

## DEUTERONOMIC LAW: WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD KINGDOMS

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We are all familiar with the King Arthur legend--the kingdom in turmoil without a ruler, an unclear line of succession, and then the true king is revealed by a divine miracle. A stone appears in a churchyard with a shining, heavenly sword stuck in it. Written in letters of light, the text states that whoever pulls out the sword is the rightful ruler of England. Only the young orphaned Arthur is able to do it out of all the men in the kingdom. It is clear he is *meant* to rule, and other power-hungry men are not. The legend had a powerful appeal to medieval people because it responded to their need to believe that the political landscape was controlled by divine will rather than by raw appetite and ruthless ambition.

If God appointed the legitimate king, as was believed in the medieval world, what happened when someone else stole the throne from him? Was that usurper legitimate or not? The question becomes an important one, given that the English throne was a chain of dynasties with one family or nation overthrowing its predecessor. The Normans under William the Conqueror took the throne from the Anglo-Saxon chieftains in 1066 AD. The Plantagenets in the Angevin line seized the throne from Stephen and Matilda in 1154, and the Lancastrian Plantagenets seized it from them in 1399 when Henry IV had Richard II murdered, and so on through the ages. As Tillyard notes, raising one's hand against the king in rebellion is a sin. So did the people owe loyalty to a line of kings who took the throne from their predecessors? Why could God's anointed be struck down and replaced by another?

The answer for some Renaissance theologians lies in the Old Testament. For Renaissance Christians, sin (and its consequences or punishment) could pass from one generation and cause suffering in later years. In Jeremiah 31:29, we read, "The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The father takes the action, but his children suffer the consequences. If you think about it, there is a degree of truth in that idea. A father might be the one who chooses to abuse his children, but his children are the ones that suffer because of that choice. A mother might choose to drink alcohol during pregnancy, but her unborn infant suffers the consequences of fetal alcohol syndrome. I am not trying to create a sermon here, just illustrate the line of thought. The Renaissance Christians took this idea to an extreme interpretation.

In Deuteronomy 5:9, we find the following text:

*". . . For I am the Lord thy God, a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon their children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate me."*

Renaissance theologians interpreted this passage literally. If an individual did evil, the next three to four generations could be punished for that action. However, that punishment would not be passed down to the fifth generation. Though kingship was itself a holy office, individual kings were human, and they were susceptible to sin like all mortals. Suppose "King Joe" is misbehaving or not ruling responsibly. God decides to punish him by sending a usurper to seize his throne. So, future "King Bob" rises in rebellion against King Joe. The act of rebellion itself is a sin, mind you. The citizens would know the new ruler is guilty of regicide. They would think it natural that Bob's reign, and those of his children and grandchildren, would be troublesome times. However, the fifth generation would be free of that guilt. Thus, if a usurper overthrows another king, even though the act is wicked, it is done by God's will. And after a few generations of successfully holding the throne, King Bob's children would become legitimate rulers, anointed by God. The fact that Bob's family held onto the throne was proof of God's favor, and the fact that rebellion failed or succeeded determined whether or not the rebellion was God's will. However, after such a *coup d'etat*, the next few generations would be facing some hard times. This was called **Deuteronomic Law**.

The only way a line of kings could come to an end was by (a) sterility--having no male heirs or (b) violence--dying in political upheaval. If a king who already had children came to throne, and he then turned to wicked ways, it was thought that God would allow someone else to overthrow him and replace him. No matter how necessary, the acts of rebellion, violence, and murder were always sinful. This led to the **Doctrine of the Nemesis**, the idea that all evil taking place was also God's will as some sort of divine punishment or a temporal necessity: "*Woe to the world because of evils! For it must needs be that evils come, but nevertheless woe to that man by whom the evil cometh*" (Matthew 18:7). Characters like Hamlet in Shakespeare's plays ask themselves whether or not they are destined to be such a nemesis, and fear the possibility; Hamlet cries out, "*Time is out of joint! O spite of spite / that ever I was born to set it right!*" (1.5.189-90). The nemesis, that punishing evil to bring God's disasters, must come eventually. Someone has to do the crime, or the evil king will never be removed. But woe to the individual who chooses to be that nemesis! Both he and his children will suffer the consequences for generations. . . . We see similar concerns in every Shakespearean play in which a king is killed or overthrown.