

Exodus 20:5 in light of the teaching on retribution in the neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria



Author:

Solomon O. Ademiluka^{1,2}

Affiliations:

¹Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria

Corresponding author:

Solomon Ademiluka,
solademiluka@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 29 Mar. 2023

Accepted: 18 Sept. 2023

Published: 18 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Ademiluka, S.O., 2023, 'Exodus 20:5 in light of the teaching on retribution in the neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria', *In die Skriflig* 57(1), a2958. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2958>

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The idea of God punishing children for the sins of their parents in Exodus 20:5 sounds contrary to divine justice as represented in the Old Testament (OT). However, despite the apparent contradiction, strands of Christianity have continued to hold the view of retribution in Exodus. In Nigeria, it is reflected in the teaching on breaking generational curses in the neo-Pentecostal churches. This article has critically examined Exodus 20:5 as a basis for this doctrine, employing the historical-critical and descriptive methods. Contrary to the claim by some scholars that the doctrine of collective responsibility in Exodus 20:5 contradicts individual retribution that is found in Ezekiel and Jeremiah, this article found that these prophets express collective responsibility when they attribute the exile to the sins of the ancestors. Moreover, the belief in corporate responsibility continued to be held among the Jews after the exile. The teaching on generational curses in Nigeria is partly a reflection of the continuing influence of Exodus 20:5. This article concluded, however, that deducing the doctrine of generational curses from the Exodus text fails to take cognisance of the folkloristic character of Exodus. Given this character, the words *visiting the iniquity of parents upon the children* are those of the narrator, and not of God.

Contribution: Contributing to the scholarly discourse on the notion of inherited punishment in Exodus 20:5, this article postulates that it is hermeneutically incorrect to base the belief in generational curses on this text.

Keywords: retributive theology; the sin of the fathers; individual and collective responsibility; the biblical narrator, generational curses.

Introduction

Exodus 20:5 is part of the expatiation on the second commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20:1–17), that is, the prohibition of worshipping any gods other than Yahweh (v. 3). Verse five indicates that Yahweh will punish the violators of this rule up to the third and fourth generations of their offspring. The phrase, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons* appears also in the list of God's attributes in Exodus 34:1–7. Verse 7 states that God is merciful and forgiving but also visits the sins of fathers upon their children and future generations up to the third and fourth. It is also repeated in the version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy (5:9). In this article, however, the focus is on Exodus 20:5. These texts contain a teaching on the theology of retribution in that God punishes children 'for the sins of the parents' (Weiss 2017:6). The term *retribution* is derived from the Latin *retribuere*, meaning 'repayment', that is, 'giving back to someone what they deserve ... in terms of reward or reproof' (Marshall 2012:13). When the word is used in conjunction with 'justice', it has reference to the 'delivery of punishment as due recompense for wrongdoing' (Marshall 2012:13). But when used in isolation, it connotes the idea of vengeance or retaliation. Marshall (2012:13) notes that the word is usually used in this negative sense, indicating paying back for wrongful deeds. Kidner (n.d.:3) opines that retribution can be understood as a universal principle, a 'built-in tendency for evil to recoil on its perpetrator'. Some call it a universal law of recompense that means 'people reap whatever they sow' (Marshall 2012:14). This law that human 'deeds carry inescapable consequences' has a biblical representation in the saying '[H]e who digs a pit will fall into it' (Pr 26:27; cf. 1:32; Ps 7:15–16; Ec 10:8), among other precepts. The Bible is particularly pervaded with the 'conviction that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer' (Walton 2008:647; cf. Gunawan 2020:66). Marshall (2012:14) notes the idea of retributive justice in the biblical accounts of divine judgement on sin, 'both within history and at the end of time' (cf. Rv 22:12). At the same time, Israelite tradition held that 'God is just and will act in accord with his justice' (Gunawan 2020:67). The concept of retribution, as portrayed in Exodus, seems contradictory to this tradition: How does visiting the iniquity of fathers upon their innocent children resonate with divine justice? Despite the apparent contradiction, some strands of Christianity hold to the view of retribution in Exodus. Visiting the sins of parents on the children

is what is termed as generational curses or intergenerational curses in the African neo-Pentecostal churches, the basic substance of which is believed to derive from biblical texts such as Exodus 20:5 and others (Banda 2020:1; Degbe 2014:255). This doctrine teaches that ‘ancestors pass to their descendants’ traits that reflect the guilt of the sins of such ancestors (Banda 2020:1; cf. Makashinyi 2019) – traits which may include barrenness and hereditary diseases, among others (Agbo 2016). The belief in generational curses has become so prominent in the neo-Pentecostal denominations that ‘delivering people from generational curses [*is now*] a lucrative enterprise’ for many pastors in that fold (Banda 2020:1; cf. Makashinyi 2019). However, it is important to note that, in Africa, the perception that curses are inherited from one’s ancestors is not wholly based on the Bible. This is because most African communities hold the belief in the ‘sins of the fathers being punished ... in the form of consequences’ upon their children (Takore 2019:3; cf. Abah 2015:3; Nwoko 2020:686). Today, many Nigerians, including Christians, believe that ‘generational curses are very real [*and that some*] individuals ... [*are*] groaning under these terrible ... spiritual hindrances’ (Agbo 2016).

The aim of the article is to examine Exodus 20:5 with a view to appraising the teaching on generational curses in the neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria as arising from this text. In other words, the work attempts to assess the correctness or otherwise of basing this teaching on the Exodus passage. It employs the historical-critical exegesis for the study of the Exodus text, and the descriptive method for the analysis of the perception on retribution in Africa as well as the teaching on generational curses in the neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. This article begins with an exegesis of Exodus 20:5, from which it proceeds to the teaching on generational curses, and finally appraises this teaching in relation to the text.

Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons: An exegesis of Exodus 20:5

Liberal scholarship has long rejected the conservative view of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, attributing Exodus to the three main sources that characterise Genesis through Leviticus, that is, the Jahwistic (J), Elohist (E), and Priestly (P) sources. The Priestly source, traditionally dated in the 5th or 4th century BCE after the Babylonian exile, is particularly distinguishable in the ‘latter half of the book with its focus on cultic matters’ (Longman & Dillard 2006:65). Commentators on the *book of Exodus* have varied perceptions about its outline, but most recognise three basic themes, namely deliverance from the Egyptian bondage (1:1–18:27), the giving of the law at Sinai (19:1–24:18), and cultic regulations (25:1–40:38). Thus, Exodus 20:5 is part of the corpus on the laws believed to have been mediated through Moses on the mountain of Sinai. As expressed by Sprinkle (2004:236), it is in the context of the theophany at Sinai that ‘the narrator introduces the Decalogue’ in Exodus 20:1–17. The essence of the Sinai event resides in the establishment of a covenant,

a formal relationship, between Yahweh and Israel. Without a covenant, law does not function ‘because the binding force of law ultimately derives from the establishment of relationship’ (Song 1992:25). In other words, where there is no relationship, no law can function, and ‘consequently there is no sin and punishment proper’ (Song 1992:20). Exodus 20:5 is properly related to the idea of covenant and punishment. On their own part of the relationship, the Israelites shall not worship any images (Ex 20:4). If they do, being a jealous partner, God will visit such iniquity upon violators up to their third and fourth generations (Ex 20:5).

The focus of this exegesis is to examine the meaning of the phrase פָּקַד עוֹן [visiting iniquity], and the idea of visiting parents’ iniquity upon the children in light of the Old Testament (OT) perspective of divine justice. It is generally admitted that the ‘verb פָּקַד is perplexingly multivalent’, as it has a variety of meanings (Egger 2019:197). Its meanings include to appoint, to deposit, to rule, to command, to inspect, to remember, to punish, to visit, to attend to, to look after, among others (Grossfeld 1984:93; Spencer 1998:540). Scharbert (1960:209–226) stresses that פָּקַד connotes the idea of investigation with a view to awarding appropriate punishment. Johnstone (2014:30) holds that in Exodus 20:5 פָּקַד implies carrying out ‘thorough investigation and the taking of necessary steps’ towards recovery and preservation, but it does not mean to inflict penalty. However, according to Rendtorff (2005:485), the meaning of פָּקַד in Exodus 20:5 is to test. Yahweh directs his testing to guilt and subsequently visits the transgression with punishment. Egger (2019:198) argues decisively that when Yahweh is the subject of פָּקַד, his action is either starkly positive, visiting his people to bestow provision or deliverance, or starkly negative in which case he visits with ‘devastating punishment for iniquity’. פָּקַד usually carries the latter connotation when used with עוֹן [iniquity] and, particularly, the preposition עַל [upon, against] as in Exodus 20:5 (Egger 2019:198). When פָּקַד is used to depict Yahweh’s acts of divine favour, it is rarely used with the preposition עַל. On the contrary, פָּקַד is used frequently with עַל to indicate ‘Yahweh’s visiting-in-punishment’, and it is hardly combined with any other preposition in this way (Egger 2019:207). Perhaps, it is in realisation of this usage that most English versions translate פָּקַד in Exodus 20:5 as ‘visiting’ (e.g., ESV, KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV¹). Egger (2019:209) stresses that פָּקַד is paired with עַל to express Yahweh’s punishing of iniquity so regularly that עַל פָּקַד is an expression denoting punishment. עַל פָּקַד ‘expresses a divine, decisive bringing of devastation against someone, in punitive repayment of iniquity’ (Egger 2019:122).

It is rarely doubted that פָּקַד עוֹן in Exodus 20:5 literally means punishing iniquity. Controversy lies with the interpretation of punishing parents’ sins upon the children. Some scholars believe that the ‘image of God as an abuser of children’, portrayed in Exodus 20:5, contradicts the larger biblical viewpoint (Fretheim 1998:107). Accordingly, varied exegetical approaches have been adopted to compare

1. The English Bible versions used are abbreviated as follows: English Standard Version (ESV), King James Version (KJV), New American Standard Version (NASB), New King James Version (NKJV), and Revised Standard Version (RSV).

the impression in Exodus with what is considered the mainstream OT thought concerning retributive justice. In the OT, retributive justice has both collective and individual aspects. The idea expressed in Exodus represents collective retribution by which 'actions performed were understood to have consequences that affected the person and his family and the community at large' (Geyser-Fouché & Munengwa 2019:3; cf. Ex 34:6-7; Nm 16:16-35). This theology is represented in narratives such as God's covenant with Abraham extending to all his descendants (Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-14). It is against the background of this belief that 'Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah' can be understood (Geyser-Fouché & Munengwa 2019:3; cf. Gn 18:16-33). In other words, the innocent were not spared of the consequences of the evils perpetrated by others. Hence, defeat in war, famine, pestilence, and similar occurrences were understood as collective punishments that made no 'distinction between the guilty and the innocent' (Geyser-Fouché & Munengwa 2019:3; cf. Dt 28:15-69; Lv 26).

Nonetheless, the idea of Yahweh visiting iniquity of fathers upon children is relegated 'to early texts with primitive thought' (Egger 2019:54). Such texts are said to be exceptions to the more general belief in individual retribution and serve as a 'metaphorical pointer to the inescapable consequences of evil conduct' (Krašovec 1999:154). Hence, as stressed by some commentators, with the passing of the centuries, the theology of transgenerational punishment 'disturbed some later biblical authors who subtly rejected the older Exodus tradition' (Weiss 2017:6). It is held that the change from collective to individual retributive justice was occasioned by the experience of the Babylonian exile. According to this latter belief, Yahweh is just and treats everyone justly. Therefore, 'only the guilty suffer the consequences of their actions' (Geyser-Fouché & Munengwa 2019:3; cf. Ezk 3:17-21; 14:12-23; 18:1-32; 33:1-20).

The view that individual retribution is the OT mainstream thought is anchored principally on Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31:29-30. Both prophets refer to an adage that was apparently rife among the Jewish exiles: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Ezk 18:2; Jr 31:29 - RSV). In the context of the exiles, this proverb means, 'The present generation is paying the penalty for the sins of previous generations' (Igbo 2021:52). This saying would indicate a strong belief in collective retribution, the belief which these prophets said was coming to an end, as interpreted by some commentators. Henceforth, everyone will bear responsibility for his or her actions. 'The soul that sins shall die' (Ezk 18:4, RSV; cf. Jr 31:30). Gerhard von Rad (1962:266) wrote that Prophet Ezekiel countered collective retribution, asserting to the contrary that every 'individual stands in direct relationship to God'. By quoting the same proverb, Jeremiah also had the individualistic view of divine retributive justice and rejected the idea that 'the children had to bear their fathers' guilt' (Von Rad 1962:266). Weiss (2017:6) similarly believes that Ezekiel and Jeremiah abrogated 'the older Exodus theology' of transgenerational punishment and formulated a new one based on individual responsibility.

But do these prophets mean to replace the principle of collective responsibility with individual responsibility? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the literary context and significance of the proverb in the oracles of Ezekiel. Being among the compatriots exiled to Babylonia in 597 BCE, Ezekiel was called to the prophetic ministry around 593 BCE (Ezk 1:1-2) and had his entire ministry in that country. Hence, the immediate audience and target of his ministration was the exilic Jews. Thus, Ezekiel 18 was a direct attack on the community of the exiles who 'quoted the sour grapes proverb' (Paska 2007:184). Paska (2007:184) suggests that the exiles most probably quoted the proverb prior to the final fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. However, there are OT texts which indicate that the exiles must have known the doctrine of collective responsibility from their homeland, and this is amply illustrated in the Deuteronomistic History (DH). For instance, in Achan's story (Jos 7), although he acted alone, the whole nation suffered defeat on account of his sin (cf. Takore 2019:5). Moreover, the DH grounds the catastrophe of the exile 'in a backlog of national sin' (Igbo 2021:53; cf. 2 Ki 21:11-15; 23:26). Before the exile, Jeremiah had prophesied the destruction that would befall the nation on account of their sins. He foretold that the land of Judah would lie in ruins while the inhabitants would serve the king of Babylon for 70 years (Jr 25:11-12; cf. 29:10). By quoting this adage, then, the exilic Jews demonstrated that the principle of collective retribution was being applied to them. They saw themselves as 'innocent victims of the actions of others' (Igbo 2021:53), while 'the really guilty parties' remained in Jerusalem (Paska 2007:184). As expressed by Levinson (2008:59), the exiles lamented their suffering unjustly for the past sins of the former generations. In this way, the exiles attacked the divine retributive system: 'God was being unfair in punishing them for the sins of their forefathers' (Igbo 2021:54; cf. Paska 2007:184; Ezk 18:26). Rationalising in this way, the exiles failed to accept any responsibility for their present predicament. Paska (2007; cf. Ezk 18:25, 29; 33:17a) puts it succinctly thus:

By quoting the proverb, not only did they accuse YHWH of punishing the innocent, but they also deny any responsibility for their own fate. Thus the proverb was used as an excuse to unload their guilt on previous generations and to exclude individual responsibility. (p. 185)

Moreover, their belief in collective responsibility also apparently made the exiles to consider repentance futile, 'since their fate and that of future generations was sealed because of the sins of their ancestors' (Paska 2007:186). To this end, Ezekiel attacked the sour grapes proverb 'because it hampered Israel's repentance' (Paska 2007:180). This suggestion becomes plausible when understood in the literary context of Ezekiel 18. The sour grapes adage in Ezekiel 18:2 is part of the call to repentance in this chapter, which, in itself, belongs to the corpus of the judgement oracles in chapters 14 through 19. In Ezekiel 14-17 the prophet had announced that the judgement on Jerusalem was inevitable because of their unfaithfulness, particularly in terms of idolatry. In Ezekiel 18, he therefore urges the exiles to repent in order to escape God's judgement. Rather than blaming the previous generations for their present suffering,

the exiles should know that every person is accountable before God for his or her own sins (Ezk 18:5–20). That is why each individual has the responsibility to come to repentance to avoid God's judgement (Ezk 18:21–29). These verses, then, present the argument that the exiles are guilty, and should repent 'in order to turn aside God's punishment' (Paska 2007:183). They can achieve repentance 'without being hampered by family ties' (Paska 2007:183; cf. Ezk 18:5–20).

Therefore, what the prophet refuted is not the content of the proverb (i.e. inherited punishment) 'but the wrong use of the proverb' (Paska 2007:185). In other words, the stress on individual responsibility (Ezk 18:4c) does not amount to a denial of collective responsibility. Otherwise, Ezekiel would have grossly contradicted himself in view of the many instances in which he had admitted 'that the exile was largely the consequence of the sins of the ancestors' (Paska 2007:185; cf. Ezk 16; 20; 21:3, 9; 23, etc.). Ezekiel 21:4 is particularly instructive in this regard when, in the context of the prophet's preaching against idolatry, he represents Yahweh as declaring, 'I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked' (RSV). Therefore, Joyce (1986:317–321) may be correct when he concludes that the emphasis on individual responsibility in some passages in Ezekiel does not abrogate corporate responsibility. Hence, rather than abolishing collective responsibility, it is more plausible to say that Ezekiel admitted both collective and individual responsibility 'as legitimate expressions of divine justice' (Paska 2007:186). As Kaminsky (1995:178) puts it, individual and collective conceptions 'function in a complementary, rather than a contradictory, fashion'. In summary (Paska 2007):

[T]he main message ... is not about giving a new doctrine of individual responsibility but about showing the urgent need to accept responsibility and to release themselves from the bondage of practical fatalism in order that they will be able to repent and will be judged according to their new life. (p. 188)

It is therefore hermeneutically incorrect to relegate Exodus 20:5 to Israelite primitive thought or to say that individual responsibility, represented therein, was abrogated by the prophets. In fact, apart from Exodus 20, some other post-exilic material indicate that the belief in inherited punishment continued to be held among the Jews. In attributing the fall of Jerusalem to the sins of the ancestors, the author of Leviticus (26:31–39) expresses belief in corporate responsibility. If the Israelites contravene their covenant with Yahweh, he will make their land desolate while those who survive shall rot in the enemies' land 'because of the iniquities of their fathers' (Lv29:39 – RSV). Similarly, the Chronicler reports that Yahweh took the nation of Judah into exile, because they refused to heed the warning of the prophets (2 Chr 36:15–21). In this declaration, he does not seem to consider the exile as 'the immediate judgment of Zedekiah's generation alone', but as occasioned by the sins of Judah as a nation (Schnittjer 2019:128). Hence, Japhet (1993:44) is not being adequately fair to the Chronicler when he declares that, in Chronicles, each 'generation is requited for its own deeds ... with no postponement of recompense'. On the contrary, in 2 Chronicles 36 the Chronicler seems to decidedly present a

'corporate understanding of judgment by exile' (Schnittjer 2019:118).

Coming to the New Testament (NT), with Jesus' mission of remission of sins for everyone who believes in him, individual responsibility, as against the collective, is in resonance with NT theology. Moreover, from the NT perspective, God is 'a perfectly ethical being' (Weiss 2017:2) – the teaching which stands against the idea of God punishing innocent children for the sins of their parents. Nonetheless, even in early Christian and rabbinic literature, belief in intergenerational punishment as depicted in Exodus 20:5 was not completely jettisoned. Indeed, various gnostic groups employed Exodus 20:5 to argue that, different from the NT God, the God of the OT must be an immoral Being. This criticism prompted some early Christian thinkers to defend the OT God as the same with the Father of Jesus Christ, adopting some exegetical methods by which the passage should not be understood to mean that God 'punishes innocent children for their parents' sins' (Weiss 2017:2). For instance, employing allegory, Origen (185–254 CE) interprets 'fathers' in Exodus 20:5 figuratively as referring not to human beings, but to the devil. Origen's premise is John 8:44, where Jesus states that his accusers are the sons of the devil (Weiss 2017:15). The rabbis were not unanimous in their attitude towards Exodus 20:5 in that, while some sources indicate that the rabbis rejected collective responsibility in their interpretation of the text, others point the fact that 'ancestral guilt played a central role in rabbinic culture' and was not in any way burdensome to the rabbinic mind (Weiss 2017:5).

It is therefore no surprise that, to date, the belief in inherited punishment, based on Exodus 20:5, still exists among Christians. In the section below, this article examines this perception among Nigerian Christian preachers, particularly those in the neo-Pentecostal fold.

Breaking generational curses

Of recent, belief in generational curses has become very popular in the neo-Pentecostal churches, particularly in Africa. Generational curses are also known as transgenerational curses, 'ancestral curses and bloodline curses' (Banda 2020:1). As taught by these churches, a generational curse refers to 'the cumulative effect on a person of things that their ancestors did, believed or practised in the past ... [or] a consequence of an ancestor's actions, beliefs and sins being passed down' (Makashinyi 2019). Asamoah-Gyadu (2004:390) states that generational curses are 'events from the past that affect the present in negative ways'. Central to this doctrine is the belief that 'ancestors pass to their descendants' unfavourable conditions such as ill-luck, poverty and undesirable traits like being temperamental, stealing, et cetera (Banda 2020:2). Thus, generational curses are understood as 'evil spells cast on people to bring [about] negative conditions' in their lives (Banda 2020:2). It is believed that generational curses are no respecters of persons, position, name or title, as 'even ministers, pastors, fervent Christians also go through these sometimes' (Agbo 2016).

It is also generally held that teachers of generational curses derive the doctrine from biblical texts such as Exodus 20:4–5, Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 5:9 (Degbe 2014:255). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the concept of generational curses is a form of traditional belief in Africa. It is traditionally held among most African communities that ‘there are ancestral spirits that cause’ all kinds of misfortune (Banda 2020:2; Hachalinga 2017:56). Hence, there is the constant fear of the ‘consequences of the guilt of the ancestors’, usually addressed by consulting traditional healers and diviners (Banda 2020:2). Therefore, the belief in generational curses among Nigerian Christians derives not only from the Exodus text, but also from their traditional worldview. In other words, Nigerian Christians adopt the traditional African worldview ‘to interpret their lived experiences and struggles in life’ (Banda 2020:2).

Based on this belief in recent times in Nigeria as in many parts of the world, a form of healing ministry has evolved in the neo-Pentecostal denominations focusing on breaking generational curses (Igbo 2021:58; Makashinyi 2019). With the emergence and popularity of this wave of teaching, it is becoming ‘increasingly common for Christians to suppose that they are victims of generational curses’ (Makashinyi 2019). The teachers profess that Christians may remain bound by generational curses ‘until they undergo special deliverance services’ (Banda 2020:2). Thus, delivering people from generational curses has become ‘a lucrative enterprise among some prophets’ (Banda 2020:2). The section below discusses whether or not it is hermeneutically appropriate to base the teaching on generational curses on Exodus 20:5.

Exodus 20:5 as a basis for the teaching on generational curses

As earlier mentioned, the authorship of the entire Pentateuch used to be ascribed to Moses, particularly in ‘pre-critical Jewish and Christian traditions’ (Block 2001:387), which still remains the position being held by many Nigerian preachers and Christians today. This position implies that all information contained in the Torah was authentically mediated through Moses. Thus, the words *I am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children* are taken as God’s own words. This stance, however, will have to be reconsidered when the narrative is subjected to form-critical analysis. In form-critical studies, the Pentateuchal narratives represent Israelite ‘old traditions, some reaching back to the period before Moses’ (Wenham 1994:49). Relying on Hermann Gunkel’s commentary on Genesis (1901), most scholars now agree that these narratives ‘constitute a body of early ethnic and tribal traditions ... of the Hebrew people’ (Ademiluka 2007:276). These sagas were not the work of individual authors, but of ‘schools of narrators or tridents’ (Ademiluka 2007:274). Hence, many have recognised several traits of folk literature in the stories. For instance, Lemmelijn (2007:406) states that interest in the narratives of the Pentateuch as history ‘no longer seems to play an important role in modern research’. In respect to the exodus

traditions, for example, the only historical fact is the residence of Israel in Egypt sometime in the past (Lemmelijn 2007:406). Clines (1995:3) compares the Pentateuch in its present form to a novel in the sense that it reports the inner thoughts and recounts the dialogue of its characters ‘whose actual words had been long forgotten’ at the time the author was writing. In other words, ‘the God in the Pentateuch is a character’, and not a real person (Clines 1995:4). As expressed by Longman and Dillard (2006:32), the narrator ‘refers to all the characters impersonally’. Reading the narratives, the reader has the impression that the voice behind the speeches is that of Moses, but in the final form in which we read them ‘we hear the voice of the narrator’ (Block 2001:392). This means that the purported speeches of the character God about himself are all the narrator’s description. For example, (Clines 1995):

When the narrative says, “The LORD ... proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34.6), this self-description does not consist of the words of God himself but of the words of the narrator. These are no more than words put in the mouth of the character God by the narrator. (p. 2)

The voice of the narrator is easily recognised when Moses is, ‘[I]dentified by name or with the third person pronoun’ (Block 2001:392). In this way, the meaning that is given to the text in its canonical form is ‘the narrator’s point of view’ (Block 2000:392). Unfortunately, the narrator’s descriptions are not always reliable, and are particularly influenced by his or her pre-modern social context. Very crucial in this regard is the narrator’s assumption of omniscience and omnipresence (Longman & Dillard 2006:32). He or she knows all the inner thoughts of the characters, and is always everywhere. To this end, Mare (2012:2) asserts that the story of Job is fictional, given particularly ‘the omniscience of the narrator’, who knew all things, including ‘what transpired in the council of God and the angels’ (Ademiluka 2022:3; cf. Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). Moreover, the ancient Near Eastern world of the OT did not make any ‘clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural’ (Ademiluka 2021:5), for which reason no ‘part of life was totally divorced from the religious realm’ (Moss & Baden 2015:50), and for which reason everything in life was attributed to God. For instance, God was believed to be behind all misfortune, for example barrenness (Loumagne 2015:1; cf. Gn 16:2; 30:2; 1 Sm 1:5). Not seeing any life issue outside the divine plan, the narrator in Judges 14:4 sees in Samson’s lust for a Philistine woman God ‘seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines’ (Anderson 2001:164), thereby not distinguishing ‘between divine sovereignty [and] human responsibility’ (Greene 1991:64). On this, Klein (1989:116) is right when she writes that in Judges 14:4 ‘the narrator introduces his [own] understanding of Yahweh’s *modus operandi*’, meaning that Samson’s desire for the Timnite woman is not justified by God, but the purported justification by God is attributed to him by the narrator.

These illustrations buttress the fact that the OT reader can hardly construct any trustworthy 'picture of God on the basis of what the narrator tells us about him' (Clines 1995:2). Therefore, rather than being a statement of God about himself, the idea of inherited punishment in Exodus 20:5 is that of the narrator, in which he or she expresses a traditional belief common among the people of Israel. The belief that God punishes children for the sins of their ancestors was not strange among a people who attributed all issues of life to God, whether good or bad. In the absence of any scientific knowledge, ancient Israelites attributed all issues, including those of disease and heredity, to 'the ultimate unknowable entity [*that is*] God' (Moss & Baden 2015:53); the attitude which has been passed down to the modern world. This explains the influence of Exodus 20:5 in Nigeria reflecting in the belief in and breaking of generational curses. In other words, the teaching on generational curses in Nigeria based on Exodus 20:5 derives from disregard for or lack of the knowledge of the form of literature contained in that text.

Conclusion

The idea of retributive justice in Exodus 20:5, namely that God punishes children for the sins of their forebears, has generated a lot of controversy among scholars, particularly as it seems contradictory to the OT perspective of divine justice. Some hold that the doctrine of collective responsibility represented in the text is old and primitive as opposed to individual retribution which is believed to be the mainstream OT thought that originated during the Babylonian exile, as found in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. However, as demonstrated in this article, the stress on individual responsibility by these prophets does not amount to a denial of collective responsibility in view of the numerous instances where they had admitted that the exile was a result of the sins of the ancestors. Moreover, some post-exilic material other than Exodus, as well as early Christian and rabbinic literature, indicate that the belief in corporate responsibility continued to be held among the Jews. The current belief and teaching among Nigerian Christians that people suffer from generational curses, reflect the continuing influence of Exodus 20:5. However, deducing this belief from the Exodus text loses sight of the nature of material contained in the Pentateuch. As folk literature, the voice behind the speeches attributed to God is that of the narrator. This means that, rather than being a statement of God about himself, the idea of inherited punishment in the text is that of the narrator, expressing a traditional belief common among the people of Israel. Not having any scientific knowledge about disease and heredity, the ancients attributed such issues of life to God – the attitude which still manifests in modern times, especially when religion is involved. Thus, the influence of Exodus 20:5 is reflected among Nigerian Christians in the teaching on generational curses. However, it is hermeneutically erroneous to base the belief in generational curses on this passage; it amounts to a lack of understanding of the nature of material contained in the text.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

S.O.A. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human participants.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or 'not-for-profit' sector.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's findings, and content.

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