

HOT TOPICS PAPER

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Nestled in the decalogue, the famous ten commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, is a powerful declaration of God's character. Particularly, we find very weighty information on how God deals with people who choose to love him or sin against him. There is a curious component that will be the subject matter of this paper, namely, the effect of one person's sin or righteousness on their children and future generations. The purpose of this paper is to show that when a person acts in opposition to God or with love toward him, there are inherited effects for future generations, but that each individual will be held responsible for his own actions and not that of his ancestors.

God's description of himself along with the ten commandments are of utmost priority. At the head of these commands we have a reason from God for obeying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2, =Deut 5:6). This powerful reminder leads into what needs to be obeyed, first and foremost, not worshipping other Gods. God declares himself to be a jealous God, who cannot tolerate defection, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me" (v. 5, =Deut 5:9). Thankfully, God does not leave the reader here, but also says that he is, "showing steadfast love to thousands¹ of those who love me and keep my commandments" (v. 6, =Deut 5:10). God declares his own character in the midst of these most important commands. He does this during one of the most significant times in Israel's history, including the miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the Red Sea, providence in the wilderness and powerful demonstrations of his might at Sinai so that the people were afraid. This declaration is repeated in Exodus

¹ ESV footnote: "Or to the thousandth generation"

34:5-8, Deuteronomy 5:9-10, Numbers 14:17-19 and Jeremiah 32:17-18, not to mention many references in the Psalms, other poetic and prophetic writings² as well as clear examples of its workings in the historical literature of the Bible. All this shouts, “Pay attention,” to the reader, “this is very important knowledge for you.”³ So let’s begin by describing an individual’s actions.

Each person has received God’s commands. As a result, he can choose to obey or disobey. Using the terminology of Exodus 20 we can say he either hates God and commits iniquity or loves him and obeys his commands. This starting point is fairly straight forward, the person either chooses rightly or wrongly. However, the implications of this individual choice not only affects the individual, but also his family and community.

There are two broad effects of an individual’s sin. The first is in relation to iniquity. Depending on the translation we find that God “visits” (ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, WEB) iniquity or that God “punishes” (NIV, TNIV, HCSB) iniquity. Other translations include “lay,” (NLT) “responding by dealing,” (NET) or “keep in mind” (RSV). This translation issue is quite important in our view of God and will be discussed in a moment. The second effect is in relation to those who love and obey. We find here that God shows steadfast love to thousands in response.

² Alphonso Groenewald, “Exodus, Psalms and Hebrews: A God abounding in steadfast love.” *Hervormde teologiese studies* 64, no. 3 (September 2008): 1368.

³ “In some ways the single most important point about the canonical form of the Decalogue is not what this section contains but its location. The commandments are given as an integral part of the Sinai narrative sequence and as an essential segment of the account of Yahweh’s presentation of himself to Israel in that sequence.” John I Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, Edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 3, (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 278.

The Hebrew word, *paqad*, in Exodus 20:5 (=Deut 5:9) commonly translated “visit” or “punish” is a difficult word to translate evidenced by the vast difference between visiting and punishing. One commentator using the RSV as his translation, suggests that “deserved judgment”⁴ is the outcome for the future generations of those who “hate” God. How he comes to this conclusion is not explained and uncertain especially when his translation reads, “will keep in mind the father’s guilt.” Another commentator, using the NIV, who doesn’t discuss the word, simply assumes the children will be punished like their fathers when they sin as their fathers did.⁵ I don’t believe this is sufficient in the study of this word. A third commentator also using the NIV suggests that God is threatening those who disobey that he will punish future generations of his children.⁶ However, he doesn’t explain the use of the word “punish” only that it has been agreed that this is what is implied. Thankfully, he does spend additional time considering the concept of children being punished for the sins of the father so as to struggle with the text and not claim complete understanding or simply ignoring it altogether. He refers to Deuteronomy 24:16 where it commands that children shall not “be put to death because of their fathers.” And he does mention the alternate translation of “visit.” He postulates that there is an affect on the future, but has no conclusions with the seeming contradiction of punishing the children in one reference and not punishing them in another.

⁴ Durham, 287.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Exodus*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and Richard P. Polcyn, Vol. 2,(Grand Rapids: Zondevan Publishing House, 1990), 423.

⁶ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary, Edited by Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 415-417.

I was initially stirred to look into the translation of the word *paqad* as well as questioning the common belief that future generations are cursed because of their parents' sin because of the work of Ken Brown. However, I cannot spend time here looking into his article entitled, *Generational Sins or God's Mercy?*,⁷ because it is not an acceptable source for this assignment.

I did find an excellent source asking the question in its title, *Is there a Doctrine of "Collective Retribution" in the Hebrew Bible?* Joze Krasovec highlights the necessity of understanding the word *paqad*. He provides a list of "the wide semantic range of the verb *paqad* 'pay attention to, look after, take care of, muster, appoint, allot, assign, observe, investigate, test, visit'..."⁸ The word "punish" is not even included in his list. Although Krasovec does conclude that there is retribution dealt to future generations he argues that these are natural consequences⁹, not to be taken as a doctrine or principle and that God is the one to implement or direct severe collective retribution in special circumstances.¹⁰ He writes:

"The Bible testifies that God appears as a judge of human affairs both directly and indirectly: directly, in a personal response to aberration; indirectly, through the operation of natural laws. This fact is compatible both with the human feeling that collective punishment should not be viewed as a doctrine or a principle and with the historical experience that evil unavoidably affects both the guilty and the guiltless."¹¹

⁷ Brown, Ken, "Generational Sins or God's Mercy?," Voice of One Crying, entry posted 2001, http://www.voiceofonecrying.com/generational_sins_or_god.htm [accessed October 29, 2011].

⁸ Joze Krasovec, 41.

⁹ Joze Krasovec, 82-85.

¹⁰ "Examples of collective punishment are therefore exceptions to a rule, and there are clear-cut reasons for them." Joze Krasovec, 81.

¹¹ Joze Krasovec, 81-82.

Another author, J. Carl Laney, in his view called, *God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8*, writes, "Some people assume that the words, "visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations," means that God *punishes* children for the sins of their parents and ancestors. But Ezekiel 18 shows that this is not the case."¹² He believes that it means, "that children can expect to experience the *consequences* of the sinful behavior of their parents."¹³ Therefore, I think that the term "punish" is too strong a term to use for our translations and that we should focus on how God "visits." Regardless, most commentators agree that there are significant consequences on future generations. So far we have looked at the negative effects, but there are also positive effects of a single person's actions.

There is an interesting contrast to be noted in the text. While God visits iniquity on several generations, he shows steadfast love to thousands or a thousand generations. Durham clarifies "thousands," "might better be read "an innumerable descendancy," as the emphasis is upon the progeny of faithfulness and Yahweh's unending goodness to them all."¹⁴ This is emphasized in a second instance of God's declaration of his character in Exodus 34:6. Alphonso Groenewald focuses his article entitled, "Exodus, Psalms and Hebrews: A God Abounding in Steadfast Love," exclusively on this theme of steadfast love.¹⁵ This stark contrast reminds readers not to dwell on the inherited affects of iniquity, but rejoice that God is gracious to forgive and

¹² J. Carl Laney, "God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," *Bibliotheca sacra* 158, no. 629 (January 1, 2001): 50. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 29, 2011).

¹³ Laney, 50.

¹⁴ Durham, 287.

¹⁵ Groenewald, 1365.

extend great love far beyond any judgment. Perhaps the thousandth generation refers to an eternal joy in a loving relationship with God. Groenewald notably uses the book of Hebrews comparing Jesus to God and his own characterization of himself in Exodus 34:6. He writes, “Already at the beginning of the book the author portrays Jesus as a reflection of the glory of God and — very important — the exact imprint of God’s very being (Heb. 1:3).”¹⁶ In doing so he gives evidence of the masterful story that God has written and adds massive interpretive implications to the decalogue. He writes:

“The ultimate meaning of Scripture is therefore defined in terms of their own privileged position in the unfolding drama of history. Whatever these Old Testament texts might have meant at an earlier time, the author of Hebrews tells his readers that its ultimate and therefore proper meaning concerns the church’s participation in God’s *eleos* (hesed), both now amid certain trouble and temptation, and later in the world to come for those who remain faithful.”¹⁷

Jesus is the God who abounds in steadfast love giving forgiveness and eternal life to thousands! This is stunning information to apply to the decalogue. Indeed, we have a God delighting not in punishment for disobedience, but in showing love that eternally restores our relationship with him to those who repent.¹⁸

The phrase “inherited guilt” or “inherited punishment” needs to be considered in this discussion as it was and still is debated. Bernhard Stade and Karl Marti refer to this phrase in ancient times, writing, “This archaic notion can be found throughout the

¹⁶ Groenewald, 1376.

¹⁷ Groenewald, 1377.

¹⁸ “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? ... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!” Ezekiel 18:23, 32.

ancient world.”¹⁹ They mention a prayer from the Hittite King Mursilis²⁰ thus suggesting a possible common belief. In John 9:2, we find an example of the disciples asking Jesus, “...who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” According to one commentator, “The disciples’ question implied that congenital afflictions were punishments...visited upon children for the sins of their parents.”²¹ Another commentator states, “Jewish rabbis generally believed in a direct cause-and-effect relationship between suffering and sin...Jesus, however, while acknowledging the possibility that suffering may be the direct result of sin (cf. John 5:14), denied that such was invariably the case...”²² Because this was normal thinking up until Jesus’ day, Jesus’ answer is striking, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents...” (v.3). So it appears that one cannot make any firm conclusions on how our guilt and punishment is inherited by future generations. We should not make absolute statements about how this person is a result of that person or saying, “I’m this way because my mom was that way.” While we may observe it happening this way, what is important is how we live now. Jesus urges us not to dwell on the past but to look ahead to God’s works saying, “but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (v.3). Even though it is difficult to make dogmatic

¹⁹ Bernhard Stade and Karl Marti, “The Number Ten and the Iniquity of the Fathers: A New Interpretation of the Decalogue,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 118, no.2, (Berlin: W. de Gruyter [etc.], 1881): 227.

²⁰ “It happens that people always sin. My father sinned as well, and he transgressed the word of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord. But I did not sin. Nevertheless, it so happens that the father’s sin comes upon his son, and so the sin of my father came upon me too.” Stade and Marti, 227.

²¹ Colin G. Kruse, *John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 220.

²² Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 281.

judgments, we can still observe patterns that are passed on from one generation to the next, while maintaining hope of something better.

The scope of an individual's actions are not limited to himself, but affect future communities and generations not yet born. This is a profound statement that must be considered seriously. God says that how we choose to live our lives will absolutely have an affect on future generations. J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney agree in the *NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible*, "For Israel, the sins of the fathers have repercussions for their children and their children's children (Isa 1:4; Lam 5:7)."²³

If this is true, we will see this effect happening in Biblical examples and personal experience. In fact, we can see this happen. John Sailhamer writes from his *Compact Bible Commentary*:

The extended commentary on this commandment (vv.5-6) acknowledges that parents often pass on to their children the misdirected and ill-advised patterns of life they learned from their own parents. Wrong notions about God and worship can be maintained for generations and can result in many hardships. On the positive side, however, the author also recognizes that, in God's grace, the love and obedience of a single generation can change the course of a family for thousands of future generations. In the historical book of the OT we see this pattern play itself out (e.g., see Jdg 2:10ff.) Part of the purpose of these books is to show that rebellion against the Lord was passed from one generation to another until ultimately the nation was sent into exile (2Ki 17:7-18a; 25).²⁴

Other Biblical examples include Achan and his household, David and the sword not departing from his family, and God's covenant carried on from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob. We also see the negative pattern breaking in examples such as Rahab and her

²³ J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, "Sin," in *NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 556.

²⁴ John Sailhamer, "Exodus," In *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994): 87-88.

household and Josiah's father Amon and grandfather Manasseh ushering in great evils while he repented, although he still experienced the consequences of his ancestors.

Personal experience also shows evidence that one person's iniquity negatively affects future generations, while another person's right choices has positive affects. Examples include the devastating effects of divorce on children, learned patterns of abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome, the absence of a father due to imprisonment, cyclical family problems and poverty. Conversely, we can see the educational success of children growing up in highly educated homes, fond views of marriage from children in stable homes, healthy parenting skills learned and on and on. John W. Miller wrote an article entitled, *The Contemporary Fathering Crisis: The Bible and Research Psychology*. He cites the "impact of the industrial revolution on family life"²⁵ and that "even with the introduction of child labor laws and compulsory education during the nineteenth century, it has continued to make family life difficult..."²⁶ He mentions the sexual revolution's affect on the stability of marriages and that "out-of-wedlock pregnancies increased dramatically."²⁷ On the positive side, Miller discusses the father's influence in the life of his child and that he helps to form their conscience, helps to control their fluctuating impulses and also contribute to their gender-identity formation.²⁸ He also wrestles with the tension of Biblical perspectives and that of modern psychology in his opening purpose statement. He writes, "My purpose...is to attempt to indicate how

²⁵ John W. Miller, "The contemporary fathering crisis: Bible and research psychology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 3 (September 1, 1983): 28, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 29, 2011).

²⁶ Miller, 28.

²⁷ Miller, 29.

²⁸ Miller, 31.

three forces...: the Bible, research psychology, and a fathering crisis are beginning to intersect in a way that could be highly important for our future well-being as families and as a society.”²⁹ Consider this quote from a news piece as an example of how collective retribution, is bad policy on a large scale, “ “Collective retribution” means that the governor of this crown colony [in Kenya, 1950s], Sir Evelyn Baring, has been granted power by the London colonial office to punish whole villages, and even regions, for crimes committed in the vicinity.”³⁰ This piece went on to show the destructiveness of that decision. That one person’s actions largely determine affects on future generations is clearly evident from personal experience.

So does an individual’s iniquity determine the actions of future generations? Are future generations cursed to repeat the failure of their ancestors? Should laws be put in place that punish a perpetrator’s children? Does God act differently than human institutions when dealing with wrongdoing or can human institutions implement a doctrine of collective retribution based on this passage?³¹ Is each person entirely responsible for his own actions? Are future generations guaranteed to obey God because their ancestors did? Should laws protect individuals when they commit crime because their father loved God? These questions and more should spawn much reflection on the massive implications of one person’s actions.

The Bible is clear that while future generations may feel the affects of their ancestor’s sin, every individual is responsible for their own sin. We may feel cursed to

²⁹ Miller, 22.

³⁰ "Collective retribution' is a dangerous policy," *Christian Century* 69, no. 51 (December 17, 1952): 1462, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 29, 2011).

³¹ See Krasovec’s complete article for insight into this question.

repeat the iniquity of our ancestors, but this is not the case. Consider Achan and Rahab. The New Bible Dictionary says in its entry entitled, "Curse," "...while Achan involved himself and his house in the destruction of Jericho, Rahab, by identifying herself with Israel, escaped the curse and saved her house also (Jos. 6:21-24; 8:26-27; Jdg. 21:11)."³² Rahab came out from under the curse, while Achan put himself under the curse, but still we see a great effect on entire families. Krasovec references Jeremiah 31:29-30, 32:18 and Ezekiel 18 for definitive mentions of personal responsibility. The proverb quoted in Jeremiah regarding fathers eating sour grapes and the children's teeth being set on edge "was being used to accuse previous generations and to justify the present one."³³ Ezekiel states clearly that "the child will not share the guilt of the parent..." (v. 23). God holds individuals responsible for their iniquity, but allows consequences to affect future generations.

Furthermore, future generations are not guaranteed to follow after God because their ancestor's did. Many people assume that because they're from a certain family line or tradition that they will go to Heaven among other things. Every individual is personally accountable to God for their life and can make no excuses or claims for their own decisions.

In conclusion, future generations will feel the affects of previous generations, but are responsible for their own actions. Children will feel the affects of their parents choices, but are not punished for their iniquity. How this all happens we must leave to God and not seek to take matters in our own hands. While we may wish for a perfect

³² J. A. Motyer, "Curse," in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 249.

³³ Krasovec, 45.

understanding of inherited guilt, we must place ourselves in the loving hands of God with an attitude of repentance so that God's steadfast love will be shown to the thousandth generation!

Word Count: 2939

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