

Transgenerational Transfer of Sin Simulated as “Sour Grapes” Metaphor-Proverb in the Prophetic Voices

Abstract

The “Sour Grape” in the prophets could be viewed as a metaphor or as a proverb. In either way, this research unveils the text as hiding its real meaning when the “Sour Grape” idea was applied. The issue being that, the children did not see, touch nor ate the sour grape but their teeth was on the receiving end just as Adam’s sin affected all humanity. Though this speaks of the injustices like the younger South Africans point to. What happen with their parents should be treated with them and not be visited upon their children, but Jeremiah 29 and Ezekiel 18 points to divine retribution! This indicates that YHWH treats love and discipline together in order to inculcate human dignity in the society. The condition serves as a prism for justice. Instead of YHWH, children should blame their parent for failing to keep their side of the covenant they both establish. The theology aims at teaching the self-worth of human being in keeping to God’s covenantal conditions.

I. Introduction

The application of metaphors and proverbs makes speech interesting. Metaphorical languages are used to relate meaningful ideas in hidden forms, while proverbs are regarded as words of wisdom which are used mostly by elders. In most African societies, the use of both, build suspense and draws attention to what is intended. They are used to smoothen speeches or perhaps hide the meaning of what is intended from the common listener. What could be the reason for mentioning the “sour grape” proverb by the prophets, and in what ways can they be equated to the theology of “sin of the fathers upon the children” in the Decalogue. Expounding on this socio-cultural voices could serve as a facilitator for interpreting the metaphor-proverb like “the sour grapes”. Although this might be an exilic proverb use in Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2 repeated, as an image in reference to the laments, complaints and murmuring of the exiles. These exilic voices warn against curses inform of cross-generational consequences for doing wrong. It is a significant adventure to compare the theology of transgenerational transfer of sin in the Decalogue and the prophets. Though intergenerational sin is believed to have progressive effects on the Israelite family, just as God judges the guilty, he also blesses the righteous.

The history¹ of Israel date to the family of Jacob in Egypt, in a foreign land. They had gone in search of livelihood and a better life. During their stay, their population increased greatly, becoming a potentially military force to be reckoned with; they were hardworking and economically viable. Spiritually, they were blessed by YHWH their God, to the extent that the Egyptians could see the difference made by the presence of God in their lives. Their deliverance

¹ Both parties must keep their side of the deal for peaceful coexistence. Kajom (2015:220) observe that memory tends to disturb and hunt people, though it remains significant for restoration. The memory of the past can arise from an experience of pain or violence. In this case, God could punish as a result of their non-compliance to the great covenant of faithfulness. Similarly, Israel was to draw on their past experiences for positive reasons, and their memory was to help bring them closer to YHWH.

came about when they ask YHWH their God for freedom, in which regard he commissioned Moses as their leader to act as a human saviour, while He remained their spiritual saviour. He worked out their deliverance on the premise that the post-exilic people would remain faithful to him. Gowan (1994:127) said God identified himself to Moses, and declared his motives. YHWH heard their cry and their desire for deliverance, and now wanted to fulfil the promises he had made to their ancestors. YHWH intends to liberate a group of slaves out of Egypt, and guide them to Canaan (Exodus 3:6-8, 16-20, 6:6, 8).

Aaron (2006:14) refers to the priestly writers with a plan of situating their socio-political and religious powers within the wilderness life. They reformulated the cultic order so that their oligarchy might be seen as a link to the time of Moses. They used phrases like “And Yahweh said to Moses...” Bosman (2013:565-566) made similar observation in Psalm 114:1-2 pointing to the election of Judah and Israel as the place of God’s presence, rather than describing the Israelites’ liberation from slavery in Egypt. The psalmist saw another element of the exodus from the questions; “Why does the sea flee, and the Jordan turn its back?” “Why do the mountains and hills skip like lambs?” This is followed by a wandering through the wilderness, described in vs.7-8. Israel’s wandering was a result of their fathers who had sinned at the beginning provoking the exile; in the Decalogue they needed to be faithful to escape divine wrath. This is not just a matter of exodus “from” an oppressive “Egypt” but an exodus “towards” the manifestation of the divine presence of YHWH on the way to promise land. The use of sour grapes brings to fore the misdeed of the parents and the lament of children, points to consequences descending upon the children. This way they will remember their God.

II. The “Sour Grapes” in Ezekiel 18:2

Although the proverb was believed to be a popular saying when Ezekiel used it, Cooper (1994:188-190) disavows personal responsibility of the people in the past. The predecessors who are guilty of gross misconduct are the ones that deserve this judgement, which is why the younger generation felt they were being punished unjustly. The practice of transfer of sin is not an individual responsibility but corporate one. Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 5:9 shows the sufferings of the exile could be traced to the transgressions of an unfaithful generation, affecting the post-exilic community due to an accumulation of disobedience (Joshua 7:1-26, Exodus 34:6-7). The priestly idea is to reconstruct a holy nation and faithful people before YHWH. Odell (2005:217-219) affirms that Ezekiel 18 is an address to the entire house of Israel, employing a direct method for the priestly-legal disputations. It can be assumed that the post-exiles² identified this saying as protest against the transfer of punishment (Lamentation 5:7). The lament calls on the prophets to see the kind of injustice that was upon them, but Ezekiel refutes their claims by portraying YHWH as a loving God who disciplines only the culprit.

Recent studies show that Tuell (2009:107-108) agrees it is a lament of the exiles over the sin of their fathers, although the prophet insinuates that they are responsible for what is happening. YHWH does not take pleasure in their sufferings; it is required in accountability to stay faithful

²Those who went to Babylon or Assyria were different from those who returned, yet they are bound in corporate responsibility and one as family. Our diversity may not affect our corporate life, blessings and divine justice.

and keep the stipulations. Perhaps they use the proverb as a post-exilic protest for their innocence; they saw the exile as their parents' fault, not theirs. As the covenant applies to the past generation as well as the present one, same applies to the proverb. They have no excuse for what is happening, since the covenant was with them that are alive. Ezekiel called for individual responsibility (post-exilic) as a means of moral liability for this generation. Collective responsibility of the house of Israel is the main point of this argument.

III. *The Impact of YHWH's Conditional Love in Ezekiel 18:2³*

As discussed in Jeremiah above, the prophet asks “*What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: ““The fathers ate sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? “Fathers sin and their sons are smitten”*”. Greenberg (1983:327-328) finds that the statement conveys some unpleasant sensation transported by “teeth on edge” because fathers ate sour⁴ grapes. The issue here is the evil consequences of the fathers’ action being transferred to their sons; though sin deserves punishment the culprit should get it and not the innocent child who did nothing to deserve YHWH’s wrath. Brownlee (1986:282) notes that the proverb was related to people of Palestine in their destiny. It is probably placed to mark the regular alteration between city and land in Jerusalem and Israel. He added that inciting the older form of the proverb, Ezekiel deals with the pre-exilic situation, to caution parents about their action, lest they bring harm upon the generations to come.

It is an important moral choice which must be made by Israel. Cooper (1994:188) supports that the proverb was used by people to disavow personal responsibility as emphasized in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Block (1997:558) says the exile disposition towards their own involvement in Judah’s fate is encapsulated in the proverb cited by Ezekiel. Two things are essential, the unripe fruit of grapevine and the effects of the unripe grapes on the teeth. A description of the sensation⁵ of the unripe fruit in the mouth could be an idea of mockery of the system of divine righteousness. Recently, Tuell (2009:107-108) added that the proverb reflects the attitudes of the exile in their community. God pointed out their behaviour by using the proverb, so that the wise will reflect upon their post-exilic lifestyle. It shows our suffering could be a result of our parents’ misdeeds before YHWH our God.

IV. *The “Sour Grapes” in Jeremiah 31:29*

The “sour grapes” appears as an important reference to the exile (Huey, Jr. 1993:2709); while they were in exile⁶, the people lapsed into self-pity and concluded that they were being punished for their fathers’ sins. Thus the punishment of the previous generation is meted

³The idea in this verse is basically a proverb for the wise to learn, though it raises some concerns as to reasons why fathers should not receive the punishment for their sins, instead of its bearing upon the children.

⁴He adds that this means since the fathers ate up the unripe grapes, their children had nothing left to eat, and the question again is, why will it be so? It is clear that it was a popular culture with Palestine-Syria in spite of the unpleasant taste in the mouth.

⁵According to Block (1997:558) the LXX is inconsistent in its reading on the proverb by translating it to “set on edge” as in Jeremiah 38:29. It could carry other meanings as well.

⁶The priestly authors did so to assure the post-exilic community that YHWH still loves them and desires them to turn back to himself.

unjustly on them. Jeremiah and Ezekiel drew their attention to individual responsibility, though there was collective responsibility in practice. It means the discipline was for correctional purpose (Allen 2008:353-355), so that we have the scenario of an exilic setting; working toward restoration. Their national survival was beginning, and they were being tested by their Creator. Suddenly Jeremiah announces their liberation as a new form of freedom, using the proverb, of the “sour grapes”⁷. Longman III (2008:209-210) uses an oracle of deliverance, saying “See today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). The days have come when the house of Israel will forget her pain (post-exilic)⁸ that led to the exile. Though Ezekiel 18:4 does remind them, “The soul that sins shall die”.

V. *An Illustration of the Restrictive Lover⁹ in Jeremiah 31:29-34¹⁰*

A new covenant, and a new beginning is being illustrated from an agrarian perspective with the “sour grapes”. Brueggemann (1991:69-72) notes that it indicates a new (post-exilic) beginning for Israel and Judah, after the old (exilic) community was destroyed by God. YHWH intends good for the exile, which is why he uses vocabularies like “plant and build”, in the form of positive commands to suggest rebirth. Huey, Jr. (1993:279-286) explains that while they were in exile, they seem to have concluded that they were being punished unjustly, since they were not the ones who sinned, they did not “eat the sour grapes”; their fathers did. The proverb was an assurance that people ought to suffer for their sins (II Kings 14:6). Jeremiah 31:31-34 indicates a better future for Israel: a new covenant will announce a new beginning in their lives. The text proclaims a new freedom from the crippling shackles of the past, i.e. from the guilt that was either inherited or transferred upon the next generation from their parents who “ate the sour grape before they were exiled” (Allen 2008:355). Though consequences¹¹ are due, and

⁷The guilt of 587BCE will end; a greater blessing now awaits God’s faithful virgins. Their guilt will be taken away from their shoulders if they continue in obedience.

⁸Now it may no longer be corporate, but individual responsibility, “the soul that sins shall die” instead of “Sin of the fathers transferred upon the children”. The post-exilic punishment is now a future judgement; also, it is not to be an instant sentence anymore, everyone will wait for the day of reckoning and accountability before God. However, there are consequences for human transgression (Longman III 2008:210).

⁹הַיְהוָה the issue of YHWH’s jealous love ought to be replaced by loyal love in comparison to the covenant relationship. His intention is to build a family and a community of godly followers, from his people who listen to and keep the law. The love and blessing are embedded in the covenant stipulations, not the laws his people must keep, but rather the fact that God cares and plans good for his chosen people Israel.

¹⁰Jeremiah 31:29-34 states that (29) “In those day people will no longer say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth will be set on edge. (30) Instead, everyone will die for his own sins; whoever eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge. (31) “The time is coming,” declares the Lord “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with house of Judah.”... (NIV). Brueggemann (1991:68-72) says God intends good life for the exile, that he is able to “plant and build”. Note that the destruction was already accomplished in 587BC and Israel’s restoration was still being anticipated. The destiny of the people is to an extent in their hands, depending on their choice and decision. Note the planting and building as indications of God’s to bless his people, as an intention of a loving God to his exiled people, especially the corrupt parents who neglected to care about their children. In vs.31-34 old and new covenant is not a reference to the Old and New Testaments, rather to the renewal and transformation of the new covenant community (the exile) as a type of Christian community that turned back to God.

¹¹ Unfortunately, even the miraculous revival could not turn the tide of the punishment for their parent’s transgression and the wrath they deserve. The revival was too shallow for them to change, they needed a transformation of character and understanding of God, not a new covenant tradition (usual agreement). It requires

whoever sinned ought to blame himself/herself. Breaking the covenant means national disaster and a collective responsibility upon the people, not merely individual obligation. Instead of the people breaking the covenant again, YHWH now gave them a Torah as a form of written revelation, viz. the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. It is an analogous text to the Scriptures, but in a better form.

The effect of the “sour grapes” on the faithful generation in Israel was not punishment, but to be regarded as discipline by YHWH, since it lasted only a short time. Though sinners were forgiven after a certain time, but their wrong deeds leave a scar upon their progeny. Perhaps YHWH’s hatred may be refuted by retributive justice, because corporate responsibility exists, and supports the consequences of sin upon the later generation. Collectively, they enjoy same blessings and curses; “we are one family”, what affects one affects all. Particular individuals may be responsible for sin, but collectively they have all transgressed, not just in the post-exilic experience. It indicates the Sinai community who were expelled to serve in obedience. They now show genuine solidarity, in line with his desire to bless he will break the viscous circle of disobedience and consequences. Grace/favour and blessings from YHWH have come to stay as result of their obedience. Allen (2008:355) agrees that the text proclaims a new freedom from the past bondage. Instead of the people breaking the covenant again, YHWH will give them the Torah in the form of written revelation.

The indictment of sin indicates a continuation of punishment directly upon the one responsible and those related to the culprit. Indicating group retribution as acceptable. Ro (2011:412) confirms inter-generational transmission of punishment as divine in the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:9b-10 and Exodus 20:5b-6). This contradicts the popular “individualistic” judgement where only the sinner is punished as in Genesis 18:25-26, Jeremiah 31:29f and Ezekiel 14:12-20. In cultic sacrificial systems, an individual in a family or community is always regarded as one living entity, not as a self-sustainable independent personality. Meyer (2015:435) clarifies Leviticus 17-26 as an addition to the priestly text made by a later generation of priests. He regards chapter 1-16s as part of P, indicating that the authors of P were acquainted with chapter 17-26 and regarded it as post-exilic and saw a land theology in the text. Similarly, this ideology began from creation, where an unholy king in Egypt refused the request of a holy God, until he was faced by the “ten plagues”. The holy God now preserves his people through the Passover, and the people respond with their sacrifices of respect, love and loyalty in the tabernacle. During the monarchy, at the early temple period, no one was allowed to enter the temple with iniquity in their heart or body, they had to be purified by the priests at the entrance of the temple to declare them holy.

VI. Conclusion

God’s love towards his creatures indicates his desires for their dignity, for this he commanded humankind to care for the rest of the creation. Within the creation space, human creatures were considered the crown of all creation and partners with YHWH. The metaphor or proverbs of the

the right behaviour to be inculcated into the people, this is the picture of the agreement in the Decalogue Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 (Huey, Jr. 1993:285-286).

sour grapes is a clear indication that YHWH punishes sin collective not just upon individuals. His punishment comes in when YHWH's partners refuse to keep their own side of the agreement. Fitzpatrick (2009:703) considers the transformation that happen when humankind ate from the garden as the cause of human difficulties. It prevented them from attaining their relationship with God, because their misdeed now defined their new state as corrupt and wantonness. Genesis 3 reveals a tragic human condition which is corporate. Andrews (2011:231-232) clarifies that the divine command that created a world that God saw as good. Their decisions good or bad also affects every other person made by God, just as sin of the fathers upon the children. It may be overly judicial, but the ancient treaties have shown the picture of YHWH's love as conditional to obedience and loyalty. Thus sour grapes points them back to the past to love YHWH, be loyal and reciprocate dignity one to another and to dignify their God.

It could be that no one will be punished for his parent's misdeeds. In South Africa for instance, the British children were not destroyed after the Afrikaners defeated them and took over leadership of the land. The Africana children though all white, there wasn't any form of stigmatisation or blame game. It must have been painful to the young British colonizers to see power shifting from them, yet it was treated with understanding. On the contrary, the children of the Afrikaners are blamed for the apartheid regime. The stigmatization is breaking the land and creating a great gap between the members of the rainbow nation. Unfortunately, some of the Africana children currently studying in the Universities were not born during apartheid. The problem ended by 1994, 25 years before the under twenty five were born. The younger Africana South Africans are feeling they have no future in their own country, the reason being that, the sins of their fathers are being visited upon them. Nonetheless in divine retribution, the Decalogue and the sour grapes indicate the children must bear the consequences of their parent's disobedience. The scar of their parent's wicked deeds and wrongs still live in form of statues and painting, like Idols. Whenever they see the scar of the past, how people suffered and died in pain, and how the past black heroes are disregarded and relegated, it reminds them of the "sour grapes" proverb. This collective justice reflects conditions for family membership, like in the case of David's lineage, where punishment could be understood in the context of the promise to Davidic dynasty that the Lord refrained from destroying the House of David for the sake of the covenant between him and David; in accord with the promise to keep his descendants.

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