

Exodus 20:5-6 HCSB You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, (6) but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands.

Why would God unfairly punish children for their parent's sins? The word פָּקַד (*paqad*), rendered "punishing" in the HCSB is notoriously difficult to translate. It is often rendered "visiting," (i.e. to come and see) particularly in the K.J.V. but Young argues that it NEVER should be so rendered. It always has the idea of "looking over, looking after, inspecting, examining". It is sometimes used causatively as in "to set, appoint, lay a charge upon" anyone.

Paqad takes its connoted flavor from its context; so, while here in Exodus 20 it might be rendered "dealing with" in the negative sense of "punishing," in Exodus 13 it describes positive attention.

- **Exodus 13:19 HCSB** Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, because Joseph had made the Israelites swear a solemn oath, saying, "God will certainly come to your aid; then you must take my bones with you from this place."

The NET renders "come to your aid" as "attend to you," which is an excellent literal rendering. However, since the implication is the eventual delivery of the people from Egyptian bondage, the HCSB inserts the positive tenor.

When *paqad* is used of God, it generally seems to imply that God intervenes in the lives of people for blessing or for cursing. This view is supported by:

- **Isaiah 45:7 HCSB** I form light and create darkness, I make success and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

The HCSB's translation of the participle here as "punishing" the children for the sins of the fathers is thus workable but limited or insufficient in meaning. Clearly *paqad* can be used in that negative sense.

- **Leviticus 18:25 HCSB** The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its sin, and the land will vomit out its inhabitants.
- **Isaiah 26:21 HCSB** For look, the LORD is coming from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. The earth will reveal the blood shed on it and will no longer conceal her slain.
- **Jeremiah 29:32 HCSB** this is what the LORD says: I am about to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his descendants. There will not be even one of his *descendants* living among these people, nor will any ever see the good that I will bring to My people"--*this is the LORD's declaration--*"for he has preached rebellion against the LORD."
- **Jeremiah 36:31 HCSB** I will punish him, his descendants, and his officers for their wrongdoing. I will bring on them, on the residents of Jerusalem, and on the men of Judah all the disaster, which I warned them about but they did not listen."
- **Hosea 1:4 HCSB** Then the LORD said to him: Name him Jezreel, for in a little while I will avenge the bloodshed of Jezreel on the house of Jehu and put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.
- **Amos 3:2 HCSB** I have known only you out of all the clans of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Obviously, the context in each case drives a negative connotation to the word *paqad*. However, if you read the verses again, but this time insert some variation of "I will deal with" or "I will attend to" in the appropriate place, you will see that that works too.

Exodus 20:5-6 is, in my opinion, implying that there is an inherent tendency for children to pick up the habits, mindsets, or cultural tendencies of their parents and thus will tend to also hate Yahweh and not keep his commandments. They will, in essence, repeat the sins their fathers committed and thus suffer for them. We can see this supported historically in the children of abusers who grow up to become abusers or multiple generations of families that are addicted to a common substance. If the sin, though not fully developed and consummated in one generation, is left unchecked, it may proceed into the next generation and there find full blossom. This is supported by the fact that “Those hating me,” refers to the children, not to the parents. What a tremendous responsibility parents have to keep their sins in check!

This idea also enjoys wide biblical support; for, we see numerous occasions where Yahweh taught individual responsibility for sin.¹

However, it may also indicate that the effects of the sins of the fathers will spill over onto the following generations. This concept can be amply demonstrated in the lives of the generations of our people who suffered in Egyptian bondage because their ancestors turned from their rightful king, Yahweh Melek, and disregarded His promises. Or consider the difficulties the children endured in the wilderness because their parents balked at the river Jordan.

Hashem’s ethical character is thus displayed in how He deals with sin and righteousness. This should provide us with ample motivation for loyalty to Him and for avoiding sin. There is a justice at work in the dealings of God that is notoriously absent in the pagan world.

By the way, the Hebrew word for “generations” [דור, dor] is not found in either verse five or six of Exodus 20 which is why they are italicized in the HCSB. The numbers (i.e. third, fourth, thousand) are like an abbreviation for a longer expression, which is understood as part of the description of the children already mentioned. So, it’s like Moses was saying “to the third or fourth child/descendent” or “to a thousand children/descendents.” For example, in the following passage, the actual word “generation” is included in the Hebrew because the word “children” has not been.

- **Deuteronomy 7:9 HCSB** Know that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps His gracious covenant loyalty for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commands.

Yahweh Shaphat (God our Judge) is the very embodiment of fairness as our father Abraham well knew.

- **Genesis 18:25 HCSB** You could not possibly do such a thing: to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. You could not possibly do that! Won't the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

He has categorically stated that each of us stands or falls for our own sins. Each of us will die and face judgment for our sins – even for our careless words or unintentional sins. Paqad means “deal with” or “look after” in my opinion. If God has to deal with us and we have sinned, we can be sure that punishment will be involved. If God has to deal with us and we have been faithful slaves, we will hear “Well done, good and faithful slave. Enter into the joy of your Master.” The fact that He limits the damage of our sins to four generations and yet ensures that the blessings of righteousness are passed on to a thousand generations speaks loudly of His merciful and beneficent nature.

¹ Exodus 32:31-33; Leviticus 26:39-40; Deuteronomy 7:9-10; 24:16; 2 Kings 14:5-6; Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:4, 18-20