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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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# GENESIS AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD: THE CANONICAL TRAJECTORY OF DIVINE JUDGEMENT

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A proper understanding of the trans-canonical theme of divine violence begins with the theology of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> As it establishes the theological groundwork for the canonical narrative of divine redemption, Genesis naturally takes a place of primacy in Christian theology. Its resounding theology displays the wrath of God to be both a retributive response to the sin of humanity while it is simultaneously the restorative effort of redemption. Because God is holy and just and the world is evil and opposed to God, he must judge. However, the divine will is not simply to judge but to restore. In Genesis, the wrath of God is the purposeful energy of redemption, wherein God acts as the judge who rectifies injustice. The love of God then is not action opposed to God's judgment, but it is God's love that drives the movement of his justice forward.<sup>2</sup> The divine will is such because God is love and desires the flourishing and blessing of his creation (1 John 4:16-18). Ultimately, the sustained movement of God's justice and love establishes a canonical trajectory that climaxes in the person and restorative work of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this paper was first presented at the *Genesis and Christian Theology Conference* at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, on 15 July 2009.

<sup>2</sup> One proposed hermeneutic rejects the Old Testament revelation of God's violence as an 'anthropological' convention in favour of the exclusivity of mercy and theological non-violence in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Michael Hardin writes, 'The God of the Bible is not to be found in the theology of the biblical writers, but in their anthropology as that "voice" that haunts the edge of their violent structuring.' And he goes on to say, 'I am asserting that biblical revelation posits violence and its correlates (substitution, satisfaction, reciprocity) as an anthropological datum, not a divine one. This is the revelatory aspect of Jesus' death and resurrection. It exposes the lie about "divine" violence.' 'Out of the Fog: New Horizons for Atonement Theory,' in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. by Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 61. However, such an interpretation moves forward at the expense of a theological interpretation of divine action in the Old Testament and its vital place in the gospel of Jesus Christ, thereby distorting the logic of divine redemption.

## SCENES OF DIVINE JUDGMENT IN GENESIS

In the primary scenes of judgment in Genesis 1–19—the Fall, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah—God actively and consistently demands the satisfaction of his justice in his role as creator. But these scenarios reveal God’s justice to involve more than simple punishment.<sup>3</sup> His outpouring of wrath and his administering of justice are consistently forward moving, stabilizing and restoring. His violence, then, is not vindictive, only concerned with vengeance, but is ultimately merciful, leading to the universal blessing through Abraham, which provides important grounding for the canonical theme of divine justice.

The opening creation account in Genesis 1 explicitly introduces God’s intent to bless creation and humanity (1:28; cf. 5:2). Yet Adam and Eve’s act of rebellion against him introduces the absolute and active nature of God’s justice into the biblical narrative. God’s response to sin is judgment; he recognizes a curse upon the serpent and the ground, and Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden, ultimately to die (3:3,19).<sup>4</sup> Cursing in the unfolding narrative negates God’s original action of blessing, displaying the gravity of sin’s entrance into the world. All subsequent texts of judgment in the Bible find their grounding in this original rebellion (i.e., Rom. 5:12–21). Sin proves intolerable in God’s creation, and he, accordingly, delivers judgment. But he does not forsake his vision of a blessed creation at rest (2:2).<sup>5</sup> The divine intent to save is inevitably bound to the act of judgment.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Travis writes: ‘In the Old Testament judgement (whether executed by God or by the king as his agent) is not a matter of dispassionately dispensing justice, but of establishing or restoring right relationships. It is action in favour of the wronged or the poor as much as it is about action against the wicked.’ *Christ and the Judgement of God: The Limits of Divine Retribution in New Testament Thought* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘The curse is the affirmation of the fallen world by the Creator: man must live in the fallen world; man has his way, he must live like God in his sicut deus world. That is the curse. He may live in it. He is not without the Word of God, even though it is the wrathful, repelling, cursing, Word of God. This is the promise. Thus Adam lives between curse and promise.’ *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3/Temptation*, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, Bonhoeffer again provides clarifying insight: ‘God views his work and is satisfied with it; this means that God loves his work and therefore wills to preserve it. Creation and preservation are two aspects of the one activity of God. It cannot be otherwise than that God’s work is good, that he does not reject or destroy but loves and preserves it. God sees his work; comes to rest; he sees that it is good’ (ibid., p. 25).

At the very proclamation of God's curse upon the serpent in 3:15, a promise of restoration is given wherein the seed of the woman will one day crush the head of the serpent. This act of judgment coming forth from Eve's seed will presumably destroy the original source of sin in the created order. Thus, in the midst of his judgment, God began the act of merciful redemption, a cosmic struggle between the serpent and the seed of the woman.

In commenting on the curse of Genesis 3:19, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

Now the enmity towards the serpent, the painful community of man and woman and the cursed ground become divine mercy. God has mercy on their ability to live in division. Man can only live as the one who is preserved in division, and he can live only on the way to death. He cannot escape life. Death, this having to return to dust, which burdens man as the ultimate, the most terrible curse, is now to man who lives in merciful preservation, a promise of the God of grace. Adam must understand this death of turning into dust as the death of his present state of death, of his *sicut deus* being. The death of death—that is the promise of this curse.<sup>6</sup>

By not binding humanity to an eternal curse and allowing his redemptive purpose to succeed, death itself is God's merciful confrontation of creation (3:22-24). Accordingly, 'the divine prohibition placed on entry to the garden is an act of grace designed to ensure that man's fallen condition would not be perpetuated eternally.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, punishment is levied against humanity (and all creation), while simultaneously allowing for its restoration and blessing.

The story of Cain and Abel which follows in Genesis 4 reinforces the escalating and cataclysmic results of sin, namely, human violence. As judgment for murder, God pronounced Cain cursed and banished him from the land (4:11). But God also displayed his commitment to restoration through Eve's seed with the provision of Seth. Yet Genesis 5 transitions to the story of Noah in chs. 6-9 with the observation that 'every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time' (6:5). This pronouncement of humanity's total degradation and giving

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Dumbrell, p. 37. Further, commenting on Genesis 3:24, R.R. Reno considers the expulsion from the Garden as a divine blessing: 'As the human race departs, God can begin to formulate a strategy that redeems rather than annihilates the transgressor. As humanity moves away from the presence of God, the conditions emerge in which God can come to humanity...'. *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), p. 97.

away to sin followed the act between the sons of God and the daughters of humans (6:1-4). God issued the verdict that the entire human race was thoroughly evil (6:5), characterized as 'full of violence' (6:11). He said to Noah, 'I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth' (6:13). Thus, the sin and violence of humanity was the catalyst for God's wrath of the Flood and the total destruction of all living things (6:17).

But God's wrathful action of destroying by the Flood was simultaneously a means of re-creating and was intentionally salvific. The Flood was not a failed attempt to eradicate evil; it was the necessary measure to preserve the hope of salvation. 'God checked the chaotic powers by which the entire earth was already engulfed, before they also brought Noah and those with him to destruction.'<sup>8</sup> Through Noah, the restoration of humanity was made possible, and, following his exit from the ark, God blessed him and his sons and commissioned them with the same creation mandate of Gen.1:28, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth' (9:1). With his destruction complete, God covenanted to never again destroy the earth by a flood (8:21; 9:11), and thus signified a major transition in the movement of redemption.<sup>9</sup>

According to Gerhard von Rad, reading the Flood story as a theological account is foundational for understanding its purpose. Dismantling an anthropocentric interpretation of God's wrath, he writes,

It shows God as the one who judges sin, and it stands at the beginning of the Bible as the eternally valid word about God's deadly anger over sin. Thus it protects every succeeding word of grace from any kind of innocuousness...; it undergirds the understanding of God's will for salvation as a pure miracle. Every one of the progressive revelations of salvation springs from God's heart, with whose radical anger over sin man can reckon, and not with the whim of an idol. Such a miracle is the choice of Noah and thus the preservation by divine patience of the whole Noachic aeon.<sup>10</sup>

For von Rad, God's judgment is not an atrocity but a 'miracle' in that through it, he saves. Judgment is the necessary energy of salvation. Knowledge of God's wrath is necessary for knowledge of his saving

<sup>8</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. edn (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> The post-flood era presumably ushers in the time of divine 'forbearance' as defined by Paul in Romans 3:25; von Rad writes that 'a divine will of healing forbearance is at work' (*Genesis*, p. 134).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

grace.<sup>11</sup> A theological reading of the Flood clarifies the unfolding role of God's wrath in redemption and the saving intent of his total destruction (6:17; 7:21-23).<sup>12</sup>

After the flood, sin continued to pervade humanity (8:21). Noah became drunk and Ham observed his 'father's nakedness' (9:20-23).<sup>13</sup> Canaan was, thereby, cursed, and as a result the majority of Israel's enemies (not least of which were the Egyptians and Canaanites) descended from him. Following chs. 6-10, the post-flood sin grew more extensive and more destructive. All the people of the earth gathered together with one language at Shinar to build a city with a tower to reach the heavens so as to, in their own words, 'make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth' (11:4). God intervened in their attempt and confused their language and 'scattered them over the face of the whole earth' (11:9). God thwarted this affront against himself, yet it was an act with salvific vision. The judgment diversified humanity and thereby limited its ability to once again undertake a universal rebellion against God.<sup>14</sup> But immediately following this event, God revealed his intent for this new world reality of scattered, confused, and fragmented humanity.

<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, David Fergusson writes, 'If God's love and justice are to remain integrated, then we must think of rejection as itself a function of God's love.' 'Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?', in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. by Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 186-202 (quote on p. 198).

<sup>12</sup> Claus Westermann emphasizes the important theological relationship of 'total destruction' and salvation in the flood event, when he writes, 'It is something peculiar to human existence, which distinguishes human being from beast, that a person can conceive of the possibility of total destruction. And so a completely new dimension enters human existence: the continuation of existence because of a saving action. Salvation by an act of God, so important a religious phenomenon, is grounded in the primeval event of the flood story' in *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John Scullion, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 52.

<sup>13</sup> For a helpful account of Ham's sin and Canaan's curse, see John Bergsma and Scott Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)', *JBL*, 124/1 (2005), 25-40.

<sup>14</sup> Reno notes the connection between the judgment of Babel to the judgments at the Garden and the Flood, 'The confusion of the languages is like the expulsion from the garden and the flood. Just as the punishment of death puts a limit on the downward spiral of corruption and prevents us from having the time to purify our devotion to the serpent's lie into the spiritual project of pure negation, so also does the confusion of the languages bring an end to the building of the tower. Unable to communicate, human beings are no longer capable of combining their wills into worldwide action' (134).

The proceeding genealogy of 11:10-32 leads directly to the new character Abram, the promise of restoration in the aftermath of Babel.<sup>15</sup> And thus the universal judgment at Babel is mirrored with universal blessing in the election of Abraham. The divine plan of redemption that originated in the garden is now clarified: God is sovereignly moving, at times violently, in human history to restore his creation's blessing through his elect seed. In a direct response to the scattered nations of Babel, God established a covenant to bless all nations in and through Abraham (12:1-3, 17:4-6).<sup>16</sup>

Following the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant in chs. 12-17, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's judgment in 18:16-19:29 introduced a marked shift in the action of God's violence. God, Yahweh, revealed his intent to judge Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham; 'I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him' (RSV, 18:19).<sup>17</sup> 'Righteousness and justice' (*ṣēdāqâ ûmišpāt*) are here distinguished as central concepts for understanding the role of Abraham and his seed as he carries out the divine mission.

The Genesis writer highlighted the role of Abraham as an intermediary; he exercised his prophetic role in his inquiry into Yahweh's justice (18:22-33).<sup>18</sup> The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was 'great' and 'grievous'

<sup>15</sup> Wenham notes, 'The brevity of this genealogy is a reminder that God's grace constantly exceeds his wrath' (*Genesis 1-15*, p. 254).

<sup>16</sup> R.W.L. Moberly's understanding of the concept of 'blessing' differs considerably from such interpreters as von Rad, Westermann, and Childs. He writes: '[T]he supposition that those who invoke Abraham in blessing actually receive the blessing invoked is a non sequitur that goes well beyond the meaning of the Genesis text. The textual concern is to assure Abraham that he really will be a great nation, and the measure of that greatness is that he will be invoked on the lips of others as a model of desirability. The condition of other nations in their own right is not in view, beyond their having reason not to be hostile to Abraham.' *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 155. Regardless of how 'blessing' is interpreted, it remains a foundational theological motif for cosmic salvation and restoration.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the special status of Abraham in Genesis 18, see Ed Noort, 'For the Sake of Righteousness. Abraham's Negotiations with YHWH as Prologue to the Sodom Narrative: Genesis 18:16-33', in *Sodom's Sin: Genesis 18-19 and its Interpretations*, ed. by Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 3-16 (esp. p. 5).

<sup>18</sup> See Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, pp. 45, 50; cf., Mark Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009) pp. 25-26.

before God (18:20), but Abraham pleaded with him not to destroy the righteous along with the unrighteous, thus presuming that the unrighteous do indeed deserve the wrath of God (18:22-33). Not even ten righteous ones could be found, but God sent messengers to rescue Lot and his family from the coming destruction. As Bill Arnold writes,

Abraham boldly stepped up to barter with the Judge of all the earth but his strategy is turned upside down, as he learns instead that he has underestimated the mercy of God. In the end, Yahweh is more merciful than Abraham could have imagined, and the encounter becomes a lesson in intercession for Israel's model ancestor.<sup>19</sup>

Yahweh established that he is indeed judge of the world and proved that his judgment is not only righteous but also merciful.<sup>20</sup> In the midst of his just wrath, he will save the righteous despite their sparse numbers, thus highlighting the justice of divine wrath in the process of redemption. The salvific nature of God's 'righteousness and justice' in the seed of Abraham is then displayed in the proceeding judgment.

Divine messengers made it clear to Lot that God's 'punishment' (*vsph*) was imminent (19:15). Total destruction, here only directed against a particular socio-political people group, was again the result of divine judgment (19:25). Yet in the midst of it, 'the LORD was merciful to [Lot's family]' (19:16). The narrative of destruction concludes in 19:29, 'So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.' Concerning the divine 'motivation' to rescue Lot from the coming destruction, Ed Noort writes, 'God remembered Abraham and therefore Lot was rescued. According to this voice, Lot was not rescued because he was righteous but because he was part of Abraham's family.'<sup>21</sup> Abraham secured Lot's salvation from destruction, projecting his covenantal role as universal blessing forward and serving as a foundational example of the 'righteousness and justice' of God for the remaining canon of Scripture.<sup>22</sup> According to Nathan MacDonald, 'If we listen to Yhwh, we learn that Abraham's exchange with Yhwh teaches the kind of response

<sup>19</sup> Bill Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> 'Yhwh turns out to be far more merciful than Abraham imagines.' Nathan MacDonald, 'Listening to Abraham—Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16—33', *CBQ*, 66/1 (2004), 25-43 (quote on p. 40).

<sup>21</sup> Noort, 'For the Sake of Righteousness', p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Sodom and Gomorrah repeatedly serves as the image of God's destructive judgment in Isaiah (i.e., Isa. 1:9; 13:19; also Rom. 9:27-29).



expected from Yhwh's elect so that the divine blessing may be mediated to the nations (12:1-3).<sup>23</sup> The reader is shown in narrative fashion that God always judges righteously and will continue his plan to save through his covenant with the intermediary Abraham.

The result of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative shows that God's wrath remains active in the world but is restrained, emphasizing the redemptive role of Abraham in God's plan. Judgment is unremittingly purposeful to the end of blessing. And God's violent movements are not antithetical to his nature of love. As G. Ernest Wright states, 'God the Warrior is simply the reverse side of God the Lover or God the Redeemer. The seeking love of God is only one side of the Suzerain's activity, because, to change the figure,... divine love is a two-edged sword. It is power in action in a sinful world, and redemption is disturbing, painful, resisted.'<sup>24</sup> Mercy is at the centre of the acts of judgment in Genesis 1-19, and these texts of wrath are foundational for establishing the canonical trajectory of divine justice and redemption.

## THEOLOGY OF JUSTICE FROM GENESIS

In light of Genesis 1-19, what is God's justice like? These scenarios display the nature of God and his unbending requirement for justice as a clear and forceful contrast between the sin of humanity and the holiness of God. Yet the distinction of God's holiness and human sinfulness, as John Webster shows, is not one of rejection but of a salvific relationship.<sup>25</sup> He writes,

God's negative holiness is the destructive energy of God's positive holiness; it is the holiness of the triune God who—precisely because he wills to sustain the creature—must obliterate everything which thwarts the creature's life with God. God's holiness destroys wickedness for the same reason that we human beings destroy disease: because it attacks the creature's flourishing and is opposed to our well-being. And as the end of the eradication of disease is health, so the end of the eradication of unholiness is the creature's

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald, 'Listening to Abraham', p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> G. Ernest Wright, 'God the Warrior', *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. by Ben Ollenburger (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> 'Holiness is not the antithesis of relation—it does not drive God from the unholy and lock God into absolute pure separateness. Rather, God's holiness is the quality of God's relation to that which is unholy; as the Holy One, God is the one who does not simply remain in separation but comes to his people and purifies them, making them into his own possession.' *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 47; cf. Travis, *Christ and the Judgement of God*, p. 20.

consecration, that is, the creature's wholesome life in righteous fellowship with God.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, God's relating to his creation in holiness is not destroying it, but is saving it, albeit through 'destructive energy'.<sup>27</sup> According to the nature of God's judgment as displayed in Genesis 1–19, God refused from the beginning to cut off humanity from himself and undertook the process of restoring his original blessing, forcefully removing the curse of death by relating with his creation.<sup>28</sup> God's love is thus evident to the world by his just retributive *and* restorative relating with it.

Divine retribution, such as in Genesis 1–19, is judicial action in which God repays a wrong made against him.<sup>29</sup> His retributive response to the sin of humanity is his proper response to the injustice brought against him and his creation.<sup>30</sup> God has rights as God. According to Nicholas Wolter-

<sup>26</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> Reno interprets the wrath of Sodom and Gomorrah in correspondence with the judgment born by Christ on the cross in that it is in love that humanity is judged; 'The flaming coal of his love purifies our hearts and lips (Isa. 6:6). Like the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Christ we die. In judgment we are joined to the Son of Man, who is revealed on the cross (Luke 17:29). For this we should rejoice in thanksgiving rather than recoil in therapeutic horror. "The Lord scourges those who draw near to him" (Judith 8:27), because he desires fellowship with us in his holiness' (*Genesis*, p. 188).

<sup>28</sup> Terrence Fretheim points out the important relational aspect of God's wrath: 'For God or humans, anger is always relational, exercised with respect to others. Even more, as with human anger, the divine anger is a sign that the relationship is taken seriously (apathy is not productive of anger). God is deeply engaged in this relationship and is passionate about what happens to it. As such, anger is always *provoked* from within such relationships, testifying to the affectivity of both human beings and God.' 'Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament', *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 24 (2002), 1–26 (quote on p. 7).

<sup>29</sup> A prominent vision in the entire canon of Scripture is that of God repaying all of humanity based upon their deeds (i.e., Deut. 32:35; Job 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Matt. 16:27; Lk. 17:26–32; Rom. 2:5–11, etc.).

<sup>30</sup> Klaus Koch argued that a theology of retribution does not exist in the Old Testament but that good or bad circumstances are the intrinsic results of obedience or sin. Yet Koch's conclusions seem to neglect a full reading of Old Testament accounts of God's action of judgment and do not consider the witness of the Torah. See Klaus Koch, 'Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?', in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. by James Crenshaw, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 57–87; cf. Travis, *Christ and the Judgement of God*, pp. 13–17 and H.G.L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Rev-*

storff, 'The assumption of Israel's writers that God holds us accountable for doing justice has the consequence that when we fail to do justice, we wrong God. We not only fail in our *obligations* to God. We *wrong* God, deprive God of that to which God has a *right*.'<sup>31</sup> Thus, when God's rights are violated by humanity, he has rights of retribution against humanity. As H.G.L. Peels writes,

If it is said of this God, who is King, that He avenges himself, this can no longer be considered to be indicative of an evil humour, a tyrannical capriciousness, or an eruption of rancour. God's vengeance is kingly vengeance. If He takes vengeance, He does so as the highest authority exercising punishing justice. The vengeance of God is the action of God-as-King in the realization of his sovereign rule. This action is directed against those who offend God's majesty through transgression against his honour, his justice or his people.<sup>32</sup>

God's actions at the Fall, Flood, Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah are just and within his rights because of the great injustice made against him as king and creator.

However, restorative justice, judicial action that brings healing and peace, does not preclude retributive justice.<sup>33</sup> Divine retribution or punishment for evil is a clear motive for God's interventions of wrath. Yet his action in each of the scenes of judgment in Genesis 1–19 is forward moving toward mercy. He does not stop at punishment, but he rights the wrongs made against himself and works toward full restoration. Accordingly, divine judgments are not retroactive or failed attempts but, rather, redemption in action. As Terence Fretheim writes, 'God's anger is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God's more comprehensive *salvific* purposes for creation.... Generally speaking, wrath may be considered God's circumstantial will that stands in the service of

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*elation in the Old Testament*, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 302–5, for a refutation of Koch's argument.

<sup>31</sup> N. Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 91. He further states, 'God's right to hold us accountable for doing justice, and God's right to our obedience when God does in fact hold us accountable, are assumed by Israel's writers to be grounded in God's excellence' (p. 94).

<sup>32</sup> Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, p. 278. Contra James Crenshaw in 'The Reification of Divine Evil', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 28 (2001), 327–32. He states that 'a cruel streak exists in the depiction of God within the Bible. The overwhelming evidence permits no other conclusion' (p. 327).

<sup>33</sup> See Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) for an introduction to the biblical concept of restorative justice.

God's ultimate will for life and salvation.<sup>34</sup> Restorative justice necessarily includes the retributive component of God's wrath.<sup>35</sup> Restoration is possible because God rectifies injustice. And there is indeed no concept of mercy without justice. Genesis 1–19 shows that God's judgment and will to save are not two dichotomous events in the narrative but are bound together in unison. The end result of God's judgment shows that it is both a retributive *and* restorative action.

Ultimately, Genesis 1–19 depicts divine wrath and violence as the fundamentally necessary means by which God saves the world. God's wrath cannot be separated from his intent to save; divine violence accomplishes redemption. 'God is wrathful and judges and punishes as He shows mercy, and indeed for His mercy's sake, because without this He would not be really and effectively merciful.'<sup>36</sup> Therefore, one cannot deemphasize the wrath of God in favour of his mercy. They are equally and indistinguishably vital in God's nature and involvement with the world. And

<sup>34</sup> Fretheim, 'Theological Reflections', p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> This affirmation stands in contrast to the following interpretation: '[R]etributive justice sticks to the letter of the law, requiring its pound of flesh, demanding re-payment, compensation, an eye for an eye, in order to forgive sin. Conversely, divine restorative justice requires neither payment nor retribution.... [Divine justice] lights the way to forgiveness and restores without violence.' Sharon Baker, 'The Repetition of Reconciliation: Satisfying Justice, Mercy, and Forgiveness,' in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. by Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 233.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 volumes in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975), II/2, p. 227. This remark is the context of Barth's theological exposition of Romans 9:13–29 and is immediately preceded by the following statement: 'The *telos* of this election is now expressly indicated.' Thus, God's salvific purpose of mercy is inseparable from his action of wrath. The above quote is immediately preceded by: 'We now learn explicitly that God's mercy is His glory (His self-confirming and self-demonstrating essence). In His mercy (and therefore not without the justification of man) God justifies Himself, as in the revelation of His wrath. The revelation of His wrath is therefore followed by that of his mercy.' Further, 'God's sentence of rejection on Israel is not a final word, not the whole Word of God, but only the foreword to God's promise of His glory later to be revealed on this shadow-Israel. The witnesses of this final and whole Word of God, of the glory of God in its revelation speaking irrefutably for itself, are called in v. 23 the "vessels of mercy" in the same special sense in which in v. 15 and v. 18 Moses was designated an object of the divine mercy' (all quotes from p. 227). Here Barth distinguishes the 'foreword' of God as wrath and the 'final and whole Word of God' as mercy.

this coherent movement in the biblical narrative culminates in the revelation of God as 'just and the justifier' in Christ (Rom. 3:26).<sup>37</sup>

## JUSTICE THROUGH CHRIST

In the context of the canon, the trajectory of God's justice as established in Genesis runs consistently through the entire Old Testament directly into the New Testament. As this storyline is traced, the forward movement of God's justice and mercy climaxes in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.<sup>38</sup>

The original mediatorial role undertaken by Abraham in Genesis is fulfilled in Christ who secured the salvation of his people by satisfying the demands of God's righteousness and justice. In fact, the Apostle Paul, embracing Isaiah's messianic theology,<sup>39</sup> argued that God's original intention in responding to sin was to demonstrate his justice in Christ:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—

<sup>37</sup> As Tony Lane writes, 'Belief in the wrath of God has, as its correlate, belief in the work of Christ in dealing with that wrath' in 'The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God', *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*, ed. by Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> According to Peels, 'A clear line runs from the judgment prophecy of the Old Testament to Jesus' eschatological preaching. Consistent with this, the judgment of God receives an important place in the New Testament kerygma. In Christ this judgement is anticipated and principally fulfilled. He drinks the cup of wrath. On Golgotha the seriousness of God's vengeance is made fully evident. Christ's death for sin means liberation and life for the people of God; the rejection of Christ's work entails eternal death. The Resurrected One is He who rules as king, until He brings all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). He stands before the door as the avenging Judge (Jas. 5:1-9). The Lamb and the Lion are one (Rev. 5:5f.)' (*The Vengeance of God*, p. 310).

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah reveals that although God's demand for justice is unrelenting, an explicit provision of satisfaction would embrace the collective guilt and just punishment of his people: 'Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed' (53:4-5). In accordance with this theology, the Psalmist proclaimed that the meaning of the combined elements of God's wrath and mercy is directed toward the Messianic promise; 'Kiss his son, or he will be angry and you and your ways will be destroyed, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him' (Ps. 2:12).

he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25-26)<sup>40</sup>

God planned from the beginning, namely Genesis, to satisfy his justice in the incarnation of Christ, consistent with the original blessing of Abraham:

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal. 3:7-9)

Abraham's salvific role as mediator is fulfilled in Jesus, who took the sins of the world on himself and satisfied the wrath of the Father with his atonement. Accordingly, John writes, 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:10). Thus, love is the driving force of the incarnation of Christ and his final and perfect punishment, given once for all (Rom 6:10). Divine wrath and love are revealed in Christ's death at the cross and salvation is secured by his resurrection; 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification' (Rom. 4:25).

However, love and mercy do not necessarily 'trump' God's wrath in Christ, but Christ satisfies God's wrath on behalf of those who will believe.<sup>41</sup> As T.F. Torrance explains, 'Reconciliation between God and

<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth writes in his Romans commentary, 'Everywhere there has been forgiveness of sins, the miraculous outpouring upon men of the wealth of the divine mercy, signs of the forbearance and longsuffering of God (ii. 4). Everywhere men are being healed of the divine wounds. But it is through Jesus that we have been enabled to see that this is so; through Him the righteousness of God has been exposed and presented to us; through Him we have been exposed and presented to us; through Him we have been placed so that we can apprehend history... as God sees it, that is to say, in the light of His dissolving mercy; through Him we know the mercy of God to be the end of all things and the new beginning, and we know what this means for us—it means that we must be led unto repentance (ii. 4, vi. 2, 3).' *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> Elmer Martens: 'Through the cross, peace is established. Love has trumped wrath.' 'Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence', in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Richard Hess and Elmer Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 33-58 (quote on p. 55). Rather, it seems that love and wrath are inseparable. According to Wolterstorff, 'Yahweh loves justice. Yahweh's pursuit of justice and Yahweh's injunction

man issues in peace when the wrath of God is removed. That wrath is not removed simply by setting it aside, for that would be the setting of the love of God aside, nay, the setting of God himself aside. The wrath of God can be removed only through the righteous infliction of the divine judgement against our sin.<sup>7</sup> He continues,

Now it is important to see that we cannot talk here of his mercy as triumphing over his wrath, or of the victory of his love over his judgement—that would be to introduce a schizophrenia into God which is impossible, and to misunderstand the wrath of God and the meaning of the penalty or righteous infliction that is due to sin. Punishment and wrath are terms speaking of the wholly godly resistance of God to sin, the fact that the holy love of God excludes all that is not holy love. Sin must be judged, guilt must be expiated by its judgement and complete condemnation, else God is not God, and God is not love.<sup>42</sup>

In this vein, God's wrath is no longer a reality for the reconciled, but it remains a reality for the irreconciled.<sup>43</sup> Just as Yahweh directly dispensed his wrath in Genesis, Jesus promises to dispense wrath and pass judgment at the consummation of his redemption.<sup>44</sup> Jesus self-consciously adopts the role of Yahweh as wrathful judge of the world and aligns himself with the theology of judgment in Genesis, drawing a direct correlation between the parallel days of destruction of Noah and Lot and the coming judgment of the Son of Man upon the world (Luke 17:26-32).<sup>45</sup> And according

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to practice justice are grounded in Yahweh's love' (Justice, p. 82). Cf. Peels, 'In contrast to modern language usage, vengeance and love in the Old Testament do not form a contradictory wordpair. On the one side, as the research indicated, God's vengeance has nothing to do with a spontaneous, wrathful or hateful urge to destroy. On the other side, the love of God is not just good affections, but it can be expressed as wrath and jealousy; God's love is his dynamic, holy love' (*The Vengeance of God*, p. 293).

<sup>42</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. by Robert T. Walker, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> According to Rom. 5:9-11, 'Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!'

<sup>44</sup> Paul proclaims that God 'has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31).

<sup>45</sup> Also note the importance of Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot in Peter's theology of divine judgment. According to 2 Peter 2:5-9, '[I]f [God] did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he con-

to Revelation, the Son of God is one who comes as a conqueror, passing judgment and wrath upon the world; "They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (Rev. 6:16-17; also, 3:21, 6:2). Thus, God's love provides an atonement to reconcile all who will believe, yet his wrath necessarily remains on those who do not.

But the ultimate end of the wrath of God is a 'New Heaven and New Earth' where the original blessing is restored, and all the wrongs of the world are righted (Revelation 21).<sup>46</sup> The final, eschatological picture of the Bible is peace, looking to the day when God will settle the disputes of the nations (Mic. 4:1-3) and when all wars cease (Isa. 2:4).<sup>47</sup> Jesus as Messiah will consummate the final victory of God's justice and righteousness. According to Isaiah 9:7, 'Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this'. Final peace arrives in Christ but cannot be separated from his judgment (Heb. 9:26-28). In summarizing the central role of judgment in Jesus' teaching, Marius Reiser aptly writes,

The coming of the reign of God means the final restoration of God's good creation, and thus, at the same time, the destruction of all evil that opposes that restoration. Therefore, judgment must come as inevitably as salvation, and the prayer that the reign of God may come...includes the plea that judgment come, too. But that judgment is not only *the precondition for the final coming of salvation*; to the extent that salvation is already present in Jesus' work, judgment is at the same time *the necessary consequence of salvation*

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demned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.' Cf. Matt. 10:1-15, 11:20-24; Rom. 9:29; Jude 7; Rev. 11-7-8.

<sup>46</sup> Fretheim states: 'God's exercise of wrath is, finally, a word of good news (for those oppressed) and bad news (for oppressors). Such wrath gives hope that evil will not have the last word; it makes a more positive future possible for those who have no other hope' ('Theological Reflections', p. 26).

<sup>47</sup> For the pervading biblical theme of peace, see Walter Bruggeman, *Peace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Also, Elmer Martens, 'Toward Shalom' (see note 41).



*rejected or despised.* That is never more clear, in Jesus' preaching, than in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-34). Accordingly, the gift of undeserved grace and forgiveness is the word that God speaks to human beings. The word demands a response. And the refusal to respond leaves inevitably to judgment.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, justice satisfied and mercy triumphant in the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah secure the promise of final peace and blessing.

## CONCLUSION

The foundational theology of God's justice in Genesis is an ultimate movement of mercy, displayed in the full message of the canon, climaxing in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God's justice is not trumped in the end by mercy, but he mercifully satisfies his justice in Christ. 'Injustice is perforce the impairment of *shalom*. That is why God loves justice. God desires the flourishing of each and every one of God's human creatures; justice is indispensable to that. Love and justice are not pitted against each other but intertwined.<sup>49</sup> Mercy is the ultimate end of divine justice and the two do not conflict or contradict in the process. Accordingly, God's justice is retributive *and* restorative. The role of divine violence, explicitly necessitated by the entrance of sin, proves to serve the final vision of universal restoration.

An answer to the apparent difficulty of divine violence is grounded in a theology synthesizing divine justice and mercy as incarnated and culminated in Christ.<sup>50</sup> Jesus can proclaim peace in God's kingdom and promise a restored creation solely because of his atonement and final judgment. To condemn the violent judgments of God is to disregard the full vision of Christian Scripture. One cannot laud God's mercy and repudiate his wrath. It is by their combined movement in Christ that God saves the world.

<sup>48</sup> Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in its Jewish Context*, trans. by Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 323.

<sup>49</sup> Wolterstorff, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Peels provides an important reminder, 'In the Old Testament, God's vengeance and God's love are not clashing, irreconcilable descriptions. However, it is equally impossible to define the connection between these two "sequences" in a single closed theological framework. The proclamation concerning the living God ultimately and finally defies a logical systematization' (p. 294).