

## **The Old Testament Law Of Retaliation**

What we today cannot but regard as one of the most puzzling and, at the same time, one of the most disturbing directives found in the Old Testament and said there to have been given from above, by God, is the famous law of retaliation quoted in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Without any qualifications or apologies it reads: "And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he has done, so it shall be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he has caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him". (Leviticus 24: 19-20). And, in Exodus, Chapter 23, in a section dealing with the situation which arises when mischief has been caused, "you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." So important, so emphatically stated is it that we can be in no doubt that this law of retaliation was a corner-stone on which rested the whole of the ancient Jewish legal system.

Apart from the fact that it is mis-applied and wrongly called upon to justify and rationalise certain actions or behaviour, as when we want revenge, the main difficulties here are, in the first place, its harshness and, because of this, the very fact that it ever found its way into a law code given by God; and, secondly, the fact that the Lord clearly went out of His way to counter-act its application when He, while on earth, urged men to forego revenge and retaliation, and to try not to resist evil. "You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you that you resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also. And whosoever shall compel you to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him that asks you, and from him that would borrow of you turn him not away". (Matthew 5: 38-42). It might be wondered if we always realise how radical, how different, how contrary to accepted practices and attitudes this new teaching Jesus gave really was.

Contradicted then as the law of retaliation could be said to have been, how then do we account for it? How did it ever get there in the first place? What is it doing there? When we think about the Old Testament and compare it with the new; when we bring to mind the unusual and difficult things said in the Old Testament - and this is one of them; alien as they so frequently seem to be to our New Testament understanding of God and of His love and purposes for us; it is important for us to bear this in mind,

that the Lord has had to lead people at different stages of mankind's history and develop according to their then ability to comprehend and understand things. He has had to adapt Himself and speak to people at the level they could understand and, most importantly, according to the state they were in. In Old Testament times much of what God said needed to be couched in terms which threatened punishment and dire consequences if evil should be committed. If the Lord had spoken to the Jews of the Exodus as He spoke to people when He was Himself on earth it would all have been lost on them. They would have fallen away, disobeyed, scoffed at, falsified and perverted what was said. A simpler and much more meaningful approach had to be adopted.

Over the ages man has progressed mentally and in his capacity to understand concepts, especially religious concepts. It is like with an infant who becomes a child, and in turn a youth and at last an adult. As we know, teaching methods, and the terms we use, the way we approach them and the manner in which we express ourselves, changes as the child grows older and enters a new stage of development. The truth that is taught to a child on a certain subject is, in a sense, "replaced", by what is told them on the same subject in their youth, and again in adulthood. A little child for example, is perfectly satisfied to be told that the sun "goes down" at night time, when it disappears in the western sky. Later, as he grows older, he will need to be told more, and how it is that the earth revolves on its axis and that in fact the sun is stationary in the sky. It is the earth which moves, not the sun. Yet, and this is the point I am making, what was told him in childhood was the truth as he could see it and understand it. It was sufficiently and entirely meaningful to him.

In childhood also, parents find it necessary to express not only disappointment but even to indicate anger as being a meaningful way to deal with disobedience and bad behaviour. It is not to say that they are either disappointed or really angry, but their love for their child has to be expressed in terms which the child can understand and will respond to.

Hence it is that in the Old Testament, which essentially applies to the childhood state of mankind, there are expressions of the Lord's anger, and of His disappointment with His people. Often they were told that if they would repent He would forgive them, give them another chance, and so on. As the Lord spoke to people then, so does a parent speak to his child now.

We can't help but see then the giving of this law of retaliation in the context of all that has just been said. It entirely accords with the mental capacity of people at that time. By means of it, order could be maintained where it wouldn't have been otherwise. It was vital, and it was needed, if community life, and living together as a people, was to be possible. In the same way it has its part to play in the parallel situation of childhood today, where relationships between children are primarily governed by the under-lying understanding they have, that as they would do to others, so they must expect the same to be done to them (though, as they develop and grow older, they will grow out of this). Of course, where men refuse to reason, and won't do good willingly, it necessarily has its application in adult life as well.

In some ways then we have covered both points which were raised. We have accounted for the giving of the law, on the one hand, and the fact that it is taken up by the Lord in the New Testament where, as we noted, its teaching - in a sense - is counteracted and a new understanding of our relationship with other people is given. What was true in Old Testament times no longer had the same application in New Testament times, for the essential state of mankind had changed and developed.

Whilst we rightly urge consideration of a particular context in which this law of the Old Testament, or in fact any law of the Old Testament, has been given, yet there is also contained within it an internal spiritual meaning which is extremely pertinent to every one of us. And this is what I now want to turn to. In essence, and what this law is saying to you and me is that every evil carries its own particular punishment with it. In the words of Leviticus, as a man does, so it is done to him. The same damage that a man seeks to inflict on others is, (though he is at the time unaware of it), inflicted on him. And this is not something that we have to go to see to and attend to. It is something that happens in any case. To the extent that a man seeks to destroy, to that same extent destruction is wrought on him, from within. To the extent, for example, that a man lies, to that extent does he cause a perversity of his spirit within. To the extent that a man destroys the innocence of another, to that extent also, does he destroy innocence with himself. To the extent that a man loves adultery, and cherishes all forms of disorder and uncleanness, to that same extent there is a withering away, and a sickening of his soul within. And this is the thing about evil so frequently overlooked and not accounted for. All evil inevitably and unmistakably carries its own penalty with it. You cannot commit evil without inflicting corresponding damage on yourself. People say what is right when they urge pity for the evil-doer, for

what he is doing to himself he cannot see and take in. We also need to be pitied when we commit evil in view of the damage we cause to ourselves within. And thus the law, so understood, is nothing less than a statement of the truth, that man loses in himself what he takes away from others, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

In the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg we read that "with him who does good from the heart, good inflows from heaven on every side into the heart and soul of him who does it .... and at the same time the affection of love for the neighbour to whom one does good is increased, and with this affection a delight which is heavenly and inexpressible.... With him (however) who from the heart does evil to another, evil inflows from hell on every side... the affection of the love of self is increased, and with it the delight of hatred and revenge against those who do not submit themselves." (*Arcana Caelestia* 9049). What a terrible thing this is, to self-inflict this upon ourselves; to throw off by both evil thoughts and evil actions, the sphere of protection which is to be found in the presence of the angels and of the Lord, and to allow in their place the perverseness and destruction that the hells only bring with them. Evil cannot but bring with it its own punishment. This is what this law of retaliation is intended to say to us today. As we do to others so it shall be done to us. It is a law of consequences which we in no way can avoid. The encouraging thing about it is that it applies both in the case of evil and in the case of good. As we do good so good is increased with us. As we do evil, however, so evil is increased with us.

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