in Theory and Practice*, revised ed. (New York: Bloch, 1954), 114. As we approach Paul's theology we need to heed this connotation of peace in Judaism and particularly its difference from the New Testament outlook.



The ceaseless unrest of the Jews did not alter their belief that the sovereign God of their fathers was controlling the course of history.<sup>46</sup> Memories of spectacular deliverances that God had accomplished in the past enhanced their hope. No matter what degree of rage the current adversity attained, it could not remove their trust in the God who had brought Israel out of Pharaoh's tyrannical hand and enabled Joshua to overthrow the mighty kings of Canaan. So, although Jewish leaders were succumbing, God would rise to save.

Other beliefs, like dualism and determinism, seem to have fostered the apocalyptic attitude of leaving vengeance in God's hands. Many Jews believed in fate and predestination.<sup>47</sup> Taking an injury as predetermined by God would of course lead one to surrender to his wise responsibility the vengeance that it deserved. In the same way dualism<sup>48</sup> could lead one to confine vengeance to God. Jewish apocalypse, though it does not put God and Satan on equal footing, often describes Satan as the source of sin and evil.<sup>49</sup> But in harming men, Satan's primary intention is to challenge God's supremacy. Thus for the dualist, the enemy of the Jew is first of all the enemy of God. God himself will appropriately execute vengeance on him. The Jew need not bother with an enemy whose strength otherwise he does not match.

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<sup>46</sup>The apocalyptic visioner viewed God as the God who "created the world, established the world order and led history towards its assured final end ..." Cf. Otzen, *Judaism in Antiquity*, 198.

<sup>47</sup>Indeed not all the Jews (e.g. the Sadducees) believed in fate (see *Sir.* 15:11-12; 16:17). But the Essenes, and less the Pharisees, exemplify the belief in fate. See for instance Bruce, *New Testament History*, 86; also Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 95 [from p. 93 for full discussion].

<sup>48</sup>This is theological /moral dualism that claims the existence of a good god (source of good) and a bad god (source of evil), who are in continuous struggle but that the good god will finally win. For Wright such a dualism is not in Judaism. See Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 252-56. Indeed the idea of two gods is incompatible with Jewish belief. But the dualism concerning the source of evil and that of good cannot be easily dismissed from Judaism. Jewish texts often refer to it (e.g. Scrolls).

<sup>49</sup>Scholars who support this refer mostly to the Scrolls, but also other texts like *Jubilees*. See more discussion with Ithamar Gruenwald, "Apocalypse: Jewish Apocalypticism to Rabbinic Period," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 341.

But above all other considerations, it was likely on the basis of God's perfection that the Jews, like their ancestors of Bible times, regarded retribution as God's prerogative. This is mainly found in the *Psalms of Solomon*. Drawing on this book, Sanders notes:

When the psalmist says that God is righteous, he asserts that God's judgment is righteous; God is a righteous judge. Thus 2:36; 4:28; 8:8; 8:27-32; 9:3-10... God's justice makes him the avenger of sin (8:12). Just as all his judgments are just (righteous, *dikaïos*), they are good (8:38). God's reliability in being the just judge also justifies the title 'faithful': he is 'faithful in his judgments' (17:12)... In his justice he punishes both sinful Israelites (2:12) and Gentiles. ... The righteousness of God (his *dikaïosyne*, *tsedaqah*) is thus not his charity or leniency, but his fairness; he does not respect persons.<sup>50</sup>

God's ways are perfect. His judgment does not part from his holiness. Jehovah remains the only judge who can never be biased by any consideration. It may be understandable that the Jews, in the midst of the injustice and confusion that marked their period, appealed to God's unique rectitude with much interest.

### **Divine Vengeance in the Greco-Roman Outlook**

It is not only with the Ancient Near Eastern and Jewish backgrounds that Paul's life was linked. For centuries, the Hellenistic way of life and thinking had impregnated Near Eastern society when Paul appeared on the scene. A thorough understanding of any of Paul's concepts requires looking at its use in the Greco-Roman culture. This section then purports to examine the idea of divine vengeance against the Greco-Roman background. Because of the great impact of Greek philosophy on Paul's world, this step is needed. It will pave the way when we will need, later, to figure out the reasons for which Paul issued his teaching on divine vengeance. Paul could teach on God's vengeance simply to give encouragement in the midst of cruel persecution. But an aberrant view on divine vengeance coming from

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<sup>50</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 407.

non-Christian circles could also lead Paul to teach the Church in order to protect them from its eventual sway. It would be difficult to figure out Paul's real motivation if the Greco-Roman outlook were not examined.

### Divine Vengeance as a Notion of the Greco-Roman Thought

Vengeance was known in the Greco-Roman culture. But at that time it did not follow the same pattern it used to have in more ancient settings. What the Greco-Romans practiced seems to be modified from a more primitive form.<sup>51</sup> The development of the notion of the state certainly played a determinative part in this change.

The central concern here is to trace divine vengeance in the Greco-Roman culture. The thought of the gods as avengers of their worshippers is embedded in the records related to this society. Apollo is depicted as the "defender of the rights of blood" and also "the god who... punishes murder."<sup>52</sup> In addition, it appears that "Isis, wherever she was worshipped, was thought to seek out criminals and strike them blind or paralytic..."<sup>53</sup> So if a worshipper of Isis was unable to avenge an infliction he received, he knew that there was a spiritual power that would deal with the evildoer. The belief in the gods who avenge is clearer with the chthonic gods. Klinger notes: "Chthonic divinities are spirits that wreak vengeance. The Greeks and the Romans

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<sup>51</sup>Klinger observes: "Roman law provided for talion-like punishments or analogous talion: 'mirror punishments,' as they were called. Under this heading came the death penalty for homicide and murder, 'but especially punishments in which the culprit was punished by the instrument used in the commission of his crime (death by fire for an arsonist) or was punished in the bodily member used in the crime (by cutting off a thief's hand or cutting out a perjurer's tongue)." Cf. Klinger, "Revenge and Retribution," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 366.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>53</sup>Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 58. It is not clear whether Isis struck criminals to avenge or whether the assertion simply intends to show the belief that gods (e.g. Isis) punish sin (e.g. criminality). Nonetheless the assertion is a good example that shows that a worshipper could count on god's retribution.



called them Erinyes or Furies respectively. They were ‘the embodiment ... of the spilt blood, which, because it had turned against itself, resulted in madness.’<sup>54</sup> This is a strong indication that some spirits (gods) were believed to be avengers of the powerless who were unjustly harmed.

### Some Characteristics

#### *Difference with Judeo-Mosaic Outlook*

Some differences seem to arise between the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Mosaic views concerning divine vengeance. The Greco-Roman outlook takes divine vengeance in a pantheistic way. The citation above, for instance, considers the avenging spirit as the embodiment of the spilt blood. This pantheistic way of merging the divine with natural things is foreign to Judeo-Mosaic thought. This latter speaks of a God who greatly values and avenges the blood shed,<sup>55</sup> but he is never the embodiment of it. Because he is a covenantal and providential God he never leaves his creation, yet on the other hand, never does he merge with what he made.<sup>56</sup>

Another point of difference is that the Greco-Roman outlook seems unclear as to who receives the advantage of the vengeance that the divinity exerts. It is often difficult to determine whether the spirit accomplishes the act for himself or for the wronged man. Indeed, when an Elateian group wronged another and Zeus is designated as “savior,”<sup>57</sup> the primary recipients of the good of his actions are the wretched men that he saves. Also the chthonic gods’ vengeance seen earlier seems to

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<sup>54</sup>Klinger, “Revenge and Retribution,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 365.

<sup>55</sup>Gen. 4:10.

<sup>56</sup>Wright, *The Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, 254.

<sup>57</sup>Stanley M. Burstein, ed., *The Hellenistic Age from the Battle of Ipsos to the Death of Kleopatra VII*, Translated Documents of Greece and Rome, ed. Robert K. Sherk, no. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 96.

be intended for men's good. But in light of other considerations, one realizes that the spirit's act is more geared to satisfying god's dignity than that of the unfortunate victim. For instance, MacMullen notes: "Many gods in one particular region, Phrygia, could be counted on to avenge themselves upon the wicked."<sup>58</sup> This assertion shows that what the gods achieve seeks primarily their own interest. The good of the human person whose dignity has been put in jeopardy stands as a subset, or a benefit of secondary importance.

The reason is that, unlike the Judeo-Mosaic faith that sees all sins as offenses against God, the Greco-Roman view distinguishes transgressions against divine laws and those against human laws. As a result, it appears that it was specifically for crimes done against divine laws that people expected divine vengeance.<sup>59</sup> Hence, the spirit's vengeance was not primarily designed to restore the rights of man. The dignity of the god that had been offended by a certain action was the primary focus as the spirit carried out retribution for evil. This self-centeredness of Greco-Roman gods is understandable considering their conception of god. The Greek metaphysical conception of the divine regarded god as a pure being, incapable of ... affection or outgoing action."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it is hardly understandable that a god without affection would revenge a wrongdoing for the interest of the unfortunate victim. The intimacy of Israel's God with his people is not found between Greek-Roman gods and their worshippers.

### ***Other Characteristics***

Despite all the differences from the Judeo-Mosaic view, the fact that the Greco-

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<sup>58</sup>MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 58.

<sup>59</sup>The category of crimes done against divine laws consisted in offenses related to ritual purity and to the sacredness of a god's own dwelling. Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man: An Interpretation of Jewish Religion*, 61.

Romans ascribed vengeance to the gods necessitates that we inquire about the reasons that may have been conducive to this belief. To begin with, one needs to note that all the ancient cultures in common considered divine beings as endowed with superior qualities. For the case of the Greco-Roman culture, Cicero's view of gods can be illustrative. He regarded Jupiter as the king of gods and men, as ruler and father of all, a creative intelligence caring for mankind.<sup>61</sup> Such a conception of the divine would necessarily result in the belief that god is in better position to champion one's cause than anybody else. One would hardly try seeking his own vengeance when he is convinced that there is a god who not only embodies all those qualities but also cares for him/her.

A radical decrease of the right of private vengeance may also have been another asset that nurtured the thought of confining vengeance to the gods. Ancient documents show that all cases were to be referred to the courts. Only the courts had the prerogative to either effect retribution or to curb it.<sup>62</sup> Under the Romans, disregard for private justice was so important that the right of blood revenge had officially ceased.<sup>63</sup> The notion of state and its responsibility had taken its place. The enemy of individuals was an enemy of the state and vice-versa. A document about the tyrant Agonippos shows that the king and his courts could not dispose of this evildoer without consulting the people.<sup>64</sup> The organization of the state had attained a very high level. But this does not mean perfection in the courts. MacMullen must be right in thinking that these

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<sup>61</sup>William W. Fowler, *Roman Ideas of Deity in the Last Century Before the Christian Era* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1914; reprint, 1969), 51-53.

<sup>62</sup>All lawsuits, particularly those involving death, were to be judged by the members of the *Gerousia* and the council. See Phillip Harding, ed., *From the End of the Peloponnesian War to the Battle of Ipsus*, Translated Documents of Greece and Rome, ed. E. Badian and Robert K. Sherk, no. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 160.

<sup>63</sup>Morris Jastrow and J. Dyneley, "Avenger of Blood: Biblical Data," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 345.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 139.



people, beside temporal justice, invoked vengeance from the gods because they hoped it to be supremely effective.<sup>65</sup>

### Summary

After this survey of three extra-biblical backgrounds--Ancient Near Eastern literature, Judaism, and Greco-Roman culture--it appears that the extra-biblical outlook on the concept of divine vengeance has much in common with the Old Testament. In all these social settings, vengeance is not taken as an ultimate good. More positive attitudes like showing love and mercy to the enemy are substantially recommended. But unanimously all these worldviews take it for granted that no evil can be committed without incurring retribution. The wrongdoer should expect vengeance for the injuries he inflicts to others.

But vengeance is not a private matter. Every cultural group seems to support the idea that vengeance must be enacted publicly. Retribution through the state's organs is preferred to individual justice. Yet because of man's imperfection, the different cultures believe that a better vengeance lies with the divine. Wherever non-vengeance is expressed, it appears to be based on this expectation that God/ god will avenge.

Some of the cultural ideas could have provoked reflection in the early church. First the notion and responsibility of the state, as found in the time of Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, had developed when compared to Old Testament times.<sup>66</sup> As a result, personal vengeance had become trivial and unjustified.

The extra-biblical *milieu* conveys other aspects that may have stirred reflection in Paul and the church. In some branches of Judaism, for example the Essenes, abstinence from vengeance seems to bear a sectarian colour. It basically concerns the

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<sup>65</sup>MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 58.

<sup>66</sup>In his time Paul can give value to the role of the state as to vengeance (Rom. 13:1-7).

members of the sect though extension to outsiders is not absolutely denied. Also the Greco-Roman's divine vengeance connotes aspects of mysticism, which departs radically from the thought of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the belief that god (spirit) coalesces with the blood of the murdered person and then this mixture returns to strike the murderer contrasts with the ways of Yahweh. There is yet another crucial discordance. While the God of the Old Testament ordains vengeance, the extra-biblical gods seem rather to be executors of what man ordains. No god outside the Bible says, "vengeance is mine." For the others, it is man who plays the pivotal role. He ordains and executes vengeance. Even when vengeance is expected of god, it is man who requests it. The divine being says nothing about his role. In addition, especially with the Greco-Romans, god's vengeance concerned first his own interest before that of man. This self-centeredness marks a great difference with Yahweh. It appears that the intimacy between God and his people has no parallel in other religions. From one setting to another divine vengeance carries these diverging colorations and thus carries different connotations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PAUL'S CONCEPT OF DIVINE VENGEANCE IN ROM. 12:19

In the preceding chapters we tried to examine the conception of divine vengeance in the Old Testament and other *milieus* that are deemed to have exercised any influence on Paul's thought. The findings will help to assess whether they have any bearing on the way Paul elaborates his theology about divine vengeance. But before examining Paul's theology, it is necessary to make an in-depth analysis of how he asserts the concept of divine vengeance in the text that is object of our focus (Rom. 12:19). This fourth chapter will be devoted to that analysis. From the fact that Paul centers his argument on the quotation of Deut. 32:35, we assume that this text bears a fundamental role in his thought.<sup>1</sup> Therefore this quotation will receive special attention. We will endeavor to find the relationship that Paul saw between the sense and context of "vengeance is mine" in Deut. 32 and its sense and context in Rom. 12.

#### Meaning and Usage of *εκδικησις* (*ekdikesis*)

The word *ekdikesis*, 'vengeance,' is the most important word in Rom. 12:19. In fact its importance does not only concern v. 19. It is fundamental to the whole unit of Rom. 12:17-21, which deals with the non-vengeance motif. *Ekdikesis* means "vengeance, punishment, retributive justice."<sup>2</sup> Its semantic group includes the verb

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, the New Testament quotes Deut. 32:35 twice with the same idea that vengeance belongs to God (here in Rom. 12:19, also in Heb. 10:30). The recurrence of this quotation "suggests that this verse had a firm place in Christian catechesis." Matthew Black, *Romans*, New Century Bible Commentary, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., eds., Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 157-58.

<sup>2</sup>*The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (1993), s.v. "εκδικησις."



*εκδικεω* (*ekdikeo*), ‘avenge, procure justice,’ and the noun *εκδικος* (*ekdikos*), ‘the avenger, the one who punishes.’<sup>3</sup> Etymologically in classical Greek, the word group carries a judicial meaning. “Thus *εκδικειν* means,” as Schrenk notes, “to decide a case.”<sup>4</sup> This judicial connotation indicates that the word *ekdikesis* denotes not a sudden but a deliberate and planned act of procuring justice to someone whose right has been abused. It appears that an action instinctively taken to stop an aggression ought not to be labeled as vengeance in the proper sense of *ekdikesis*.

The New Testament holds two semantic uses of *ekdikesis* linked to two different linguistic traditions. The first use is linked with classical Greek. Thus for instance, the occurrences of this word in Lk. 18:7-8, are classified as connoting the judicial use, which is viewed as pertaining to the Hellenistic tradition.<sup>5</sup> But in all the other contexts in which *ekdikesis* appears, it upholds the sense of retribution, which is estimated to stem from the Hebrew tradition.<sup>6</sup> Due to this prevalence of its usage stemming from the Old Testament, the use of *ekdikesis* (and its group) in the New Testament prominently connotes the idea of taking vengeance for an evil that was committed against someone. This fact is reminiscent of the dominant connotation of ‘vengeance’

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<sup>3</sup>*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “*εκδικεω, εκδικησις, εκδικος*.”

<sup>4</sup>Classically *ekdikos* meant ‘an outlaw’ [from *εκ*, ‘out’ and *δικη*, ‘justice’]. By Hellenistic change the word was associated with *δικαζω*, ‘I avenge, decide a legal process.’ Then it designed ‘an avenger,’ i.e., one who executes a judicial sentence. Thus the commonest use in the papyri is ‘to fight, to defend, or to plead someone’s cause.’ See ample detail in Gottlob Schrenk, “*εκδικεω, εκδικος, εκδικησις*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1982 reprint, 444.

<sup>5</sup>The context of Lk. 18:7-8 requires that the word be defined as ‘to procure justice’ (cf. vv. 3, 5). E.g. NIV translation; also John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick, and James A. Swanson, *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 239. But this judicial use implies a sense of avenging [see note 146]. For support for the idea of vengeance in Lk. 18:7-8, see Horst Goldstein, “*Εκδικησις*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (1990), 408.

<sup>6</sup>In some instances the rendering ‘punishment’ seems more appropriate (e.g. 2 Cor. 7:11). But the connotation is of ‘absolute punishment,’ hence the idea of vengeance. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Literature*, s.v. “*εκδικησις*.” It is noteworthy that, apart Lk. 18:7-8, *ekdikesis*--without considering *ekdikeo* and *ekdikos*--figures seven more times, all with the connotation of retribution (Lk. 21:22; Acts 7:24; Rom. 12:19; 2 Cor. 7:11; 2 Thes. 1:8; Heb. 10:30; 1 Pet. 2:14).

in the use of the Old Testament counterparts of *ekdikesis*. It appears that the Old Testament use of the word ‘vengeance’ inspired the New Testament authors.<sup>7</sup>

There are some points of similarity that seem to justify that a certain influence occurred between the Hebrew approach to vengeance and its use in the New Testament. First of all, the terminology used in both settings is inclined to be more relating to God than man. As seen earlier with the Hebrew terms, God remains the main subject of *ekdikesis*. Out of nine occurrences of *ekdikesis*, there are only two where man performs the action (i.e. Acts 7:24 and 2 Cor. 7:11). But even there, God implicitly stands as the ultimate cause.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, the idea that God is the person most able to grant justice permeates Scripture from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament.

Second, the use of the word *ekdikesis* in the New Testament recalls the emphasis that the Old Testament puts on the fact that vengeance is to be handled by the civil authority. Private vengeance is strongly rejected in the connotation of the Greek terminology for vengeance.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the joint action of God and the civil authority is so powerfully expressed in Paul’s argumentation that individual justice appears to be completely revoked.<sup>10</sup> The idea that punishment of evil must be left to a public

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<sup>7</sup>According to Schrenk, ‘revenge,’ as the meaning of *ekdikeo*, follows the pattern of the LXX, the major evidence being its use with ref. to blood in Rev. 6:10; 19:2. Cf. Schrenk, “*Εκδικεω, εκδικος, εκδικησις*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 442, 444.

<sup>8</sup>In Acts 7, Moses believes that he acts by God’s mandate (v. 25). Note that God’s presence (and deliverance) among his stiff-necked people stands as the overriding motif in Stephen’s speech (cf. e.g. vv. 2, 9, 17, 44, 51). Also in 2 Cor. 7:11, God is strongly implied as the source of the punishment. Not only it is executed by the church (which is God’s representative), but also the sorrow that leads to this punishment is described emphatically (repeated in v. 10 and 11) as *κατα θεον λυπη*, ‘sorrow that is according to God’ [adverbial accusative of relation seems the best option, i.e. sorrow that is based on the relation with God].

<sup>9</sup>This is also true for the verb *ekdikeo* and the noun *ekdikos*. In every context in which any of these three words stands, it is God, or a public authority, or the church, who does the action. Only in Acts 7:24 does an individual seem to initiate vengeance. But here also God is behind the scene [just as the agency seen in the Old Testament].

<sup>10</sup>As Paul ends the motif of non-vengeance (Rom. 12:17-21), without transition he explains that the state authorities are God’s servants for punishing evildoers and that, as a result, they deserve loyalty



structure is not peculiar to Paul in the New Testament. Peter--in a thought strikingly similar to that of Paul--expresses the role of the state in dealing with evildoers (1 Pet. 2:14, compared with the argument in Rom. 13:1-7).

### **Paul's Use of Deut. 32:35 in Rom. 12:19**

In Rom. 12:19 Paul declares that only God is to avenge. This implies that any evil inflicted on a believer concerns God as well. But, is this the argument that Paul develops in his text? Also it must be noted that he quotes Scripture (Deut. 32:35). It is necessary to assess why the apostle finds this Old Testament passage to be conducive to his argument on divine vengeance. What input does it bring to his thought?

### **The Structure of Rom. 12:9-21**

The book of Romans has two major sections. The first part (ch. 1-11) is devoted to doctrinal<sup>11</sup> matters. The second major part (ch. 12-15) deals with the conduct of the believer. It is in this section of the believer's conduct that Paul inserts the reference to Deuteronomy. Our focus is particularly on Rom. 12:9-21,<sup>12</sup> which constitutes the specific block of argument that embodies the quotation taken from Deut. 32:35. The structure of Rom. 12:9-21 can be framed as follows:

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(13:1-7). The point is noteworthy. The argument is that the individual should abstain from vengeance because God has appointed a more appropriate agent for the matter. While the tradition has seen the state as God's avenger or executor of divine judgment against evildoers, scholarship of revolutionary tendencies (especially Roman Catholics) regards *ekdikos* here 'as not the avenger or the one who brings recompense, but as the defense attorney who mediates between the royal official and ... communities...' see Goldstein, "Εκδικησις," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 408; also Schrenk, "Εκδικεω, εκδικος, εκδικησις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 445. But if a prohibition on the individual's vengeance (Rom. 12:17-21) is taken seriously, the role of the state emerges as a necessary substitute. This agrees with the developed notion of the state that characterized the Greco-Roman era.

<sup>11</sup>For some, ch. 9-11 does not seem doctrinal. But it is not less doctrinal inasmuch as it addresses such points as the future (salvation) of Israel.

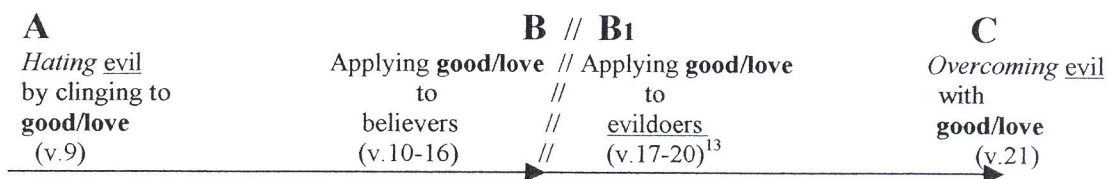
<sup>12</sup>The theme of vengeance per se covers vv. 12:17-13:7. But it is mainly in vv. 17-21, in the wider block covering vv. 9-21. 13:1-7 stands as a supplement. So we choose to limit the structure at v. 21



## LEVEL 1

## L E V E L 2

## LEVEL 3



The result gives a ‘linear’ pattern:



The structure of the argument of Rom. 12:9-21 shows that Paul’s major concern is to inculcate good/love in his hearers. As a matter of fact, it is realized that the concept of good/love appears at every step of the argument [in bold above]. A secondary focus is on evil,<sup>14</sup> but the primary focus is on good/love. The argument begins with a base and ends with a climax. As a result, the argument forms a ‘linear’ pattern. Both the base and the climax are antithetical effect [put in italics] of seeking good/love. Hating evil by clinging to good marks the basic attitude (A) from which any other good effect has to derive. The believer’s awareness of the hostility between evil and good and the firm decision to hate evil and cling to good constitutes the foundation. But good/love must grow into palpable acts. So Paul goes on commanding that good/love be applied to daily life. This application is double: it must extend both to Christians (B) and unbelievers (B1). If the believer demonstrates genuine good/love, the stunning result is that evil will be overcome (C). Overcoming evil with good stands as the climax of Paul’s argument.

<sup>13</sup>The view of some commentators is that the believer’s attitude towards outsiders and enemies begins with v.14. e.g. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 416.

<sup>14</sup>In the structure, evil (underlined) appears, just as good/love, at all three levels of the argument. So in Paul’s thought good and evil are contrasting realities that his hearers are to heed. But, unlike good/love, at the second level evil is found only in one part (i.e. B1). So Paul’s main focus seems to be on ‘good/love,’ but he also gives due attention to evil as a reality that competes with good.

Now, we can turn to the quotation of Deut. 32:35. It belongs to B1. Here we may need to give substantial attention to B and B1. The antithetical motif ‘good/love versus evil’ to which Paul seems to give focus, follows the line A—B1—C. B does not have it. In this perspective, B1 seems to be more crucial than B. It appears then that it is not at random that Paul makes reference to Scripture in B1. He seeks to underscore his point. The matter can be expanded this way. B and B1 carry two discordant settings in which the believer is required to apply good/love. In B the believer practices good/love toward his fellow Christians. This setting presents less of a challenge. There he can practice good/love easily because the community he deals with is not characterized by evil. But unbelievers (B1) are evildoers. There, evil may be so challenging that the believer might think of taking action and dealing with the evil that impedes his good/love undertakings.

It is in B1 that Paul brings in God’s part. For him, the believer does not have to struggle with judging evil. The apostle remembers that the prerogative of judging evil pertains to God. Since it is a timeless truth that was already taught in the Old Testament, in effect, he cites Scripture to give authority<sup>15</sup> to his point. But, does Paul cite it just for support? What input does Deut. 32:35 bring to Paul’s thought of leaving vengeance to God? In order to understand it fully, we need to analyze the immediate unit (Rom. 12:17-21) in which he exposes the non-vengeance motif.

### God as the Ultimate Target of Evil

#### ***The Layout of Rom. 12:17-21***

The wider block of Paul’s argument is from v. 9 to v. 21 [cf. structure]. But vv.

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<sup>15</sup>Black observes that, “as usual the Christian *didaché* is authoritatively summed up by a Scriptural text or interwoven texts” [here in Rom. 12:19 there is an interweaving of Lev. 19:18 and Deut. 32:35]. Cf. Black, *Romans*, 157. The perfect tense conveys this intention of vesting authority in the statement [Intensive perfect seems the use here, i.e. “It stands written that...”]; so it is as if the apostle were saying, “It remains an established fact that the avenger is God”].

17-21 form the smaller section of vv. 17-21 forms the narrow unit in which the quotation of Deut. 32:35 [and its central word, *ekdikesis*] plays an immediate part. The diagramming of this portion will help to show how Paul inserts God's declaration, 'vengeance is mine,' in his non-vengeance motif.

1 μηδενι κακον αντι κακου αποδιδοντες  
 2 προνοουμενοι καλα ενωπιον παντων ανθρωπων (17)  
 3 ει δυνατον το εξ υμων μετα παντων ανθρωπων ειρηνευοντες (18)  
 4 μη εαυτους εκδικουντες αγαπητοι  
 5 αλλα δοτε τοπον τη οργη  
 6 γεγραπται γαρ Εμοι εκδικησις εγω ανταποδωσω λεγει κυριος (19)  
 7 αλλα εαν πεινα ο εχθρος σου ψωμιζε αυτον  
 8 εαν διψα ποτιζε αυτον  
 9 τουτο γαρ ποιων ανθρακας πυρος σωρευσεις επι την  
 10 κεφαλην αυτου (20)  
 11 μη νικω υπο του κακου  
 12 αλλα νικα εν τω αγαθω το κακον (21)

A grammatical and syntactical examination of this text shows the importance of the quotation in its relation to Paul's thought. The text reveals the reason why the apostle found it necessary to stress his argument with a scriptural truth. First, all through the unit it appears that the apostle aims to emphasize<sup>16</sup> the injunction that he makes on non-vengeance. The quotation that recalls God's readiness to revenge is made to support this underscoring of non-vengeance.

But there are more syntactical signs of the importance of the clause that embodies

<sup>16</sup>Several elements show that Paul underscores the prohibition of vengeance. First, he repeats it three times though with different vocabulary (vv. 14, 17, 19). Also several words are put in emphatic position: Indir. obj. *μηδενι* and dir. obj. *κακον* before verb (line 1), the phrase *μετα παντων ανθρωπων*, a circum. complement before verb (line 3), *παντων ανθρωπων* repeated in chiasm (line 2 and 3), dir. obj. *εαυτους* before verb (line 4), pron. *εγω* while implied in verb (line 6), *λεγει* before subj. (line 6) [note that this pronoun is not in the original Masoretic text that he quotes], *πεινα* before subj. (line 7), and dir. obj. *τουτο* and *ανθρακας πυρος* before verbs (line 9). The prohibitions show the reason of the emphasis. Requit was already in progress. He 'stops' it [*μη νικω*, line 11, is *μη* + imperative pres., i.e. 'stop being overcome'. The participles also have the same use: *μη...αποδιδοντες* (line 1) and *μη... εκδικουντες* (line 4) carry an imperative meaning. Since they are in pres. tense, they convey the same pattern of *μη* + imperative pres., so the type of 'stop...' prohibition]. See more on this emphasis in Hendriksen, *The Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 421.



the quotation (line 6). It explains the two prohibitions that precede it, i.e. ‘do not repay’ and ‘do not revenge (lines 1 and 4).<sup>17</sup> The quotation line explains that the believer is not to revenge (or repay) evil because the Lord himself will repay<sup>18</sup> it.

Also the position of line 6 seems pivotal in the unit. It divides the unit (vv. 17-21) into two parts that can be described successively as “promoting *evil*” and “overcoming *evil*.”<sup>19</sup> First, there is the part from line 1 to 5, which is dominated by the two parallel injunctions of line 1 and line 4. Paul prohibits revenge in these lines because returning evil for a wrong deed is to serve evil instead of defeating it (cf. lines 11 and 12). It is better to leave vengeance to God who can accomplish retribution perfectly without promoting evil (line 6). Now, since God takes vengeance into his hands, the believer can avoid revenge, which is nothing else but reinforcing evil.

The second part (line 7-12)<sup>20</sup> constitutes that alternative for the believer. It can be entitled as “overcoming evil” (lines 11 and 12), which is achieved by returning good for evil (lines 7 and 8). So the pattern we have is: Do not avenge yourselves so as to enhance evil (lines 1-5) → instead, let God handle vengeance (line 6) → and you, since you do not need to avenge, then care for the enemy so as to make good/love overcome evil (lines 7-12).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Lines 1 and 4 begin two parallel sets of equivalent ideas. This gives another sign of emphasis.

<sup>18</sup>Note that line 6 takes back the important words of lines 1 and 4 [*μη αποδιδοντες* by its cognate *ανταποδωσω* and *εκδικουντες* by *εκδικησις*]. Thus the *οργη* (line 5) that the believer is asked to ‘give place to’ is not man’s wrath, as it may appear, but God’s wrath [e.g. NIV. It means ‘the judgment of God’ cf. Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 348. Also the def. article seems to point to a special wrath, i.e. God’s wrath; see Kenneth S. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 219]. Note that Romans prominently relates *wrath* to God: 1:18; 2:5-11; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 13:4, 5.

<sup>19</sup>The word ‘evil’ is important in this syntactical interplay. Note *κακον* at the beginning and the end. It makes an *inclusio*.

<sup>20</sup>The prominent *αλλα* of line 7 marks this major alternative. *Μη...* (line 11) resembles line 1 and 4. But it fits well in this second part. For, unlike 1 and 4, it can be better regarded as an injunction resulting from the fact that revenge is God’s task (line 6). Better it can be seen as carrying a rhetorical sense: “Eh! You have an avenger, namely God! You need not continue ...!”

<sup>21</sup>The negative idea of “heaping fiery coals” requires comment here. On the surface it makes one think that the believer, as he does good to his enemy, may wish in his heart that terrible things befall his

The position of the words of Deut. 32:35 between the two parts seems to contribute significantly to Paul's argument. A believer can hear and accept the exhortation of abandoning revenge (lines 1-5). But Paul's intention is to move his hearer beyond mere acceptance. He wants the believer to make palpable acts of love towards the evildoer. But once it has gone that far, the non-retaliating Christian would necessarily pause and ask, "where is the justice in all this?" The concern for one's right is intrinsic to the human spirit. Paul seems to be sensitive to this aspect. As Godet remarks, "there is in the heart of man an ineffaceable feeling of justice which the apostle respects."<sup>22</sup> So Paul gives the believer the guarantee that his own right is cared for (line 6). Only after that could he command the believer to confidently and joyfully do good even to the evildoer.

### *The Sense of 'Vengeance Is Mine' Based on Both Contexts*

We have attempted to understand the way that Paul makes God's declaration "vengeance is mine" to fit into his argument. Our intention now is to find the meaning of this assertion in its original context, and hence the correspondence that Paul envisages between its value in Deut. 32:35 and that which it holds in Rom. 12. At this stage, we intend to use a comparative approach. We have already examined the terminology for vengeance both in the Old Testament and the New Testament and we attempted to compare their meanings. It was realized that their meanings remain

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enemy from God. But the context does not allow us to think that the believer is given the right to bear such evil feelings. The idea of 'good' overrides lines 7-12. Good/love is the arm with which the believer overcomes evil. Thus the "heaping of fiery coals" must be a metaphor that means something positive. It is stated as a result of the acts of love (feeding and giving drink) [the participial phrase *touto gar poiwn*, 'for by doing this' is the instrumental use of participle anticipating a result]. Also note the link with line 6: the same fut. tense for both *soreuseis* here and *antapodoso* in line 6. Paul seems to imply an act that will derive from God upon the evildoer as the believer does good to him [in Prov. 25:22, from where it is quoted, the expression is linked with God's rewarding]. Thus most scholars take it as not a sign of vengeance but of the burning pain of shame and remorse that leads to repentance. E.g. Hendriksen, *The Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 423; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 349; and Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 789.

<sup>22</sup>F. Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 438.



fundamentally identical. Here, we are no longer going to compare the terminology. Our endeavor will rather consist in comparing the offense, the offender, and the offended (avenger).

The offense in Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:19

Any revenge presupposes that a certain offense has occurred. To assess the offense of Deut. 32:35, one needs to expand the context back to chapter 31. Deut. 32 is a song of Moses to the whole assembly of Israel (31:30). But the entire argument begins with 31:14 and continues up to 32:47. The concern of the passage is to warn Israel about God's wrath. The Lord would not tolerate their corruption (31:14-30). Israel's disobedience to the covenant would cause God to decree doom upon them (32:1-33). Also, concerning the nation that he would use to punish Israel, their arrogance and depravity made them fall under a similar doom (32:34-38). God's judgment respects no one. Therefore the epilogue (32:39-47)<sup>23</sup> extols God's greatness and summons all to be faithful to his will. In sum, the evil attitude against the supremacy of God constitutes the offense that instills vengeance in Deut. 32.

In Paul's text the offense is named 'evil' in the clause 'Do not repay evil for evil' (Rom. 12:17). This evil is the persecution<sup>24</sup> inflicted on the believer. Here it is now a question of bodily harm committed by a person against another. The offense is located at the socio-ethical level. The injury here appears to be primarily directed to man, not to God. In Deut. 32, the offense is man's challenge to God's will and supremacy. So, while the offense seems to be socio-ethical in Rom. 12, it takes a religio-covenantal resonance in Deut. 32. Therefore, the offense in the two texts is not

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<sup>23</sup>The division of Deut. 32 adopted here is from Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament ed., eds., John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1985), 318-320.

<sup>24</sup>Verse 14 specifies it as 'persecution' (... *τους διωκοντας υμας, those who persecute you*).



on an identical level. In quoting it, Paul's focus seems to lie not on a correspondence of levels but rather on the identical root. In both contexts the root of the offense is evil. The same root of injury leads Paul to make a correspondence as to who brings retribution as well.

The offender in Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:19

In Deut. 32 the offender upon whom the vengeance of v. 35 is to fall is collective. According to the context, it can be either Israel or the heathen nation that God used to punish her or both people. Since the Reformation,<sup>25</sup> it has remained a controversy whether in Deut. 32 the offender to be punished is Israel or the nation whom God used to punish his people. Some commentators consider the offender to be Israel<sup>26</sup> on the basis that Israel constitutes the central focus of the text. The scribes of the Targum Onkelos (TO) also held this position. We may compare their rendering of Deut.

32:35b with the Masoretic Text (MT):

**MT:** Their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. (KJV)

**TO:** ... in the time when they will go into exile from their land; for the day of their calamity is near, and the things that shall come upon them are hurrying.<sup>27</sup>

The Targum Onkelos interprets the metaphor 'their foot shall slide.' It understands that the metaphor refers to Israel with regard to her deportation. Thus God's vengeance in v. 35 is taken as directed not to the heathen but Israel. But the rabbis

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<sup>25</sup>The dispute on the matter goes back to the Reformers. For Luther, it is Israel; see *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 9, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1960), 297. But Calvin thought of the oppressors of Israel; see John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Books of Moses*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1852), 363.

<sup>26</sup>Among them are Keil and Delitzsch, cf. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1, *Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 487.

<sup>27</sup>Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (New York [?]: Ktav, 1982), 286.

themselves are not unanimous in this view.<sup>28</sup>

So not everyone agrees that God's retribution concerns Israel. The problem is not whether or not God can exercise vengeance against Israel. He does take vengeance against his people. We saw it earlier especially in Lev. 26:24-25. But Deut. 32 is not confined to Israel. It also denounces the nation to whom God had sold Israel (v. 30). In fact the series of metaphors from v. 31 to v. 33 describe the depravity of this heathen nation. The evil described is so typical to the heathen that Driver sees God's retribution (v. 35) as destined upon them:

The reference is to the moral corruption of the heathen, and its fruits (v. 32f); these are not forgotten, or disregarded by Jehovah, but (as it were) stored up with him, till the day of retribution shall arrive.... That the reference both here (in v. 34) and v. 35 is to the guilt of the heathen, not to that of Israel, is apparent from v. 36, 'For Jehovah will judge his people, and repent himself towards his servants': the guilt of Israel could not be a motive for Jehovah's compassion towards them.<sup>29</sup>

Driver's syntactical way of treating the demonstrative 'this' (v. 34) is attractive. He takes it as referring to the heathen depravity spoken of in vv. 32-33. He might be right if we follow the rule of proximity. But this pronoun ought not to be confined to the heathen attitudes of vv. 32-33. It seems to encompass both the heathen situation and Israel's 'lack of wisdom' (vv. 28-29).<sup>30</sup> Both Israel and the nation that grew arrogant towards the Lord are concerned with God's judgment stipulated in v. 35. People who sin are all adversaries of God (v. 41). In sum, both Israel and her oppressor have offended Yahweh. They incur the pending retribution of v. 35.

<sup>28</sup>See *Ibid.*, same page and 283, n. 82 for the following elements: According to Rabbi Judah, vv. 28-38 apply to Israel; Rabbi Nehemiah thought otherwise. Also *Targum to Pentateuch* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* hold that the text up to v. 29 concerns Israel, and that after v. 29 it is about their enemies. So in Judaism diverse views were held on the matter.

<sup>29</sup>Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 373-74. The difficulty is that Driver considers 'servants' (v. 36) to be Israel and 'people' as representing the heathen nation. This disagrees with the Old Testament concept 'my people,' which normally refers to Israel (e.g. Exod. 3:7; Lev. 26:12). One can consider 'people' as referring to Israel in general and 'servants' to the faithful remnant. So v. 36 does not allow interpreting God's vengeance as intended only for the heathen.

<sup>30</sup>Verse 29 talks of Israel. Yet it contains 'this' and 'end', which are reflected by 'this' of v. 34 and 'day of judgment' in v. 35. Since these elements begin with Israel (v. 29) and reappear after the description for the nation, it gives evidence that the judgment of v. 35 concerns both groups.

In the context of Rom. 12, the offender to receive vengeance is the person who treads down the right of the believer. Paul looks especially at the persecutor (12:14), whom he calls the enemy (12:20) of the believer. As far as the question of the offender is concerned, there is less disparity between the two contexts. Both places speak of someone who has trodden down the right of another party. The slight difference consists in that the offender in Deut. 32 is depicted in a more collective pattern [Israel, nation]. Because of the social perspective of Rom. 12, the focus is more individual.<sup>31</sup> But despite this difference of pattern, the two texts basically share the similar fact that there is an offender and that a wrongdoer must receive vengeance.

The offended (avenger) in Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:19

In Deut. 32, God is the offended party. On the one hand, his chosen people have broken his covenant. So he is greatly dishonored as Israel, his people, rebel against the sovereign, living God and give allegiance to corruption. On the other hand, it is also a serious dishonor to God as the heathen nation manifests arrogance against him and indulges into depravity. In response to all this rebellion God declares, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will recompense.’ The language seems indirect, involving some rhetoric. God is likely saying, ‘I, God, it is my nature to take vengeance against those who sin against me. I will surely give them their due recompense.’ As Keil and Delitzsch state rightly, we have here “an expression of the divine energy, with this signification, ‘I will manifest Myself as an avenger and recompenser...’”<sup>32</sup> God in Deut. 32 is both the offended party but also the one who exacts revenge.

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<sup>31</sup>Verses 20 and 21 show this focus on individuality. The offender is a limited entity, for it is assumed that the believer can feed him and quench his thirst. Note that Paul had all along been using the second pers. plural. This shift is noteworthy. Indeed the singular in v. 20 comes from a source other than Paul (Prov. 25:21-22). But he adopts it because v. 21 takes it up instead of resuming the plural.

<sup>32</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 487.



In Rom. 12, the situation is different. The object of injury is not God but the believer, at least as it appears at first sight. In this case, it would be expected that the believer as the offended party would avenge his right. But here also God remains the avenger. So a substantial shift takes place on this point. Certainly, as we shall see, Paul is making an interpretive point.

### ***Paul's Hermeneutical Point in Quoting Deut. 32:35***

In Deut. 32, God is not speaking of avenging someone else. Even the assertion differs to what he recommends in Lev. 19:18. He does not make an ethical address to his devotees. As far as the text is concerned, he does not urge people to leave vengeance to him. God is not telling people that they should assign to him the responsibility of punishing evildoers. Indeed some authors have understood this text from that point of view.<sup>33</sup> But it is not a question of a dilemma as who, God or the believer, has the capacity to take revenge. God intends to say that he cannot leave evil without punishing it. So the context differs from that of Rom. 12 where the central purpose is to summon the believer to leave vengeance to God. With such a difference of contexts, what then is the point Paul tries to make by his allusive<sup>34</sup> interpretation? A chart that sets the elements that we have just examined side by side is helpful.

	<b>Deut. 32:28-43</b>	<b>Rom. 12:17-21</b>	<b>Similarity or Shift</b>
<b>1 Meaning of Major word</b>	Avenging someone's right	Avenging someone's right	Similarity

<sup>33</sup>See for instance Smick, “נָקַם (*naqam*): Take Vengeance, Revenge, Avenge Oneself, Be Avenged, Be Punished,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 599. Driver seems correct in arguing that, “The words are not intended as a warning against self-vengeance (as the verse is applied in Rom. 12:19), for the prostrate nation is not in a condition to think of that.” See Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 374.

<sup>34</sup>For a detailed discussion on Paul's allusive approach to the Old Testament, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), xiv-vii.

	Deut.32:28-43	Rom. 12:17-21	Similarity or shift
<b>2 Offense</b>	<u>Evil</u> (religio-covenantal level)	<u>Evil</u> (socio-ethical level)	Similarity
<b>3 Offender</b>	Sinner (collective pattern)	Sinner (individual pattern)	Similarity
<b>4 Offended (avenger)</b>	<b>God offended, and</b>  <u>God</u> avenges	<b>Believer (God implicitly) offended</b>  <u>God</u> still the avenger	<b>Shift</b>  Similarity

Despite some slight differences here and there, the two contexts carry elements that are strikingly parallel. Though the original context of Deut. 32:35 differs from the context where Paul inserts the quotation, the significant parallels between the arguments enabled the apostle to note a relationship. The recurrence of the conflict motif ‘evil versus God (avenger)’ [rows 2 and 4] seemed especially much worthy of consideration.

That every evil is an offense against God constitutes the cornerstone on which Paul centers his interpretation. From Deut. 32, Paul understands that every evil that sinners commit is offensive to God (cf. v. 41). Thus God stands determined to punish evildoings without compromise (32:35; cf. also chart, column of Deut. 32). Now, since God is the target of every evil, Paul understands that even when evil (persecution) is directed to the believer, its primary aim is actually to harm God’s sovereignty and will [in row 4, column of Rom.12, the ‘offended’ is noted ‘the believer (God implied)’].

Thus Paul perceives that, with regard to persecution, there is a sort of *identification*<sup>35</sup> between the believer and his Lord. The believer suffers something that

<sup>35</sup>This is not the mystical coalescing of the spirit and the blood of the Greco-Roman belief that we saw earlier. It is rather the relation of proprietor (Master) to servant. Any evil hurled to the servant constitutes a blow to his Master. But it is also a relation of being driven by the same principle of life, i.e. good/love. It binds them. Because of that bond, any evil done to the believer affects God as well.

is designed to harm God himself. In other terms, God considers the believer's persecution as his own persecution. Persecuting a worshipper of God equals doing it to the Lord (Acts 9:4). Now since God punishes any evil against him (Deut. 32:35), he will necessarily take vengeance for that kind of evil directed against the believer but with the ultimate intention of harming God himself. This seems to be the major point that Paul is construing by using Deut. 32:35 in Rom. 12:19.

### Summary

In general, Paul's use of the Greek terminology of vengeance has much to do with the Old Testament use of this concept.<sup>36</sup> Constantly, Paul--and the New Testament in general--discards private vengeance. Like the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern worldviews, God remains the predominant source of retribution. Paul perpetuates the belief, common to Near Eastern backgrounds, that only the civil authority--as God's agent --is to exercise retribution for evil deeds.

As far as the immediate sense of the text is concerned, it is not because God is a stronger force that Paul urges the believer to commit vengeance to the Lord. Though allusions to the power of God are important to Paul,<sup>37</sup> they must be viewed as an implication but not his immediate point. The might of God is not Paul's focus when he speaks of divine vengeance. The landscape on which he sets his reflection is that of the principle of good/love. On this landscape, unfortunately, evil is also active, seriously seeking to hamper the consolidation of good. The two principles of evil and

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<sup>36</sup>In fact Paul uses the Old Testament repeatedly as he constructs his thought. Rom. 12:19-20 is a succession of quotations from the Hebrew Bible. So sometimes Paul uses the rabbinical combination (called *catena*) of pieces of Scripture, which Edersheim describes in these words: "A favourite method was that which derived its name from the stringing together of beads (*charaz*), when a preacher having quoted a passage or section from the Pentateuch, strung on to it another and like-sounding, or really similar, from the Prophets and Hagiographa." Cf. A. Edersheim, cited by Matthew Black, *Romans*, 64.

<sup>37</sup>It is noted that the book of Romans all through purports to show the *power of God* demonstrated through the Gospel (cf. 1:16).



good/love are in conflict. In Paul's view, the victory of good/love over evil is a necessity [cf. Paul's use of an overriding emphasis and a dominantly imperative mood]. In this battle, evil is not only against the believer; it is first of all a foe against his Master. Evil must be punished; it is adversary. Thus the preeminence of good/love can be ascertained. In fact, Paul's point is that each one--God and the believer--assume his particular role. But crucial to Paul's argument is that all action against evil must remain within the framework of good/love. In this case actual retaliation must be ruled out. It does not fit the principle of good/love. It counts in favor of evil since it is evil itself. Instead of retaliating, the believer's role, in spite of the pain of injury, should be focused on acts of unconditional love. Only God knows how to reward evil without endangering the principle of good/love. So retribution must be assigned to him. It is his role; for he made certain in his word that he would never leave an evil deed unpunished.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PAUL'S THEOLOGY WITH THE CONCEPT OF LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD

In the fourth chapter we attempted to analyze the way Paul develops the concept of divine vengeance. Not only was it found that the apostle strongly prohibits vengeance, but also that non-vengeance is not an isolated theme. Leaving vengeance to God is placed at the heart of the tension between good and evil. In view of the importance that the apostle seems to ascribe to this principle of leaving vengeance to God, our objective in this chapter is to examine the ethical theology that Paul seeks to establish as he urges Christians not to retaliate. In some instances it will be necessary to establish a link between Paul's ideas in Rom. 12:19 and other passages of Romans in general, of the Pauline corpus, and other New Testament authors. When such a link is deemed important references will be made.

#### The Kerygmatic Meaning

The examination of Paul's argument in Rom. 12:17-21 within context seems to point to a kerygmatic purpose. From the beginning of the Romans' epistle the proclamation of the gospel is emphasized (e.g. 1:5-6, 13, 15-16). Paul's urgent appeal to the Roman Christians to avoid retaliation makes more sense when taken in light of the proclamation thread of the epistle.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the immediate context itself sustains

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<sup>1</sup>Paul's recommendation of leaving vengeance to God appears to agree with what Snodgrass asserts, "Paul's agenda was larger and encompassed a range of theological issues pertinent to his whole missionary enterprise, an enterprise he was asking the Romans to support. Paul's theology and missionary activity will have to be kept together to understand Romans." See Klyne Snodgrass, "The Gospel in Romans: A Theology of Revelation," in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. by L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 289.

the kerygmatic objective of Paul's injunction. His argument in Rom. 12:17-21, as we saw, is about the conquest of good over evil. This conquest implies the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Rom. 1:11-17). In this perspective, avoiding retaliation stands as a means that would effectively help in overcoming evil. However this way of valuing abstaining from vengeance makes one wonder about the underlying kerygmatic significance. Why is the Christian's abstinence from retaliation deemed to be an effective weapon on the battlefield against evil? In other words, why does Paul believe that yielding vengeance to God is a crucial factor for unsaved people to reject evil and embrace God's realm? Also a question may be raised regarding the believer himself. Is there a blessing--a kind of self-feeding--that the persecuted believer obtains from the gospel that he proclaims by carrying God's grace into practical acts?

#### No-Retaliation as a Powerful Means of Overcoming Evil

Paul says in Rom. 12:17, 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody' (NIV). The interpretation of Paul's urgent prohibition of not repaying evil for evil [found in this verse 17 and vv. 19, 14] has led to different views among the scholars. For instance Dunn, among others, thinks that Paul's intention was to deliver a policy of avoiding the increase of trouble.<sup>2</sup> It appears however that the apostle intends something that goes beyond the desire of minimizing the intensity and frequency of trouble. His major focus does not seem to consist in equipping the believers with a strategy that they would resort to in their attempt to decrease persecution. Instead, his focus is on the good impact that such suffering can

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<sup>2</sup>Dunn says: "His [Paul's] first concern therefore is to urge a policy of avoiding trouble, by refusing retaliation to provocations and by responding with positive good to all hostile acts directed against them." See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, no 38b (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 755. Certainly, the believer's choice of not retaliating is an effective way of minimizing the aggressions hurled against him. There is no doubt that Paul had this in mind. But the contextual idea of fighting and overcoming evil leads one to look for something more, i.e. spreading the gospel by exemplifying God's love.



paradoxically produce towards evildoers.<sup>3</sup> In verse 17 the predicate phrase *kala enopion panton anthropon*, ‘what is right in the eyes of all men,’ shows that the ‘good for evil’ is not only intended for Christians, but its focus is primarily on outsiders,<sup>4</sup> whose ‘eyes’ need to discover what the believers profess.

But what difference does it make when a Christian abstains from avenging himself when a persecutor hurts him? The impact it makes appears to be remarkable. This can be seen through Paul’s thought, which he patterns on a military analogy. Evil in his view is an enemy to vanquish. The power of this enemy resides in the mass of its agents, i.e. the persecutors. Then it is imperative first to win the evildoers to good, i.e. to God’s reign. But the persecutors are people who have gone far in identifying with harshness. Often their nature is so prone to violence that they are not predisposed to listen to anybody. In this case the spoken proclamation alone is deemed to produce little fruit. Paul awakens the believers to a means that harsh people would hardly resist. The fact that Paul repeatedly<sup>5</sup> enjoins the Christians to refrain from retaliation proves that he finds it to an effective way of proclaiming salvation to this category of sinners. It appears that the believer’s attitude of returning good for evil is one of the

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<sup>3</sup>Paul cannot be a sadist. He certainly wished the betterment of those who were persecuted. But for him, making Jesus’ salvation known was preeminent to fighting persecution. He viewed it as a tool (e.g. Phil. 1:14, 29-30; Eph. 6:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:3,9,12). Note that “Paul does not offer any immediate hope of deliverance” from persecution. Cf. Linda L. Belleville, “Enemy, Enmity, Hatred,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (1993), 236.

<sup>4</sup>Paul has talked about how the believer behaves among his fellows (12:9-16). So the words ‘before all men’ make sense if now Paul focuses on outsiders. Also note *kala*, ‘what is right.’ While *agaphos* refers to intrinsic goodness, *kalos* refers to goodness that is seen on the exterior, the outward expression of an inward goodness. Cf. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament*, 218. So Paul targets the evildoers.

<sup>5</sup>Paul asserts it not only in Rom. 12 (three times, v. 14, 17, 19), but also in 1 Cor. 4:12-13; 6:7-8, 2 Cor. 2:5-11, and 1 Thes. 5:15. Though this theme permeates the N.T. (Mt. 5:38-47; Heb. 10:30; 1 Pet. 3:9), it appeals more to Paul. The cause, Hendriksen suggests, is that the great missionary “knew that ...if anything would succeed in filling the heart of an opponent with shame and penitence, this method would do it.” See Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 425. [granted that ‘coals of fire’ (v. 20) is translated as pain of shame and repentance]. Moo says, “Acting kindly toward our enemies is a means of leading them to be ashamed of their conduct toward us and, perhaps, to repent and turn to the Lord whose love we embody.” See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 789.

things that can powerfully move the heart of the persons whose life know nothing else but inflicting evil to their fellow humans.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that Paul sees a special meaning in abstaining from vengeance with regard to its usefulness in communicating God's love. Non-vengeance, as a method of conveying the gospel, carries something unique and very powerful. First, the act of not retaliating is exceedingly important because it demonstrates God's way of bringing sinners to repentance. It is God who frequently shows acts of grace to people who deserve nothing but rejection and curse. History abounds with tangible events that bear witness to his unconditional love. It suffices to pinpoint the most striking. From the Exodus event, through the liberation from the exile, to the sending of Jesus on the cross, God was constantly acting for people who were stiff-necked. But such visible and undeserved acts of God's grace were so surprising that many who noticed them could not persist in their unbelief.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that Paul directs the church to adopt God's method of breaking the stiffness of some men's hearts, not by coercion<sup>8</sup> but by the irresistible power of grace materialized into tangible acts.

Second, abstaining from retaliation is upsetting for the unbeliever because of the difference of personality that it displays. The Christian distinctiveness

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<sup>6</sup>Dawn agrees with this view as she says, "One of the most impressive ways in which Christians command a hearing for their message is when they manifest their hilarity by repaying with good those who have inflicted evil upon them." See Marva J. Dawn, *The Hilarity of Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 255. Prince has a similar view: "There is only one power that is strong enough to overcome evil, it consists in good. Any type of evil that we face, we always have to respond with equivalent good; otherwise we will find that evil is stronger than us." See Derek Prince, *Expérimenter la puissance de Dieu* (Olonzac [France]: Derek Prince Ministries, 1999), 261-62 [translation is mine].

<sup>7</sup>In the following words Kaylor notes how Paul draws on God's approach: "One should note here the partial parallel [partial because God's approach involves judgment (Rom. 1:18), which man is not allowed] between God's way of dealing with the world of unbelief and the church's way. Extending grace to the alienated leads to conquest evil, just as God has acted to overcome human opposition by approaching in grace." See R. David Kaylor, *Paul's Covenant Community: Jew and Gentile in Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 198.

<sup>8</sup>Marshall is right when he observes, "The power of God is not finally the power of coercion, but the power of forgiving love, a love that endured the agonies of crucifixion without retaliation." See Christopher Marshall, "Paul and Christian Social Responsibility," *Anvil* 17, no. 1 (2000), 14.



constitutes an important theme for Paul (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 1 Cor. 10:14-22; Eph. 5:5-11).<sup>9</sup> In Rom. 12:1-2, he reminds the Christians that they are a special offering to God and that they are to be transformed rather than conformed to the world. This distinctiveness of the Christian is an important power against evil. First, it is a powerful means of preserving one's own godliness. It is a great victory when by his steadfastness the believer refuses to do evil while it is exactly by the committing of evil that he is provoked. The believer's overcoming of evil is determined by his ability to avoid compromise and to keep steadfast against the injuries that he receives.<sup>10</sup>

But the importance of the believer's steadfastness against evil is not only for his preservation. It is far more important for the persecutors themselves. When the Christian refuses to be swayed by their provocation, he demonstrates the contrast between his and their personality. They are staggered when they discover such a human spirit which, contrary to their inability to resist evil, is able to resist their provocation and to sincerely return good for the pain that they inflicted on him. There is no sharper way than this to let God's gospel penetrate the spirit and marrow of a violent person (Heb. 4:12). The Christian's proclamation loses power when he hits back;<sup>11</sup> for his retaliation is evidence that himself succumbs to the pressure of hostility. From personal experiences--e.g. the attitude of Stephen in Acts 7:58-8:1--Paul knows the impact of a Christian who keeps his distinctiveness as he suffers injustice (cf. Acts 22:20).

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<sup>9</sup>It permeates the New Testament: in Jesus, Mt. 5:21-6:34, and others: 1 Jn 2:15-17; 1 Pet. 2:9-12.

<sup>10</sup>Moo notes, "Evil can overcome us when we allow the pressure put on us by a hostile world to force us into attitudes and actions that are out of keeping with the transformed character of the new realm." See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 789; which he describes later as when we allow evil 'to corrupt our own moral integrity.' See *Ibid.*, 790.

<sup>11</sup>Hendriksen makes this noteworthy observation: "The manifestation of a vindictive spirit destroys Christian distinctiveness, the absolute prerequisite for success in winning people for Christ. It is this lack that causes outsiders to say, 'Those Christians are no different than we are.' Paul, the great missionary, wants believers to conduct themselves in such a manner that unbelievers will take note." See Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 419.



## Passivity Discarded

Paul's injunction of leaving vengeance to God can be easily construed as an advocacy to passivity. But this would be to misunderstand his point. Fitzmyer seems right when he stipulates: "Whatever be the real meaning of this mysterious verse [Rom. 12:19], it is clear that Paul is recommending not Stoic passive resistance to hostility, but instead the OT (sic) treatment of an enemy in order to overcome evil with positive charitable action... cf. 2 Kgs. 6:22."<sup>12</sup> A man like Paul who declares overt war on evil in Eph.6:12ff, can hardly advocate passivity in Rom. 12. In fact the context shows that the apostle is not encouraging passivity. The acts of love required in Rom. 12:20 demand creativity and determination. Evil is not passive, it is powerfully active. Persecution is proof enough that evil is not passive. Such an enemy cannot be overcome by simply laying down one's arms. It must be counter-attacked<sup>13</sup> with actions that are deemed to be even stronger<sup>14</sup> than the actions used by evildoers. The actions that Paul wants the believer to do are twofold. First, the apostle focuses on tangible<sup>15</sup> actions of love and grace. Their great help is that the natural senses of these

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<sup>12</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 658. Fitzmyer recognizes that Paul bases his idea on the OT thought. It is true, but I think that he was also influenced by oral material of the Jesus tradition. In texts like Mt. 5:38-47, Jesus commands: turn the other cheek (v. 39), go two miles (v. 41), pray for those who persecute you (v. 44), greet not only your brothers (v. 47). All these are not passivity.

<sup>13</sup>In fact a close look at Paul's argument makes one to realize that the Christian avenges but in a way totally different from that of the world (12:2). He repends to evil but according to God's method. He has surrendered his negative, human vengeance to God, and in turn God helps him to adopt God's loving and positive way of retribution. To some extent Candlish is right to state that the believer says, "It is not my vengeance that I am to ask God to make his; it is God's vengeance that is to become mine." See Robert S. Candlish, *Studies in Romans 12: The Christian Sacrifice and Service of Praise* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 323. Since God's judgment is based on love, the believer is executing a kind of vengeance in God's perspective when he brings the evildoers to remorse by returning good for their evil.

<sup>14</sup>'Stronger' here does not imply physical arms. It implies rather the spiritual and moral quality.

<sup>15</sup>See particularly the injunction of giving food and drink in Rom. 12:20. Also the exhortations in the whole passage denote initiatives actively done, not passivity. Cf. also 1 Cor. 4:13; 6:7; 1 Thes. 5:15. Food and water must not be considered exclusively but as including any other action that might be done for the welfare of one's enemy.

unspiritual people can apprehend them easily. On the other hand, Paul considers prayer to be crucial in the effort to win unbelievers to God [invoking blessing for one's enemy, Rom. 12:14; cf. 1 Cor. 4:12; it is a tradition strongly rooted in the ethic of the early church: Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:28; 23:34; Acts 7:60]. All these actions can only come from a deep inner commitment. They are not the fruit of passive attitude. Especially when they are done for an enemy, a very creative decision<sup>16</sup> is needed.

### The Advantage of the Believer

Leaving vengeance to God overcomes evil and releases the evildoer from the grips of sin. We may now turn to the believer himself. What advantage does Paul anticipate for a believer who overcomes evil by submitting to the apostle's injunction of not retaliating? Certainly there is an advantage for him, and this blessing is not to be relegated to the end times,<sup>17</sup> at least as far as Rom. 12:19 is concerned. The gain that the believer receives can be assessed in light of the first two verses of Rom. 12. First, the believer can rejoice for having discerned and done the will of God (12:2) by serving God in his fight against evil. Also his joy may be great because he has managed to sacrifice his interests (v. 1), for winning the brother to God. Taking the two verses together, the result is that the believer may say that he has been a fellow-

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<sup>16</sup>There is nothing from the enemy that encourages the believer to show him acts of love. The believer's acts towards the enemy are only founded on an unconditional decision that springs out of love. This decision needs to be strong and even aggressive, not passive. Barrett observes, "Reconciliation means that by a creative act of love one of two warring parties makes peace; the adversary is no longer an adversary but a friend. He does not pretend that his former adversary is a friend; he actually makes friendship." See C. K. Barrett, *Paul: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994), 98. Note the similar idea applied to forgiveness in Kathy E. Dahlen, "Free to Forgive," *Discipleship Journal* 18 (May 1998), 64. So the believer does not need to feel affection in order to act for the enemy, but he has to love the enemy only because he decides it. It is a serious action, not a passive thing. Denman says this concerning her struggle to forgive her unfaithful husband: "The feeling to forgive never came. Instead I made a conscious decision to forgive." See Mary Denman, "Forgiveness: A Decision, not a Feeling," *Decision* 39 (June 1998), 15.

<sup>17</sup>See for instance Belleville, "Enemy, Enmity, Hatred," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 236; apparently also John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 305. Indeed the final vindication will take place at Christ's return (2 Thes. 1:6-10). But today the believer enjoys something like a blessing of God's vindication.



worker with the Lord (1 Cor. 3:9). This is a great blessing indeed.

However Paul's argument reveals more concerning the believer's benefit. In terms of advantage, at first sight the proclamation of the good news by not retaliating seems to be largely for the benefit of the evildoer. An act of vengeance normally focuses its benefit on the party that suffers injustice. But this primary focus of vengeance is not lost by non-vengeance, even though it might appear to be lost. The idea of liberation embedded in the terminology for vengeance, as we saw, applies to both the offender and the offended party. The Christian's act of carrying vengeance in God's way rescues the evildoer from the entanglement of evil. But at the same time the believer is released from resentment and anger, which are but subtle snares by which evil creeps into his life in order to overcome him. As the believer obeys to turn the burden of the offense over the Lord (Mt. 11:28), he gains freedom.<sup>18</sup> His freedom derives from his refusal to promote evil, but to promote good<sup>19</sup>

### **A New People Bound with God**

We have seen that the believer can abstain from retaliation. Also Paul believes that this abstinence makes the believer into a powerful herald of the gospel. By not retaliating, the Christian strongly impacts evildoers because returning good for evil is simply something unusual and unexpected of man. But all this thought raises some questions. What thing does guarantee the believer that it is not a mistake to leave his vengeance to God? What relationship is there between him and God that he can accept

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<sup>18</sup>Rejected by her husband, Denman's heart was being consumed until she turned her burden over to God. She says, "I had been nurturing and nourishing my 'martyr' complex, and it had to stop." See Denman, "Forgiveness: A Decision, not a Feeling," 15. Also Preston says, "The only way to be free [from bitterness, resentment] of the offense and to forgive others is to bathe in the soothing bath of God's forgiveness..." see Gary D. Preston, "Resisting the Urge to Hit Back," *Leadership* 19, no. 2 (1998), 64.

<sup>19</sup>Fitzmyer says, "The Christian's victory over evil consists in refusing to promote evil by returning evil for evil and to become like the evil person who injures, and in accepting injury without resentment and without allowing love to be turned into hate or even weakened." See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 659.



to give up his right? Concerning the believer's kerygmatic power and role, how does he get such a powerful personality that it seems unusual to the evildoer?

### A Community Founded on Christ

One of the aspects emerging from Paul's thought on divine vengeance is the special relationship between God and the Christian. The God who avenges the Christian is a living person who keeps a personal relationship with his devotees. Paul makes it clear in Rom. 9:25ff that Christians are--on the model of Israel--a new community that God constituted for his glory. So for Paul, God is concerned by the harm caused to Christians because, like Israel, they are his cherished community (cf. Zech. 2:8).

Now it ought to be noted that the foundation of God's relationship with Christians as his new covenant people surpasses that of the Old Testament. The community of God that Paul addresses is a perpetuation of the Israel paradigm. They are both a particular community that belongs to God. But Paul redefines the bond that is between God and Christians as his 'new people.'<sup>20</sup> The new people of God owe their inception to the sacrificial work of the Son of God (Eph. 2:11-22; Gal. 3:28-29). This link with Christ's death carries other traits. Christ's reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:14-20) brought about a union of the believer and the Lord (Rom. 6:3-11). The believer shares the same Spirit with Christ (Rom. 8:9-11).<sup>21</sup> This bond is so great that it produces a

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<sup>20</sup>The concept of 'people of God' stems from Israel. So Paul sets continuity between Israel and the church. But a redefinition is observable. Dunn rightly warns: "... we must be careful about defining Pauline Christianity simply as a kind of Judaism (continuity); but equally we must beware of falling into the old trap of thinking that Christianity can only define itself in opposition to Judaism (discontinuity)." See James D.G. Dunn, "How New Was Paul's Gospel? The Problem of Continuity and Discontinuity," In *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 385. See also Kaylor, *Paul's Covenant Community*, 198. Early Christians emphasized their newness but without denying continuity. For they could claim, "We are a new group, ... and yet not new, because we claim to be the true people of the god (sic) of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ... ." See Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol.1, 369.

<sup>21</sup>Rightly Fitzmyer notes that this sharing of the Spirit constitutes the ontological basis of their union. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 71.

coherent organism in which Christ forms the head and the church functions as his body (Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 1:23). The relationship of the believer and the Savior who died for him is not only one of appropriation (Eph. 1:14), but also of organic incorporation.<sup>22</sup> With such a bond, any harm inflicted on the believer constitutes an injury to the Lord himself.<sup>23</sup> If Israel had no reason to doubt God's care, in Paul's view the Christian's relationship with God gives greater confidence.

So, Paul's writing reveals a profound truth. For him, it is not as a mercenary that God stands as the avenger of the Christian. Nor is he viewed as a far distant being to whom Christians appeal for the punishment of injustice but who in reality has little to do with their lives. The divinities who are credited with being avengers of evil but who do it not for man's advantage but for their own divine interest contrast sharply with the Lord of the Christians. God and his followers make common cause and have common lot.<sup>24</sup> God and the Christians are so organically joined that the injury of one party necessarily affects the other party. In effect, when God avenges his devotee, his act is done for the advantage of both himself and the person defended. The union of God and the believer produces two aspects that we want to treat separately, i.e. God's lordship and a new nature for the Christian.

### Living Under the Lordship of God

The special relationship that exists between Christians and God carries an idea of dependence or subordination. The bond of God and the believer and God's role of redressing the situation of the weaker party recall the Old Testament duty of the

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<sup>22</sup>In many other metaphors, the apostle substantiates this integral relationship. He describes the church as the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; cf. 2 Cor. 6:16), the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; cf. Eph. 5:22-33), the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16); and Christians as the children of God (Rom. 8:14; cf. John 1:12).

<sup>23</sup>Certainly Paul can recall the word that the Lord addressed him: "Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Jesus expressed this common cause with his followers elsewhere, cf. e.g. Lk. 10:16.

<sup>24</sup>Candlish, *Studies in Romans 12*, 229.



‘*goel*.’<sup>25</sup> One of the characteristics of the *goel* practice was the implication that the kinsman possessed the means required for his relative’s liberation, but the latter did not have them. It appears that Paul’s command to leave vengeance to God is driven by his belief that God has multiple ways to accomplish revenge justly. God’s wisdom and uprightness surpass any means that the believer could ever use to repay the offenses that he receives. Needless to say, in some situations the Christian finds that he has no means at all to oppose the oppression imposed on him. Only his Lord holds ways of giving retribution justly. So the perfection<sup>26</sup> of God’s ways is in view when the apostle commands the believers to leave judgment and retribution to the Lord.

Now this disparity between God’s ways of giving retribution and that of man entails a sense of subordination. Only God’s vengeance is perfect. Paul insists that the Christian’s way has not yet reached perfection.<sup>27</sup> His own weaknesses make him into an object of the judgment of God, the only perfect judge (1 Cor. 3:8-17). Paul apparently understood that the Christian should not make himself a judge while he is also under judgment. As Candlish notes, this confusion would easily give an

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<sup>25</sup>The idea of ‘ransom’ (1 Tim. 2:6) contained in Paul’s description of the redeeming (liberating) act of Jesus is linked with the concept of Yahweh as the *goel* of Israel. See detail in Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology*, 49. The notable point in this analogy of the *goel* and God is that both intervene to set free without using physical force. Their intervention is rather based on possessing proper means that the person who is in trouble lacks.

<sup>26</sup>Vengeance must be left to God because he is perfect in his retribution. As Ziesler notes, it is not a matter of “ensuring harsher and more effective judgment.” See Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 305. Also Barrett states, “God’s righteousness is ... the righteousness of a wise and just judge who will properly distinguish between good and evil.” See Barrett, *Paul: An Introduction to His Thought*, 97. In the Old Testament, as we saw, God’s perfect qualities were also the major reason why vengeance was seen as his prerogative. Paul maintains that line of thought. Seemingly Jesus has the same idea when he prohibits to exercise judgment (Mt. 7:1f). Leaving vengeance to God looks not for harsher but perfect retribution from the Lord as Belleville states: “It is important when approaching references to God’s wrath and hatred in the NT (sic) not to read these in light of corresponding human emotions. God, unlike sinful humanity, is not given to vindictiveness, fitful rages or the urge to retaliate. Divine anger in the NT is a controlled response of a holy being to the sinful actions of humanity.” See Belleville, “Enemy, Enmity, Hatred,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 237.

<sup>27</sup>Rom. Rom. 8:23-25. The Christian still has to fight the old self (Rom. 6 and the injunctions of Rom. 12-15 are mainly about this issue; see also 1 Cor. 3:3f.; Gal 5:16f.; Eph 4:22f.; Col. 3:5f.).



advantage to evil, particularly when one is judge in his own case.<sup>28</sup>

Retribution is therefore the prerogative of the perfect judge. It involves an aspect of subordination. Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 8:6), and he was declared Lord after he had overcome persecution (Phil. 2:11). Inasmuch as the Christian acknowledges Christ as Lord, subordination is imperative. Surrendering one's vengeance to the Lord who overcame evil is certainly one vivid way of manifesting one's subordination to his lordship.

### A People Endowed with God's Strength

The union of God and the believer results in more than just causing an intimate dependence and subordination of the believer upon his Lord. Another result of this union is that it endows the Christian with a new nature (1 Cor. 5:17). The idea of a transformed nature seems to be a core factor in Paul's teaching of non-vengeance (Rom. 12:2). As Dawn notes, the selfless morality of returning good for evil is impossible for natural men, trapped in their sinful human nature.<sup>29</sup> Paul's command can only appeal to human beings whose nature is transformed by their entering into union with God. Due to the fact that God lives in them--as his temple (1 Cor. 3:16)--they are endowed with the strength necessary for accomplishing anything (Phil. 4:13).

The Christian has a new and empowered nature that enables him to return good for evil. In fact, Jesus lives in him (Gal. 2:20). Screened through Paul's dualism,<sup>30</sup> Christ's followers are people who have made a radical change. In Romans, Paul

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<sup>28</sup>Candlish states the risk: "You make yourself a judge, and a judge in your own case... This is the very subtlety of the snare... You quit the floor and usurp the bench." See Candlish, *Studies in Roman Law*, 280. In similar words Preston describes this attitude: "It's like having one of the guilty parties in a contractual dispute participate in the trial and sentencing of the other party. Justice cannot be served by one guilty party judging the other." See Preston, "Resisting the Urge to Hit Back," 62.

<sup>29</sup>Dawn, *The Hilarity of Community*, 259.

<sup>30</sup>Belleville describes Paul's dualism as follows: "The humanity is divided by Paul into those who are being saved and those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15); those of the kingdom of light and those of the domain of darkness (Col. 1:12-13); those who belong to Christ and those who belong to this world (Eph. 2:1-10)." Cf. Belleville, "Enemy, Enmity, Hatred," in *Paul and His Letters*, 235.

amply explains the ground for this new state. First of all, Christ has freed the believer from the entanglement of the Law (Rom. 7:4; 8:2-3), sin (6:1ff), death (5:12ff), and self (6:6). Second, God has granted them his Spirit of adoption, making them his children (Rom. 8:14-17). Paul has no doubt that what he commands is practically impossible for sinful people.<sup>31</sup> He addresses those who are transformed (cf. Rom. 12:2), i.e., people whose nature has been joined with God's nature (ch. 6 and 8). These Christians are "of the same mind and character with their Father in heaven; partakers of his divine nature; perfect as he is perfect, in the accomplishment of loving their enemies, and doing them good."<sup>32</sup>

Loving those who hate and persecute is but God's character. Only genuine, transformed people can afford practicing such morality because they are endowed with God's nature. In fact, Christ's character is what Paul demands the believer to imitate.<sup>33</sup> No one has ever exemplified non-vengeance like Jesus. He was oppressed, afflicted, and led like a lamb to the slaughter; yet he did not open his mouth (Isa. 53:7; cf. Mt. 27:12, 14). He was insulted but did not retaliate (1 Pet. 2:23). Paul substantiates that Christ sacrificed his life not for those who had a good relationship with him but his enemies (Rom. 5:10). In fact in Rom. 12:1 Paul anticipates a sacrificial life for all the ethical conducts that he explains in ch. 12 to 15. Loving one's persecutor demands giving up one's own rights and life.<sup>34</sup> Non-vengeance

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<sup>31</sup>Undoubtedly Paul "knew that returning good for evil was something against which sinful human nature violently rebels." See Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 425. But he does not address such a man. His recipient, "the Christian activated by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), can no longer live a life bound by a merely natural, earthly horizon. He is no longer *psychichos*, but *pneumatikos* and must fasten his gaze on the horizon of the Spirit." See Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology*, 78-79.

<sup>32</sup>Candlish, *Studies in Romans 12*, 231. He seems too bold with some words. But the idea is right.

<sup>33</sup>Paul's ethical teaching is christocentric. As Fitzmyer puts it, "As Christ was the image of God (1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), so man in his earthly existence is to be the image of the heavenly man (1 Cor. 15:49; cf. Rom. 8:29) ..." see Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology*, 82.

<sup>34</sup>Loving one's enemy is a great sacrifice modeled on Jesus' example. To a Christian who applies it, Jones' words stir reflection: "In a fashion analogous to God's self-giving life... we find life in self-giving love ..." See L. G. Jones, "Crafting Communities of Forgiveness," *Interpretation* 54, no. 2



requires sacrifice. Self-centeredness cannot foster giving up retaliation.<sup>35</sup> In fact the love that Paul exposes in Rom. 12:9-21 condemns self-centeredness altogether. He teaches genuine love (v. 9). The conduct that it involves is predominantly acts that the Christian ought to exercise not to himself but to others, both believers and unbelievers. Christians cannot put into action Paul's injunction to love those who wrong them if Jesus' self-giving love has not yet replaced their self-centered natural inclination. Dahlen is right when she argues forcefully that the ethic of loving one's enemies must focus on Christ and his kingdom.<sup>36</sup> Only a radically new nature can carry non-vengeance into effect.

### Summary

Paul places the prohibition of revenge at the center of the tension between good and evil. His main focus is on the usefulness that the attitude of repaying good for evil has in the fight between good/love and evil, i.e. between evil and God. In Paul's view, abstaining from vengeance stands as a very important asset that the Christian should use in his endeavor to overcome evil. Thus non-vengeance is basically considered in its kerygmatic role.

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(2000), 123. Dunn rightly takes Jesus' model as being central in Paul's thought: "The same sympathetic concern and positive outgoing love should be the rule in all cases--a love which does not reckon or depend on receiving a positive response in turn. For this not only Jesus' words but Jesus' example provided the model which would be not far from the surface of Paul's mind ..." see Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 756.

<sup>35</sup>Volf gives a vivid example. From his investigation of the Christians' participation in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, he reports, "Though explicitly giving ultimate allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ, many Christians in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective culture, ethnic group, or nation. In conflict situations, they tend to fight on the side of their group and are tempted to employ faith as a weapon in the struggle." [Further on he continues] "Churches find themselves unable to act on the gospel call to reconciliation because their commitments are wrongly ordered. The universal claims of the gospel, including the call to practice the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, are subordinated to the claims of the particular social groups they inhabit." See Miroslav Volf, "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation," *Interpretation* 54, no. 2, 159. This example proves that egocentrism runs counter to non-vengeance.

<sup>36</sup>Dahlen observes, "The person who chooses to forgive acts contrary to any natural inclinations for immediate and personal justice, imitating Jesus' response to the unjust treatment He endured... Personal definitions of fairness are set aside. In fact, self is set aside altogether. The focus becomes Christ. However real the offenses..., however justified our hurt, we must view it all from the cross-beams of Calvary. True forgiveness rises from a deep-rooted trust in Jesus Christ and in the values of His kingdom." See Dahlen, "Free to Forgive," 64.



The method of repaying good for evil stands as a highly effective means of proclaiming God's reign to those who are inclined to inflict harsh injustice on other human beings. Such insensitive spirits can only respond to a powerful demonstration of love such as is exemplified in returning good for the evil they do. Abstaining from vengeance can lead to that great achievement because of a number of characteristics. It demonstrates a category of love that is not human; it is God's way of loving. Loving one's enemies is fundamentally an attitude of God, not to be expected from humans. So abstaining from vengeance and the positive acts that it demands are highly effective because they are a noticeable demonstration of the true love that comes from God.

However, the act of returning good for evil is not only important because of the opportunity of witness that it provides for bringing a harsh persecutor to God. The Christian who abstains from doing evil blesses not only the evildoer but also himself. By not repaying evil for evil, the believer preserves his own godliness and gains further growth. Wuest notes that we cannot "continue growing as the people of God if we seek vengeance on others. That spoils our reconciliation, not only with them, but also with God and with ourselves. To curse our persecutors is surely always more destructive to us than to them."<sup>37</sup>

Also significant with non-vengeance is its demonstration of the special relationship that the believer shares with God. The believer can afford that selfless, sublime morality because he has God's nature and lives in union with the Lord. His leaving vengeance to God actually implies submission to the Lord who overcame evil by good. Repaying acts of love for evil stands as a service rendered to the Lord who uses that way to treat enemies and to break the hardness of evildoers.

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<sup>37</sup>Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament*, 229.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

In Rom. 12:19 Paul makes it an obligation to leave vengeance to God. By this study of Paul's thought and its context, we have attempted to understand what Paul means in commanding the Christian not to retaliate but to let God carry out his/her vengeance. As a result, it is noted that Paul's thought can be summarized on two grounds: (1) it follows a contextual social worldview that provides the foundation and (2) it has a theological point.

#### **Social Worldview**

Paul's concept of abstaining from vengeance is not a new thing that he invented. It appears that Paul got the idea of not retaliating from the Near Eastern worldview. From ancient times, Israel and other Near Eastern societies did not encourage private vengeance, although some documents like the code of Hammurabi seem to give the impression that individual vengeance was allowed.

It is important to note that there was no leniency towards evil deeds.<sup>1</sup> Like Paul, these societies took it for granted that evil deeds must be punished. But this retributive punishment remained something to be executed by civil authority. So retaliation in essence had a social value. It embodied an important role. In fact, its aim was not just to repay the wrongdoer the harm that he had caused to another person. The central objective of inflicting a public repayment to someone who had caused injury was

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<sup>1</sup>Note for instance that the God of Israel does not leave the guilty unpunished (Exod. 34:7).

educational. It was intended that the community would see<sup>2</sup> and be dissuaded from perpetrating further crimes. The primitive society with low political and administrative performance needed such a system to survive. Thus retaliation was institutionalized, but it was used as a necessity. It was not considered as ultimate good per se. Showing love and mercy to the wrongdoer was far preferred.

Also the belief that the divine being can avenge the injustice that an evil man has caused is something that Paul finds in the tradition of the Near Eastern worldview. The idea that God/god avenges was substantially rooted in Israel and the people with whom they shared history. In spite of some different points of emphasis, the people of Israel and the social settings around them fostered the belief that better vengeance lay with the divine. When a person abstained from avenging, in most cases he was motivated by the expectation that God/god would avenge on his behalf.

### **Theological Point**

The study of Paul's assertion in Rom. 12:19 and its context shows that the apostle makes a theological reflection in which he draws on the above tradition, particularly Old Testament thought. But he expands it with a new development. The first point consists in the difference that Paul sees between human vengeance and God's way of doing it. As in the Old Testament, Paul believes that God deals with injustice with perfect wisdom and motives. The apostle knows that resentfulness and anger are still active in the believer's life (Eph. 4:27). So Paul's urgent command to leave vengeance to God hinges on the fact that God has perfect ways of rewarding evildoers.

But the fight against evil constitutes the background against which Paul

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to notice that Paul uses the same paradigm in recommending acts that will be seen by people and will benefit them.



considers this difference between God and the believer. The Christian's vengeance is deemed to work for evil since it will spring out of evil dispositions such as anger, resentment, and the malicious desire to retaliate. Only God's vengeance promotes good. It demotes evil because it stands on holy intentions. So it is central to Paul's intention that the believer ought to integrate God's ways of dealing with evildoers. Also the implication is that the believer is commanded to use God's attitudes when dealing with someone who persecutes him.

God's attitudes are founded on love. Thus the believer is urged to integrate Jesus' self-giving love. Paul's argument can be construed as telling the Roman believers that genuine love is a prerequisite for nonrevenge. Undoubtedly one of the great points in Paul's thought consists in the acts of love that the believer must sacrificially--and yet sincerely--show to the evildoer.<sup>3</sup> In Paul's view love--particularly the love demonstrated through tangible acts--is very important. All the distinctiveness of the believer hinges on it. The persecutors perpetrate evil because they lack Jesus' model of love. Something that can ever impact and bring their soul to change is to show them the outstanding good [love] that they long for but fail to reach. Here Paul conveys to the Christians a very important principle, i.e., that evil never overcomes evil, but only genuine love overpowers evil.

It is necessary to note that by requiring acts of love, Paul defines the great role that the believer is to play in spite of a situation of serious indignity and injustice. Not only is the persecuted believer asked to repay good for evil but also through his acts he is to seek with determination to go as far as to change a person marked by evil into a person of good. Simply showing love is not to be the believer's objective. The conversion of the wrongdoer is the ultimate aim that motivates the victimized Christian to love and

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<sup>3</sup>Rom. 12:20 stands as a cornerstone to v. 19. Abstinence from revenge makes no sense if it is not realized through acts of love.

act sincerely for his enemy. It is good for the evildoer to see a demonstration of love and be aware of what true love is about. But it is far better when the evildoer not only notices Jesus' love but also integrates it into his life and leaves evil. Paul's focus is on this extreme good for the evildoer. And the love that is to produce it must be really genuine. Paul's focus on the evildoer marks a considerable change in the ethics of retribution. The retributive action that seeks so great a benefit for the party who has caused injury is peculiar to Paul and the New Testament. It constitutes a radical development that departs from the past.<sup>4</sup>

Returning acts of love with the decisive intent of winning the enemy brings about another important point that the Christian needs to heed. One can realize how much less passive the harmed Christian is expected to be, even after he has surrendered his vengeance to God. Paul redefines the idea of surrendering one's action to God. Paul introduces us to a new partnership where God and his people co-operate in their fight against evil. But this association is not confusion. The retribution is God's. Yet in his love, and for the sake of the edification of the person who believes in him, the believer is associated to the fight against evil. In fact leaving vengeance to God should be described as a process in which the Christian surrenders his human ways of retaliation to God and in exchange receives the Lord's holy ways of repaying an evildoer. In other words, leaving vengeance to God is not synonymous with abdicating from fighting against evil, but means rather to set aside one's spoiled arms and take on

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, it is noted that the words of Rom. 12:20 that recommend acts of love to the enemy are in fact a quotation from Prov. 25:21-22. But they do not have a same purpose in Proverbs as in Romans. They carry a winning purpose in the new context where Paul places them. For, due to the fact that hostility between good and evil is the background, all the Christian is asked to do concurs with overcoming evil and liberating the evildoer [note the connotation of liberation embedded in the terminology for 'avenge']. These words seem not to have this same winning purpose in Proverbs; at least it is not overtly expressed. In this line of thought, Klinger's words can be noted, "In Christianity the law of talion is inverted. It requires that evil be repaid not with evil but with good, so that the evil may be turned to good. [cf. Mt. 5:38-42]. In this new principle retribution continues to be retribution, but it is put on a new level: the guilt of the guilty party becomes a means of conversion (see Rom. 12:20)." See Klinger, "Revenge and Retribution," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 366.

God's weapons (Eph. 6:12ff.). So the Christian is not allowed any passivity in his dealing with those who molest him. He must combat evil by actively initiating powerful and deliberate acts of love. It is as if Paul tells the Christians of Rome that it is no longer the time when the people of the Lord were asked to be still and watch the Lord defending them (e.g. Exod. 14:13-14; 2 Chr. 20:17). The Lord wants a people who wield God's love to conquer evil. Passivity would account for the prevalence of evil.

But a man who understands and takes on the good/love as a weapon sanctioned by God must be someone impregnated with the nature of God (1Cor. 2:14). Receiving painful injuries without retaliating seems to be a tough spiritual exercise. It is violence against oneself. Nominal Christians are destined to fail in such morality. It requires people who have a special relationship with God. Those who are united with Christ and are transformed by his presence qualify for this great privilege of being the instruments that God can use to win those who were in the grip of evil.



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