

Revenge

by Lisanne Teuchert

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This article examines the ways in which revenge and retribution have been systematically analyzed and evaluated from a theological perspective, both historically and in the present day. It presents several key arguments and positions on this topic along two main lines of inquiry. This article concludes with insights for a theological perspective on revenge and retribution today.

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Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Introduction

“Revenge” is not a distinct topic in systematic theology. In substance, however, revenge or retribution is addressed in many places within the context of dogmatic and ethical topics, particularly where justice as restitution is concerned:

1. Dogmatics:

- *Doctrine of Providence*: Does God establish compensatory justice in history, nature, and individual lives?
- *Eschatology*: Does God reward or punish in the last judgment according to works, or does he (exclusively?) exercise grace?
- *Soteriology*: Should the crucifixion of Jesus Christ be interpreted as retribution for human sin? And, in light of the doctrine of justification, can we even speak of a God who metes out retribution?

2. Ethics:

- *Punitive Ethics*: Should punishment meted out by the state be understood as retribution and in accordance with God's justice?
- *Just War Theory*: (When) is it permissible to retaliate against an attack?
- *General Ethics*: Should not a logic of reciprocal retribution be superseded by a Christian ethos of love for one's neighbor and love for one's enemies?

Interdisciplinary research on revenge is conducted by sociobiology and behavioral science, psychology and psychoanalysis, cultural studies and ethnology, and social and moral philosophy. Currently, there is even a trend toward defending revenge in many of the humanities and social sciences. This raises questions for *anthropology* within theology: Is revenge/retribution inherent to human nature or is it culturally conditioned? What functions does it serve? And how should it be evaluated ethically?^[1]

In the *history of religions*, the avenging retribution for evil deeds has been personified and represented since antiquity by the mythological figure of *Nemesis*. She embodies a principle of retribution that is widespread across many religions. As a mythological figure, Nemesis has influenced theological interpretations and contemporary popular culture. In general, revenge has a long history of fascination and influence in culture, literature, drama, art, and film (revenge films, for example, constitute an entire genre of film).^[2]

Within theology, the concept of retribution must be addressed in conjunction with *exegesis*. In doing so, it is particularly important to avoid stereotypical interpretations that tend toward antijudaism and antisemitism, such as the simplistic equation: Old Testament = revenge, New Testament = love.

2. Concept

In the Old Testament, revenge (*nekama*) is a *legal concept*.^[3] In contrast, in the Western context today, revenge is regarded as something outside or below the realm of the law (private justice, clan conflicts, everyday phenomena). Revenge is defined as an act that responds to one's own experience of injustice and seeks to harm the person or group responsible.^[4] In this context, revenge is considered *unmeasured, emotion-driven, irrational, and arbitrary*.^[5] *Retribution*, on the other hand, is considered measured and thus suitable for integration into the legal framework (principle of proportionality). Unlike revenge, retribution can also include positive reactions (e.g., reward).

This *distinction between revenge and retribution* has been strongly advocated, particularly in the area of punitive ethics. In contrast, voices from the field of psychology, for example, question whether revenge and retribution can actually be separated in this way. Theorists such as Nietzsche ^{GND} also suggest that behind the institution of punishment lie inner psychological forces that are only retrospectively justified through rationalization strategies.^[6] Retribution remains, at its core, revenge.

3. Problem and Positions

The systematic-theological problem associated with revenge can be formulated as follows: on the one hand, the idea of just compensation seems so deeply embedded in our moral intuitions and emotions, ethical concepts, social practices, and perhaps even our biological makeup that we cannot completely disregard it in dogmatics and ethics – and may even need to rehabilitate it. On the other hand, surely the point of the discourse on God's grace and a Christian ethos consistent with it lies in a "greater righteousness" (Matt 5:20) that goes beyond merely returning like for like.

1. As for the first category, *retributive justice* has been a fundamental component of the Western concept of justice since Aristotle ^{GND} (384–322 BCE). The corrective form of retributive justice is necessary to restore equality in specific interpersonal situations. Unlike transactional justice, it is not established voluntarily but enforced by

criminal law. Before corrective justice, all are equal – only the extent of the harm is decisive, not the status of those involved. The just judge compensates for the harm through punishment by taking back the unlawful gain.^[7]

This idea became central to the *retributive theory of punishment*. It became the dominant framework for discussing revenge and retribution. According to this theory, retribution is just in and of itself. In classical formulations, this is simply taken for granted (e.g., in the works of Kant ^{GND} and Hegel ^{GND}). In current theories, this is justified, for example, by empirical research on institutions of justice.^[8] For a long time, theology has supported the retributive theory of punishment. According to this view, the state thereby guarantees the order of society established by God.^[9] Today, there are significant theological reservations regarding the retributive theory.

Retribution is thus deeply embedded in interpersonal practice. Some theories recognize a principle of *reciprocity* behind this. Biblically, the “act-consequence” connection can be cited as evidence. According to recent interpretations, it stands for a *connective justice* (as in J. Assmann ^{GND} and B. Janowski ^{GND}), which connects people in their mutual interactions.^[10] Reciprocity can also be valued from a theological-ethical perspective.

In *eschatology*, too, the idea of retributive justice has been and continues to be upheld: even common sense (cf. art. Reason) recognizes that God’s goodness and justice entail a retribution for good and evil.^[11] To define God’s judgment entirely in terms of his justifying grace risks blurring the distinction between perpetrators and victims and overlooking history. Because some people are denied justice in this life, God ultimately ensures that they receive what is rightfully theirs. To disregard God’s restorative justice would be to trivialize and undermine the very purpose of judgment.^[12]

Feminist and liberation theology also approach the issue from different social perspectives. This draws critical attention to the question of which groups are expected to renounce revenge: “The renunciation of revenge by slaves toward their masters or by kings toward their defeated enemies [...] are hardly comparable even if the ethical formulation uses the same words.”^[13]

2. As for the second line of thought, there has been an ethos of refraining from revenge since ancient times. In the Old Testament, the Wisdom literature, among other sources, advises against taking revenge (see Prov 24:29; 25:21ff.; cf. also Lev 19:18). In the New Testament, Matt 5:38f. has had a powerful influence. Throughout Christian history, this ethos inspired *pacifist movements*.^[14] For them, overcoming the spirit of revenge is the very essence of the Christian faith.^[15] For Luther ^{GND} as well, the renunciation of revenge and retribution is one of the *hallmarks of the church*.^[16]

As for the emotional aspect of revenge, the ethics of anger as a desire for revenge has been debated since antiquity. It is contrasted with the virtue of meekness.^[17]

In dogmatics, the principle of reciprocity and a retributive conception of justice are superseded by God’s grace. God’s *justifying justice* breaks through the logic of gift and counter-gift; this is precisely the decisive insight of the Reformation. In the twentieth century, Paul Ricœur ^{GND} elaborated on this break and supersession philosophically.^[18]

The idea of *delegating revenge to God* can serve as a hinge between the two lines, but also between dogmatics and ethics (see, e.g., Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30). God will ensure justice. Humans, therefore, can refrain from seeking revenge and retribution on their own.

4. Conclusions for Today

The diversity of phenomena subsumed under the terms “revenge” and “retribution” requires careful differentiation in each individual case. Nevertheless, it can be summarized as follows:

- To dismiss reciprocity – which includes negative reciprocity – as an inferior ethos would be just as misguided as merely bestowing theological sanction upon strategies for legitimizing retribution.
- In contrast to current attempts to establish revenge and retribution as anthropological constants, theology points to the difference between these and a transcendent ethos and overflowing grace. Conversely, it must be wary of demonizing desires for revenge, even if they exist only as fantasies.
- Instead, theology should point to the ambivalence inherent in all human interaction: even in the darkest desire for revenge, there may lie an appeal to God's saving justice, but also in the most highly esteemed moral forms of supposedly objectified retribution, the insidious ability of sin to masquerade as morality may still lurk. ^[19]

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- ² Cf. Papenbroock, Frank, Filmgenres und Filmgattungen. Ein Überblick, Wiesbaden 2023, 286–287.
- ³ Cf., e.g., Zenger, Erich, Art. Rache II. Biblisch, in: RGG⁴ 7 (2004), 11–12, 11f.
- ⁴ Cf. Ott, Martin, Art. Rache I. Religionsgeschichtlich, in: LThK 8 (1999), 790–791, 790.
- ⁵ Cf. Volkmann, Stefan, Art. Rache III. Dogmatisch und ethisch, in: RGG⁴ 7 (2004), 12–13, 12.
- ⁶ Cf. Teuchert, Wiederkehr, 9f. For a concise introduction to various approaches to revenge throughout the history of ideas, see Teuchert, Wiederkehr, 9–17.
- ⁷ Cf. Höffe, Otfried, Gerechtigkeit. Eine philosophische Einführung, Munich ²2004, 24; Aristotle, Nikomachische Ethik, Book V.
- ⁸ Cf. Andrissek, Tobias R., Vergeltung als Strafzweck. Empirisch-soziologische Begründung und kriminalpolitische Folgerungen (Studien und Beiträge zum Strafrecht 13), Tübingen 2017.
- ⁹ Cf. Anselm, Reiner, Strafen. Protestantismus, in: Klöcker, Michael/Tworuschka, Udo (Eds.), Ethik der Weltreligionen. Ein Handbuch, Darmstadt 2005, 249–254, 251.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Assmann, Jan, Ma'at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten, München 1990; Janowski, Bernd, Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück. Offene Fragen im Umkreis des "Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs," in: ZThK 91 (1994), 245–271 etc.

- ¹¹ Thus – fundamental to the subsequent tradition of rational theology – [Herbert of Cherbury](#) ^{GND}, who regards the distribution of reward and punishment after this life as one of five fundamental truths shared by all religions on the basis of natural revelation (De Veritate); see Scholz, Heinrich (Ed.), Die Religionsphilosophie des Herbert von Cherbury. Auszüge aus “De veritate” (1624) und “De religione gentilium” (1663), Gießen 1914, 51–56.
- ¹² Cf., e.g., Etzelmüller, Gregor, Realistische Rede vom Jüngsten Gericht. Erkenntnisse im Anschluss an Karl Barth, in: EvTh 65 (2005), 259–276.
- ¹³ Schottroff, Luise, Gewaltverzicht und Feindesliebe in der urchristlichen Jesustradition. Mt 5,38–48; Lk 6,27–36, in: Strecker, Georg (Ed.), Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie. Neutestamentliche FS für Hans Conzelmann zum 60. Geburtstag, Tübingen 1975, 197–222, 206, translation by Jacob N. Cerone. German Original: “Racheverzicht von Sklaven gegenüber ihren Herren oder Racheverzicht von Königen gegenüber den besiegten Feinden [...] sind kaum vergleichbar, auch wenn die ethische Formulierung wortgleich lautet.”
- ¹⁴ Cf. Teuchert, Wiederkehr, 5.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Rohrmoser, Günter, Art. Atheismus I/3. Philosophische Aspekte der Geschichte des neuzeitlichen Atheismus, in: TRE 4 (1979), 364–371, 369.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Neebe, Gudrun, Art. Kennzeichen der Kirche (notae ecclesiae), in: RGG⁴ 4 (2001), 927–929, 928.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Fritz, Martin, Zorn und Sanftmut. Erinnerung an ein exemplarisches Stück klassischer Tugendethik, in: Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity 2 (2020), 6–24.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Ricœur, Paul/Bayer, Oswald, Liebe und Gerechtigkeit. Amour et justice, Tübingen 1990.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Teuchert, Wiederkehr, 102.

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