

An Assessment on the Nature and Consequences of Sin According to the Old, New Testaments, and one of the Patristic Writers

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Introduction

A fundamental principle that Christian anthropology teaches is that man is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). On the contrary, having been created in God's image, man is tainted with sin. Revelation in scripture and patristic tradition attempts to explain this reality. This article, assess the nature of sin and its consequences as is revealed in the Old and New Testament as well as Irenaeus' theology of sin.

Sin in the Old Testament

The nature of sin in the Old Testament is quite diverse, explained in many different ways. Sin is even personified in some images found in the Old Testament. Fundamentally sin is conceived as the breaking off of a personal relationship with God (Gelin 11). The first instance we encounter man breaking his relationship with God is in the story of the fall in Genesis 3. In this account, Gelin understands the cause of sin to be the pursuit of inordinate aspiration, one unbefitting to a mortal. In other words, man disobeys the commandment of God not to eat of the tree because of the desire to be at par with God.

Associated with the idea of breaking off of a relationship, is the view of sin as rebellion. In Isaiah 1:2 – 4 the prophet speaks of the rebellion of the nation of Israel towards God. Appended to this rebellion is the abandoning of God that characterizes the behaviour of the people of Israel. A despising of the law of God is what characterizes sin in the Old Testament. Hence to sin is to fail or to miss the target, to fail to follow the precepts of the Lord.

In the Old Testament sin is personified, treated as though it were a being that carries out positive actions attributed to being. In Genesis 4:7, sin is characterized as a crouching beast on the doorstep ready to devour Cain. Hence, in the Old Testament sin is viewed as an active power that corrupts the flesh. The sin of man has its consequences, to the individual, community and humanity at large. Gelin makes reference to Leviticus 19:17 in showing that sin was not only transgression towards God but also the human community (16). Summed up the consequences of sin are alienation from God and the community, punishment on both a personal and corporate level. Pervasion is also a consequence of sin. Sin spreads from one act of defiance to the entire progeny.

In analysis, it is apparent that there cannot be any talk of sin in the Old Testament without mention of a relationship. To be precise, sin cannot be talked of without mention of a covenant. Two very important covenants in the Old Testament are the Adamic and Sinaitic covenant from which we get the Torah. What is also worth noting is that we see a covenant of unequal partners, God being the Superior and man being the subject. Man is supposed to fulfil the law of God. Failure to obey the law of God is to act without concern for one's obligations. Israel sinned because she did not fulfil her obligations towards God.

Complementary to the notion above, is that the consequences of sin reveal the relationship between sin and evil in the world. Sin spreads and it pervades the will of the human person. The serpent in the Garden of Eden is indicative of sin as an active force, a being that pervades the will humans. This active force has the capacity to spread throughout the human race. The defiance of Adam and Eve in the story of the fall of man is the defiance shown by their descendants when they abandon God. Hence sin perverts human being's religious inclination towards God to the glorification of oneself. Religious attention is shifted towards idols, man's own creation. The New Testaments builds on some Jewish anthropology in its concept of sin.

Sin in the New Testament

The Gospels identify the Kingdom of God as the emergence of the reign of God over evil. Christ preaches the message of the forgiveness of sin and repentance as prerequisites to the entry into the Kingdom of God. Albert Descamps says that for Christ sin is all that is resistance to the coming of the Kingdom. Victory over sin is to be understood as the total adherence of the disciple to the cause of the Kingdom (78). The implication being that to be in the state of sin is to be excluded from the Kingdom. This is why Jesus has an empathetic approach towards sinners.

Jesus somehow adheres to the Jewish idea that sickness and death are the wages of sin (Descamps 65). Apart from the liberation from illness and evil spirits, Jesus' healings and exorcisms were also a remedy against sin and its consequences. In Matthew 9:12, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' allegations of him eating with sinners by emphasizing that it is the sick who need a doctor not the healthy. Jesus associates sin with 'sickness'. In Jewish anthropology the salvation of the body is seen as the salvation of the total man: body, soul and spirit. Probably Jesus likened being in the state of sin to sickness of the soul. Paul juggles between the concepts of life in death in his theology on sin.

Sin in Pauline Theology

According to Paul, sin is a power. It is a compulsion or constraint that humans generally experience within themselves or in their social context. A compulsion towards attitudes and actions not always of their own willing or approving (Dunn 112). For Paul sin is a power that fully masters the fleshly, people driven by the passions of the flesh. In accordance with his understanding of sin, Paul personifies it with the imagery of the master as in Romans 7:14. In this text Paul mentions himself as being unspiritual and has been sold as a slave to sin.

Paul outlines the consequences of sin as misdirected religion, self – indulgence and death. Sin creates, according to Paul, perversion of the basic instinct of the creature to honour God. The creature fails to acknowledge God and his dependence on Him. Hence the creature glorifies oneself. Instead of giving ultimate significance to God, humans can readily give that significance to what they more easily define, attain or control like money, governance and idols (Dunn 114). Second, sin then creates self-indulgence. Sin provokes the desires of the mortal body. In Romans 7:7 – 8 Paul says that it was sin that stirred up covetousness. Hence sin creates a desire for something forbidden ‘lust’ or ‘covetousness’.

The last of all the effects of sin is death, says Paul. The outcome of life lived in accordance with the flesh is death (Dunn 125). Sin corrupts the flesh, as Paul puts it and death is the end of the process of decay, the final destruction of the corruptible. In Pauline theology death is seen as the last and worst effect of sin. It is a dominating power, inescapable (1 Corinthians 15:26).

A deep inspection of the New Testament concept of sin and its consequences brings new ideas into light. Its power is greatly emphasized in between the two extreme poles of life and death. A summative analysis would comply with Romans 6:23 that the wage paid by sin is death and the present given by God is eternal life in Jesus Christ. One can concur that sin does have an effect on man’s mortal body. It corrupts the flesh, takes away life from it and this is expressed in moral decay like self-indulgence as Paul puts it.

From a different perspective, sin can then be assessed as the reality that stands between man and his salvation. In Jesus’ healings and exorcisms he utters the statement that the Kingdom of God is upon the one he delivers. This is recognition of how sin brings about disunity in the total man. The soul becomes imprisoned in the body so to say and the spirit also suffers. Therefore sin can be looked at as that active force that pervades the will of man such that he lives in a ‘state of

sickness' through which only repentance and forgiveness of sins can bring about healing.

Irenaeus on Sin

Irenaeus looks at sin from the point of the emergence of sin into the human race and its redemption. He states that sin plays a big part in God's design. He views disobedience as constitutive of the nature of sin (Rondet 45). Sin is a transgression, a disobedience to the command of God. However, in reference to the sin of Adam, Irenaeus defines sin as the growing pains and mistakes of man. He does not take the hard stance that man rebelled against God in the garden but that man erred with the caprice similar to that of an infant (40).

The consequence of sin in Irenaeus' teaching is the loss of immortality and innocence. The major aspect though that man loses is his likeness to God. He defines this likeness to the spiritual similarity we have with God. Like God, before the sin of Adam and Eve, man was like God in that he possessed glory and fullness of grace. Irenaeus sees the loss of this likeness to God as what prompted God's remedy of deification of man through Christ. Hence according to Irenaeus sin is detestable and providential. God, who in his providence had foreseen the evil, also envisaged the remedy (Rondet 49). God recapitulated fallen humanity back to Himself through Christ (Ephesians 1:10). In summary, Irenaeus looks at sin in the context of the entire discourse on the economy of salvation.

There appears to be an overwhelming intersecting of ideas of sin with scripture and the discourse by Irenaeus. Common to scripture and Irenaeus' theology, is that man is in a relationship with God. This relationship is a covenant, governed by the law of God and man is to obey this law. Sin as disobedience is the major description of the nature of sin that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments and is quite elaborated in Irenaeus' theology. However, in the Old Testament not much discourse on sin is from the point of mortality. Paul is quite distinguished in the explanation of sin whose consequence is death.

However, one is inclined to assert that Irenaeus deals with sin quite holistically. He speaks of sin and its consequences in light of the entire dialogue between God and humanity. For him man in the garden was just a ‘new creature’, not yet ready to receive the gift of perfection. Due to this, man made a mistake and experienced growing pains because of his lack of maturity (Rondet 42). In his response in the dialogue, God sends Jesus, the perfect man in whom humanity finds its maturity and fullness. Hence, in Christ’s salvific act of redemption there occurred a filial adoption. In Christ, humanity was adopted to be the children of God.

Conclusion

Sin is an anomaly of the fallen human condition if we are to follow the teaching of scripture. The understanding of sin has developed in different epochs from Old Testament times to the patristic era. However, there have been common understandings towards the phenomenon sin throughout this period. Irenaeus gives a good summation of the reality of sin. It was in God’s design. Having known that man had the propensity to sin; God foresaw a remedy through which man could retain his likeness to God. Sin is part of the whole story of redemption.

List of Sources

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