‘Judgement’ as a Cultural Construct in the West

Dr. Bina Nir

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to examine a deep structure embedded in Western culture – Judeo-Christian judgement. This deep cultural structure still exists in Western culture even though its roots are religious and ancient. According to Freud, a culture in which a supreme court with immeasurable power exists, is a culture that bolsters the belief in eventual reward for all those who do good, and punishment for those who do evil (Freud 2000, 23). Also, in modern culture, man aims his actions toward success in accordance with cultural and social criteria of judgement – external criteria that has become normative. In capitalist society, in which success is an important value, many fail to meet this cultural criterion and struggle with the burden of social judgement. In a culture in which success is a supreme value, failure is unbearable (Sandage, 2005).

Western Judeo-Christian culture recognizes a legislating, judging and punishing god – God is positioned as an authoritative entity separate from mankind who determines what is right and wrong; a supreme judge who rewards or punishes human beings for their actions. The idea that a meticulous and strict supreme judge exists separate from mankind, constitutes among other things, a motivation for the pursuit of success, and for the avoidance of failure in terms of exterior cultural criteria. Man fears the consequences of judgement, especially when they entail punishment, and endeavours with all his might to succeed in the eyes of the judge. Motivation for success is indeed religious, but in time it undergoes processes of secularization. Following Jung (1987), we accept as a basic supposition that when worldviews are deeply rooted in religious experience, they have a latent capacity to act as cultural forces and predispositions which, while constantly transforming, are preserved in the secular experience as an identical construct with new forms of expression. Jung opines that our modern–oriented consciousness is infused with Christianity (Jung 1987, 66).

The genealogical approach will be applied to a corpus of canonical religious texts in Western culture, focusing mainly on the Old Testament. Religion is the essential mark of cultural identity. Thought systems and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of any given culture. Christian religion and culture were based on Jewish sacred texts that were distributed throughout various regions of the Roman empire (Malkin 2003, 44). In Judaism and Christianity, the Hebrew Bible is perceived as a sacred text – as an absolute truth, a product of divine revelation (Hacohen 2006, 23).

# The Bible and the doctrine of punishment and reward

Judgement is a principal element in the biblical narrative. Judaism presents a testing and trying god. God is the one to set the rules of justice; but he is beholden by a covenant with the chosen people that includes distinct, comprehensible rules obligating him to act according to the rules of justice he set.

The election and destiny of the people of Israel imposes upon them the obligation to serve as a paragon and therefore, they are severely punished for every sin–failure; ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’ (Amos3.2). In the heavenly court man is remembered and indebted not only for his deeds, but also for his ancestors’ deeds. Not only is the basic family unit a domain of reward and punishment: ‘my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans’ (Exodus 22.23), but also society at large. Only three thousand people participated in the making of the Golden Calf (Exodus32.28), but the entire nation was judged and punished: ‘Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf – the one that Aaron made’ (Exodus32.35).

From a Jewish perspective, as explained by Mowinckel (1087), the blessing bestowed upon man is no other than a life force manifest as happiness and success, while curse empties life of all goodness.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked  
[…] but their delight is in the law of the Lord […] They are like trees  
planted by streams of water […] In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so […] for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalms 1.1–6)

The deed leads to the reward, and the deed and reward are combined in a relationship like causative relationships in natural law. Because God’s power is to judge and punish, ‘His Divine Attribute of Strict Justice’ (*Middat HaDin*) is one of the two principal facets of divine nature, it is comprehended as complementing divine grace and mercy, ‘His Divine Attribute of Mercy’ (*Middat HaRachamim*) (Shalom 1992, 168). Among the appellations for God in the Bible is ‘the judge of all the earth’ – ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ (Genesis 18.25).

‘The judge of all the earth’ 

To strengthen the hearts of his chosen-beloved, God promises them corporeal success and happiness in the future, once they have fulfilled their mission. As a testing and judging God, he warns them that the promises will be kept in the far future only if the sentenced fulfil their commitment to follow his path and obey his commandments (*mitzvot*). From a Jewish worldview, man and the community influence future success, and history’s purpose is clearly defined – ‘for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country’ (Jeremiah 31.16–17). Judaism views corporeal success as a sign of God’s grace, while failing in the world obligates man to examine his deeds and where he has sinned, because failure constitutes punishment for his sin.

The Bible’s conception of punishment is established in the first chapters of Genesis. Despite differences between biblical stories dealing with punishment and judgement, a unified concept underlies most biblical narratives, because a direct and contingent linkage exists between the sin-failure and the punishment (Shalom, 1992). The most prominent representation of this in the Bible is in Genesis, chapters 2–12; up to this day, this depiction remains a myth of punishment that Jewish and Christian theologians endeavour to understand. The chapters presenting humanity’s primordial history depict all of humanity’s hardships as penalty for alienating God, for failing by disobeying the legislating God and the supreme judge. The punishment effects events on both natural and historical levels.

The traditional doctrine of punishment and reward does not illuminate the reason behind Jeremiah’s complaint, ‘Why does the way of the guilty prosper?’ (Jeremiah12.1). One possible answer is that the evil man’s success is temporary and transient (Jacobson 2010, 13). Job, for instance, does not accept the argument that suffering indicates sin; indeed, he is certain that he has not sinned; he seeks out the causal relationship between his failing and suffering and cannot find it. He feels that he is being punished for no apparent reason. ‘I will say to God, do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me’ (Job10.2). In the doctrine of punishment and reward, this approach does not associate suffering with sin; rather, it contends that God tries the righteous (e.g. Abraham, Job) by causing them to suffer and not as punishment for their sins. God’s response to Job includes the idea that man’s intelligence is limited and therefore, he is incapable of understanding how the world is governed; providence does not operate according to man’s moral criteria.

In Judaism, man is not perceived as innately sinful (Weiss 1987, 460). In the Bible, there are no representations of primordial sin, hereditary sin or a unique, natural inclination to sin, but judgement of cumulative sins-failings may entail communal punishment.

The Bible may be viewed as a fundamental document in which definitive and influential ideas on the concept of sin-failure and punishment were crystalized. Although these ideas are based on various parts of the Bible, and surely in vastly different eras, indeed – as paradoxical as it may seem – they functioned as a homogeneous system of ideas in Judaism’s religious and theological history (Shalom 1992, 162).

Judaism presents a testing and judgmental God, and this concept is significantly reinforced in Christianity. The biblical punishment myth constitutes a cornerstone in Western culture, particularly given that Christianity’s concept of sin and punishment is based on the biblical text.

**Christianity takes the concept of judgement further -** In Christianity, one is judged not only for the deed, but also for the intent; that is, thoughts and emotions (Schimmel 1997, 15). In Christianity, God does not judge according to appearance or false impression. In Christianity, God sees the invisible, while in Judaism judgement ensues in retrospect, after a visibly manifest deed is performed. Judgement in Christianity applies also to intent, before the action is executed. There is no need to appear observant of the commands, internal purpose is what is significant.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites […] But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret. (Matthew6.16–18)

Christians view the Jewish past, which is marked by failings, as preparation for the Christian present. ‘For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one’ (Hebrews8.7).

With the invalidation of the Old Testament, the message to believers was that God’s desire was not manifested in external deeds, in the mechanical success of observing the commandments ‘according to the flesh’ (Romans 8.4–5), but rather observance based on inner significance. With the abolition of the commandments, Christianity became a religion very different from Judaism, one that, in contrast to Judaism, does not focus on the daily observance of obligatory and prohibitive commandments (Ploser 1960, 75–98). The theological basis for the commandments’ annulment was the doctrine of grace developed by Paul.

# Epilogue

As we have seen in this brief overview, Western culture is founded on principles that presume a God who legislates, judges, and punishes. A person who fears divine judgement, and particularly divine punishment, strives with all his or her might to act in accordance with the Judge’s will and fears failing to do so.

Articulating this religious worldview allows us to see its cognitive element. The deep structures at the foundations of culture have the capacity to drive cultural developments while constantly changing and evolving and to be preserved in secular experience as the same structure with new modes of expression. In secular cultural experience, divine judgement turns into social judgements that set criteria of success and correspondingly generate fear of failure, guilt, conscience, and similar phenomena. When we evaluate the religious foundations of culture, we must take care to avoid the pitfall of overgeneralizing about religions (Biederman 2003: 36-37). For this reason, we have discussed only foundational religious elements that are common to Western culture and upon which a whole range of beliefs and values are expressed. Sketching only a general outline, one may conclude that, inspired by the New Testament, all denominations of Christianity constituted a culture wherein moral rules control everything that occurs.

Judaism also presents a God of judgement, but the Hebrew Bible’s strict conception of reward and punishment grants human beings the capacity to choose their own path. That autonomy implies responsibility for the results of the judgement. Hebrew Biblical judgement is generally of the collective while Catholicism transferred the locus of judgement to the individual. Catholic judgement also shifts the focus from the external, the action of the believer, to the internal, his or her intentions. Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, treats judgement as arbitrary, taking place before a person is born and thus precluding anyone from having control of his or her own destiny.