

JÜRGEN MOLTMANN AND THE OLD TESTAMENT:
A BIBLICAL-DOGMATIC DISCUSSION OF HUMAN SIN

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Introduction

Jürgen Moltmann is acknowledged as one of the most influential voices in contemporary theology by both supporters and critics alike. Moreover, his influence is not restricted to a single sphere, but encompasses both the West and the Third World, both the academy and the confessing church.¹ He figures prominently in many of contemporary theology's most vibrant discussions, grappling as he does with highly relevant issues such as ecology, ecclesiology, and political theology.

In this essay, I bring Moltmann's theological writings into conversation with the Old Testament. My focus is the enduring reality of sin and the nature of God's response to it. My method is to observe how Moltmann speaks to his modern context about this crucial biblical theme, and then to compare and contrast his approach with that of the Old Testament. In simple terms, this essay intersects biblical and dogmatic theology, the unifying factor being the theme of human sin and its divine remedy.

Moltmann's Life and Writings

Jürgen Moltmann was born in Hamburg in 1926. He describes his liberal Protestant upbringing as being thoroughly secular and recalls that he read the German classics instead of the Bible. His desire to study science and mathematics led to him to university but he was drafted into the German army before he was able to begin his studies. In 1945, Moltmann was sent to the

¹ Williams, "Critical Introduction," 76; Bauckham, *Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 1; Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 172–74.

front lines in Belgium where he surrendered to the first British soldier he encountered. He was held as a prisoner of war until 1948, and it was during these years that he had his first substantive encounters with God and with the Bible. He writes:

In the camps in Belgium and Scotland I experienced both the collapse of those things that had been certainties for me and a new hope to live by, provided by the Christian faith. I probably owe to this hope, not only my mental and moral but physical survival as well, for it was what saved me from despairing and giving up. I came back a Christian, with a new “personal goal” of studying theology, so that I might understand the power of hope to which I owed my life.²

After receiving his doctoral degree from Göttingen in 1952, Moltmann served as pastor of the Evangelical Church of Bremen-Wasserhorst, a small Reformed congregation in rural Germany. He speaks fondly about his time there, during which he set aside his lecture notes and instead preached the “shared theology” that emerged from his experiences with the farming community.³ In 1958, Moltmann travelled to Wuppertal where he taught theology at an academy operated by the Confessing Church. He then taught for a brief time at the University of Bonn, before accepting the prestigious position of professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen. He remained at Tübingen until his retirement in 1994.

Moltmann is best known for his *Theology of Hope*, which drew strong reactions when it was first published in 1964. It is beyond the scope of this brief survey to trace the origins of this work, or to consider in any depth why it struck such a powerful chord with its readers.⁴ It suffices to say, as Moltmann himself has said in recent years, that “the subject was in the air.”⁵ Traditional theology was declining in the face of rapid secularization, and “protest atheism” was gaining strength. People were understandably concerned about the world’s future, and in this respect Christianity seemed more problematic than helpful. Moltmann’s call for a thoroughly

² Moltmann, “Autobiographical Note,” 203.

³ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 59–60.

⁴ For a discussion of the origins of *Theology of Hope*, see the work of Meeks.

⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 9.

eschatological approach to the theological task, coupled with his insistence upon theological praxis, gave theology a way forward at a time when much of the church was in retreat.

Moltmann's next two works (*The Crucified God*, 1973; *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 1975) round out his early period, offering additional perspectives on Christian theology. Whereas *Theology of Hope* insists upon the eschatological orientation of Christian theology, Moltmann's *Crucified God* presents the cross of Christ as the ultimate criterion of all Christian theology. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* proceeds from these reflections on Good Friday and Easter in order to consider the significance of Pentecost, particularly the role of the church in the world.⁶ The concerns that dominate these early works have endured throughout Moltmann's career. On the subject of his work, Moltmann writes: "If I were to attempt to sum up the outline of my theology in a few key phrases, I would have at the least to say that I am attempting to reflect on a theology which has: a biblical foundation; an eschatological orientation; a political responsibility."⁷

In his more recent writings, Moltmann has avoided presenting a comprehensive theology, choosing instead to provide what he calls "contributions to systematic theology":

By using the word 'contributions', the writer recognizes the conditions and limitations of his own position, and the relativity of his own particular environment. He makes no claim to say everything, or to cover the whole of theology. He rather understands his own 'whole' as part of a 'whole' that is much greater.⁸

The six volumes in this series of "contributions" discuss the doctrine of God (*The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 1981), the doctrine of creation (*God in Creation*, 1985), Christology (*The Way of Jesus Christ*, 1990), pneumatology (*The Spirit of Life*, 1992), and eschatology (*The Coming of God*, 1996), concluding with a discussion on theological method (*Experiences in*

⁶ This is how Moltmann describes the trilogy in *History and the Triune God*, 176.

⁷ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 182.

⁸ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, xii.

Theology, 2000). Because of the way that Moltmann has chosen to publish his ideas, it is impossible to open a volume of “the theology of Jürgen Moltmann” and turn to the section on sin.⁹ This essay therefore seeks to be sensitive to the manner in which the theme of sin is woven throughout his writings.

Resonances between Moltmann and the Old Testament

We have seen that Moltmann consciously strives to perform a “biblically based” theology. This is almost certainly due to the formative influence that biblical theology had on him during his years studying under Gerhard von Rad and Ernst Käsemann.¹⁰ As an example, consider Moltmann’s treatment of divine revelation. He writes:

If we would trace out the Old Testament’s peculiarly ambiguous, emphatic and yet widely broadcast observations on ‘revelation’ and turn them to good account for dogmatics, then it is not advisable to set out from the assumption that every man’s existence, threatened as it is by chaos and transience, leads him to ask after ‘revelation’, nor yet to start with the question how the hidden God, the Origin and the Absolute, becomes manifest to men estranged from him. Rather, it is essential to let the Old Testament itself not only provide the answers, but also pose the problem of revelation, before we draw systematic conclusions.¹¹

Elsewhere Moltmann is even more explicit in his criticisms, taking both Bultmann and Barth to task. These men, he charges, take as their starting point a *concept* of revelation that has been derived from general word studies or from later theological traditions. Consequently, they develop a way of speaking about the revelation of God “without first asking what is the reference

⁹ In fact, Moltmann fails to provide any in-depth analysis of sin. For Joy Ann McDougall’s comments on this, see *Pilgrimage of Love*, esp. 123 and 163.

¹⁰ Bauckham writes: “The pressure from biblical scholarship to overcome the dehistoricizing of eschatology which had characterised most twentieth-century German theology was mounting, and it was in the conjunction of these biblical theological influences with his systematic theological concerns and, eventually, with Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope, that Moltmann found the way to do theological justice to biblical eschatology” (*Messianic Theology*, 7).

¹¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 95.

and bearing of the words for the revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments.”¹² Remarks like this reveal Moltmann’s sympathies towards the task of biblical theology. Although he wrestles with the great questions of the modern world, he strives to sustain an authentic engagement with the Bible, one that refuses to impose modern categories and thereby do an injustice to scripture’s incarnated and enculturated voices. Where he departs from the concerns or conclusions of the biblical authors, he departs honestly, having given a fair hearing. For this reason, I will refrain from discussing Moltmann’s handling of specific texts and focus instead on how his theological emphases align with or depart from the emphases of the Old Testament authors, at all points seeking to remain conscious of the fact that theology must always address a context, and that the modern context that Moltmann addresses cannot be conflated with the ancient contexts addressed by the authors of the Old Testament. In this section I will consider how Moltmann’s thoughts on sin resonate with the witness of the Old Testament; in the next section I will discuss some prominent ways of talking about sin that do not have clear resonances with Moltmann’s writings.

The Divine-Human Relationship

Throughout Moltmann’s writings, there is a perpetual coming back to the question of God’s relationship to humanity. God is deeply relational within his own nature, and this relatedness opens up so as to include God’s creation. Much could be said about the manner in which Moltmann conceives of these things—his Trinitarian reflections have engendered many debates—but here I am primarily interested in how this framework affects his handling of human sin.

¹² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 45.

Above all, attention must be drawn to Moltmann's insistence on the *pathos* of God. The classical doctrine of God's impassibility, he claims, must not be misconstrued as a purely negative formulation, for in its encounter with the *agape* of the Christian gospel the Greek ideal of θεὸς ἀπαθής was filled up positively with the notion of God's freely given love.¹³ In addition—and more to the point for this essay—Moltmann follows Abraham Heschel in reading the Old Testament prophets as proclaimers of a *pathetic theology*.¹⁴ According to the prophets, he says, God is interested in his creation, his people, and his right. “The prophets never identified God's *pathos* with his being, since for them it was not something absolute, but the form of his relationship to others. The divine *pathos* is expressed in the relationship of God to his people.”¹⁵ God opens his heart towards his covenant people such that he is injured by disobedience, and in this way divine love plays a foundational role in our understanding of human sin.

The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference. Indifference towards justice and injustice would be a retreat on the part of God from the covenant. But his wrath is an expression of his abiding interest in man. Anger and love do not therefore keep a balance. ‘His wrath lasts for the twinkling of an eye,’ and, as the Jonah story shows, God takes back his anger for the sake of his love in reaction to human repentance.¹⁶

In other words, sin affects humanity's relationship with God, but this wound can be healed because God continues to love.

Undoubtedly, clear expressions of this idea can be found in the Old Testament prophets. The book of Hosea, for instance, is almost entirely preoccupied with Yahweh's passionate love for his people—a love that persists despite the people's cold response. What is more, as Douglas Stuart observes, “[Hosea's] portrayal of God as other than cold and dispassionate is surely a biblical theme. God's attitude towards his people and his world in both testaments is love—

¹³ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 269–70.

¹⁴ Heschel, *The Prophets*.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 270–71.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 272.

which though surely a matter of behavior and relationship, still involves the essence of an emotion.”¹⁷ A critical text in this respect is Exod 34:6–7. In this highly influential passage we do not find a philosophical discussion of the nature of God’s being, but rather a highly relational declaration of his personal character: he is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. This revelation of the divine being is given to Moses following Israel’s rebellion at Sinai and in the context of a covenantal renewal, so we are quite justified in treating it as something central to the Old Testament’s witness concerning sin and its remedy. An even stronger case can be formulated when we draw in the numerous places where this so-called character credo is found elsewhere in the canon. Consistently, it reappears in contexts where human sin has done harm to the divine-human relationship and where forgiveness is needed (e.g. Num 14:18; Pss 86:15; 103:8; Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3; 2 Chr 30:9). Moltmann is entirely correct that the Old Testament conceives of sin in association with humanity’s relationship with God.

There is a hitch, however. Before we can apply these theological ideas to human sin in general, it is necessary to consider the fact that the theologians of Israel speak as they do because of Yahweh’s covenant with his people: “The *pathetic theology* of Judaism must begin from the covenant of God with the people and from membership of this people of God.”¹⁸ If it is by means of the presupposition of election that Israel develops this understanding of sin, what right does the non-Israelite have to appropriate it? Does this conception of sin apply only to people within the covenant? Here Moltmann turns first to the cross. “Where for Israel immediacy with God is grounded on the presupposition of the covenant, for Christians it is Christ himself who

¹⁷ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 54.

¹⁸ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 275.

communicates the Fatherhood of God and the power of the Spirit.”¹⁹ In the cross of Jesus Christ, Moltmann suggests, God himself creates the conditions for communion with God, even for the sinners, the godless, and those forsaken by God. Although the sin of the world engenders wrath, the cross of Christ reveals the enduring love of God, and his resurrection opens up the possibility of the world’s redemption and the creation of a new community of love.²⁰ The Christian theologian, therefore, is justified in speaking about all human sin as something that is relational and that can only be remedied through divine love.

In another place, Moltmann approaches the question of humanity’s relationship with God by means of the *imago Dei*. Abandoning the anthropology of substance, he seeks “to understand the human being in the relations given by the history of God, and in that light.”²¹ This approach, he suggests, leads to a conception of the *imago Dei* as something established by God that cannot be abrogated or withdrawn except by God himself. The *imago Dei* is God’s relationship to human beings, and this is something that sin cannot destroy: “Human sin may certainly pervert human beings’ relationship to God, but not God’s relationship to human beings.”²² Since the *imago Dei* relationship is grounded in creation rather than in the more exclusive concept of covenant, Moltmann is once again able to draw upon Old Testament theology in order to argue that, while sin complicates the divine-human relationship, that relationship endures by virtue of God’s enduring love. He writes:

Since the Fall, and under the conditions of sin’s domination, this human designation to be God’s image on earth must certainly be viewed as grace—the grace of the God who holds fast to his relationship to human beings in spite of their opposition. The graciousness of this faithfulness of

¹⁹ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 275.

²⁰ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 290. “[God in the person of the Son] does not merely become the covenant partner of an elect people so that men must belong to this people through circumcision and obedience to the covenant in order to enter into his fellowship. He lowers himself and accepts the whole of mankind without limits and conditions, so that each man may participate in him with the whole of his life” (Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 276).

²¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 232.

²² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 233.

God's to his refractory image is a pointer to the messianic calling of human beings through Christ, and finds expression in that calling. The completion of the *imago Dei* is therefore to be found at the end of God's history with human beings.²³

The Eschatological Perspective

More than anything else, Moltmann is best known for his eschatological perspective. This outlook permeates every aspect of his theology—including his reflections on human sin.

Consistently, Moltmann treats human sin as something presently wrong that will eventually be made right. Sin, he insists, must be viewed in the light of God's promise:

In the eyes of Christian hope the epithet 'transient' belongs not only to the things which we generally feel are destined to pass away, but it sees as transient those very things which are generally felt to be always there and to cause the transience of all life, namely, evil and death. Death becomes transient in the promised resurrection. Sin becomes transient in the justification of the sinner and the righteousness for which we have to hope.²⁴

Essentially, what Moltmann is saying here is that sin has a historic character, whereby it plays a critical role in our understanding of human history. This is true with respect to universal history, in that sin is a component of the cosmic story on a par with other pervasive realities like evil, decay, and death. But, as the Apostle Paul so strongly insists, sin also has a historic character within the life of the individual, who lives with the reality of sin yet presses on towards a better life. In considering these two ways in which sin is historic, Moltmann says, it is important that the narrower history not be divorced from the larger history of which it is a part. The sin of the individual cannot be isolated from the sinfulness of creation. Although the righteousness of God comes to the justified individual by way of the cross and resurrection, it is also publicly revealed to all of creation in the cross and resurrection. Moreover, it is important that we bear in mind this historic character of sin when contemplating its divine remedy. God's solution for sin—his righteousness—comes to humanity in the form of hope, so that it engenders

²³ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 233.

²⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 165.

a contradiction between what is presently experienced and what is hoped for. This hope and its concomitant contradiction can be seen easily in the life of the individual believer. They are also present on the universal stage, as creation awaits the consummation of that which has been inaugurated.

Since Jesus' resurrection and his exaltation as Lord is not yet the consummation of his lordship, but the ground and guarantee of his liberating and remedial lordship over all, so the divine righteousness is present in faith and in baptism, yet in such a way that it is engaged in a process which will be completed only at the parousia of Christ. In this process we have the divine righteousness here always as a gift that is pledged, disputed and subject to testing, that is, we have it in terms of promise and expectancy.²⁵

This understanding of sin and righteousness strongly influences Moltmann's ethic and his sense of mission. It is *because* the believer approaches sin armed with the hope of righteousness that he or she is able to engage in a victorious struggle over its power. The promise of bodily resurrection undergirds the pursuit of bodily obedience.²⁶ Of equal importance is the fact that the individual struggles against sin in the context of a hope that is larger than his or her own self. Because in Christian theology sin takes the form of a historic reality that stands in contradiction to the promises of God concerning his entire creation, the Christian Church must be a missionary disturbance in human society.²⁷ This ethical and missional framework is summarized well by Moltmann when he writes:

In the darkness of the pain of love, the man of hope discovers the dissension between the self and the body. In the struggle for obedience and for what is due to God in the body he discovers the contradiction of the flesh and his subjection to the hostile powers of annihilation and death. In beginning to hope for the triumph of life and to wait for resurrection, he perceives the deadliness of death and can no longer put up with it. The corporeality which thus comes to the fore in hope is plainly the starting point for the solidarity of the believer with the whole of creation which, like him, is subjected to vanity—in hope. This corporeality, for the redemption of which the man of hope waits because it has not yet taken place, is the existential starting point for the universality that marks the Christian hope and for the as yet undetermined character of what is hoped for. The

²⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 206.

²⁶ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

²⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 22; 288–91.

hope of the redemption of the body and the hope of the redemption of all creation from vanity are one.²⁸

When we look to the Old Testament, we find that related ideas are integral to its witness. The Torah, for instance, narrates Israel's history within "a universal frame of reference"²⁹ wherein the nation is God's way of addressing what has gone wrong in creation. Sin dates back to humanity's primeval history (Gen 1–11), but God is active within history and he is bringing about a solution. Abraham has been given the primeval blessing in the form of a promise (Gen 12:1–3), and his descendants have been established as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:4–6). Is this movement towards the resolution of humanity's sin problem negated by the ensuing accounts of Israel's rebellion and punishment? By no means. To the contrary, the narrative's recurring cycle of sin, punishment, forgiveness, and restoration is part of an overarching literary plan that pushes its reader towards an appropriate response to God's promises. The Torah, after all, is the product of an exilic community attempting to come to terms with its past and present in order that it might proceed into the future. The stories of Israel's past are told with a view to Israel's present, which is to say that they place the reader in a narrative that engenders repentance and faith in Israel's future. This is why the Torah's pessimism with regard to Israel's obedience is so often accompanied by threads of hope. Boda writes:

In Genesis, this is seen in the transformation of Jacob after being "exiled" from the land, returning, and wrestling with God. In Exodus, this is demonstrated in the undeserved grace of Yahweh after the people's idolatry with the golden calf. Leviticus expresses this in the hope of Lev 26:40–46, which envisions a penitential response of the people in exile that will result in renewal of covenant and return to the land. In Numbers, this hope is expressed through the opportunity afforded to the new generation after the wilderness punishment. Finally, Deuteronomy expresses hope in the revelation that in exile there will be repentance and a circumcision of the heart by Yahweh (Deut 4:29–31; 30:1–10).³⁰

²⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 213–15.

²⁹ Fretheim, *Pentateuch*, 44.

³⁰ Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 116–17.

The reader of the Torah is permitted to seize these threads of hope only insofar as he or she is willing to embrace the text's negative evaluation of Israel's disobedience and its implicit call for repentance in the face of God's mercy.³¹ The Torah thus draws the historic struggle of the individual up into a universal struggle and depicts sin as an enemy that can be overcome only through faith in God's promise of salvation.³²

Very similar themes can be found in the prophets, although here I can mention only two examples.³³ In Ezekiel, God promises to grant future restoration to a purified remnant from among his people. This restoration is predicated upon a spiritual renewal whereby people come to terms with their past sin (e.g. 6:9; 20:43; 36:31). In Greenberg's words, "shame and disgrace over the past bespeak the new, impressionable, contrite heart that will animate the future Israel."³⁴ Furthermore, contrition must be accompanied by a renewed obedience, such that people cease their defiling behaviours (e.g. 11:16–21; 37:23–24). Clearly, however, both contrition and obedience are developments that God promises to bring about within his people (e.g. 11:19–20; 36:26–27). Thus Ezekiel's repeated calls for repentance are delivered within an eschatological framework wherein repentance is the promised result of God's supervening of history. Human responses of contrition and obedience are enabled by a hope that is grounded in the promise of divine initiative.

If anything, Isaiah is even more permeated by hope. This hardly needs to be argued with regard to chs. 40–55, which are dominated by the notion of God's promised eschatological salvation. The suffering of exile has been a necessary punishment for sin (40:2), but the

³¹ One cannot help but see a close analogy here with the situation in Germany following the war.

³² This argument can be extended to encompass the shape of the entire Old Testament canon, which in its Hebrew form reflects a shaping similar to what I have just described. The very shape of the canon thus lends credibility to Moltmann's understanding of sin as a historic reality that needs to be confronted in hope. See Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 238–40.

³³ In this section I am drawing upon ideas found in Boda, *Severe Mercy*.

³⁴ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 306.

imminent ending of the Babylonian captivity will usher in a new age not only for Israel but also for the entire world. As Childs observes, however, this vision of restoration is also present within Isaiah 1–39. Isaiah of Jerusalem proclaims both Israel’s judgement *and* her future salvation. What is more, even amidst the judgments of the nations in chs. 13–23, Isaiah envisions a future where the nations will come under the sovereignty of God.³⁵ Contrary to what some have claimed, chs. 40–55 do not distance themselves from the earlier message of judgement; they merely seize upon an embedded message of promise and in hope declare that the time has come.³⁶ What can be said about chs. 56–66? Do we find here a muted hope? An abandoning of the promise on account of disobedience? No, but here more than anywhere else in Isaiah there are clear indications of the contradiction that arises for those who choose to hope in God’s promise. The new age is indeed coming, but the old age remains in all its violence. Even the end of the Babylonian captivity—so passionately lauded in chs. 40–55—must be recast as a component of a still larger plan.³⁷ This is not the end of hope, but a foregrounding of the ethical and missional dimensions of hope. In Childs words, “The salvation promised by Second Isaiah is misunderstood if it is not joined with an obedient response.”³⁸

It is clear that both the Torah and the prophets encourage the belief that God is actively confronting the problem of human sin in such a way as to bring about a better future. The contrition and obedience that flow out of this hope are transformative of the individual, who comes to see his or her own sin in the light of larger redemptive developments. In these ways, the Old Testament resonates with Moltmann’s supposition that the historic reality of sin must be actively confronted with a hope engendered by God’s promises.

³⁵ Childs, *Isaiah*, 116.

³⁶ Cf. Seitz, “Divine Council”.

³⁷ Childs, *Isaiah*, 266, 463.

³⁸ Childs, *Isaiah*, 456.

The Social Dimension

From the above treatment of the eschatological character of Moltmann's theology, it should already be clear why he insists that theology must be political: a theology that has no impact on the present has no claim to being an authentic theology of hope.

The coming lordship of the risen Christ cannot be merely hoped for and awaited. This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society. Hence mission means not merely propagation of faith and hope, but also historic transformation of life....The hope of the gospel has a polemic and liberating relation not only to the religions and ideologies of men, but still more to the factual, practical life of men and to the relationships in which this life is lived.³⁹

With regard to human sin in particular, the political nature of Moltmann's theology finds expression in his insistence that liberation from sin entails more than the individual's inner freedom. Insofar as sin affects "horizontal" relationships between human beings as much as the "vertical" relationship between the individual and God, so too sin's remedy must have a social dimension. So on the one hand individuals are "freed from the obstructions of guilt and the melancholy of death," and on the other hand "the compulsions of economic, political and cultural repression are broken."⁴⁰ Avoiding a narrowly individualistic conception of sin, Moltmann reminds us that sin can be embodied in social structures just as much as in fleshly individuals.⁴¹

Lest Moltmann's thinking in this respect be mistaken for a "baptised" form of neo-Marxist philosophy (along the lines of Karl Barth's early suspicions), I should stress that he does not reduce Christian hope to something that can be realized through political activity.⁴² As Richard Bauckham astutely observes,

³⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 329–30.

⁴⁰ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 99.

⁴¹ See especially Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 128, 138–40.

⁴² For Karl Barth's initial thoughts on *Theology of Hope*, see *Letters 1961–1968*, 174–76; for a response from Moltmann, see *Theology of Hope*, 9.

It is not that human activity in the present builds the future kingdom, but that the future kingdom by arousing hope and obedience in the present creates anticipations of itself within history. These are real anticipations of the kingdom, forms of God's presence...within the contradictions of a still unredeemed world, but they are precisely anticipations of a kingdom which itself remains *eschatological*, transcendent beyond all its historical approximations.⁴³

In other words, however strongly Moltmann insists upon the necessary connection between Christian hope and political liberation, he also refuses to conflate them. Some see this as an abstraction that detracts from the struggle for liberation, but I find it to be a critical component of Moltmann's approach to structural sin. When all political acts of liberation are relativized in this way, no social structure is permitted to stand as an acceptable status quo. Instead, in all times and places, the critique of the cross must be heard. Bauckham, it would seem, concurs: "The transcendence of the kingdom exposes the deficiencies of every revolutionary achievement and makes frank recognition of them possible, against the tendency of revolutionary regimes to hide such deficiencies behind a glorification of the new *status quo*."⁴⁴

It goes without saying, I think, that these ideas are heavily indebted to relatively recent intellectual developments. Nevertheless, there are lines of continuity that connect with earlier writings, including some within the Old Testament. At a very general level, we can observe that social justice is commanded in the law (e.g. Deut 24:10–22) and that the prophets pronounce judgement because of social problems (e.g. Jer 5:26-29; Amos 8:4-14). Clearly injustice is recognized as an essential component of the fallen human condition. Moreover, in Isaiah 58 this recognition is explicitly tied together with humanity's hope for release from the consequences of human sin. People who cry out for divine assistance will not be heard if they live unjustly, since their cries for help will be drowned out by the cries of those who are being oppressed. Like human sin, the coming righteousness of God is not an individual affair. The righteousness of

⁴³ Bauckham, *Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 104.

⁴⁴ Bauckham, *Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 105.

God for which the righteous hope entails justice for all who dwell on the earth, and so the righteous have an obligation to act justly and to love mercy (Micah 6:8).

We also find in several texts an awareness of the fact that sin somehow manages to endure within social contexts long after its initial perpetrator has died. A dramatic example of this may be seen in the book of Kings, which consistently attributes the sins of Israel to the iniquities of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 15:34; 16:19, 25–26, 31; 22:53; 2 Kgs 3:2–3; 10:29–31; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28). Similar sentiments are scattered elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Lev 26:39–40; Ezra 9; Neh 1, 9; Dan 9; Ps 106). Arguably, there is nothing especially esoteric or arcane about this. As Weinfeld says with regard to the message of Kings, those who suffer retribution “do not perish as a consequence of their fathers’ sins but because they have adopted and propagated the evil ways of their fathers.”⁴⁵ So while the message of the Old Testament may not be as well-formulated as more recent 20th- and 21st-century theories, it does manifest an awareness of the fact that human cultures tend to socialize and even institutionalize injustice. Highly striking in this regard is the Old Testament’s willingness to acknowledge that even divinely established institutions can become oppressive and hence sinful (e.g. Jer 5:30-31).

I conclude, therefore, that Moltmann’s thoughts on the social dimension of human sin resonate with the Old Testament. The Old Testament recognizes that sin cannot be treated simply as a problem between God and human individuals. It has social consequences. Moreover, in its social manifestation sin has both intra-generational and inter-generational consequences.⁴⁶ The flipside of God’s word of promise is always a word of judgement against the enduring corruption

⁴⁵ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomistic School*, 319. He describes this principle, that “God requites the sins of the fathers on the children only if the latter propagate the evil ways of their fathers,” as “the underlying view of retribution in the deuteronomistic history.” This is evident from the fact that the author of Kings is aware of the principle that children should not be put to death for the sins of their parents, since each person must die for their own sins (2 Kgs 14:6, quoting Deut 24:16). It is also explicit in the passages cited above, which refer both to Jeroboam’s sin *and* to Israel’s subsequent sin.

⁴⁶ This terminology may be found throughout Boda, *Severe Mercy*.

of human society, which is heard as a word of liberating freedom by those who are presently enduring that harsh edge of that corruption.

Another Aspect of the Old Testament Witness

By now it should be obvious that when Jürgen Moltmann and the Old Testament are brought together and permitted to discourse on the topic of human sin, clear areas of agreement emerge. This, of course, is a consequence of Moltmann's conscious effort to formulate a theology that is thoroughly biblical. In addition, it should be apparent that Moltmann's thinking cannot be understood in isolation from the problem of human sin. He has not provided us with a sustained treatment of sin, but his understanding of sin plays an integral part in his major theological emphases (e.g. the relational nature of God, hope, and liberation).

Personally, I find the manner in which Moltmann has addressed the questions of the modern world to be inspiring. He has developed his thinking along lines that have made it possible for 20th- and 21st-century people to seriously consider the ongoing relevance of the Christian theological tradition. My reflections in this section, therefore, are exploratory rather than critical. I do not mean to imply that Moltmann is entirely silent with regard to the ideas that I am going to consider. Nor do I mean to imply that they undermine or contradict his work. I point them out because this is the task of the biblical theologian, and because there may yet be ways of presenting these ideas in a way that makes clear the continuing relevance of the Old Testament's witness concerning sin.

Sin as Disobedience

We have seen that the Old Testament contains several complementary perspectives on the nature of human sin. We have also seen that it often views sin as something relational, both in a

“vertical” sense (i.e. as a complication of the divine-human relationship) and in a “horizontal” sense (i.e. as a complication of human social relations). Here I want to consider a somewhat more specific instantiation of this general conception, in which sin is understood as a form of disobedience with respect to some instituted hierarchy.

Beginning in Genesis, we see that in Gen 3 sin is depicted as a violation of God’s explicit command. From the outset of the Old Testament, therefore, an unequal divine-human relationship is in view and sin constitutes a violation of the divine will. This becomes even more conspicuous in Exodus when God supplies his people with a series of laws which, according to Boda, serve to “define sin for Israel.”⁴⁷ In Numbers we encounter less emphasis on law, but much stress is placed upon the importance of authority: Israel’s great sin in the wilderness is rebellion. Deuteronomy speaks inspiringly about love, but it also articulates explicit norms associated with the divine covenant. Insofar as Israel’s acceptance of those terms entails an acceptance of Yahweh as sovereign, covenant violations must be viewed as acts of disobedience towards an authority. Without question, the Former Prophets are dependent on Deuteronomy in this respect, since they depict the history of Israel as a history of sinful disobedience resulting in divine punishment. Similarly, the proclamations of judgement and salvation found in the Latter Prophets can only be understood when obedience is recognized as the appropriate response to all that God has done for Israel. Whatever else the Old Testament says about sin—and we have already seen that it says many different things—it clearly says that sin receives punishment because sin is disobedience. This must be a central component of any Old Testament theology of sin.

We can arrive at this same conclusion by examining how the Old Testament conceives of the divine-human relationship in analogy with various institutionalized relationships drawn from

⁴⁷ Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 47.

the ancient world. God is ruler. God is judge. God is master. God is husband. God is parent.

These relationships were all unambiguously hierarchical in the ancient Near East, and this sense of hierarchy colours their use in the Old Testament. Notice that, regardless of the cultural frame invoked, God is presented as the dominant figure. He is ruler, judge, master, husband, or parent; he is (typically) not vassal, defendant, servant, wife, or child.⁴⁸ From these hierarchical models, the idea that sin is disobedience follows naturally.

In view of the predominance of this disobedience motif within the Old Testament (and within Christian theological writings as well), it is somewhat surprising that it does not figure prominently in the writings of Jürgen Moltmann. The inescapable truth, however, is that authority has become a highly problematic issue in the culture of the contemporary West. This is so much the case that many theologians—and it would seem that Moltmann should be included in their number—prefer not to speak about God as an authority figure who must be obeyed. Richard Bauckham observes: “[I]n place of the concept of God as divine monarch providing the prototype for human domination, at the expense of freedom, [Moltmann’s theology of] the social Trinity provides a model for human community in which people are free for each other and find freedom in relationship with each other.”⁴⁹ In Moltmann’s own words: “God’s relation to the world is not a dominating lordship, but a loving fellowship.”⁵⁰ Why has it become so problematic to speak about God as a divine authority? And more importantly for this essay: If we

⁴⁸ When, under special conditions, God is depicted in a subservient role, his authority is never undermined. To the contrary, this rhetorical device is effective precisely because it will be interpreted within a cultural sphere that permits no serious questioning of God’s authority.

⁴⁹ Bauckham, *Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 176–77. For Bauckham’s criticisms of Moltmann’s thinking, see 177ff. Stephen Williams is somewhat less discrete when he writes: “As Moltmann sees it, false ideas of God as an absolute ruler...dwelling in patriarchal unity, spawn unchristian political ideologies with absolute kingship ruling the roost. Attention to Trinitarian history, which presents us with a fellowship of persons united by mutually interpenetrating activity, not Fatherly domination, will lead us to see how a kind of democratic socialism in political structure corresponds to the Trinitarian being of God” (“Introduction,” 96).

⁵⁰ Cited by Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought*, 2:286.

do not speak about God as an authority figure, can we continue to hear the Old Testament's message that sin constitutes a form of disobedience?

The answer to the first question, I think, can be derived from what we have already observed about sin. To the extent that sin has tainted human culture, such that cultural institutions are almost inevitably susceptible to the critique that they institutionalize sin, it becomes highly problematic to draw upon human institutions in order to speak about God. This has been made abundantly clear by various ideological critiques in recent history (e.g. feminist theology, liberation theology, etc.).⁵¹ Theologians rash enough to interpret the divine-human relationship by invoking human culture (and here all theology is rash!), must be careful about what they invoke. In a post-colonial context, it is hazardous to define sin as defiance towards an overlord. In the context of an abusive family, it is thoughtless to define sin as a failure to obediently submit. There are many contexts today where the responsible theologian must be cautious about teaching that sin is disobedience.

Presumably, however, the theologian who aspires to be biblical will want eventually to invoke the entire teaching of the Bible. Moreover, if the Old Testament so consistently invokes cultural hierarchies to talk about sin, it must be asked whether this is something the modern theologian can responsibly neglect. My suggestion is that we learn from the ancient theologians who gave us the Old Testament, since they themselves had to grapple with the very dilemma confronting the modern interpreter. Generally, they uphold existing social structures; indeed, disobedience to human authority is often conceived of as sin. This is especially clear when the authority in question has been instituted directly by God, as is the case with Moses (Num 12, 14,

⁵¹ Women, for example, often have difficulty appropriating the theological witness of the Old Testament. Daphne Hampson writes: "The God of the tradition...fits the male system. Indeed he seems to have been modeled on the worst image of the human male. He is isolated, powerful, and the top of the hierarchy. He is said to have aseity: to be entire unto himself! Moreover his supremacy qualifies others. It is by comparison with his goodness that men are to know themselves as sinners" (Hampson, "Niebuhr on Sin," 56).

16) and Saul (1 Sam 24, 26), but it is implicit in some very general principles, such as in the commandment that children must obey their parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). Where necessary, however, the ancient theologians pronounce judgement on authority figures and hierarchical structures, denouncing them as sinful. This is true with respect to religious authorities instituted by God, as well as with respect to those woven into the basic fabric of the ancient world. Nothing in the world is above critique; only God's authority is unquestionable.

Implicit in this approach, I think, is the conviction that human authority should be conceived of as a reflection of the divine-human relationship, rather than vice-versa. Although we must draw upon human culture in order to speak about God, we can choose to allow God's revelation of his lordship to critique human culture. God is just *and* loving. He needs nothing and so has no reason to exploit; to the contrary, his authority over creation is grounded in his status as the giver of life. In this way, the sovereignty of God validates our refutation of unjust structures and encourages us to obediently strive for the liberation of all people. Rather than allowing the sinfulness of human authorities to negate the possibility of speaking about God's authority, we allow the revelation of God's righteousness to motivate the institution of just authorities.⁵²

In this respect Moltmann's work is especially fertile, and I am optimistic that he has opened up avenues of approach that will enable us to speak persuasively about sin in connection with obedience and disobedience. Here I will pursue only one such avenue.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann insists that the cross represents a fundamental critique of human ideology, in that it negates faith in human utopias and undermines any human authority

⁵² The necessary caveat is that, until the kingdom fully comes, the justice of a human authority can never be taken for granted. As I have already said, the revolutionary must not be allowed to become the new oppressor.

that promises permanence.⁵³ But the cross also manifests the obedience of Jesus towards God. This kind of obedience, I suggest, is not possible for the person who criticizes *all* authority. No, the kind of redemptive obedience manifested in the cross is only possible for the person who believes that the coming reign of God transcends both the power of the executioner and the power of the revolutionary. Let me put it this way: to obey through crucifixion means to surrender the right to decide what is right. It follows that the cross must entail not only the negation of all human authorities (including the self) but also the recognition of some legitimate authority. The submission of the cross is founded on the recognition that the distinction between justice and injustice is neither arbitrary nor something that can be revealed through the exercise of human power. It is an exercise of faith in God.

Against such a backdrop, we can conceive of sin as pride. Augustine writes: “Our first parents fell into open disobedience because already they were secretly corrupted; for the evil act had never been done had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? For ‘pride is the beginning of sin’ [Sirach 10:13].”⁵⁴ Citing Simon ben Sira to the same effect, Aquinas remarks that “it is characteristic of pride to be unwilling to be subject to any superior, and especially to God.”⁵⁵ The pride of sin resides in the choice to decide for oneself what is right. This choice denies God’s authority (cf. Gen 3) and gives rise to human violence (cf. Gen 4). Thus Moltmann is able to speak about humanity being under “the compulsion of self-justification, dominating self-assertion and illusionary self-deification.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 38.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV 13.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa IIae, q. 84, a. 2. This interpretation continues into the present day, finding clear expression in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr (e.g. *Nature and Destiny*, 186–207).

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 69. Williams criticizes Moltmann for stressing the sin of despair rather than the sin of pride, arguing that atheism’s rejection of God is more a manifestation of the latter than of the former (“Introduction,” 114). Passages like this one, I think, reveal that the question must be dealt with at the level of theology’s application. Clearly, Moltmann’s theology is robust enough to encompass the classical notion that sin is rooted in pride.

Although the idea that sin is rooted in pride has been widely held over the centuries, an alternative is also possible. Sin can also be conceptualized as a form of despair.⁵⁷ Moltmann writes: “Temptation then consists not so much in the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us.”⁵⁸ He finds a common voice in the work of many feminist theologians, who have often drawn attention to the fact the pride and self-assertiveness are characteristically male traits. The root of sin for most women, Valerie Saiving Goldstein suggests, is better described as “underdevelopment or negation of the self.”⁵⁹ The insights of Moltmann and Goldstein, taken together, reveal two important principles. On the one hand, the nihilistic denial of universal meaning has nothing in common with the cross. The obedience of Jesus proclaims faith; the disobedience of despair fails to account for the coming kingdom of God. On the other hand, the obedience of crucifixion does not consist in a willingness to let other people decide what is right. Jesus boldly stood before powerful men and incited them with his self-confidence, and this belies the notion that the cross represents weakness or negation of the self in the face of terror and violence. The cross is not a capitulation to evil, for in that case it would be a symbol of disobedience. As it stands, the cross is a symbol of obedience, and this is because it presumes upon God’s authority and proclaims faith in his right and power to judge.

There are, I think, a variety of different ways that the modern theologian can appropriate the notion that sin is disobedience, even in the contemporary West where we are so quick to

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 23. In this he is following Joseph Pieper, who advanced the two vices as prototypical forms of hopelessness. See, however, *Crucified God*, 211–12.

⁵⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 22.

⁵⁹ Goldstein, “The Human Situation,” 109. Taking up this idea, Judith Plaskow has written a thorough critique of Niebuhr, arguing that his emphasis on the redeeming character of self-sacrificial love can actually push women deeper into sin (*Sex, Sin, and Grace*). Similar ideas have been written about Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Niebuhr by Daphne Hampson, Susan Nelson Dunfee, Serene Jones, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. See Hampson, “Niebuhr on Sin”; Dunfee, “Sin of Hiding”; Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*.

question the legitimacy of authority. Here I have explored one possible avenue of approach, and I have done so by drawing upon Moltmann's own ideas. Given that sin is so consistently conceived of as disobedience in the Old Testament, theologians—or, at least, those who aspire to be biblical—would do well to think more seriously about how this facet of the biblical witness might be responsibly and effectively communicated today.

Conclusions

It is always an encouraging experience to observe that the ancient message of the Old Testament remains alive and relevant despite the passing of time. Although many people in our modern culture would despise its witness concerning human sin as something antiquated or oppressive, Jürgen Moltmann has appropriated several key components of that witness and has integrated them into a corpus of theological writings that will remain compelling and urgent for some time. His major preoccupations—the love of God, the power of hope, and the importance of liberation—are all interwoven with the problem of sin. Sin complicates humanity's relationship with God, although it does not sever God's relationship with humanity, which persists because of his love. Sin creates a contradiction that must be overcome through hope. And finally, sin perpetuates itself in unjust acts and unjust structures, such that the establishment of justice is an integral part of sin's remedy.

Of course, important issues emerge wherever biblical and dogmatic theology meet, and this has certainly been true in the present essay. In particular, the Old Testament's claim that sin is a form of disobedience raises penetrating questions for modern theologians. What happens to our understanding of sin when the relationship between creator and creation is no longer viewed hierarchically? Although the Old Testament clearly teaches that God loves his people, should our

understanding of love's freedom be allowed to push out the notion that God is a divine ruler who demands humble trust and obedience? Standing at the intersection of Old Testament theology and the dogmatics of Jürgen Moltmann, I have tried to articulate an initial response. It seems to me that more thorough work is needed.

As a concluding reflection on Jürgen Moltmann, I would like to praise his sensitivity to the reality of human exploitation and his insistence that the Christian scriptures still speak persuasively today. He is quite correct to insist that the kingdom of heaven should not be viewed as an oppressive and unjust force, and that there are biblical materials that can be used in order to present theological truths in ways that are less vulnerable to postmodern criticisms. I only wish that he would more thoroughly explore the positive contributions that can be made by the Old Testament's teaching that God is an authority figure who desires obedience. The fact that sinful humans regularly exploit one another and establish oppressive regimes certainly justifies a hermeneutic of suspicion. It does not justify the wholesale rejection of Yahweh's lordship as creator of the universe.⁶⁰ How can we hope for God's righteousness if we do not also believe that his divine righteousness is a power much, much greater than the power of human sin that dominates our present experiences? Should we not tremble before that power, especially insofar as we remain conscious of our own sin?

⁶⁰ In using this strong language, I am not characterizing Moltmann's work. I am warning against what might happen if theologians continually neglect the biblical teaching concerning God's authority.

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