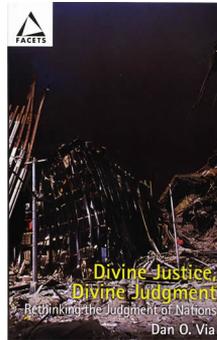


# ○ REVIEW OF DAN O. VIA, *DIVINE JUSTICE, DIVINE JUDGMENT: RETHINKING THE JUDGMENT OF NATIONS*

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*Kathryn Imray, Murdoch University*



This book is one in a series of Fortress Press' Facets series, offering 'Brief, brilliant treatments of vital aspects of faith and life'. If it is alliteration we are after, one word more applicable than either of those offered to qualify this particular treatment is, perhaps, 'brave'. *Divine Justice, Divine Judgment* presents a Christian theology of 9/11 that is bound to be unpopular. Via attempts to interpret a 'new and perplexing' event, 9/11, in the terms of the 'old and more familiar' biblical justice and judgment (pp. 2–3). Via accepts 'the prophetic understanding of God's judging action in history as a hermeneutical lens that is still valid for Christian theology' (p. 4). He proposes that 9/11 can be understood both as an injustice/evil inflicted upon the US and as a judgment against them for their violations of biblical justice (p. 4). His hope is for sufficient changes to be made that, should such an event as 9/11 happen again, 'we shall not have reason to interpret that evil as judgment against us' (p. 4). Via brings into play many texts both from the NT and from the HB, as well as the theories of several philosophers and theologians. As my own area of interest is the HB, this review focuses primarily on Via's treatment of the HB texts which provide him with his entry point into his treatment of 9/11.

The book is organised in two parts. Part One explores the theological perspectives of justice, judgment, and evil. In Chapter Two Via draws on Aristotle and the HB to establish two categories of justice: distributive and retributive. Retributive justice, he argues, is often a result of violations of social justice. Via then looks at Hosea, Isaiah, and the story of the Tower of Babel to discover how and why judgment occurs (Chapter Three), which leads him to differentiate between 9/11 as an evil committed against the US by al-Qaeda (Chapter Four) and as divine judgment against the US (Chapter Five). In Chapter Four Via develops a working definition of evil through such biblical texts as Paul and Job, while in Chapter Five he develops a challenging theory of judgment in which he distinguishes between prospective and retrospective proclamations of judgment (p. 67) and defines divine judgment as an event resulting from human behaviour, an event which a

believing community interprets as divine action (p. 71). Via declares that it is only through the death of the old that the new may be born (p. 75), though he expresses doubt about the judgment interpretation (p. 77). In Part Two Via asks what the US has been doing since 9/11 in order to avoid another such judgment, both in domestic (Chapter Seven) and in foreign (Chapter Eight) affairs. He concludes with projected repercussions from current policy: environmental collapse (p. 150), economic collapse (p. 152), and the unheeded slide toward fascism (p. 154). Via suggests repentance following John Rawls's theory of fairness as justice (p. 159) and Kathryn Tanner's theory of the cooperative society (p. 161).

All of the above hinges upon Via being able to argue successfully that the US is subject to divine judgment. Via uses two HB texts, Amos 1-2 and Genesis 8-9, to show that the US is in a covenant relationship with God requiring that the US conform to certain standards of behaviour both within its own boundaries and between it and other nations which, because violated, resulted in the judgment of 9/11.

I find troubling Via's reading of Genesis 9 and Amos 1-2. It might be true that there is 'no wholly uncovenanted nation' in the HB (p. 5), but the covenant cut in Genesis 8-9 does require specific behaviours. Gen. 8:21-22, 9:9, 16, and 19 – the verses chosen by Via to prove that there is no uncovenanted nation – can be seen, when put into context, to require Noah and his descendants both not to eat blood (Gen. 9:4) and not to shed the blood of other people (Gen. 9:6), in addition to the more pleasurable command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:1, 7). If the US and its citizens are bound by this covenant, they are not only required not to shed blood, they are also presumably required not to eat blood. Via, not surprisingly, doesn't mention the latter. It is surprising, though, that he also does not make mention of the specification not to shed blood. Rather, Via assumes that 'God makes an absolute commitment to humankind without imposing any conditions on the human partner' (p. 5).

The prohibition against bloodshed can be found also in Amos 1-2. Via states in his analysis of Amos 1-2 that only Judah and Israel are judged for religious and social transgressions while the other nations are judged for social and political transgressions (p. 25). Via confuses the issue by referring to the 'social' transgressions both of Judah and Israel and of the other nations as if they are the same. It seems to me, and one can see even in the summary list of the other nations' transgression provided by Via (p. 25), that the nations other than Judah and Israel are judged for what Via later describes, in relation to the US, as foreign affairs (pp. 115–148). The other nations in Amos 1-2 are judged for 'war crimes' and for actions which impinge upon other nations. This is not a 'social' transgression in the same sense as Israel commits 'social' transgressions. Israel is condemned by God for selling out the needy or those with a just cause for profit (Amos 2:6). However, only Israel, in Amos 1-2, is held to this type of justice.

The judgment against nations other than Israel and Judah in Amos 1-2 then are, arguably, those who have committed 'war crimes', who have forgotten the 'covenant of brotherhood' (Amos 1:9), which covenant might be found also in Gen. 9:5-6, and which seems to entail simply refraining from killing one another. Via's exploration of the US foreign policy, specifically the carnage it visits on foreign peoples whilst scrambling for wealth and for oil, fits very well with this element of the judgment of nations. However, Via's emphasis on social justice within the US does not fit quite so well. Neither in Amos 1-2 nor in the covenant made with Noah is any nation other than Israel enjoined to treat its own people well, beyond refraining from killing them.

In this light, Via's discussion of non-fatal US domestic policy becomes redundant. It is necessary to make a clear connection between US foreign and domestic policies, and especially how US domestic policy detrimentally affects the lives of people both inside and outside the US (that is, kills them). Via does not make this clear enough, though he has ample opportunity in his discussions about environment (p. 101), health care (p. 87), abortion and the rise of the Christian right (p. 105), and about US imperialism and its consequent militarism (pp. 116 and 131). Via could have made a case for US domestic policy killing both US citizens and the citizens of other countries, thereby violating the covenant of Genesis 8-9 and also aligning it with the judgment of the nations (other than Israel and Judah) in Amos 1-2, but, because he considers biblical social justice (distributive justice; see pp. 11-26) as binding on the US, not just on Israel as I have argued above, and because he considers the covenant in Genesis 8-9 as a one-way street, restricting only the behaviour of God, he has not expressly made these links.

Via's book is disturbing, not least because – should one accept his treatment of all the biblical texts woven throughout it – his hermeneutic could be successful. It leads one to question the responsibilities of theologians and Bible scholars towards our texts and toward the people whose lives they inform. However, Via's treatment of his chosen HB texts is certainly not without contention. It is my view that Via's argument would have been stronger had he left out issues of domestic policy altogether, or limited the 'judgment' represented by 9/11 to US foreign policy and domestic policy directly resulting in death for US citizens and/or citizens of nations other than the US. The fundamental problem with Via's approach, though, is his attempt to establish 9/11 within the judgment tradition. Via's project could have been just as successful had he not used the biblical judgment of the nations as the hermeneutical key to 9/11, but without the hermeneutical entry point provided by the judgment of nations, this would have had to become a work of politics and not one of theology.