

Social Justice and Divine Righteousness in the Old Testament Wisdom Traditions

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Over the entrance gate of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, there is an inscription. It's a biblical quotation from the Book of Proverbs:

וְצַדִּיקָה תַצִּיל מִמוֹת

This text has an extraordinary theological value: “(Treasures shall not profit the lawless,) but righteousness delivers from death”; also the Greek translation signifies it: (οὐκ ὠφελήσουσιν θησαυροὶ ἀνόμους) δικαιοσύνη δὲ ῥύσεται ἐκ θανάτου. The text belongs according to many scholars to the oldest part of the Book of Proverbs. Usually the old Wisdom in the Old Testament is underestimated as immanent, utilitarian, without theology. I have a very different perception; I see a very early connection of wisdom traditions with deep theological thoughts. The main argument for my interpretation are the Ancient Near Eastern parallels, especially the Egyptian wisdom of the late second millennium, e.g. Teachings of Amenemope. Already there is a deep ‘connection of human life and divine judgment characteristic’. In the Book of the Death, “the bible of the Egyptians”, we find the “Negative Confession” in chapter 125 and we can study a person performing in the final judgment. We learn what the person has to answer about his life style in order to pass this decisive moment.

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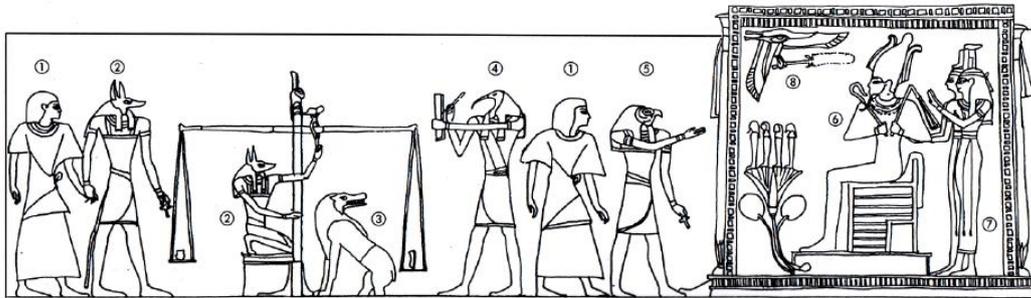
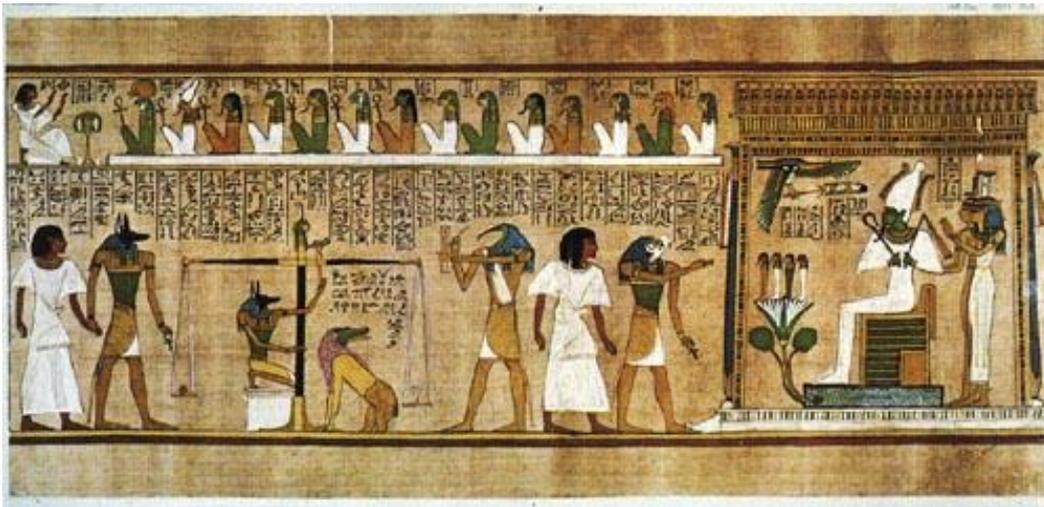


Figure 1. The decisive moment of the judgment in front of Osiris and the 40 gods as witnesses

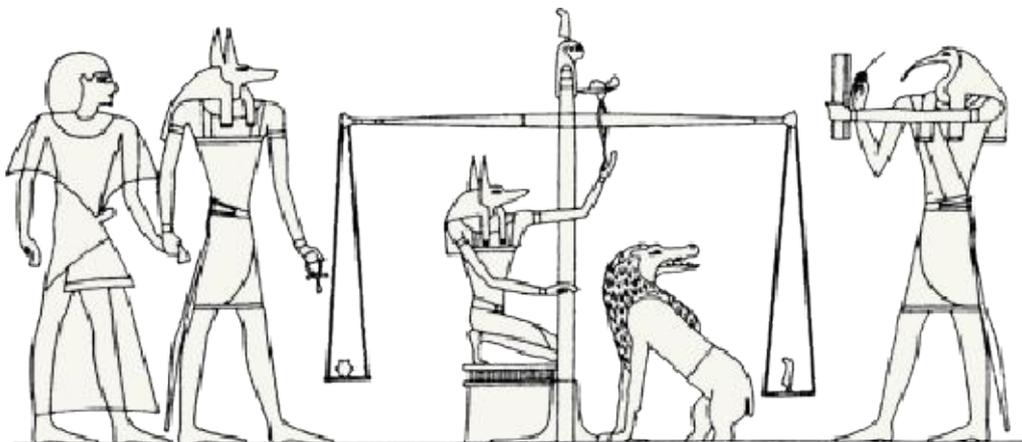


Figure 2. Detail: The soul (in the little vessel on the left scale) is tested by the truth (the feather) on the right scale, also as a coronation of the scales in the middle.

We find here a clear connection of social justice and eternal life:

I have not orphaned the orphan of his goods;
I have not slighted a servant to his master;

I have not caused affliction;
I have not caused hunger;
I have not caused grief;
I have not killed;
I have not caused pain for anyone;

Book of the Dead of Nu,
on a papyrus now preserved in the British Museum (EA 10477)

Like in Egypt there is a connection of acting in this life and the fate in the afterlife, e.g.:

Proverbs 11:4

לֹא-יִזְעֵל הוֹן בְּיוֹם עֲבָרָה וְצְדָקָה תִּצִּיל מִמּוֹת

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.

Proverbs 12:28

בְּאַרְחֵ-צְדָקָה חַיִּים וְדֶרֶךְ נְתִיבָה אֶל-מָוֶת

ἐν ὁδοῖς δικαιοσύνης ζωὴ ὁδοὶ δὲ μνησικαίων εἰς θάνατον

In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.

The vision I have is to defend the early connection of human good deeds and social engagement with the divine righteousness. The connection of doing and receiving is not a theological problem, but an inspiration. The “classic” exegetical understanding of the connection between action and consequence as a “law of retribution” has been criticised by Old Testament scholars for about the last 50 years.

In 1955 the Old Testament scholar and Egyptologist Klaus Koch raised the question: “Is there a law of retribution in the Old Testament?” and, surprising to some, denied that such a law exists.¹⁾ His line of reasoning took two directions: one route traced linguistic phenomena, one centred on creation theology. Within Old Testament theology terms such as “retribution” or “reward” are primarily

1) K. Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?”, *ZThK* 52 (1955), 1-42. = K. Koch, hg., *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments*, WdF 125 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 130-180. = K. Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?”, J. L. Crenshaw, ed., *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, IRT 4 (Philadelphia; London: Fortress Press; SPCK, 1983), 57-87.

used to describe the relation between human action and divine reaction. Although the Old Testament speaks both of divine reward and of divine punishment when using the term “retribution”, the negative aspect most often predominates. It is a hardly disputable fact – according to Koch – that retribution is used in reference to the Bible most often to describe divine ‘punishment’ and thus as a synonym to ‘revenge’. He is also intent on showing that creation theology place a much more predominant role in the Old Testament than many others recognize. Any appropriate understanding of the relation between action and consequence must take the causal processes seriously that are ‘immanent’ to nature. These processes provide the horizon of expectations also for a life with God. Every deed is a “force”²⁾ that surrounds the doer with a “sphere of effect”³⁾. The German expression “Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang” tries to describe this aspect of the causal connection that exists apart from the relation between the actor and the person acted upon.⁴⁾ Koch rightly emphasizes that an inner connection exists between actions and their consequences that are not merely the result of external norms (Pro 22:8; 26:27 et al.). Koch has done a great service to scholarship by pointing out aspects that had been ignored or neglected beforehand. His “intrinsic” model of the connection between action and consequence is an important element of the Old Testament world view, especially in light of the inherent order of creation – but it is just ‘one’ element! Any concept that reduces causality exclusively to an impersonal “automatic” link between action and consequence is just as problematic as the idea that God personally rewards or punishes every deed himself.⁵⁾ Is “punishment” really only the brick that lands on my head because I threw it into the air? Even if

2) K. Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?”, 18.

3) Ibid.

4) K. Koch and J. Roloff, “Tat-Ergehen-Zusammenhang”, K. Koch, et al., hg., *Reclams Bibellexikon*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), 493-495.

5) On the debate surrounding Koch’s suggestions see H. Graf Reventlow, “Sein Blut komme über sein Haupt”, *VT* 10 (1960), 311-327; H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffs*, BHT 40 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968), 175-179; H. Graf Reventlow, *Rechtfertigung im Horizont des Alten Testaments*, BevTh 58 (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 33-36; P. D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis*, SBLMS 27 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 86-90; H. D. Preuß, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. I (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), 217-219; J. Hausmann, *Studien zum Menschenbild der älteren Weisheit*, FAT 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 231-232; H. Delkurt, *Ethische Einsichten in der alttestamentlichen Spruchweisheit*, BThSt 21 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993), 148-161.

Koch's suggestion was a theological attempt 'to save God's honour', Yahweh's actions are not mere midwifery⁶⁾ to implicit natural laws.

Hans Heinrich Schmid took another approach and tried to rehabilitate wisdom as a theological concept.⁷⁾ According to him, all biblical wisdom texts bear witness to a permanent struggle for a just world order. Their basic problem is the tension between faith and experience. Over time, different ways evolved to resolve this tension. These include changing institutions and persons such as the national king, intellectual solutions such as wisdom reflection, or theological reinterpretations of the history of God with his people. "There is no other option than retribution for the sins of the people. Judgement has to happen – and its legitimacy must be accepted. Historical occurrences and expectations are thus consistently subsumed and interpreted under the causal connection between action and consequence."⁸⁾ A just world order is the one central issues at the heart of all biblical theology. The *δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ*, which the apocalyptic texts late in the Old Testament tradition ask for with great resignation, is finally revealed with clarity in the gospel of Christ.⁹⁾

Horst Dietrich Preuß argued vehemently against the principle of causal connection. He considers this concept a rigid and inflexible idea, a dogma of wisdom that uses Yahweh only as the guarantee for an automatism of action and consequence that met inherent expectations of wisdom theology. Preuß bases his criticism on the late wisdom texts of the Old Testament such as Job or Ecclesiastes. These books dissolve the connection between action and consequence from within the wisdom traditions themselves. Experience finally

6) K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?", 4-5.

7) See especially H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffs* (s. Anm. 38); H. H. Schmid, "Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil: "Schöpfungstheologie" als Gesamthorizont biblischer Theologie", *ZThK* 70 (1973), 1-19; H. H. Schmid, "Gerechtigkeit und Glaube: Genesis 15,1-6 und sein biblisch-theologisches Kontext", *EvTh* 40 (1980), 396-420; H. H. Schmid, "Was heißt 'Biblische Theologie'?", H. F. Geisser and W. Mostert, hg., *Wirkungen hermeneutischer Theologie: Ein Züricher Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstags Gerhard Ebelings* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1983), 35-50.

8) H. H. Schmid, "Altorientalisch-alttestamentliche Weisheit und ihr Verhältnis zur Geschichte", H. H. Schmid, *Altorientalische Welt in der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), 64-90, hier 84-85.

9) See U. Luck, *Welterfahrung und Glaube als Grundproblem biblischer Theologie*, TEH 191 (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1976); U. Luck, "Inwiefern ist die Botschaft von Jesus Christus "Evangelium"?", *ZThK* 77 (1980), 24-41.

destroys the dogma. In this manner, the basic assumptions of wisdom literature were destabilized step by step until the concept itself and thus Old Testament wisdom as a whole finally crumbled and fell. It is hard to imagine a verdict that isolates and convicts wisdom within the Old Testament canon with greater severity. Antonius Gunneweg argues along the same lines when he interprets Job and Ecclesiastes as proof for the failure of wisdom: “Wisdom as such – and not merely the doctrine of retribution – crumbles. It cannot stand up to reality. Based on the realisation that wisdom teachings are insufficient, the book concludes that everything in life is meaningless. ‘All is in vain and a chasing after wind’ (Ecc 1:14). Its own inner logic leads wisdom to dissolve itself; it turns into a scepticism that almost borders on nihilism.”¹⁰⁾

These approaches are understandable as children of dialectical theology that is fundamentally opposed to worldly wisdom; at the same time, they hardly describe the historical development adequately. W. H. Schmidt attempted to show that already the earliest wisdom in Israel was aware of its own limitations¹¹⁾ (see Pro 10:11; 14:12; 16:1, 2, 9; 21:2 u.a.). It is always Yahweh himself who creates the connection between action and consequence or intercedes between both. We should recognize that this causal connection is not severed completely anywhere in the Bible, not in Job or Ecclesiastes, nor in the Old or in the New Testament. Even the so-called sceptics and nihilists are convinced that a causal system exists, but they realize that they are not able to fully understand it.

The Egyptologist Jan Assmann introduced a new concept into this virulent discussion. On the basis of an analysis of theological concepts surrounding the goddess Ma’at, he introduced the new category of connective justice.¹²⁾ This category places factors of ‘mutuality’ and ‘solidarity’ at its centre. Anyone who acts within a social context can hope that others will treat him the way he treats

10) A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments: Eine religionsgeschichte Israels in biblisch-theologischer Sicht* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), 239-240.

11) W. H. Schmid, “‘Wie kann der Mensch seinen Weg verstehen?’ Weisheitliche Lebenserfahrung – ein Gespräch mit H. D. Preuss”, J. Hausmann and H. J. Zobel, hg., *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und biblische Theologie: Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuss zum 65. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 287-297. = W. H. Schmid, *Vielfalt und Einheit alttestamentlichen Glaubens. Band 2: Psalmen und Weisheit, Theologische Anthropologie und Jeremia, Theologie des Alten Testaments* (A. Graupner, H. Delkurt and A. B. Ernst, hg.) (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1995), 63-73.

12) J. Assmann, *Ma’at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (München: C. H. Beck, 1990), bes. 58-91.

them. The Old Testament scholar Bernd Janowski has transferred this concept to the exegesis of biblical texts.¹³⁾ In his view, the close ‘social’ ties within clearly structured societies constitute the determining factor; any local system of mutual control within a village or small city, patriarchal forms of sanction, as well as collective memory make sure that individual actions receive immediate retribution.¹⁴⁾ “Every deed returns to the doer and determines his ability to function within a community. This interpretational model exists in many psalms, in which the psalmist’s suffering appears as the result of his own transgression in the eyes of his contemporaries.”¹⁵⁾ The function of the causal principle in these contexts is the creation and protection of a just (i.e. stable) social order; divine judgment serves the purpose of ensuring behaviour that is conducive to the group as a whole. Janowski retains a clear perspective on the fact that, according to Old Testament witness, God’s freedom is not swallowed by this system of social control. God can interrupt the consequences, both good and bad, at any time.

Holger Delkurt has analysed the principle of causal connection in the ethical proscriptions of the book of Proverbs in detail. He concludes:

“Proverbial statements themselves warn against inflexible application of the causality principle. Many proverbs state explicitly that evil actions can be separated from their just consequences ... Tension exists between human reflection and divine action; it is never fully possible to predict what consequences will follow upon a particular deed ... In other words, proverbial wisdom is very aware of human limitations. These limitations are accepted as divine boundaries. God can step between intention and what results from that intention; he influences the outcome ... Proverbial wisdom grants God a high degree of freedom in his actions. God is able to influence causal connections according to his plan.”¹⁶⁾

13) B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott: Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2003), 138.

14) The Proverbs also warn against the attempt to force a connection between action and consequence: “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the LORD, and he will help you” (20: 22; 24:29).

15) B. Janowski, “Er trug unsere Sünden: Jesaja 53 und die Dramatik der Stellvertretung”, *ZThK* 90 (1993), 1-24, here 14.

16) H. Delkurt, *Ethische Einsichten in der alttestamentlichen Spruchweisheit*, 153-154.

A recent German study on the issue was presented by Georg Freuling.¹⁷⁾ Based on a differentiated analysis of the Solomonic proverbs, wisdom psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes, he presents the following results: The principle of causal connection was originally a ‘pedagogical tool’; it strengthened the motivation of young people to keep to the rules of their community and to help to develop the social engagement. This “optimistic” wisdom is not merely a naive early stage that dissolved in the face of crisis; instead, there never was a “crisis” of wisdom reflection.¹⁸⁾ This so called “crisis” merely moved borderline experiences of life, which had always been at the fringes of the tradition, into the centre of wisdom theology. The increasing critique against the causal principle was the direct result of growing individualism that undermined the stability of social structures and emphasized a direct connection between individual action and consequence. This connection could not be verified by experience. The just individual could suffer (Job) and the oppressor could live very well (Psa 37; 49; 73). In this context, a connection between action and fate could no longer be observed (Ecclesiastes). The “crisis” was an element of wisdom traditions from the very beginning. Israel’s wisdom schools found various ways of reacting to such empirical observation; their span of answers reaches from the idea of testing the righteous, including a vision of divine pedagogy, to the hypothesis that God was a mysterious enemy of humanity. Yet even the greatest sceptic never imagined that the causal connection between action and consequence did not exist at all.

Two further authors from an English speaking context should be mentioned: Leo Perdue¹⁹⁾ and Samuel L. Adams.²⁰⁾ In various monographs and edited books, Perdue has submitted a history of wisdom literature that is oriented towards the leading cultural force of each specific age. His diachronic journey through wisdom literature is supplemented by the reconstruction of the social

17) See G. Freuling, “Wer eine Grube gräbt...”: Der Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang und sein Wandel in der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur, WMANT 102 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004); see also his article in WiBiLex.

18) See *ibid.*, 270.

19) L. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); L. Perdue, hg., *Scribes, Sages and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, FRLANT 219 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); L. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

20) Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition. Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions*, JSJSup 125 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008).

and intellectual contexts of the wisdom teachers. For the first time, Perdue has made clear that wisdom literature exists in continual interaction with the specific historical contexts in which it develops. Despite these various epistemological and ideological influences, Israelite wisdom traditions show a continual theological interest in creation as the place in which the (indirect) revelation of God remains active.

In recourse to newly available texts, Adams reactivates the older thesis that the principle of causal connection underwent a complete paradigm shift during the late period of Old Testament formation. It shifted from the idea of inner-worldly retribution as taught in the book of Proverbs and in several ancient Egyptian teachings to a process allocated in heaven. In other words, it became an eschatological hope. The history of wisdom in Israel is placed in the context created by Egyptian, Greek-Hellenistic, and ancient Near Eastern environments. Adams discusses the wisdom text from Qumran, 4QInstruction, dated in the late 2nd century B.C.E., from which he traces lines of tradition to the first book of Enoch and Wisdom of Solomon.²¹⁾ But his dating of the whole idea is not convincing to me.

If we survey the continual debate (while realizing that all of the various positions find current representatives), we are able to conclude that the idea of the causal principle is rejected by systematic theologians such as Schleiermacher and his many contemporary followers. Apparently, this concept robs God of his freedom to act in grace and mercy; instead, God becomes the predictable accountant who places the burden of individual action on each person even throughout all eternity. God thus becomes a monster. From a Christian perspective, we can only accept that God negates the entire system and rewards 'everyone' without regards for personal status. 'But does not this concept of universal reconciliation also make God predictable while classifying the kind of life an individual lived as completely irrelevant?' This view does not match the biblical witness as already a cursory reading of Matthew 25 makes abundantly clear. Various authors have developed counter-positions against this blanket rejection of the causal principle. God is not imprisoned within this causal

21) See also M. Goff, "Recent Trends in the Study of Early Jewish Wisdom Literature: The Contribution of 4QInstruction and Other Qumran Texts", *Currents in Biblical Research* 7 (2009), 376-416.

connection; he retains his freedom at all times (W. H. Schmidt, Delkurt, Graupner). Several recent publications have shown that creation theology interconnects the Old and New Testament on several different levels; we can even speak of a kind of melody of the Bible as a whole (esp. H. H. Schmid). I believe one of the most important insights to be the idea that God as creator remains a mystery in all of his actions. His deeds are a mystery that is present in the reality of this world. We are faced with a complex structure of freedom and limitation, of rules and exceptions. The principle of causal connection is a kind of “rule of thumb” that frequently proves to be true but is not a closed mechanistic system.

If we depart from specific texts and return to our general discussion of the causal connection between deeds and consequences, the complexity of God’s rule over the world should have meanwhile become clear. I would like to indicate this multifactorial complexity in the connection of doing and receiving by refraining from using the term “Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang”. Instead, I propose that we speak of the large causal context surrounding deeds and consequences, “large doing-receiving-connection” (Tun-Ergehen-Großzusammenhang). The word “large” points to the fact that many causes and aspects are involved in shaping an individual biography and that they interact with each other over time and space. Past and distant events, occurrences in this life and the next, personal and communal, and national and international issues create a complex matrix full of dialectical tension that surrounds each life. “How is each person supposed to understand which path to take in life?” – This is not possible without recourse to the law, but also not without an awareness of the complexity of the factors involved. The relation between individual retribution for individual action and other surpassing factors – some of which cannot be known – must enter reflection together. A community that surrounds the individual, the inheritance of good and bad deeds performed by the forefathers, as well as the effects of good and evil forces that surround him or her, and – not least – God’s free will can influence every human existence. Scholarship (and piety) can only attain a realistic view of the world, if it considers all this. The following figure can illustrate this multi-factorial context:

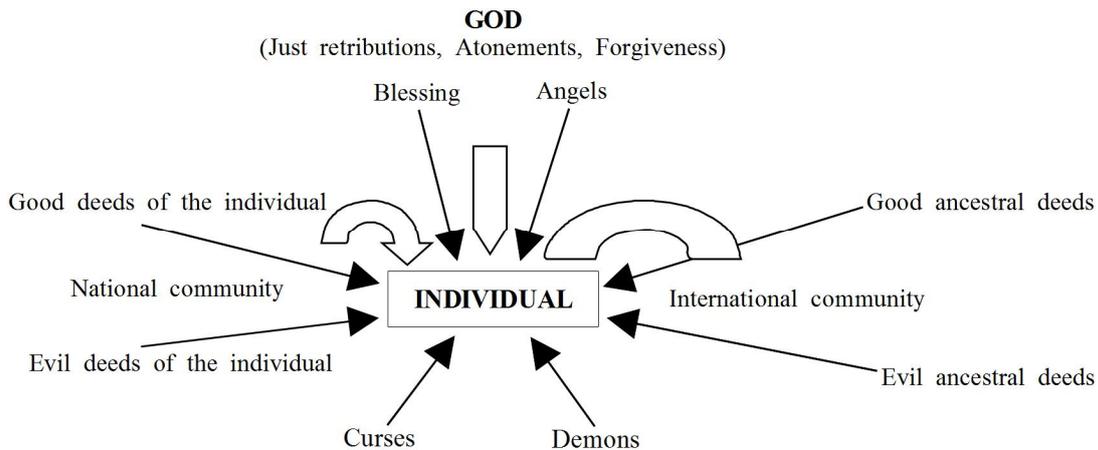


Figure 3. The large causal context surrounding deeds and consequences

Several consequences arise from this view:

a) The connection between action and consequence cannot be reduced to an individual level. Many threads make up the fabric of an individual life. It is not possible to calculate the fate of an individual from the sum of his or her actions. This simplification can only lead to miscalculation. This insight is especially important for counselling and pastoral care.

b) At the same time, personal responsibility exists for individual action. Every human being contributes to the whole by the energies released through his or her deeds. This insight is highly important for biblical pedagogy.

c) The large causal context surrounding deeds and consequences forms the basis for a very positive view on life. In much reflection, we can observe an imbalance between the negative and the positive aspects of retribution. Theologians, especially Protestant theologians, tend to emphasize the power of sin and neglect the positive side of the equation. The large causal context also implies that good deeds produce good fruit. If you are blessed with good ancestors (and become one yourself), you are part of a river of blessing and forgiveness. If good forces watch out for you, you are surrounded by protection and care (Psa 91). Experience teaches that love begets love. Love is the source of life, of any kind of meaningful existence. This is an important part of any biblical homiletic.

“Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it” (Pro 15:17)

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” (Pro 10:12)

“10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. 13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him” (Psa 103:10-13)

“6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned” (Sol 8:6-7)

Wisdom teaches us to recognize the power of love. There certainly may be a utilitarian element, but ethical motivation and eschatological hope is dominant:

“Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death” (Pro 10:2)

וְצַדִּיקָה תִּצְיֵל מִמּוֹת

<Keywords>

hope for the afterlife, divine and human justice, doing-receiving-connection, Egyptian influence, importance of ancestors.

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<Abstract>

Social Justice and Divine Righteousness in the Old Testament Wisdom Traditions

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The assumption commonly held in historical critical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible that hope for the afterlife was only a late, marginal phenomenon is not plausible. This paper tries to demonstrate first an early dating of the expectations for a post mortal existence. Already in the oldest wisdom literature (Pro 10-12) there is the promise of a salvation from death by good deeds (*zedakah*). The origins of this idea are the Egyptian funeral habits and imaginations best known from the Book of Death, chapter 125. With great probability, the (archaeologically well attested!) political and cultural hegemony of Egypt over Israel in the Late Bronze Age also influenced the concepts concerning the future life of the soul from the beginnings, especially from Solomon's era onwards. Throughout the course of the history of Israel's religion, the early vision (my deeds cause my destiny) became increasingly complex. Not only the deeds of a living individual are decisive for his fate, but also the deeds of the other contemporaries, especially the king, and the deeds of the ancestors (Abraham, David) and the actions of heavenly beings (like angels cf. Job 33:23-30 or Satan). At the final form of the canonical theology, there is a complex view of a "large doing-receiving-connection". But from the beginning until the end of this evolution of faith, "justice" – divine and human – was decisive.