When God Punishes Israel: What Will the Gentiles Say?

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Woodcut carved by Johann von Armssheim (1483). Portays a disputation between Christian and Jewish scholars (Soncino Blaetter, Berlin, 1929. Jerusalem, B. M. Ansbacher Collection).

P*arashat Nitzavim* continues the theme of the rebuke from *[Parashat Ki Tavo](https://www.thetorah.com/parashah/ki-tavo%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*, which describes in detail the punishment that the children of Israel will receive if they do not follow God’s laws (Deut 28:15-68), but adds something new (Deut 29:21-27): the reaction of later generations to the destruction of the land of Israel. Surprisingly, this is presented in a question and answer format:

Later generations and foreigners notice the destruction and exile.

דברים כט:כא וְאָמַ֞ר הַדּ֣וֹר הָֽאַחֲר֗וֹן בְּנֵיכֶם֙ אֲשֶׁ֤ר יָק֙וּמוּ֙ מֵאַ֣חֲרֵיכֶ֔ם וְהַ֨נָּכְרִ֔י אֲשֶׁ֥ר יָבֹ֖א מֵאֶ֣רֶץ רְחוֹקָ֑ה וְ֠רָאוּ אֶת מַכּ֞וֹת הָאָ֤רֶץ הַהִוא֙ וְאֶת תַּ֣חֲלֻאֶ֔יהָ אֲשֶׁר חִלָּ֥ה ה֖’ בָּֽהּ…

The nations ask why YHWH did this?

כט:כג **וְאָֽמְרוּ֙ כָּל הַגּוֹיִ֔ם**עַל מֶ֨ה עָשָׂ֧ה ה֛’ כָּ֖כָה לָאָ֣רֶץ הַזֹּ֑את מֶ֥ה חֳרִ֛י הָאַ֥ף הַגָּד֖וֹל הַזֶּֽה:

They (?) explain that it is because Israel abandoned YHWH to worship other gods.

כט:כד **וְאָ֣מְר֔וּ** עַ֚ל אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָֽזְב֔וּ אֶת בְּרִ֥ית ה֖’ אֱלֹהֵ֣י אֲבֹתָ֑ם אֲשֶׁר֙ כָּרַ֣ת עִמָּ֔ם בְּהוֹצִיא֥וֹ אֹתָ֖ם מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרָֽיִם: כט:כה וַיֵּלְכ֗וּ וַיַּֽעַבְדוּ֙ אֱלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים וַיִּֽשְׁתַּחֲו֖וּ לָהֶ֑ם אֱלֹהִים֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר לֹֽא יְדָע֔וּם וְלֹ֥א חָלַ֖ק לָהֶֽם: כט:כו וַיִּֽחַר אַ֥ף ה֖’ בָּאָ֣רֶץ הַהִ֑וא לְהָבִ֤יא עָלֶ֙יהָ֙ אֶת כָּל הַקְּלָלָ֔ה הַכְּתוּבָ֖ה בַּסֵּ֥פֶר הַזֶּֽה: כט:כז וַיִּתְּשֵׁ֤ם ה֙’ מֵעַ֣ל אַדְמָתָ֔ם בְּאַ֥ף וּבְחֵמָ֖ה וּבְקֶ֣צֶף גָּד֑וֹל וַיַּשְׁלִכֵ֛ם אֶל אֶ֥רֶץ אַחֶ֖רֶת כַּיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּֽה:

Parallel with the Annals of Ashurbanipal

Several modern scholars have pointed out that the question and answer in this section (“Why did YHWH do thus?” “Because they forsook the covenant….”) is similar both in style and content to the Annals of Ashurbanipal (687-627 BCE), King of Assyria, describing his military victories over states that rebelled against him. As Jeffrey Tigay explains: “Ashurbanipal records how the king of Arabia violated his treaty obligations and rebelled against Assyria, and how the gods afflicted Arabia with all the curses written in the treaty.”[2] The text in the Annals reads in part:

Whenever the inhabitants of Arabia asked each other: “On account of what have these calamities befallen Arabia?” (they answered themselves:) “Because we did not keep the solemn oaths (sworn by) Ashur, because we offended the friendliness of Ashurbanipal, the king, beloved by Enlil!”[3]

Tigay explains further: “In the Assyrian text, it is a political treaty that was violated, whereas Deuteronomy refers to Israel’s covenant with God. This is another example of how political treaties served as the model for Israel’s understanding of its relationship with God.” Tigay is alluding to the scholarly approach that the book of Deuteronomy presents God as the suzerain to whom the Israelites, God’s vassals, owe fealty in exchange for the protection and blessings that they receive from the suzerain.[4]

Parallels in Kings and Jeremiah

This question and answer style (Why this destruction? Because of Israel’s sin) is also found in other biblical books. In language very reminiscent of Deuteronomy, 1Kings 9:8-9 reads:

מלכים א ט:חוְהַבַּ֤יִת הַזֶּה֙ יִהְיֶ֣ה עֶלְי֔וֹן כָּל עֹבֵ֥ר עָלָ֖יו יִשֹּׁ֣ם וְשָׁרָ֑ק **וְאָמְר֗וּ** עַל מֶ֨ה עָשָׂ֤ה ה֙’ כָּ֔כָה לָאָ֥רֶץ הַזֹּ֖את וְלַבַּ֥יִת הַזֶּֽה: ט:ט**וְאָמְר֗וּ** עַל֩ אֲשֶׁ֨ר עָזְב֜וּ אֶת ה֣’ אֱלֹהֵיהֶ֗ם אֲשֶׁ֨ר הוֹצִ֣יא אֶת אֲבֹתָם֘ מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרַיִם֒ וַֽיַּחֲזִ֙קוּ֙ בֵּאלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים וישתחו וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲו֥וּ לָהֶ֖ם וַיַּעַבְדֻ֑ם עַל כֵּ֗ן הֵבִ֤יא ה֙’ עֲלֵיהֶ֔ם אֵ֥ת כָּל הָרָעָ֖ה הַזֹּֽאת: [5]

God also instructs Jeremiah to give this same explanation of the exile to the Israelites, when they ask (16:10-11):

ירמיה טז:יוְהָיָ֗ה כִּ֤י תַגִּיד֙ לָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֔ה אֵ֥ת כָּל הַדְּבָרִ֖ים הָאֵ֑לֶּה **וְאָמְר֣וּ אֵלֶ֗יךָ** עַל מֶה֩ דִבֶּ֨ר ה֤’ עָלֵ֙ינוּ֙ אֵ֣ת כָּל הָרָעָ֤ה הַגְּדוֹלָה֙ הַזֹּ֔את וּמֶ֤ה עֲוֹנֵ֙נוּ֙ וּמֶ֣ה חַטָּאתֵ֔נוּ אֲשֶׁ֥ר חָטָ֖אנוּ לַֽה֥’ אֱלֹהֵֽינוּ: טז:יא**וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ אֲלֵיהֶ֗ם** עַל֩ אֲשֶׁר עָזְב֨וּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶ֤ם אוֹתִי֙ נְאֻם ה֔’ וַיֵּלְכ֗וּ אַֽחֲרֵי֙ אֱלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים וַיַּעַבְד֖וּם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲו֣וּ לָהֶ֑ם וְאֹתִ֣י עָזָ֔בוּ וְאֶת תּוֹרָתִ֖י לֹ֥א שָׁמָֽרוּ: [6]

This last text from Jeremiah is easier to understand than the others. The theological explanation that promotes the values of God’s *torah* is given by Jeremiah himself, at God’s instruction, not by the gentiles, and is addressed to the Israelites themselves.

But the texts from Kings and from *Parashat Nitzavim* seem odd, for there non-Israelites are asking and apparently answering the questions. Why would the gentiles assume that the Israelites are being punished for Israelite religious infractions? Could they reasonably reach this conclusion? Would they not be more likely to conclude that the Israelites lost to their enemies because the enemy’s army was stronger? Or, if they were looking for a theological explanation, wouldn’t polytheists conclude that the God of Israel was weaker than the gods of the nation that brought on the devastation?

Abarbanel’s Creative (Partial) Solution: Two Groups

Deuteronomy 29:23-24 contains a doubled formulation: Verse 23 begins by saying וְאָֽמְרוּ כָּל הַגּוֹיִם (all the nations will say), followed by verse 24, which begins by saying וְאָמְרוּ, with no subject. It is possible that the same group that is speaking in v. 23 is also speaking in v. 24.

Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), however, in his commentary on Deuteronomy (*ad loc.*), suggests that in Deut 29:21, two different groups ask why the destruction occurred: (1) the (Israelite) children who succeed you, and (2) foreigners who come from distant lands. Taking this into account, Abarbanel understands verses 23 and 24 as a discussion between these two groups.[7]

Group two, “the foreigners who come from distant lands” ask “Why did the Lord do thus to this land? Wherefore that awful wrath?” Then group one, “the children who succeed you,” in other words, Israelites living in that later generation, give them the answer, “Because they (our ancestors) forsook the covenant that the Lord, God of their fathers, made with them….” In other words, the theologically appropriate answer is given by Israelites, not by gentiles.[8]

It is striking, however, that Abarbanel does not explain the verses in I Kings this way. In his commentary there, he writes:

ויכירו כל בני עולם שהיה כל זה בחטאת ישראל על עזבם את ה’ אלקיהם.

Subject of the Word ואמרו

Another possible solution is to say that the subject of the word ואמרו in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Kings is not necessarily the gentiles. Instead, some unidentified person or people—probably an Israelite group or individual—will say that the destruction came from God as punishment for covenantal disloyalty. A number of translators have attempted to solve the problem in that way.[11] In other words, it is not that the gentiles will come to the correct Jewish theological understanding independently. Someone—presumably some Jewish person or group—will tell them.[12]

The Tension between Deut 29 and Deut 9

In Deuteronomy 9, Moses prays after the sin of the Golden Calf, telling God why He should refrain from punishing the Israelites and why He should bring them to the promised land despite their sins. Here, Moses adduces a very different argument, one that plausibly gentiles might claim:

דברים ט:כו וָאֶתְפַּלֵּ֣ל אֶל ה֘’ וָאֹמַר֒ אֲדֹנָ֣י ה֗’ אַל תַּשְׁחֵ֤ת עַמְּךָ֙ וְנַחֲלָ֣תְךָ֔ אֲשֶׁ֥ר פָּדִ֖יתָ בְּגָדְלֶ֑ךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵ֥אתָ מִמִּצְרַ֖יִם בְּיָ֥ד חֲזָקָֽה: ט:כז זְכֹר֙ לַעֲבָדֶ֔יךָ לְאַבְרָהָ֥ם לְיִצְחָ֖ק וּֽלְיַעֲקֹ֑ב אַל תֵּ֗פֶן אֶל קְשִׁי֙ הָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֔ה וְאֶל רִשְׁע֖וֹ וְאֶל חַטָּאתֽוֹ: ט:כח **פֶּן יֹאמְר֗וּ הָאָרֶץ֘ אֲשֶׁ֣ר הוֹצֵאתָ֣נוּ מִשָּׁם֒**מִבְּלִי֙ יְכֹ֣לֶת ה֔’ לַהֲבִיאָ֕ם אֶל הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּ֣ר לָהֶ֑ם וּמִשִּׂנְאָת֣וֹ אוֹתָ֔ם הוֹצִיאָ֖ם לַהֲמִתָ֥ם בַּמִּדְבָּֽר:

It makes much more sense for a polytheist to believe that, when Israel suffers misfortune, it is because Israel’s God is not sufficiently powerful or has rejected them, rather than believing that Israel had sinned, citing such details as the covenant God made with Israel at the exodus (Deut. 29.24). Polytheists did understand the concept of a god being angry with his people, but connecting that anger to infractions of religious law is not common.

The Theme of Worrying about God’s Reputation in the Bible

Moses’ prayer here is not unique. Moshe Weinfeld, adducing many similar biblical texts, writes, “Appealing to the fame of God and his reputation is a common motif in the national prayers.”[14] All of these passages seem to assume that the gentiles believe that God is weak, non-existent, or is rejecting Israel, rather than suggesting that God is punishing Israel, which is a most unlikely sentiment for gentiles to believe in. All these texts ask God to have mercy in order to preserve His own reputation as the powerful God of Israel.

So we find two approaches:

* The destruction will lead people to conclude that God is appropriately punishing sinful Israel (Deut 29 and other texts).
* The destruction will lead people to conclude that the Lord, God of Israel, is weak, or perhaps fickle, and has accordingly abandoned Israel (Deut 9 and other texts).

Can these two approaches be harmonized? Probably. As long as we adopt the NJPS understanding described above, we can say that Israelites will properly conclude that their misfortune is a result of their sin, but gentiles will be likely to conclude differently—that the God of the Israelites is powerless.

Rashbam’s Surprising Harmonization

Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam; c. 1080 – c. 1160) offers a completely different way to harmonize these two approaches in his commentary to Deut 9. He begins by describing the Israelites’ purported mindset about repentance:

חכמה גדולה יש כאן ולהוכיח ישראל בא.

שמא תאמרו, והלא חטא גדול כמעשה העגל הועילה תפלתו של משה וניצלנו, אף בארץ ישראל אם נחטא יועילו לנו תפלות הנביאים.

Nevertheless, Moses is going to disabuse them of this notion, according to Rashbam’s interpretation, and explain to them that things will be different once they settle the land.

אמר להם משה לא תועיל לכם תפלה בארץ ישראל. כי עתה לא נתכפר לכם אלא כדי שלא יתחלל שמו, שהרי כך התפללתי זכור לעבדיך וגו’ פן יאמרו הארץ אשר הוצאתנו משם מבלתי יכולת י”י להביאם, ולכך לא נתחייבתם מיתה במדבר.

אבל לאחר שיהרוג לפניכם שלשים ואחד מלכים וינחילכם את הארץ, אז יוציאכם ויגרש אתכם מן הארץ שאין כאן עוד חילול השם לאמר האומות מבלתי יכולת י”י, אלא יאמרו הגוים, ישראל חטאו לו.

Rashbam presents here his theory of historical progression. At an early point in history, before the original Israelite conquest of Canaan, God’s reputation was fragile. Had the conquest not succeeded, His Name would have been disgraced. Hence Moses’ prayer appealing to God’s reputation was efficacious.[16] But once God’s people have successfully conquered the land (in a future that Deuteronomy envisions), the gentiles will know of God’s power and concern for Israel. So when they see the sorry state of the Israelites, they will conclude that the Israelites are being punished for covenantal disloyalty. Appealing to God to act for the sake of His Name is useless.

Rashbam’s prooftext comes from *Parashat Nitzavim*:

כמו שמפורש באתם נצבים ואמרו כל הגוים על מה עשה י”י ככה לארץ הזאת מה חרי האף וגו’ ואמרו על אשר עזבו את ברית י”י אלהי אבותם וגו’ ויתשם י”י מעל אדמתם באף ובחימה ובקצף גדול וישליכם אל ארץ אחרת כיום הזה: [17]

A Comment in Tension with Exilic Hopes and Jewish Liturgy

Considering the subservient political situation in which Rashbam and the Jews of the world lived in the twelfth century, and particularly the fragility of the community after the ravages of the First Crusade, his comment is striking. First, his argument goes against the theological interests of his own community. Essentially, by saying that God will not save Israel to protect His own reputation, Rashbam has removed a Jewish reason for hope that God would intervene on their behalf. Even more surprising is the fact that this idea flies in the face of the standard Jewish liturgy, which (in Rashbam’s days and still today) calls upon God to end the desecration of His Name that results from the exile. For example, the *Avinu Malkeinu*prayer reads in part:

אבינו מלכנו, עשה עמנו למען שמך.

אבינו מלכנו, עשה למענך אם לא למעננו.

אבינו מלכנו, עשה למענך והושיענו.

אבינו מלכנו, עשה למען שמך הגדול הגבור והנורא שנקרא עלינו.

Similarly, the *Tahanun*prayer repeats the refrain “save us for your sake (הושיענו למען שמך)” multiple times, and includes phrases like:

ואם לא למעננו למענך פעל.

למענך עשה עמנו חסד ואל תאחר.

As Weinfeld writes,[18] “this motif [=asking God to act for the sake of His reputation] together with the motifs of invoking the fathers’ merits and the recital of the gracious qualities of God became the three pillars of the Jewish prayers for forgiveness (*selichot*) prevalent until the present day.”

Rashbam, Abarbanel, and Medieval Reality

How Rashbam related to these common Jewish prayers asking God to act for the sake of His reputation is unclear. But that aside, why did he, and Abarbanel, conclude that it was reasonable to think that gentiles would understand that the Israelites’ misfortunes were their punishment from God?

Perhaps Rashbam and Abarbanel were influenced by what they heard from their Christian neighbors. In medieval Christian Europe, no one was saying that the Jews’ lowly status and statelessness was “because the Lord is powerless” (Deut 9:28); the Christian community believed in a powerful deity who was with them in their battle against the Moslems. The verse in Psalms that quotes the gentiles saying, “Why do the nations say, ‘Where now is their God?’” also did not reflect the experience of medieval Jews.

At least since the days of Saint Augustine, the teaching of the Church was similar to what we find in Deut 29, that the subjugation of the Israelites was their punishment from God.[19] Of course, the sin that the Christians attributed to Jews—the rejection and murder of Jesus—was not the sin that Jews felt was causing their exile. But it may have been natural for Jews living in medieval Christian Europe to imagine that when *Parashat Nitzavim* writes, “*They* will say, ‘[the Jews/Israelites are powerless] because they forsook the covenant that the Lord, God of their fathers, made with them’,” “they” refers to the gentiles.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/when-god-punishes-israel-what-will-the-gentiles-say)

1. For reasons that I discuss later, I have deviated from the NJPS translation of the word ואמרו that appears in this verse, the next, and in 1 Kings 9:8-9 below.
2. Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), p. 281. For the comparison to Ashurbanipal, see also Jack Lundbom, the Anchor Bible *Jeremiah 1-20* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 397.
3. James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 300.
4. This theory has been discussed in a number of essays on TheTorah.com, including Deena Grant, [“Loving God beyond the Way You Love Ashurbanipal,”](http://thetorah.com/loving-god-beyond-the-way-you-love-ashurbanipal/) and Pamela Barmash, [“The Introduction of Blessings into Our Treaty with God.”](http://thetorah.com/introduction-of-blessings-into-our-treaty-with-god/)
5. A similar passage is found in Jer 22:8-9.
6. A similar passage is found in Jer 5:19.
7. In the *Daat Mikra*Bible commentary series, Aharon Mirsky argues that the question in vs. 23 is posed by gentiles from distant lands and the answer in vs. 24 is given by gentiles who live near the land of Israel. See *Devarim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 420.
8. Abarbanel credits Abraham ibn Ezra for first offering this explanation. Ibn Ezra writes cryptically in his commentary to verse 24: ואמרו הקדמונים. Abarbanel understands הקדמונים as meaning “the former,” namely the first group mentioned back in verse 21, “the [Jewish] children who succeed you.” Yehudah Leib Krinski in his super-commentary on ibn Ezra (*Humashmehokekei* *Yehudah*) also views this as ibn Ezra’s position.
9. *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar,*edited by E. Kautzsch, translated by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), sec. 144d-g.
10. The addition of “they and indeed” is surprising and appears to have no textual basis. Note also that NJPS uses speaking verbs, while NRSV uses thinking verbs.
11. See e.g., NJPS, "They will be told" (Deut 29:24), "they shall be told" (1 Kgs 9:8); and NIV (2011), ad loc.
12. See also Tigay (ibid.): “How the nations will learn the answer is not said.”
13. NJPS is not the only translation that is based on this understanding. See for example, the New International Version (2011 edition) which offers very similar interpretations both of Deuteronomy (All the nations will ask: “Why has the Lord done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger?”And the answer will be: “It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the Lord”) and of I Kings (All who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, “Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?” People will answer, “Because they have forsaken the Lord their God”).
14. Weinfeld lists the following passages as advancing the same argument: Num 14:15-16, Josh 7:7-9, Jer 14:7, Ps 25:11, 79:9-10, 109:21, and 115:1-2, and many passages in Ezekiel. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*(Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 416.
15. A reference to Joshua’s successful wars against the many kings in Canaan.  See Josh 12:24.
16. Rashbam also interprets other prayers from distant antiquity as being based on the argument concerning God’s reputation. See e.g. his commentary to Gen 32:13 where Jacob prays to be saved from the hands of his brother, Esau.
17. Rashbam alludes to this explanation again in his comment to this week’s *parashah*(at Deut 29:24). In his commentary to Deut 32:37, Rashbam tempers his position slightly. See my *Rashbam’s Commentary on Deuteronomy: An Annotated Translation* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), p. 77, note 32; p. 160, note 53; and p. 193, note 126.
18. Weinfeld, *ibid*.
19. See Augustine’s “Response to Faustus the Manichean,” where he writes, “So to the end of the seven days of time, the continued preservation of the Jews will be a proof to believing Christians of the subjection merited by those who . . . put the Lord to death. “ This text and others on the same theme may be found in Frank Talmage, *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter*(New York: Ktav, 1975).