

Summary of the paper

Koch's account of the 'Acts-Consequence Construct' – which suggests that the Bible always sees human agency as the crucial force shaping human destiny – has been uncritically appropriated by many Biblical scholars. However, the theory ignores counter-evidence such as those verses in Proverbs that suggest bad actions can have good consequences. Indeed, elsewhere in Scripture, God is portrayed as intervening to punish and reward in a way that squares badly with Koch's paradigm. Proverbs is, in fact, only one of several biblical texts that contain a dialogue between differing accounts of human and divine agency. In Genesis, for example, the events in Chapter 3 conforms closely to Koch's model, but other episodes portray an interventionist God. Moreover, the story of Joseph constitutes a creative response to the dialogue in the preceding Chapters, suggesting a model of a God who is neither helplessly supine nor wrathfully interventionist. The dialogues in Scripture model ways that we can move creatively through our debates about divine involvement and agency.

Acts and Consequences in Biblical dialogues

Retribution in the Old Testament

In 1955 Klaus Koch published an article entitled ‘*Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?*’ [Is there a doctrine of retribution in the Old Testament?] Koch answered this question with a qualified ‘*Nein*’. If by *Vergeltung* [retribution] is meant the action of a deity who directly intervenes in human affairs to punish sin and reward good actions, then, Koch argued, such a doctrine of an interventionist God cannot be found in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the legal implications suggested by the word ‘retribution’ are inappropriate. The God of the Bible, according to Koch, does not act as a modern judge and punish the wrongdoer according to a predetermined tariff; the Scriptures, he argued, assume that we are the primary authors of our own good or bad fortune. Good actions such as acquiring wisdom, hard work, fearing the Lord and benevolent treatment of the poor lead to consequent prosperity; bad actions such as theft, oppression or impiety lead, sooner or later, to ruin;

An action which is performed in faithfulness to the community brings on blessed consequences. A wicked action brings with it disastrous consequences.

(Koch 1955 trans. 1983, 61)

Koch’s considered understanding of the Old Testament’s teaching in this matter is that we create for ourselves ‘*eine schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*’ – literally, ‘a destiny producing sphere of action’. This expression – and others very like it – concise and expressive in German, was used repeatedly in Koch’s article (1955, 9; 15; 18; 32).

If humans are the primary agents of their own fate, what role does God play in our affairs? According to Koch, God ‘like a midwife ... sets in motion what the person had previously initiated’ (Koch 1955, trans. 1983, 62); he ‘pays special

attention to make sure that the person actually experiences the consequences...’(Koch 1955, trans. 1983, 74). Such limited involvement never amounts to direct intervention to punish or reward – ‘A person is abandoned to whatever the consequences of one’s action might be, which, in and of itself, is damage enough’ ((Koch 1955, trans 1983, 65).

Koch cited verses from Hosea, Psalm 97, Psalm 112 and, above all, the book of Proverbs to support his thesis. The article begins with a discussion of Proverbs 25.21–2 – ‘If your enemies are hungry give them bread to eat; if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads and the LORD will reward you’ (NRSV) – in which Koch argued that these verses illustrate the principle that God facilitates the completion of something which previous human action had already set in motion (Koch 1955 trans. 1983, 61). He also saw a cluster of thirteen verses earlier in this book – Proverbs 11.1, 3–6, 17–21, 27, 30 and 31 – as demonstrating the existence of the ‘*schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*’ with particular clarity.

Furthermore, in support of his argument, Koch cited a linguistic argument developed by Karl Dahlgren, namely that a whole series of Hebrew roots were used to describe both an action and its consequence. In particular several key words, used to describe both a bad character or action and a bad or unhappy situation, imply that the two are intimately and inevitably related – ‘what goes around, comes around’ as we might say.

So heisst רע sowohl ‘sittlich verworfen’ wie ‘unglückbringend’; רשע der ‘Frevler’ und ‘der im Unglück Befindliche’... [Thus רע means both ‘morally depraved’ and ‘the one who brings misfortune’; רשע ‘the wicked’ and the ‘the one who finds themselves in misfortune’...]

(Koch 1955, 26)

The God Who Acts and the Helpless God

Koch's advanced these arguments against the belief that the Old Testament depicts God as directly intervening to punish the wicked or reward the virtuous which, he held, was as an unchallenged element in the picture of ancient Israelite religion assumed by all scholars, citing Gunkel and Eichrodt as among those who accepted it as axiomatic (1955, 1). It is not difficult to find support for Koch's contention in the work of other respected scholars around the time of the publication of his article. For instance, the apparently axiomatic assumption that God intervenes directly in human affairs lies behind the view expressed by George Wright's discussion of traditional Israelite wisdom in his influential book, *God Who Acts*.

Thus Yahweh¹ is the true source of wisdom (cf. Job 28) and the author of prudential morality. It is he who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked

(Wright 1952, 103).

Such a statement is strikingly contradicted by Koch's remark that, on occasions, God must 'stand by helplessly and watch' (Koch 1955 trans. 1983, 66) while the automatic processes of cause and effect run their course.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that both Koch's model of a 'helpless' God and Wright's assertive divinity were shaped by their respective historical contexts. Clearly, post war German Protestantism wrestled painfully with what seemed to have been God's helplessness, his inability to intervene to protect the victims of Nazi genocide. Many contemporary Christians in the English-speaking world were more open to the idea of an interventionist God as, indeed, they were prepared to support punitive or corrective interventions of the sort that had ended, seemingly successfully, in 1945. The endorsement by the World Council of Churches

¹ This vocalisation of the divine name is offensive to many Jews and I avoid it when writing myself but, as in this instance, it is not always possible, unfortunately, to avoid it in quotation.

– then dominated by representatives of the victorious western nations – of the UN intervention in Korea in 1950 is noteworthy in this regard.

Be that as it may, it is clear that, in fact, both accounts of God could be justified from Scripture. The texts that Koch selects do indeed point to a God who completes what humanity has begun; on the other hand, episodes like the punishment of Korah and his clan in Numbers 16 look very much like the result of express divine intervention to punish those with whom he is displeased. Not only that but, as I argue below, passages expressing both these conflicting ideas can be found in the same biblical book. Is this a result of the random splicing together of variant traditions? In my view, these contrasts are deliberate; the biblical writers are deliberately allowing competing accounts to clash in order to explore their implications.

The Acts-Consequence Construct

Koch's favoured description of the principle he had detected was, as we have seen, '*eine schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre*', but this formula – when rendered in the English version, published in 1983, as the (unavoidably?) wordy, 'a sphere of influence in which the built-in consequences of actions takes effect' (Koch 1955 trans 1983, 78) – was not so striking for scholars as another term in his article. They focused instead on another description of the cause and effect mechanism in the moral life, one he had used less frequently, the '*Tat-Ergehen Zusammenhang*' [acts-consequence-connection] (Koch 1955,8). In the English translation this is rendered as 'Action-Consequence Construct' (trans. 1983, 62) – a somewhat misleading rendering for *Zusammenhang* means simply 'connection' (or, less precisely, 'relationship'), rather than 'construct'. Indeed, *Zusammenhang* is translated 'connection' elsewhere in the English version; for instance, in rendering the phrases '*Sünde-Unheil-Zusammenhang*' and '*Guttat-Heil-Zusammenhang*' (Koch 1955,7) as 'Sin-Disaster-

Connection’ and ‘Good Action-Blessings-Connection’ respectively (trans. 1983, 62). This was more concise but, as we shall see, gave, arguably, a misleading impression of Koch’s thesis. Nevertheless, English-speaking scholars often speak of the ‘Action–Consequence Construct’ – whether they acknowledge the phrase’s origin in Koch’s work or not. Even when they do use the more accurate ‘connection’ for *Zusammenhang* the phrase has become imbued with a spurious concreteness.

Koch’s article was to have a major impact on scholarly discussion. The notion that the Old Testament (or the ‘Hebrew Bible’), particularly the wisdom literature and above all the book of Proverbs, teaches the existence of an ‘Acts-Consequence Construct’ has acquired axiomatic status. This has not prevented many scholars, while they may use Koch’s vocabulary, from ascribing to God a rather different role than Koch allowed him. By stressing God's role as guarantor of the created order, or by simply relapsing into the language of reward and punishment, they, in fact, turned Koch's argument on its head while continuing to use his vocabulary.

Koch could not have foreseen this and would, presumably, regret it. His article can be seen as an attempt to vindicate the Old Testament; to clear the scriptures from the charge that they portray God as punishing and rewarding in an arbitrary way. However, he was far from endorsing the beliefs about human actions leading to inevitable consequences that he discerned in the Old Testament. Indeed, he suggests that these concepts are alien to us because they are in constant conflict with our experience.

Die Auffassung von der schicksalwirkenden Tatsphäre ist deshalb für uns so fremdartig, weil sie nach unserem Empfinden in ständigem Widerstreit mit der Erfahrung liegt. Dieser Gegensatz ist dem Israeliten kaum je zum Bewußtsein gekommen.

[The concept of a destiny– producing sphere of action is so alien to us because, to our sensibilities, it is in constant *conflict with experience*]

(Koch 1955, 32; his italics underlined)

‘Conservative’ sages and ‘radical’ scholars

The reception of Koch’s article provides an interesting example of how a contentious theory can acquire axiomatic status within the academic guild. It is rather remarkable how scholars have both accepted Koch’s analysis uncritically and shared his feeling that the mechanism he described was counter-factual and untenable. The consequences of this were particularly severe for the book of Proverbs, from which so many of Koch’s proof texts were drawn. It came to be seen as a repository of a counter-factual traditional wisdom against which the more questioning texts of Job and Qohelet are in revolt. Such a generally accepted analysis played a major role in preventing Proverbs from receiving proper attention in the revival of interest in Israelite wisdom that began in the 1960’s.

Mark Sneed illustrates how this paradigmatic understanding, supposedly grounded in Koch’s analysis, has taken root in scholarly discussion.

Qohelet’s most deconstructive feat is his questioning of the contemporary formulation of retribution. The Germans call it the deed/consequence connection (*Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*), that is, a person’s behaviour is connected with his fortune. The doctrine forms the ethical matrix of the aphoristic material in the book of Proverbs.

(Sneed 2002, 117)

There is, it seems, no need to refer to any precise source for this description of the ‘contemporary formulation of retribution’. It appears to be so self-evident that an entire nation accepts its validity – ‘The Germans call it ...’. Sneed’s analysis allows him to award Qohelet the ultimate post-modern accolade – that of being a text that ‘deconstructs’.

David Clines shows how this paradigm might lead to a very pejorative account of the book.

Proverbs is, next to Deuteronomy, the most stalwart defender in the Hebrew Bible of the doctrine of retribution.... Everywhere it is asserted – or else taken for granted – that righteousness is rewarded and sin is punished (e.g. 11.5-6) [this is]...lacking in intellectual sophistication and, to be frank, in realism. Job and Ecclesiastes introduce the needed element of sophistication and realism into the philosophy of wisdom, calling into question as they do the universal validity of the tenets of Proverbs.

(Clines 1989, 272)

The influence of Koch's discussion is clear here, particularly in the choice of verses to illustrate the supposedly ubiquitous doctrine of retribution. On the other hand, it is not clear that Clines has completely grasped Koch's basic thrust; the language of reward and punishment that Clines uses is the very discourse that Koch suggests is inappropriate and wishes to replace with his notion of an inevitable and automatic process,

However, what is clear here is Clines's disapproval of Proverbs. He accuses it of lacking realism and compares it unfavourably Job and Qohelet, held to be more sophisticated and realistic; he assumes the book contains a doctrine of retribution that allows for no exceptions and is divinely ordained. His views are far from being unique. Indeed, they are mild and restrained compared with those offered by some scholars more recently.

For instance, the influence of Koch is apparent in Philip Davies's description of the scribes responsible for Proverbs as teaching that 'reward and punishment' is built into the 'fabric of creation' (Davies 2002, 123). He goes on to accuse the wisdom writers of articulating in Proverbs a self-serving theory about the way things are in the world and in the society. Their talk of 'Wisdom' was a claim to knowledge, and thus to power, on the part of a scribal class, the intellectuals of their day, that had identified itself with the ruling establishment. Proverbs, it is claimed, was produced

by conservative sages whose interests were served by the notion that the poor and oppressed receive the consequences of their fecklessness while the privileged enjoy a prosperity that came from their own diligence and godliness.

Furthermore, Davies argues that this self-serving teaching is bound up with the development of the doctrine that most distinguishes the Old Testament from other Ancient Near Eastern Texts, that of monotheism. Monotheism's 'logical consequence' is, apparently, a notion of a moral order built into the 'fabric of creation' that ensures that 'the wicked suffer, the righteous blossom, the indolent starve, the foolish come to grief, the wise prosper' (Davies 2002, 123). He holds that, in Proverbs' sayings asserting these doctrines – a 'half-baked' but 'official' (2000, 123) theology – we see a 'self-portrait' of this scribal class. Like Clines, Davies contrasts Proverbs unfavourably with Qohelet.

This philosophy has major advantages to the privileged scribal class: it justifies the *status quo*, a system in which the haves deserve their having and the poor are poor because they are not wise but foolish ... It is very much a theology of the elite, the well-off. That intellectuals believe or are told to believe in this philosophy is not to their credit, but perhaps we can understand that it would be very unwise to publish under the name of King Solomon anything suggesting the contrary (or wait for the writer of Qoheleth).

(P. Davies 2002, 123)

Davies's strictures are manifestly unfair and based on a number of questionable assumptions, for instance, that the 'intellectuals' responsible for Proverbs were establishment figures. Furthermore, he assumes that a belief that 'reward and punishment are built into the fabric of creation' is a 'logical consequence' of monotheism (Davies 2002, 123), but it is, clearly, possible to believe in a single God, while denying that any rewards and punishments are built into the created order. Indeed, the belief that there was a moral order in creation was a feature of some

polytheistic belief systems in the ancient world. For instance, *Maat* embodied a concept of divine order – though not one focused on the actions of the general populace – in the shape of one goddess among the many in the Egyptian pantheon. However, even more contentious is the assumption, shared by Davies, Clines, Sneed and a host of other modern scholars, that Koch’s account of biblical thinking on retribution is a complete one.

Who is unsophisticated?

In my forthcoming book on Proverbs² I challenge Koch’s account of the book’s teaching on the grounds that his proof texts are carefully selected and ignore numerous counter–examples. Thus, even in Proverbs 11, from which so many of his proof texts are taken, there are verses that problematize the notion that good results follow from good actions and bad from bad. For instance, Proverbs 11.16 states that ‘attractive women gain respect and ruthless men gain wealth’.

Indeed, I argue that the book of Proverbs is – to use a phrase from Mikhail Bakhtin’s late notebooks (1970–1) – a ‘dialogue about ultimate questions’ (trans. 1986, 151). That is Proverbs is what Bakhtin would have called a ‘heteroglossalic’ text, that is, a dialogic text that allows more than one voice to speak and so provokes its readers to appropriate a mature wisdom, the product of critical reflection on both experience and traditional teaching.

In my view then, the lack of sophistication, so decried by Clines, is not so much found in Proverbs, as it is evident among those modern scholars who have uncritically accepted a partial account of the Old Testament’s teaching on retribution and incorporated it into a distorting paradigm. This is not to say that the mechanism that Koch describes cannot be found in the Old Testament. There are indeed passages that

² To be published 2008 by Ashgate Ltd in the SOTS Supplement series as *Provocative Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel*.

indicate the presence of something very like it. However, in Proverbs, and elsewhere in the Scriptures, such passages are problematized by others that bespeak a more interventionist account of the deity. Indeed, the dialogue between these two accounts is not confined to Proverbs or Wisdom literature but can be discovered elsewhere in the Bible.

Die schicksalwirkende Tatsphäre of Genesis 3

Had Koch so wished he might well have pointed to one of the most well known stories in the Bible to illustrate his view of the biblical of understanding of ‘retribution’. The story of the ‘Fall’ in Genesis 3 conforms well to the notion of human actions being chiefly punished in and through their consequences. The man and the woman ignore God and eat the forbidden ‘fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden’ (Genesis 3.2), a tree which is to be identified, presumably, with the טוב ורע עץ הדעת [tree of knowledge, good and evil] in the previous chapter (Genesis 2.17). The knowledge [דעת] they acquire by so doing is a sort of punishment, driving them to concealment ‘And their eyes of the two of them were opened and they knew (ידעו) that they were naked (עירמם) and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths’ (Genesis 3.7).

‘They knew’ (ידעו) in the verse is from the same root as ‘knowledge’ (דעת). Thus, in a manner that Fahlgren would have recognized, the very language urges a connection, indeed identifies, disobedient action and bitter consequence. Moreover, as Robert Alter points out (2004, 24, n.1), the passage puns on the resemblance between one of the great words of the wisdom tradition ערום ‘intelligent, canny’– used in Genesis 3.1 to describe the serpent in a negative sense, ‘sly, cunning’– and עירם ‘naked’ (Genesis 2.25, 3.7)

Thus the actions of the man and the woman are the chief determinants of their destiny (*Shicksal*). True, it seems that God's agency is involved in their punishment – 'I will set enmity between you and the woman' (Genesis 3.15); 'I will greatly multiply your labour pains' (Genesis 3.16), but, in fact, God's words at this point are best seen as essentially commenting on what has happened – 'because you have done this' (Genesis 3.14) – while, perhaps, hastening its effect and acting to limit further damage that might have come had the humans stayed in the garden and ate from the tree of life (Genesis 3.24). This is congruent with Koch's notion of God paying 'special attention to make sure that the person actually experiences the consequences...' (Koch 1955, trans. 1983, 74).

Much of the rest of Genesis can be seen as the outworking of the consequences of the man and the woman's actions in Genesis 3 as their descendants populate the earth and – in a context where God is increasingly distant, glimpsed in dreams and visions, or wrestled with in the form of a mysterious stranger – human difficulties multiply. Here we should note the irony that Adam's first reported action upon being expelled from the garden is to 'know' (יָדַע) Eve, his wife (Genesis 4.1), in the 'biblical sense'. Of course, the 'Augustinian interpretation' that sees the sexual act as the point where sin is transferred down the generations is not in view here, but given the complexities which the preceding Chapter has generated around יָדַע and its derivatives, neither can one speak of a naively affirming view of human sexuality here.

On the other hand, Genesis can only be pressed into Koch's mould if some of its material that clearly portrays God as 'intervening' to punish humanity for its wickedness is trimmed away. It is difficult to see how the stories of the flood (Genesis 6–10) or Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18.16–19.28) can be read as anything other

than as portraying the explicitly punitive interventions of an angry, judgemental God. Indeed, Abraham's description of God in Genesis 18.25 as השפט כליהארץ [the judge of all the earth] underlines the explicitly punitive and forensic nature of the latter intervention, even if Abraham's 'plea bargaining' reduces the sentence somewhat! Historical-critical source analysis of the book offers little in the way of enlightenment here. For instance, direct divine intervention and a stress on human agency creating its own consequences are both featured in passages that would, traditionally, been assigned to 'J'.

However, in the concluding chapters of Genesis a more subtle, but in some ways more profound, challenge to the notion that acts are inevitably punished by their consequences can be detected. The Acts-Consequence-Construct is, (oh joy), 'deconstructed' in the story of Joseph and his brothers in which the notion that human agency determines human fate is explicitly contradicted.

Joseph as an anti-type of Adam

Robert Alter notes that Genesis 39 'is the most elegantly symmetrical episode' in Genesis (2004, 221 n.1). This carefully crafted passage is remarkable for its allusions to other episodes in the Joseph story (notably the story of Judah and Tamar in the preceding Chapter). However, it has not been remarked (to my knowledge) that the passage also contains a number of unmistakable echoes of Genesis 3 much earlier in the book. These are not precise verbal allusions but more subtle references that, cumulatively, encourage us to see that Joseph, whose story dominates the end of the book, is a sort of anti-type to the Adam who dominates the first chapters.

Several details of the story in Genesis 3 are echoed in Genesis 39 – the woman looks at the tree in the midst of the garden, sees that it is 'desirable to the eyes' (לעינים) and believes the serpent's promise that her eyes will be opened (Genesis תאוה-הווא

3.5–6) while in Genesis 39.7 the object of female desire is the enslaved Joseph, to whom his master's wife 'raises her eyes'; Adam listens to the voice of the woman (Genesis 3.17) and commits the evil that brings suffering upon them both, but Joseph refuses – volubly – to obey the curt command of the woman 'lie with me' (Genesis 39.8–9); Adam becomes aware of his nakedness and crudely covers it over (Genesis 3.7) while Joseph's clothing is stripped away by his lustful assailant, leaving him to flee, presumably naked (Genesis 39.12–13); one of the evil consequences of Adam's action is alienation from God, from whose presence he and his woman hide (Genesis 3.8), but Joseph's integrity, though it leads him into prison, brings him into God's presence – 'And there he was in the prison house but God [YHWH] was with him and showed him loving-kindness' (Genesis 39.21).

Joseph's encounter with his master's wife is therefore a crucial, defining episode. It is carefully crafted to point back to Genesis 3 and suggest that the *Tatsphäre* initiated there does not in fact determine the fate of the human actors in Genesis. Unexpected developments are possible and Joseph's rejection of an evil suggestion is the antithesis of Adam's easy collusion with evil. Certainly the episode is a turning point for the good in his fortunes. Here we could invoke the 'Acts-Consequence Construct' to say that his virtue, far from its being its own reward, leads to the worldly success that he subsequently enjoys.

Bad actions, good consequences

However, Joseph is not the only moral actor in the closing chapters of Genesis. His brothers commit a great wrong in assaulting him, stripping him, confining him in a pit and selling him into slavery. They then compound their wickedness by misleading their father Jacob as to the true fate of his favourite son, inflicting upon him a grief which is all the harder because he has not even the consolation of the closure that a

sight of Joseph's body might bring (Genesis 37.12-36). At first sight it might seem that the misfortunes that the brothers subsequently suffer are another good example of the 'Acts-Consequence Construct'. This is what they themselves fear when, economic migrants to Egypt in a time of catastrophic climate change, they fall foul of the immigration authorities and one of their number is detained in order to ensure their return to answer the charges against them.

Each man said to his brother, 'Alas, we indeed are punished because of our brother in as much as we saw the distress of his spirit (צרת נפש) when he with us and we did not hear him. That is why this distress (צרה הזאת) has come upon us' (Genesis 42.21 – my translation)

The brothers' sense that a dreadful symmetry is now in place, that they are finally suffering the consequences of their actions, is graphically conveyed by their use of the same word 'distress' (צרה) to describe both their pain and that of their victim long ago.

However, that is not, of course, how things turn out. Forced to return once again to Egypt, and submitted to further agonizing tests by the enigmatic official, their anguish turns to joy when he is revealed to be their long-lost brother Joseph. Moreover, this turn of events leads to the salvation of their family, for it facilitates their successful emigration from famine-stricken Canaan to the well-fed land of Egypt. Not only that, but in the process we see evidence of moral transformation in at least one of the brothers. Judah – who had been prepared to see a brother sold into slavery – now shows himself ready to put his own life on the line to ensure the safety of another (Genesis 44.18–34).

Thus, the final outworking of a heinous crime is not evil but a great good. Joseph's words almost at the end of the story when his brothers beg for his forgiveness ascribe this outcome to God, who has, as it were, subverted human

intentionality to fulfill own plans. ‘Even though you intended to do harm (רעה) to me, God intended it for good (טבה) in order to preserve a numerous people ...’ (Genesis 50.20, NRSV). Wrestling with this verse in his great commentary on Genesis, Koch’s teacher, Gerhard von Rad asserted that ‘This all-sufficiency of divine sovereignty makes human action almost irrelevant’ (Von Rad 1972 ed. trans. 1972, 438). This is a remarkable statement for one who elsewhere accepts the ‘Acts-Consequence Construct as axiomatic (Von Rad 1970 trans 1972, 128-9), but it is too sweeping a judgement. It is not that the human actions in the story of Joseph are shown to be ‘irrelevant’, but rather that God’s actions change the relation of human actions to the outcome. People had to act to bring about the outcome, but it is not the outcome that they, or anyone except God, would have anticipated. Furthermore, is ‘divine sovereignty’ (with its quasi-Calvinist overtones) implied here? Rather we might speak of God working with the fabric of human actions to bring about an unexpected pattern and conclusion – a picture rather similar to that suggested by Romans 8.28.

In my view, this resolution represents a creative response by the final redactor, the author, of Genesis to the clash between those strands in his story that insisted on the primacy of human action and those that asserted the ability and willingness of God to intervene in human affairs. In the light of my analysis, I would stress that this was a creative response. The dynamic of Genesis is not a simply Hegelian one of thesis, antithesis and synthesis but something altogether more unpredictable and more insightful. The book allows different understandings of human and divine responsibility to clash and, as Bakhtin argues (1934–5, trans. 1981, 284), it is precisely where the voices and opinions clash that new meanings and insights are generated.

Conclusion

At first sight the investigation in this paper of an obscure theory of human and divine agency in the Old Testament – influential as it may have been within the guild of biblical scholars – appears to be of little service to ‘the present age’. However, it is intriguing that so many of the fault lines within both the church and politics concern actions and their consequences. It can be plausibly argued that one of the main divides in Protestant Christianity today is between those who, like Moltmann and the Process theologians, see God as fundamentally helpless, indeed conditioned by human action in the world, and those who see him as capable of intervening to bless and to punish. That such a divide – itself strongly conditioned by historical context – influences exegetical approaches is suggested by the work of both Koch and Wright.

Of course, we must recognize that this line often runs through individuals as much as it does denominations; that one moment we find it more plausible that we are the authors of our own destinies, and in another we believe in, and pray for, divine intervention. Be that as it may, if party lines have been formed around models of divine and human agency then the way such models scrutinize each other in Proverbs and in Genesis offers an encouraging prospect that even in the midst of party strife new and creative meanings may emerge.

Less encouraging perhaps is a related observation, namely that one of the main political fault lines, in the UK at least, is between those who judge that intervention in the affairs of other nations cannot be justified – certainly in the case of Iraq – and those who continue to support such interventions. Here one can only speak of a dialogue of the deaf.

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