

# THE DOCTRINE OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN EZEKIEL 18:1-32 VIS-À-VIS THE BELIEF IN TRANSGENERATIONAL RETRIBUTION AMONG PRESENT-DAY CHRISTIANS

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## Abstract

The idea that the sufferings and misfortunes encountered by the present generation are a consequence of the sins of its ancestors is common among many preachers in the contemporary Nigerian church. Such a belief was held by the Jewish exiles in Babylon. The exiles had held that their calamities and the exile were caused by the sins of their forebears. This belief finds support in several OT passages (Exodus 20:5 = Deut 5:9; Exodus 34:7). Exodus 20:5 (cf 34:7) portrays God as “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” Similarly, in Lam 5:7 the people lament: “Our forebears sinned ... and we bear their iniquities.” Apparently, this belief in transgenerational retribution was an appeal to Ezekiel’s pre-587 oracles in chapters 16 and 23, which refer to the sins of their ancestors as the reasons for the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel tackles the question of retribution in chap 18.

**Keywords:** Individual Retribution, Transgenerational Guilt, Life, Death, Conversion.

## Introduction

Ezekiel 18 is of paramount importance in the Book of Ezekiel. It is one of Ezekiel’s main contributions to the development of OT theology (Geyer, 1979). Ezek 18 is addressed to the Exiles in Babylon who were going through a great crisis of faith in Babylon because of the catastrophe that befell the nation in 587 B.C. This chapter is well known for its doctrine of “individual responsibility.” This reappears in chap 33. The point of disputation is set up in 18:1-4. The exiles blamed their fate on the sins of their ancestors. This is encapsulated in a proverb that Ezekiel cites verbatim: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezek 18:2; Jer 31:29). The slogan means: “The present generation is paying the penalty for the sins of previous generations.” The proverb seems to refer to the common ancient belief that the gods punish children for the sins of their parents and grandparents. In Ezekiel’s time, the exiles applied this saying to the situation in which they found themselves. The slogan enabled them to think that their miseries in exile have been a punishment for the sins of their ancestors rather than their own sins. Because this enabled them to deny their own blameworthiness, the penalty being inflicted upon them was not likely to lead them to their own moral conversion (Cody, 1984). This article seeks to make a close study of Ezekiel’s doctrine of Individual retribution in the light of the present-day belief in the transgenerational retribution among Christians.

### **Background of Ezekiel's Doctrine of Individual Responsibility**

The belief in transgenerational guilt is given vent to by some Old Testament texts. The idea that God would punish later generations for the sins of their forefathers is found in several biblical texts. It is overtly expressed in the second article of the Decalogue which warns against idol worship: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me...." (Exod 20:5-6; Deut 5:9-10; cf. Num 14:18). The Decalogue statement had originally been intended as a proleptic warning to adults to guard their conduct because of the implications of their actions for their children.

The Deuteronomistic History grounds the downfall of Judah in a backlog of national sin, especially that of Manasseh (Allen, 1998; 2 Kgs 21:11–15; 23:26). Passages, like 2 Kgs 14:6, suggest that this principle meant that it was perfectly legal to punish sons or grandsons for crimes committed by their forefathers. The author of Lam 5:7 expresses this in literal language: "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities." The exiles might have appealed to Ezekiel's pre-587 B.C. oracles in chapters 16 and 23, which cite the sins committed by their forefathers as reasons for the inevitable fall of Jerusalem. These factors may have been partly responsible for the shifting of blame for the tragedy of exile to the previous generation. There was a feeling that the community was caught up in a web of guilt which was deadly and inescapable (Carley, 1974).

The exiles were claiming to be innocent victims of the actions of others. Behind the people's protests of transgenerational punishment lies a reluctance to accept responsibility for their own conduct and the consequences accruing from it.

### **Protest Against the Divine System of Justice (Ezekiel 18:1-4)**

Ezekiel 18 is so well known for its discourse on the doctrine of "individual responsibility." This reappears in chap 33. The exiles blame their fate on the sins of their ancestors. This is encapsulated in a proverb that was current among the exiles, which Ezekiel cites verbatim: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18:2).

The phrase, "set on edge," literally meant "blunted". Whatever the original meaning of the slogan was, as Carley (1974) has said, it conveys the sense that the deeds of the fathers affected their children. The slogan means: "The present generation is paying the penalty for the sins of previous generations." Some of the cynical exiles might have repeated this proverb in order to blame their forebears or even God for their sufferings (Craven, 2001).

The proverb seems to be a mockery of the system of divine justice that would punish children for the sin of their parents. The slogan is occasioned by the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of a cream of the Jerusalemites. The exiles saw the present

through the prism of the past. Overwhelmed by that catastrophe, they saw their whole lives doomed and devoid of purpose (Allen, 1998). Perceiving themselves as innocent, the exiles apparently accused Yahweh of unfairness in his administration of justice. By using this “sour grapes” slogan, the exiles implied that God was being unfair in punishing them for the sins of their forefathers (cf. Jer. 31:29). They were claiming to be innocent victims of the actions of others. In this, they sounded just like many in our own day who shift the blame for their misfortunes to the sins committed by their forefathers or to witches and wizards.

Behind the people’s protests of transgenerational punishment lies a reluctance to accept responsibility for their own conduct and its consequences. Their use of this slogan indicates that they have been overtaken by a spirit of pessimism. The bitterness of the exile and the suffering of the “house of Israel” are mixed with despair, cynicism, and a feeling of hopelessness; they could no longer see God’s righteousness in the face of all that they had suffered (Zimmerli, 1979). The eating of sour grapes by the fathers is said to have set the teeth of their children on edge, but the proverb was inapplicable because they were far from innocent of complicity with the evil for which the Lord was judging the nation.

When one eats an unripe or sour grape, one experiences a slightly unpleasant sensation on the teeth as if a thin coating has come upon one’s teeth. Anyone who eats such a grape must put up with the after-effects. But it would be absurd if this unpleasant after-effect were to happen to someone who had eaten no grapes. It is like one drinking alcohol and another person having a hangover. It is equally absurd, the cynic suggests, for children to be burdened with the consequences of paternal guilt (Eichrodt, 1970). Can such an absurdity still be called righteousness? Can burdening a son with the guilt of his forefather be counted as justice?

Although this mocking proverb does not name Yahweh, it upsets a fundamental conviction in Israel that Yahweh’s retribution is always just. The way the slogan is cited by the exiles, as (Eichrodt, 1970) has said, suggests that it is a bitter criticism of the system of divine justice that would punish children for the sin of their parents. The principle is based on the ancient view of group solidarity in which the individual’s own identity was absorbed into the identity of his family, clan, people, or nation. Ezekiel’s contemporaries were abusing this ancient sense of group solidarity by ignoring the reality of their own contribution, as individual sinners, to their nation’s sinning, while recognizing in their own historical suffering the divinely afflicted penalty for their nation’s sins. The sins of parents indeed result in consequences for their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren that we might call the “fallout” of the parents’ sins. But it is not correct to say that God “punishes” children because their parents have sinned. Some of what Ezekiel’s hearers were experiencing were indeed the consequences of the sins of former generations. But they were not innocent sufferers. God was judging them personally because they were personally responsible for their own sinful actions (cf. Ezek 3:16-21). That is why the prophet says, “only the person who sins shall die” (cf. 18:4b).

The exilic community to which Ezekiel belongs receives a strong rebuke from God for harping on this slogan to blame their suffering on the sins of their forebears and thus questioning Yahweh's system of Justice. The rebuke focuses on the slogan that summed up their attitude. The Lord declared that the slogan is untenable and should no longer be used because its use implied that God was unjust (Feinberg, 1969). In v.4, Ezekiel enunciates the principle of the chapter: "all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die." These solemn words leave no doubt that God lays the obligation for individual conduct.

### **The Problem of Transgenerational Guilt (Ezekiel 18:5-18)**

One of the challenging issues that the prophet Ezekiel confronted is the question of transgenerational guilt. This is the belief that the Lord punishes children for the sins of their forefathers. Challenging this false theory of retribution, Ezekiel gives a theoretical example of three generations: the case of a righteous grandfather (18:5-9), the case of a godly son (18:10-13), and the case of a godly grandchild (18:14-18).

The first case is the case of a righteous father who has an ungodly son (Ezek 18:5-9). He is loyal to Yahweh (cultically and ethically) - he refrains from idolatry and idolatrous feasts: "he does not eat upon the mountains." The phrase, "eating on the mountains," refers to participation in immoral worship and idolatrous feasts. Such a righteous man refrains from adultery and does not approach a woman during her menstrual period (Ezek 18:6). He does not oppress anyone (v.7); he commits no robbery (Deut. 24:19-22; cf. Isa. 58:7), refrains from injustice and does not exploit the debtor by demanding interest on money he had loaned. He is benevolent, generous, and distributes bread to the hungry and provides the naked with clothing (Isa 58:7). Ezekiel declares that such a person will live for his righteousness.

The second case is the case of an ungodly son of a righteous father (Ezek 18:10-13). A righteous man might have a violent son (*ben-parîz*), a shedder of blood, or a burglar, who does things that his father abstained from and fails to do the good things that his father did. A list of sins he engages in is given - idolatry, adultery, oppression of the poor, indifference to the needs of the unfortunate, and unlawful gain. His life is opposed to that of his father on every moral and humane issue. The question is: could this man possibly claim the merits of his father's godly life? In strong terms, Ezekiel showed a child who does the opposite of the parent cannot be saved by the parent's righteousness. A natural relationship would profit him nothing, for his character would have revealed him as no true son of his father. He will die for his own sins; the responsibility for his death would be his own (Feinberg, 1969).

The third example is the case of a righteous son of an ungodly man (Ezek 18:14-18). A sinful son might have a son who sees his father's evil practices and refrains

from them and does what is right. That man would surely live for his righteousness whereas his father would die for his wickedness. Ezekiel insists that God would not visit the sins of the ungodly father upon his righteous son. Just as he would not credit the merit of a just father to an ungodly son, so he would not charge the misdeeds of an unjust father to a godly son. The righteous grandson is not subject to the fate of the wicked parent.

### **The Righteousness of God and the Question of Transgenerational Punishment (Ezekiel 18:19-29)**

Verses 19-29 may be considered as the summary of the teaching of the entire chapter. In 18:19-20, God proceeds to adopt a dialogical teaching style in which he both asks and answers questions about individual and collective responsibility. The question posed in v.19a constitutes the second of three quotations attributed by Ezekiel to his audience. “Yet you say, “Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?”

Ezekiel tackles this issue head-on in 18:21-28. Quoting the proverb familiar to the earlier prophets which shifted responsibility on the shoulders of past generations: “The fathers have eaten unripe grapes; the children’s teeth are set on edge,” Ezekiel declared that this concept is no longer tenable (cf. Ezek 3:17ff; 18; 33:10-20; Jer 31:29; Deut. 24:16). For him, and for Jeremiah, the objection arises: if the individual is punished for an act that he did not commit, why should he endeavour to be virtuous? Repeating Jeremiah’s idea (Jer 31:29), Ezekiel declared this untenable concept abolished for the future (Ezek 18:2-4). Ezekiel by this proclaimed the personal responsibility of the sinner (Dheilly, 1960): “The one who has sinned is the one who must die; a son is not to bear his father’s guilt, nor a father his son’s guilt. The upright will be credited with his uprightness, and the wicked with his wickedness” (Ezek. 18:20; cf. 18:4).

Ezekiel tackles this issue head-on in 18:21-28. To the exiles who thought that their suffering was a result of the sin of their fathers, Ezekiel maintained that their sins were the cause of their suffering. Just as God does not judge one generation for the sins of previous ones, so also Yahweh does not keep a “scorecard” of wickedness or righteousness accumulated in the course of a single lifetime or generation. Persons are judged not based on past conduct, but on the choices, they make here and now. Each generation is judged based on its actions (De Vries, 2012).

When a good son of a wicked man does what is lawful and right, and is careful to observe all God’s statutes, he shall surely live. The bad father would die, while the good son of a bad father would live (Ezek 18:19b). Ezekiel insists that “a child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child.” People die for their own sins, not for the sins of their fathers or the sins of their sons. This was not that Ezekiel rejected the principle of human solidarity, but he held that in the new order which will be established after Israel’s trial, the individual value will break free of the collectivity. Ezekiel maintained that

everybody will be judged for his personal acts, without taking into account the preceding solidarities (Ezek. 18:10-20; 9:4-6; 14:12-20 [Oostrom, 1986]).

Ezekiel has sought to convince his audience that Yahweh does not act according to the principle of transgenerational retribution. Just as God does not judge one generation for the sins of previous ones, so also Yahweh does not keep a “scorecard” of wickedness or righteousness accumulated in the course of a single lifetime or generation. Thus, the possibility of a son suffering for the sins of a father or any person suffering for the sins of another is ruled out. Persons are judged not on the basis of past conduct, but on the choices that they make here and now.

With v. 21, Ezekiel takes up a second issue concerning divine justice: the idea of a “treasury of demerit or merit.” If the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Similarly, if the son of a wicked father has done what is lawful and right and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The bad father would die, while the good son of a bad father would live. Ezekiel insists that “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child.” People die for their own sins, not for the sins of their fathers or the sins of their sons (Constable, 2021).

First, he takes the case of a wicked person (community, generation) who repents of (i.e., turns away from) past sins, obeys God’s laws, and does “justice and righteousness”. Ezekiel teaches that such persons would live and “not die”. The trove of sin accumulated in the course of a lifetime (treasury of demerit) does not determine destiny; only one’s present disposition and behaviour pertain. Past transgressions will not be “remembered” (Darr, 2001). On the other hand, if a person turned from righteous conduct and pursued a life of sin, God would punish him with premature death for his sins even though he had formerly done right. Past righteousness will not be remembered. Each one is judged based on his present disposition and behaviour. Likewise, a generation is not predetermined for judgment or blessing by the previous one (Constable, 2021). One generation cannot build up such a treasure for another; everyone determines his or her own destiny by his or her own conduct. Second, an individual cannot build up such a treasury in one phase of his or her life and count on this to balance off a deficit later (Block, 1997).

Ezekiel introduces another factor in verses 21-24. He took a hypothetical case of a wicked man who radically changes and forsakes his wicked ways to do God’s righteous will. The implication is clear that man can determine his final condition. Such a man will not die but surely live. Thus, not only is a man free from his father’s misdeeds; he can also break with his own ungodly past if his heart desires. This man will live in his righteousness. His past will be no deterrent to the

blessing of God. The standing of the individual is determined by his final choice of good or evil.

### **Ezekiel's Message of Individual Retribution (Ezekiel 18: 25-29)**

In 18:25, Ezekiel's assertions provoke his audience. They say, "The way of Yahweh is unfair". That was a "frontal attack" on God's administration of justice (v. 25a). The exiles characterize God's way as inequitable and arbitrary. The Lord rhetorically asks the exiles if it is their ways that are right rather than God's way. Here God first reasserts the divine prerogative to judge and reiterates the principle by which judgments are made: "I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways."

### **Admonition to Conversion (Ezekiel 18:30-32)**

In verses 30-32, Ezekiel's oracle moves from lecture to exhortation. Not only were the exiles blaming their ancestors for their own misfortunes, but they were also sinking into a mood of hopelessness, letting themselves think that God was unfair and that they could do nothing about the situation. The real issue is the people's unwillingness to "get a new heart and new spirit." They are avoiding even considering repentance (Sakenfeld, 1978). Although the covenant is corporate in that it involves the total community of Israel, yet it is individual in that it calls each person to a decision (Lind, 1996): "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways" (18:30). Even as their suffering, i.e., the exile was orchestrated by the sin of the nation, God leaves open the possibility of salvation. Therefore, the prophet prodded the exiles relentlessly to repent, to change their ways and turn to God and to "get themselves a "new heart" (*lēb hādāš*) and a new spirit (*rûah hādāšāh*) (Ezek 18:30-31). In Ezekiel, returning to God means turning away from wickedness and casting away (*šālah*) rebellion (*peša'*) which they have committed against God. Changing their way, here is not a matter of a more resolute keeping of individual laws, but of man's turning completely to God (Zimmerli, 1979). Verse 32a reiterates the substance of v. 23 that Yahweh has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked." His pleasure is that the wicked turn from his evil way and live. The chapter ends with an appeal to repentance: "Turn, then, and live" (v.32b).

### **Ezekiel 18 and the Doctrine of Transgenerational Retribution in Nigeria Church**

In recent times a remarkable new method of healing is making waves in the Nigerian church; it is the problem of transgenerational guilt. In many instances, some healers have alleged that certain families are victims of special demons who pursue them from one generation to another, causing misfortunes, suffering and premature death. Others tend to link their problems to a "curse" occasioned by sins committed by the ancestors. This was a kind of mentality of the exiles in the time of Ezekiel. The exiles had thought that their sufferings in the land of exile was a punishment from Yahweh for the sins committed by their forebears. That was the

reason for the slogan: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezek 18:2b). Ezekiel came up with a counter-thesis to upset this slogan: “The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek 18:19-20). Fundamental in Ezekiel’s position is that each person stands on his own before God (Rendtorff, 1985; Von Rad, 1975; Boadt, 1984). Similarly Jer 31:29f affirms the moral responsibility of each person, because the Jerusalemites had made offerings to Baal and poured out libations to other gods, thus provoking Yahweh to anger. Because the people of Israel and the people of Judah “have turned their backs” to God and to me, not their faces; though I have taught them persistently, they would have persistently refused “to listen and accept correction.” Instead, they have “built the high places of Baal” and offered up “their sons and daughters to Molech” (Jer 32:29f). Although the exiles were directly bearing the effect of the sins committed by several generation of Israel, they too, collectively, and individual, were not innocent sufferer. Their own sins contributed to the collective guilt of the nation.

The question of transgenerational retribution and the belief that sicknesses and afflictions have links with specific past sins find expression in the disciples’ question to Jesus in respect of the man born blind: “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus’ answer to this question is very informative: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (Jn 9:3). This same notion finds an echo in the teaching of some preachers and healers in the Nigerian church, who create the impression that a person, family, or community could be living under a spell cast by generational curses occasioned by the sin of an ancestor of the family or community. (Corbon, Giblet, 1973) are of the view that curses have the potentiality to “brings into play profound forces” and even “deadly effects” on the person cursed. Scholars like Hampsch (1986) and Njoku (2007) are of the view that the sins committed by one’s ancestors could set in motion a chain of “sicknesses, misfortunes, calamities, or even death in the family which could be transmitted to subsequent generations. Hampsch and Njoku opine that generational curses, like original sin, can be passed down on a generational basis. Generational curses are believed to bring judgment or bondage during an individual’s life, reducing the quality of life, until the curse is broken through rituals and prayers of deliverance. It is believed that individual and families could be released from the effects of these curses by having the curses broken or by healing the family root of the affected persons.

It is an empirically verifiable fact that, sometimes, the mistakes or sins of a person can affect others. But it is particularly disturbing and misleading to attribute every misfortune people experience in life to the sin of an ancestor or to a curse. In an age where people tend to look elsewhere than themselves for the source of their problems, such doctrines sound appealing. But such positions tend to create a fear of insecurity, a fear that the world is under a curse, the redemptive act of Christ



apart (Igbo, 2009). In *The Search For Security*, Ndiokwere (1990) thinks that this kind of “religious metaphysics” induces a sense of insecurity and goads people into a frantic search for quick and magic solutions to problems. Hampsch (1986) believes that there are things like generational curses and that such curses can be broken by healing the family tree.

### **Conclusion**

At a glance, Ezek 18 appears to be a moral treatise on the question of individual responsibility. The prophet goes through each scenario of sinful/repentant, father/son in order to assert that neither a father nor a son is held responsible for the sin of the other (Carvalho, 2010). Apparently, Ezek 18 was written after 857 B.C. Ezekiel addresses the Judeans who were exiled to Babylon. They were blaming their misfortunes on the sins of their forefathers. Ezekiel rejects this idea in three ways. First, he asserts that God holds each generation responsible for its own choices and actions. Second, God also allows for repentance and does not punish a generation immediately. Third, God offers each generation a chance to repent. Ezekiel insists that the only requirement is that each person changes his way and follows God’s law (Cody, 1984). He must strive for “a new heart and a new spirit” (v.31). These terms appear several times in the Book of Ezekiel. In 11:19 and 36:26, God speaks about taking out of the people a heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh and a new spirit. In these chapters, a new heart and a new spirit connote a changed interior attitude, a kind of true repentance that will allow them to live (Carvalho, 2010).

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