
The Biblical Concept of Vengeance: Re-reading Romans 12:19-21 and its Implication for Christians

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Abstract

The term vengeance is an important concept in the Bible and has a peculiar place in both Old and New Testaments; hence it is found in the teachings of Jesus. Vengeance is נָקָם (*naqam*) in Hebrew and **εκδικεος** (*ekdikeos*) in Greek, it means to vindicate, to set free or to deliver from allegation and blame. However, revenge and vengeance seem to be confusingly used in words and practice today. Over every trivial issue people desire revenge, out of hatred, malice, and desire for retaliation revenge has been disguised as vengeance. It is upon this notion that this study takes up to examine what Apostle Paul meant in the Epistle to the Romans 12:19-21, to established biblical concept of vengeance and its implication for contemporary Christians. This study is domiciled in Biblical Studies, therefore, historical-critical and exegetical analysis method for the exegesis of the pericope was adopted. The finding revealed that vengeance only belong to God and not man, being the only righteous judge who also desire the repentance of sinners, he is therefore the only one that can bring about repentance through his righteous judgement. On the contrary revenge/self-retaliation reside in the heart of man and it always result in violence hence Apostle Paul admonished, to allow God to do the fighting. The study therefore recommend that Christians generally should control their emotion and allow God to have

his way, and religious leaders should encourage peaceful cohabitation.

Introduction

The Biblical vengeance is an essential concept in the Bible, also an integral part of the Old and New Testaments; hence it is found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. vengeance is נָקָם (*naqam*) in Hebrew and **εκδικεος** (*ekdikeos*) in Greek, it is Middle English and its etymology is from Anglo-French ‘avenge’, which was also from Latin word *vindicare*, meaning to vindicate, which invariably means to lay claim or maintain a right, it also means to set free or to deliver from allegation and blame. In summary, vengeance originally means ‘to justify and to protect or deliver from attack and encroachment,’ until around 1579 vengeance was used as an act to provide justification and defence. Nevertheless, the meaning started changing overtime (Gerhard and Geoffrey 1973). In 1586, it changes to an act of revenge (unforgiving act), that is seeking to punish or working towards retaliation, in 1613 it becomes an act or action of defending the state and protecting oneself by resisting attack, in 1624 it advances to mean *vindica*, a Latin word for punitive, which means to inflict or penalise. Finally, in the 14th, 15th century to date it is *vindicta* meaning vengeful, to seek revenge, showing spite or being malicious, it also means to inflict punishment in retaliation for an injury and offense or payback with great force or violence (Botschaft, 1993). Vengeance in Ancient Near East involves the exercise of a divine rulership, whereby the superior authority, which is God or one representing him stand to defend and vindicate his subject over their enemies.

Old Testament and Vengeance

According to Davies (1962, p.176), the word *naqam* (vengeance) is used in seventy-eight passages in the Old Testament. It first occurs in Gen 4:15, though the source of vengeance is not stated, it is implied that God is the source since he is the speaker. God's concern for the innocent ones is equated with

his care for the sinners, this is revealed in the contention prayer of Cain, though it appears like a seed of appeal; God answered with a pledge and a mark as a sign is almost a covenant, which makes God virtually Cain's protector. Within this same Cain and Abel's episode there is a deeper theological subject of vengeance. The subject arises when God confronted Cain for killing Abel. God raises the question, "*What have you done?*" *The voice of your brother's blood is crying (sicaqim) to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand (Gen 4:10-11).* The word sacaq denotes strictly the cry for help and, particularly, for redress or vengeance (Davies, 1962, p.177). The notion that blood speaks from the ground calling for vengeance occur repeatedly in the Old Testament (Job 16:18; Isa 26:21; Ezek 24:7-8; 2 Kgs 9:26). In this case, it is the shedding of Abel's blood which is pictured as drawing God's attention to Cain's crime and to the need for his vengeance.

Leupold (1953, p. 154) claims that the blood is seen as crying out persistently, *the language of this passage is both emotional and powerful.* The same phrase, "cry out," is regularly used in the Old Testament to plea for the poor, the burdened, or the fatherless. The cry of the Egyptians to Pharaoh for food (Gen 41:55), the plea of the indebted son of the prophet's widow to Elisha (2 Kgs 4:1), the cry of the burdened widow or the orphan to God, who would certainly hear (Exod 22:23); and the cry of the wandering and distressed people of God (Ps 107:6). It is interesting to note that among the four passages stated above, the cry is not directed at an influential friend or neighbour to step in and help. Instead, it is directed to the appropriate authority; in the first two instances to appropriate human power, Pharaoh as king of Egypt and Elisha as the director of the schools of the prophets; and in the last two passages, to God. In both the latter two passages, God is pictured as one who hears and responds to that type of calls. Leupold (1953) affirmed that the biblical examples, as in other Ancient Near Eastern literature, the appeal goes out to the highest authority that deals with the particular situation of peril or injustice.

Lex Talionis and Vengeance

For a number of specified offenses the Mosaic Law, like other Near Eastern codes such as Code of Hammurabi, This Code was named after the sixth king of Babylon and was implemented around 1760 B.C. it's provided for balanced payback (Bright, 1967). The *lex talionis* or “tit for tat” formula is amplified as “life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” formation of justice. (Exodus. 21:23–25; Leviticus. 24:20; Deuteronomy. 19:21). *It is an ancient law of ethical standard, originated from the Babylonian law and present as well in the Bible and early Roman law. It states that the kind or magnitude of justice meted out is fixed to correspond as exactly as possible to the gravity of the original injury.* (Driver & Miles, 1952) According to Driver (1902), the intention of this law, as St. Augustine among many others has observed, is actually to signify a measure of control in retribution, so that punishment will not exceed the injury.

Vengeance in the New Testament

Martin (1957) observed that the Greek word εκδικεος, (avenge.) is relevant to a passage found in the Gospel according to Luke, which begins with an interesting omission. In which the inaugural address of Jesus recorded in Luke 4:16-19, when compare with Isaiah Isa 61:1-2 (the original passage where Luke seems to have copied from) ended with *the day of vengeance of our God*, Martin (1957) asserted that it was omitted in Luke. Therefore, Jeremias (1958) argued that *Jesus' omission of the vengeance phrase was an indication that he meant to detach the nationalistic idea of vengeance from the idea of redemption.* The idea of detachment seems to be a lawful one, because the reason for the omission was not only the fact that vengeance belonged to God, but actually find full meaning in the work of redemption which Jesus Christ brought to human race. In addition, Mendenhall (1973) thinks, *the year of the Lord's Jesus Promised to the Nations, is equivalent to the day of*

vengeance of our God, since a primary meaning of vengeance is deliverance.

Solomon (2021) asserts that *Judaism had come to misapply the whole vengeance concept in a narrow, divisive, and nationalistic sense*, whereas Jesus did not thus distort the true biblical idea of vengeance. In the parable of the importunate widow (Matt. 18:1-8) there is an Old Testament flavor; *vindicate me against my adversary* (vs. 3), Witmer (1983), observed that *the passage brings out the Isey Old Testament ideas whereby the saints (or their blood) cry out day and night, and that God will avenge them*. Solomon (2021) opines that *the expression his elect, has the covenant relationship which is implied*. That means that by the covenant the *elect* had become his people, and he had become their God (Jer 31:31- 34). Davies (1962) states that, *Jesus used the expression days of vengeance in Luke 21:22 with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem*, pointing out that the fall of that city was a fulfillment of the warning towards vengeance made by Moses (Lev 26 and Deut 32). It is clear from this text, as well as from the parable of the persistent widow, that Jesus did not do away with biblical vengeance.

However, vengeance in Rom 12:19-21 the Pauline admonition, to leave vengeance in the hands of God has raised a question because of the accompanying reference to the heaping of coals of fire on the sinner's head. Stendahl (1962) considers this as *an attitude of rejection and passive hate*. He traces this attitude back to Qumran, where the ethics was neither to return evil for evil nor to turn away anger from the enemy. With resolute purpose the Qumranite says, according to Stendahl, *but my anger I will not turn away from the men of deceit, and I will not be content until he [God] has established judgment*. That revealed emotional hatred and non-retaliation in the Qumran ethic. What then, is the Pauline ethic revealed in Rom 12:19 as it relates to vengeance? For Stendahl (1962) Paul is unavoidably in agreement with Qumran, in that the Pauline ethic is rather seen as the right attitude in an unfriendly

world, and it is right and beyond human calculation since it is agreeable to the attitude of God.

William and Arthur (2000) asserted that *the burning coals means pangs of repentance*. They see this as the only interpretation that takes seriously the biblical ethic of loving forgiveness. Though some scholars view it as the wrath of God on the wicked ones. Though some bible passages shows and support Paul's use of wrath or the wrath to be exclusively the wrath of God (Rom 2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; etc.). William, (1963) proposed that these other passages is quite clear that *Paul keeps a balance between the love and wrath of God*. It is therefore very important that based on this balance as been proposed by Paul, that Christians need not to take vengeance for themselves. Paul's line of thought and the general love ethic of the New Testament, as one studies Rom 12:14-21, references to the Sermon on the Mount are obvious.

Dodd (1932) observes that *vs. 21 forms a summary of that Sermon and -crystalizes the New Testament teaching on non-resistance*. In agreement, Sanday and Headlam, (1932; pp200-201) postulate, *the concept of vengeance can be clearly decoded from Jesus'command which is embedded in conquering through suffering*. This opinion is base and found in Jesus' teachings such as pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44), turn the other cheek to one who smites you (vs. 39), go a second mile, and give over your cloak to one who takes away your coat (vss. 40-41). The book of Revelation also presents the Lamb as one who triumphs through suffering (Rev 5:6-10). Thus, the Christian is to overcome evil by fighting it back with good. In Rom 12:14-21, there is no clear reference to the consequences of enemy's remorse. It seems the outcome of the Christians' positive response to evil doer is not the principal concern here. Rather, the focus seems to be on the conversion of the enemy, which has to do with the Christians'proper ethical reaction to persecution and wrongdoing.

Dodd (1932) added that, *New Testament only provides motivation for good deeds and love*. he further explained that Christian does not take love from fellow human and give it back to man, instead Christians take from Christ and give it totally back to all humans. It can be alluded to mean, the consequence of non-retaliation and loving acts, whether vengeance or repentance, are not the main responsibility of Christians. this is supported by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matt 5:44, *Do good to them that hate you*, though this does not imply that Christians are to do this for the sake of heaping coals of fire on the enemy, but that this will be the result.

Expounding on *Thou shall heap Coals of fire* Spiros (2001) argue that the action is truly *symbolic of pain*, but the impression is not that in so doing one shall call down divine vengeance on the man; rather the Apostle is discoursing the positive and natural effect or outcome of showing an enemy an undeserved kindness. Nevertheless, burning coals heaped on a man's head could be an expression of intense agony, it can then be concluded that Apostle is saying, the consequence of being good to an enemy would be to produce shameful pain, that is, pain that comes because of guilty conscience. Deducing from Spiros' argument the coal of fire can be taken to be conviction of bad behavior, and fear of divine anger which may eventually lead to repentance. Then this is not only flawlessly right, but it is something to desire by all Christians.

Revenge and Justices

Revenge can masquerade as justice, but it frequently ends up perverting it (Tripp, 2015). The terms *revenge* and *justice* often get muddled, and that's hardly surprising, in the course of history, the two have been frequently used interchangeably. Still (2020) postulate that, *meanings alter and change over time*, no wonder the different between the two words have gradually been mixed up, at times it is commonly used the same way today. Barclay (2012) noted, *revenge has experience various*

changes in meaning that have become obvious. Though, some common characteristics between the two, and indistinctness within the two terms do exist. Barclay then proposed, *it would be fitting to say that justice is fair, and revenge is not.* It thus implied that revenge depends on what caused it, the implementation might be *either* just or unjust, fair or harsh depending on the motive behind the revenge and the proportion of the wrong initially committed. Therefore, there seems to be an unexpressed notion that is strongly embedded into the term (revenge) and is not apparent in the connected concept of justice. However, there is need to be careful about differentiating between the two concepts one must understand that the two can be relative and subjective.

Although there are notable and sensitive variances between revenge and justice, they are ideas that have been generalised about the two for decades. For Barclay, there are instances when revenge can legitimately be understood as a *type of justice, and justice is a kind of revenge.* Moreover, a certain amount of resemblance and repetition has been unavoidable. Certain differences can be observed through the submission of Schadenfreude (2015); *Revenge is predominantly emotional; justice is primarily rational.* By this Schadenfreude meant that Justice as rationally, lawfully, and morally describe is not about retaliation. Instead, it is about correcting the wrong that many people would agree is morally wrong. In contrast revenge has a selfish undertone in it, justice is unselfish in that it relies on selfless and established law. *Revenge is, by nature, personal; justice is impersonal, impartial, and both are social and legal phenomenon;* The leading motivation behind revenge is to get even, to carry out a secretive battle, or to succeed in what, personally, might be described as *subjective* justice. On the other hand, *social* justice is impersonal, it rotates around proper correction in situations where certain moral and social vital values have been dishonoured. Schadenfreude continues, *Revenge is an act of vindictiveness; justice, or vindication;* the strong determination to avenge oneself or others can easily

become undignified, and ethically reduced the retaliator's prestige to that of the offender. Two wrongs do not make a right and never can. Humiliating another only ends up degrading oneself. In contrast, justice is stands on expectations, resolutions, and policies that have to do with respect, impartiality, and virtue.

Revenge is about cycles; justice is about closure. Revenge has a way of insistently reiterating itself and even more wickedly. Revenge normally produces *more* revenge. Justice, on the other hand, is intended to provide a solution that is unbiased. And when justice is done the conflict also comes to an end. However, punishments for wrongdoing is an agreement with authority which lacks personal vengeful acts. Finally, Schadenfreude asserts that, *Revenge is about retaliation; justice is about restoring balance.* The reason behind revenge commonly has to do with communicating fury, disgust, or malice. It is a complaint or return, and its leading concentration is harmful. On the contrary, justice is concerned with dispassionately restoring balance by bringing about equality or better, *equity*. It centers on proportion as it equates to fairness.

Vengeance Is of the Lord

Paul gives three reasons why vengeance is not personal but of the Lord,

- Personal retaliation undermines human right (v. 17b): personal revenge clouds true justice since it's not focused on doing what is best for others
- Personal retaliation undermines peace making (v. 18): personal revenge isn't about peace making, but getting its own pound of flesh and it continues the spiteful cycle.
- Personal retaliation undermines God's authority (v. 19b): revenge is God's domain, so personal vengeance trespasses on God's territory and never achieves the perfect justice God can achieve.

According to Paul in Romans 12:17, Christians must not repay evil for evil. This is assumed to mean God is much better at it than we are. In a sense, Paul infers that taking our own revenge may weakens God's chance to avenge us in His annoyance towards those who hurt us. Similar passage from Deuteronomy 32:35 show that God declared His intention to take vengeance on those who wrong others. A desire for justice for ourselves and those we care about is not wrong, but the scripture simply wants Christians to trust God's timing and power to bring justice as He sees appropriate. The truth is that God executes justice for every sin, for those in Christ, God's anger was dispensed on Jesus on the cross, Christ experienced what we deserved. Those who refuse to receive Jesus' death in their place for their sin will suffer the consequences for that sin themselves for eternity. The scripture admonished that concerning God, Christians should trust Him to handle revenge and justice for all who harm them instead of seeking it themselves.

Exegetical Study of Romans 12:19-21

The text in Greek

19 μη εαυτους εκδικουντες αγαπητοι αλλα δοτε τοπον
τη οργη γεγραπται γαρ εμοι εκδικησις εγω ανταποδωσω
λεγει κυριος
20 αλλα εαν πεινα ο εκθρος σου ψωμιζε αυτον εαν
διψα ποτιζε αυτον τουτο γαρ ποιων ανθρακας πυρος
σωρευσεις επι την κεφαλην αυτου
21 μη νικω υπο του κακου αλλα νικα εν τω αγαθω το
κακον

English Translation

19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

20 No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (NRSV)

Semantic And Syntax Discussion

19. **εκδικουντες**; “Avenge” to vindicate one's right, do one justice, to avenge oneself. **δοτε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ**; Give place unto wrath. Wrath has the article: *the* wrath, referring to the divine wrath. *Give place* is give room for it to work. Do not get in its way, as you will do by taking vengeance into your own hands. νταποδωσω "Repay" *antapodidæmi*) "to give back or requite." The idea is not that instead of executing vengeance ourselves, we are to abandon the offender to the more tremendous vengeance of God; but that God, not injured men or those who believe themselves such, is the maintainer of moral order in the world, and that the righting of wrong is to be committed to Him

20. **ψώμιζε**; Feed, John 13:26. The citation from Prov. 25:21, 22, closely follows both Hebrew and Septuagint. Shalt heap (σωρευσεις). Only here and 2 Tim. 3:6. Coals of fire. Many explain: The memory of the wrong awakened in your enemy by your kindness, shall sting him with penitence.

ν21. **μη νικω̄ υπο̄ τοῡ κακοῡ**, ‘do not allow yourself to be overcome by the evil done to you and be led on to revenge and injury, but conquer your enemies’ evil spirit by your own good disposition.

Application of the Text for the Contemporary Christians

According to Diaro, (2018) the teaching of New Testament Greek seems to be threatened by those who think that text in translation is adequate in themselves for reader-response work. That seem to be one of the reasons why many preachers and teachers think the scripture can just be translated literally. It

is therefore apparent for the future scholars to train both themselves and their students in a study of the New Testament that draws from both new and old system of interpretation (Dairo, 2018 p.12). That will enhance balance interpretation and application that will affect people's way of life positively.

The future of the world and that of the church depend on the Christians attitude towards vengeance as it touches human lives, and considering the weakness of man's nature in regard to judging right, man is emotional and passionate when it comes to the things that touches the heart. It is therefore recommended that Christian should learn to control their emotions and allow God to fight on their behalf. God's judgement usually bring repentance Christian should allow God to deal with the offender so as to repent and change for better. Living vengeance for God will bring about harmony and peace, Christian should try to imbibe this.

Conclusion

Vengeance has been in practise even before the compilation of the scripture, and it has only been carried out by the superior power on behalf of the subjects. It is very clear that revenge is different from vengeance. Revenge has to do with self-retaliation while vengeance require and demand God intervention in delivering and vindicating the offended or inflicted person. Christian is not to retaliate, or to return wrath for wrath, but to endure the wrath of his enemy, and to leave the matter in the hand of God. Misinterpretation and misunderstanding of some people who interpret the Bible and misapplication of same by the ignorant hearers has led to so many, marred and destroyed relationship, family and societal ties has been weakened and broken, whereas the Bible is meant to foster relationship (Alabi, 2022, p.56).

On so many occasions, misinterpretation of the scripture is the reason for so many misunderstandings and misconceptions among contemporary Christians. According to study from the

exegesis of the pericope vengeance belongs to God, not to us. The sinful nature of man, even as regenerated believers, the struggle within us according to Galatians 5:17 makes it impossible for man to seek vengeance with pure motives. Just as with every other normal desire, the desire for vengeance can become a dungeon of pain and bitterness. The only One who can carry out true justice without the taint of impure motives is God. He's the Ultimate Judge, who repay everyone according to what they have done (Romans 2:6; cf. Psalm 62:12).

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