A Critical Appropriation of the Term Theodicy for the Study of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: The Case of Jeremiah 2–6

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Abstract

The term theodicy was coined by Leibniz in 1710 in a treatise that adopts scholastic methods, fitting better within the category of systematic theology than that of biblical studies. Schmid, however, argues that although the OT/HB does not contain theology in the scholastic sense, it is not atheological. According to Carroll, theodicy belongs to the area of theology that attempts to justify God in the face of evil and suffering. In Jeremiah's case the circumstances around the deportation of 587/6 BCE invite the use of this term. Yet since Weber argued that the issue of theodicy is dependent on one's own perspective about god, the use of theodicy in the study of the OT/HB must first dissociate the religious background of ancient Israel from theistic perspectives because, as stated by Gericke, the imposition of a highly transcendental being on the OT/HB misrepresents what this literary corpus intends to say about its main deity. In addition, Leibniz's visible systematisation of the relationship between God, the people and evil alongside the logic of non-contradiction is also problematic, as pointed out by Ricoeur. Thus, Landsberger's notions of 'conceptual autonomy' alongside Pike's distinction between 'emic' and 'etic' are valuable tools for differentiating the modern and ancient milieux, particularly with regard to dichotomies involving polytheism versus monotheism and iconic versus aniconic. This paper argues that since Jeremiah went through a long and complex process, involving redaction, transmission and reception, Crenshaw's first definition of theodicy would fit with the circumstances around the exile, as for the Deuteronomists the people are not innocent. Nonetheless, Crenshaw's second definition of theodicy, which adds 'hostility toward virtuous people', would be applicable to 𝔊-Jeremiah within the Diaspora context, a period in which Wisdom of Solomon with other writings present a high view with regard to righteousness and vindication after death.