

JBTS

VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

A Reply to Gregory Bock

by James S. Spiegel

A Reply to Gregory Bock

JAMES S. SPIEGEL

Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Taylor University

I want to thank Gregory Bock for his critical response to my *JBTS* article “‘It’s the Wrath of God’: Reflections on Inferring Divine Punishment.”¹ In my article I pose the question whether it is ever reasonable to infer that a particular contemporary state of affairs is a case of divine wrath. In addressing this question I review several cases of divine wrath reported by the biblical writers, including the worldwide flood (Gen. 6), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19), the Egyptian plagues (Exod. 12), the Korah rebellion (Num. 16), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts. 5). In light of such cases, I discuss potential criteria for inferring the occurrence of divine wrath. The conditions I propose include: (1) the occurrence of a miracle in conjunction with the event in question, (2) extraordinary coincidences associated with the event, and (3) the association of the event with a fulfilled bold prediction.

Bock’s Helpful Critique

To test these criteria, Bock applies them to the case of Job—a man who suffered severely but, despite the claims of some of his friends, was actually righteous and thus not a victim of divine wrath. Yet, as Bock explains, my proposed criteria would seemingly invite a very different conclusion. After all, in this case: (1) Job’s suffering is a consequence of a miraculous event (i.e., the spontaneous fire falling from the sky, destroying Job’s sheep and servants), (2) there is an extraordinary coincidence of events in the form of simultaneous destruction of Job’s house, the stealing of his flocks, the burning of his sheep, and the killing of his servants and children, and (3) although these tragedies do not fulfill an actual bold prediction, as Bock puts it, “we can imagine Job’s narrative including one without changing the outcome.”² Such, he says, “would be compatible with the rest of the story playing out as it does, but Job’s friends would still be wrong about God’s intentions.” Therefore, Bock concludes that my proposed conditions “are not sufficient for justifying belief in the occurrence of divine punishment.”³

1. James S. Spiegel, “‘It’s the Wrath of God’: Reflections on Inferring Divine Punishment,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 4:2 (2019): 301-16.

2. Gregory Bock, “The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 5:1 (2021): 137.

3. Bock, “The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment,” 137.

Bock's application of my criteria to the Job narrative is interesting and instructive. It reveals that I should have been explicit about a key assumption in my proposal, specifically that *only persons demonstratively guilty of some significant sin are proper candidates for divine wrath*. Let us call this the *known sin* condition. The case of Job clearly fails this criterion, since God himself declares Job to be "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8, NIV). Moreover, Job's friends, though not privy to this divine assessment of Job, had no independent evidential grounds on which to base their judgment that Job had sinned in some significant way so as to warrant such harsh treatment by God. Given these facts and the additional "known sin" condition, the application of the other criteria I propose becomes moot. Thus, my proposed conditions don't fail as much as they must be supplemented with the "known sin" requirement. This is something that I took for granted but I certainly should have made explicit, as Bock's critique makes evidently clear.

Bock's Misguided Critiques

While I am indebted to Bock for this corrective, I would like to push back on his other critiques. Bock proceeds to note that the failure of Job's friends in assessing him is rooted in a lack of empathy. He therefore proposes a condition of his own which he dubs the "empathy condition." He articulates this as follows: "before ascribing divine wrath to explain the suffering of others, one ought to have a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances."⁴ He adds that such a requirement "would remind us that epistemic caution is a virtue and that the act of judging others is prone to error."⁵ I strongly agree with both of these points and there is nothing in my argument which would suggest otherwise. In fact, I emphasize and elaborate in some detail on Bock's point about epistemic caution, noting that "it is probably prudent to maintain an especially stringent standard for making such assertions. After all, it is always possible to err in one's interpretations regarding each of the potential corroborating factors" that I discuss.⁶

Bock proceeds to focus on the personal dimension of making sense of suffering and emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting individual believers regarding sin in their lives. He says, "the conviction of sin is not the conclusion of a deductive argument or the satisfying of a set of sufficient conditions; rather it is an awareness of one's spiritual condition communicated by God through the Holy Spirit."⁷ I couldn't agree more. But the principal concern of my article and the criteria I propose is not personal divine guidance but the matter of inferring divine wrath

4. Bock, "The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment," 138.

5. Bock, "The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment," 138.

6. Spiegel, "It's the Wrath of God," 314.

7. Bock, "The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment," 139.

in the lives of *other people*. Since we are naturally interested in God's purposes in allowing or inflicting suffering in other's lives, not just our own, this is what motivates my interest in the question when, if at all, one may justifiably infer the occurrence of divine wrath in such cases. Furthermore, the public nature of much suffering is what demands the sorts of objective criteria (or "rational formulae") that I propose for making assessments in such cases.

Bock sums up his critique when he says that "a distinction that Spiegel should stress . . . is between the justificatory demands of ascribing meaning to one's own suffering, on the one hand, and the demands of ascribing meaning to the suffering of others, on the other hand."⁸ While this is no doubt an important distinction, for various reasons, I am not convinced that it is always useful, much less decisive, in the context of striving to understand *God's* purposes in allowing or inflicting suffering in one's life. While each individual has privileged access to many dimensions of their own life, it doesn't follow from this that their subjective judgments are incorrigible or even more reliable than that of some other persons. In fact, as psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated, it is often the case that the subjective point of view distorts one's judgments on events. Given the reality of personal bias and self-deception, whether due to the warping effect of emotions on one's use of reason or other factors, we might actually have more reason to be *skeptical* of a person's ascriptions of meaning to their own suffering.⁹ For this reason, perhaps the justificatory demands are *greater*, not lesser for the person who makes such meaning assessments regarding her own suffering. In any case, we need not assume, as Bock does, that justificatory standards should be less demanding when ascribing meaning to one's own suffering as opposed to the suffering of others.¹⁰

Conclusion

I do appreciate Gregory Bock's critical response to my treatment of the matter of inferring divine punishment. I have conceded a major point of his critique, namely

8. Bock, "The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment," 140.

9. See, for example, James R. Larson, Jr., "Evidence for a Self-Serving Bias in the Attribution of Causality," *Journal of Personality* 45 (1977): 430-441 and Emily Pronin, "Perception and Misperception of Bias in Human Judgment," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2007): 37-43. And this is to say nothing of the problem of self-deception, the deleterious epistemic effects of which have been well-documented. For a definitive study on self-deception, see Alfred R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

10. Bock even goes so far as to assert the following: "it is one thing to interpret the events in one's own life as instances of divine wrath; this fits well with a biblically-based understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and requires no further 'justificatory burden.' It is quite another thing to interpret such events in the lives of others for their sake" (Bock, "The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment," 140.). Why should we believe that one's assessment of whether God is acting wrathfully in one's own life incurs *no* rational justification? We most certainly have some degree of justificatory burden as we strive to interpret divine purpose in our own lives, as is evident for the reasons just noted regarding the psychological specters of self-serving bias and self-deception.

that my three criteria were not sufficient for inferring divine wrath. I have also showed that Bock's other critiques are problematic. Specifically, I pointed out that Bock seems to have overlooked the fact that I emphasized exercising epistemic caution when making inferences regarding divine wrath. And I also showed that Bock mistakenly grants certain epistemic privileges—specifically in the form of relaxed justificatory demands—to those making meaning assessments of their own suffering. I argued that because of the self-serving bias and the risk of self-deception, the justificatory demands in a context of self-concerned meaning assessments should be at least as rigorous as those pertaining to other people.

As for Bock's critical point that I concede, this concerns the fact that the three conditions I propose as potential criteria for inferring the occurrence of divine wrath should be supplemented with a "known sin" condition, which stipulates that *only persons demonstratively guilty of some significant sin are proper candidates for divine wrath*. Thus, my revised proposal would constitute a two-phase analysis, such that *only* in cases where the "known sin" condition is satisfied should one proceed to the next phase of application of conditions, which include: (1) the occurrence of a miracle in conjunction with the event in question, (2) extraordinary coincidences associated with the event, and (3) the association of the event with a fulfilled bold prediction.

While I am at it, let me make two further clarifications. First, the application of my proposed conditions ought to be construed *disjunctively* in the sense that in the second phase of analysis (that is, given the satisfaction of the "known sin" criterion) condition 1 *or* 2 *or* 3 might be sufficient to warrant the inference to divine punishment. That is, the demand that all three or even two of these further conditions be satisfied in phase two would be too strict—so strict, in fact, that it would rule out even many biblical reports of divine wrath as unwarranted. Secondly, I regard all inferences to divine punishment on the basis of these criteria to be inductive or abductive in nature, as opposed to deductive. This means that no such inferences are warranted to the point of rational certainty. Instead, they should be construed as probabilistic claims (if inductive) or inferences to the best explanation (if abductive). For this reason, inferences to divine wrath will always be epistemically fallible and subject to falsification given the acquisition of further data about a given case. Consequently, such claims should always be guarded, cautious, and, depending on the particular case, even tentative or provisional in nature.