

What Does “Judgment” Mean? A Series on Divine Judgment: Part 1

While making the Septuagint, Jewish scholars translated three Hebrew terms used for “judge” with terms from the Greek word family of “krinō” (English: to judge).

Shaphat - While this is the most commonly used Hebrew verb for “to judge,” it is usually with the sense of “to rule or govern” with the authority “to punish.”

And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge (Hebrew: **shaphat**, Greek: **krinai**) between you and me.” (Gen 16:5)

Dîn – This Hebrew term “to judge” is with the meaning of “to punish, vindicate and obtain justice for a person.”

But I will also judge (Hebrew: **dîn**, Greek: **krinō**) the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. (Gen 15:14)

Rîb - This Hebrew term adds the meaning of “to quarrel, litigate or to carry on a lawsuit” to the verb “to judge.”

Then they dug another well, and they quarreled (Hebrew: **rîb**, Greek: **ekrinonto**) over it too, so he named it Sitnah. (Gen 26:21)

When pertaining to the divine judgment of God, the Greek word family of “krinō” is used throughout the Septuagint. Hence bearing the Hebrew basis of the Greek translation in mind provides a better understanding of God’s judgment.

In one of the earliest uses of “krinō,” God elaborates on the unilateral and unconditional covenant He made with Abraham (Gen 15:2-5; 12:3). The implication here is that divine judgment is for those who are not of the covenant and with punishment in view.

God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. (Gen 15:13-14)

Abraham speaks of God’s judgment in the context of Ruler, judgment based on a moral standard, and justice. It is unknown whether Abraham was aware of Noah, but, the reference to the righteous and wicked is reminiscent and a well known example of God’s judgment of moral wickedness (Gen 6:5-13).

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen 18:25)

Sharing Abraham’s point of view, Moses spoke of God leading the nation of Israel by instructing judges to base their legal judgment in accordance with Mosaic legislation (which was given by God).

Then I charged your judges at that time, saying, “Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s. The case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.” (Deut 1:16-17)

The Song of Moses that the nation of Israel was required to learn (Deut 31:19) speaks of divine judgment in the context of bringing justice for God’s people against their enemies as God promised to Abraham (Gen 12:3).

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Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,
In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.
For the Lord will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free. (Deut 32:35-36)

Subsequent to Moses, God’s people (in this case the king of Judah) would call upon Him to judge their enemies. Here “to judge” was with the view of punishing enemies and with its basis in the Abrahamic Covenant. Psalmists would praise God for His deliverance of Jerusalem or God’s people from the rule of wicked pagan oppressors.

Now behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt (they turned aside from them and did not destroy them), see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out from Your possession which You have given us as an inheritance. O our God, will You not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You. (2 Chron 20:10-12)

That I may tell of all Your praises,
That in the gates of the daughter of Zion
I may rejoice in Your salvation.
The nations have sunk down in the pit which they have made;
In the net which they hid, their own foot has been caught.
The Lord has made Himself known;
He has executed judgment.
In the work of his own hands the wicked is snared. (Ps 9:14-16)

In contrast, the prophets, in their tireless call to Israel to remember their covenant, would pronounce God’s judgment for Israel’s failure to uphold their part of the Mosaic Covenant. Judgment in this sense was punishment of God’s faithless people and placed an emphasis on God’s sovereign rule and authority.

The Lord arises to contend,
And stands to judge the people.
The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people,
“It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
The plunder of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing My people
And grinding the face of the poor?”
Declares the Lord God of hosts. (Isa 3:13-15)

Therefore, I will bring the worst of the nations, and they will possess their houses. I will also make the pride of the strong ones cease, and their holy places will be profaned. When anguish comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none. Disaster will come upon disaster and rumor will be added to rumor; then they will seek a vision from a prophet, but the law will be lost from the priest and counsel from the elders. The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with horror, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. According to their conduct I will deal with them, and by their judgments I will judge them. And they will know that I am the Lord. (Ezek 7:24-27)

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The Old Testament portrays God as the divine judge who actively rules and judges nations contemporaneously. When calling for divine judgment against pagan oppressors, the nation of Israel appealed to the Abrahamic Covenant. When the prophets of Israel pronounced God’s judgment on the nation of Israel, it was in accordance to the Mosaic Covenant.

In contrast, the New Testament portrays the divine judge as Jesus Christ who will judge the world in the future at the end of history, and Jesus’ judgment is seen with a greater emphasis on individuals.

With a reference to the “branch” from the family of Jesse, the royal house of David, the prophet Isaiah introduces the idea that the Messiah will be judging human beings. Here Isaiah explicitly indicates that the Messiah, with the Holy Spirit, will judge the world with righteousness at some time in the future.

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
And He will delight in the fear of the Lord,
And He will not judge by what His eyes see,
Nor make a decision by what His ears hear;
But with righteousness He will judge the poor,
And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth;
And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth,
And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.
Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins,
And faithfulness the belt about His waist. (Isa 11:1-5)

In private discussions with His disciples about the future, Jesus informs them that His coming glory includes His authority of Judge. In contrast to the Old Testament where judgment included physical salvation from evil, it is apparent that the object of judgment is the soul of human beings.

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. (Matt 16:26-27)

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. (Matt 25:31-32)

Likewise, later letters in the New Testament refer to Jesus Christ as the Judge of human beings in the future.

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. (James 5:7-9)

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For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Pet 4:3-5)

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11-15)

Contrary to the most common perception that divine judgment is in the negative sense (punishment), Jesus indicates that it also includes the idea of rewards. For example, because of their devoted service, the twelve apostles will be given the authority to judge Jewish Believers, and this is with the sense of rule.

And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matt 19:28)

“You are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Luke 22:28-30)

And this idea of judgment in the positive sense is not limited to the apostles.

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Cor 5:9-10)

Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Rev 22:12)

While divine judgment is the prerogative of God and His Son Jesus, the apostles Paul and John indicate that some Believers beyond the twelve apostles will have the right to judge as well. This appears to include the judging (or ruling with authority) of angels.

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? (1 Cor 6:1-3)

Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Rev 20:4)

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Divine judgment is the work of God, because it is the consequence to one’s sin evaluated against God’s holy nature and moral standard. It is absolute, exact and just.

The privilege of being a divine judge (authority to rule) is granted to those whom God chooses.

Divine judgment can be seen in both the negative and positive sense.

In the negative, while God’s judgment may vary, it is usually capital punishment (physical death) for either Believers or non-Believers, and in the future, Jesus Christ’s Final Judgment is eternal death for those who do not have faith in Him.

In the positive, when Jesus Christ judges Believers in the end, the result is about rewards for service although there is little about the concept of rewards.

Divine judgment is best understood in the context of God’s promises and ongoing fulfillment of His divine covenants. It is a reflection of the sovereignty of God’s plan.

References:

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