



HUMANKIND DISOBEDIENCE BRINGS INJUSTICE INTO THE SOCIETY¹

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Introduction

God created the humans as the apex of his creation. He established an open and just way of living with each other, with God and how to live justly within the environment. However, the serpent shrewdly creeps in bringing disobedience. Introducing a new way of interpreting reality that is contra what God had out rightly said. Let us explore that nature of disobedience and the nature of the consequences. Is disobedience a cardinal sin in your present worldview?

God judges humankind for its disobedience that brought injustice and a curse into the world (Genesis 3-11). From the sin in the garden (Genesis 3) to the building of the tower/temple of Babel (Genesis 11) must be at least four thousand years. From this section onwards, the story tells of selective events that demonstrate how God acts when humans disobey. Note that the consequences are monistic.

SCENE ONE: ADAM AND EVE DISOBEYED— INJUSTICE IN THE FAMILY (Genesis 3-4)

Adam and Eve are now in the garden with all of its provisions for them. It is without doubt the “Paradise” which it is often called. However, into that garden comes the serpent.

i. Enter the serpent

The serpent attacked God’s word: “Did God really say?” (3:1) By his word God had first created the world itself and then created patterns in society such as marriage (2:24), work (1:28; 2:15), ceasing from work (2:2, 3) and the avoidance of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). The serpent questioned the validity of one of these patterns and offered an alternative pattern of behavior (3:4).

Following the strategy of reading the story from within the texts, we do not at this point go off to other parts of the Bible which come later to discover that the serpent is Satan. That is true, but the actors, Adam and Eve, do not know that and perhaps the author does not know it either. God’s “word” was the creative word. The serpent’s word was the “counter-word”, the “destructive-word”. We shall keep our eyes and ears open as we observe this battle of words, powerful words of life and death. Given the world in which Genesis was written, there is a serpent or one behind the serpent that appears in other forms who is just out of sight most of the time (cf. Job) but always really present is the spirit world. The LORD lives in that realm, but so do other beings one of whom is Satan. Exactly why Satan and other such spirits opposed to the LORD are not much mentioned in the OT, except toward the end (Daniel), is not clear to me. I presume that in most traditional societies it was understood that behind or inhabiting idols were spirits. The OT is full of idols, but not demons.

¹ This reader is adopted and adapted from Dr Chester C. Wood’s unpublished material titled “In Paths of Righteousness for His Name sake” The Story of the Task of the People of God: A Biblical Theology of Justice.

ii. Disobedience: 3:6

"When the woman saw that the fruit...was good... pleasing... desirable for gaining wisdom...she took and ate it." The woman moved from obedience, the pattern of behavior that God created by his word, to disobedience, the alternative pattern of behavior created by the word of the serpent. She moved from learning about good and evil by trusting God to learning about good and evil by experience, "when you eat ...your eyes will be opened" (3:5). She turned from trusting God to distrusting God. She withdrew from being dependent upon God and sought to become an independent creature. Then "she also gave to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (3:6).

The description of this event occupies only a few lines. How critical is this event in the course of human history? We have some idea of the pivotal nature of this event by assessing its immediate results. Although the vocabulary for justice is not present in this text, this act of disobedience, this sin, is a matter of injustice. Injustice is an "unjust act", "applies to any act that involves unfairness to another or violation of one's rights." Adam and Eve had not acted rightly toward God, i.e. they had not obey his word.

iii. Results of disobedience: 3:7-19

We first inquire about the scope of the results of the disobedience of our first parents. How much damage did the first act of disobedience result in? What was its scope? Second, we observe that the results were monistic.

a) Scope of the results of disobedience:

The disobedience of our first parents impacted three areas. First, the right relationship that existed in society was broken. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked" (3:7). I doubt if we are to read this passage to mean that Adam had never realized that Eve had no clothes on. Rather, "naked" points to a realization on the part of Adam and Eve that something had gone wrong between them. Nakedness now is a source of embarrassment, shame. Therefore, "they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (3:7). The first recorded effect of their disobedience lies in the societal area. The open, just, good relationship, which they had with each other was broken. Society became unjust. (Remember, that from the biblical point of view, Adam and Eve are the totality of society at this stage.) However, the effects of this act of disobedience are not limited to the societal impact, although this is recorded first.

Second, the good, just, open relationship, which the couple had experienced with God in the garden was fractured. The pattern of the relation of Adam and Eve, we presume, was to have "fellowship" with God in the garden (3:8a):

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day...

This pattern of fellowship was interrupted ("and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden," 3:8b) and Adam confessed to the LORD "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" from God (3:10).

Third, a curse came upon fertility. For the woman, the fertility of her womb was affected.

To the woman he said, *"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children."* (3:16)

For the man, the fertility of the land was affected (Gen 3:17).

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground..." (Genesis 3:17, 18; cf. 5:29; Jeremiah 23:10) Both for the woman and the man pain entered into their sphere of fertility. Note that a curse is the opposite of a blessing. As blessing conveys or communicates some concrete good so a curse communicates some concrete evil. Besides, the curse upon the womb and the land, God has also placed a curse upon the serpent (Gen 3:14): Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!

God also announced, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*

The exact meaning of this pronouncement is difficult to discern. What exactly did the author have in mind? What would the first readers have understood? We know that Paul saw in these words some kind of messianic prophecy. Perhaps, we have here the first hint of one of the major threads that makes up the core of a biblical theology of justice, the task of the people of God, i.e. the motif of war, or conflict, or power encounter, to use recent terminology. But reading the story from within the text we are left wandering exactly what it means. There is an element of suspense. The three major relationships were broken: God to humans, humans to humans and humans to environment. They have already "died" (2:17) in the sense that death means separation, not extinction.

Cain murdering Abel thus becoming injustice in the family follows the disobedience of Adam and Eve: Genesis 3, 4. Injustice between two individuals when unchecked grows and becomes injustice in the family. Sibling strife. Envy and jealousy brings in murder. Afterwards it grows to injustice in society as demonstrated by the flood in Genesis 6-9 and we see it spill into injustice among the nations as demonstrated by the tower of Babel.

b) Effects of disobedience are monistic

What is the nature of the problem that God seeks to solve? When God enters into the human situation and when he calls humans to join him in redemptively entering the human situation what kind of predicament is encountered? We suggest that the effects of the disobedience of Adam and Eve can be characterized as being monistic. To repeat, monistic means that understanding of the world in which the physical and spirit aspects can be distinguished but not separated. The physical and spirit aspects of life interact with each other. The effects are evident in the spiritual relationship with God, in the societal relationship between Adam and Eve and in the physical relationship of Adam and Eve to the fertility of their environment, the land and the womb. The whole began to unravel when the spiritual thread was pulled. But once the spiritual relationship of human's dependence upon God began to unravel, the other relationships also unraveled. These relationships can be distinguished, but cannot be separated.

If the sicknesses caused by the disobedience is monistic and if the spirit and physical aspects can be distinguished, but not separated, the cure must be monistic. If the curse is monistic, the restorative blessing must be monistic (cf. Genesis 12:2, 3). All Christians agree with this in that we believe that in the End all the effects of sins, e.g. sickness, poverty, alienation from one another and from God, will be sorted out. However, the differences among Christians enter when we ask when this cure is to take place and how. Will the monistic cure only come at the End or does the monistic cure begin with the first coming of Jesus? Or does it begin earlier, with Abraham? And how does this cure come? Via a Messiah (with two comings) or via the community of the people of God which finds its culmination, enablement and focal point in the Messiah?

So what happens next after the disobedience of Adam and Eve? Or one might say the unbelief of Adam and Eve for it is really their lack of faith in God's Word that leads them to disobedience, is it not? God walked with them but they did not "by faith" walk with God. We simply must see how God deals with the disobedience of Adam and Eve and the devastating results which came from that act.

c) Judgment came because of disobedience: 3:23,24

"So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:23)

With these solemn and dreadful words, God brought judgment upon humans. We shall call this judgment "retributive justice," which has the idea of punishment, and is counterbalanced by "distributive justice" which has the idea of restore.

God's response to human injustice is divine retributive justice. The word for "banish" is not one of the basic Hebrew words use to express the concept of justice, in particular retributive justice. Nevertheless, the action of banishment is clearly an act of judgment. The concept of justice, as with love, etc., does not always need to be expressed in the basic words for justice. Actions, metaphors, visions, etc. can all speak about judgment or justice without using the basic words. We have tried to explain in chapter one how we go about constructing a concept of anything, in this case a concept of justice. Obviously, there is some arbitrariness in the construction of concepts. They are not just built up simply from basic words, i.e. key vocabulary, but also include actions, etc. in which one sees justice enacted. Therefore, narrative is important for our understanding of the concept of justice. We cannot just turn to the Law in the OT or to Letters, especially those of Paul, in the NT. We must also read attentive narratives, e.g. Genesis and Matthew. This is the first indication that God is a God who brings justice in the form of punishment or retribution. Many simply reject this outright. "God has no right to judge me or anyone else!" But the Bible pulls no punches on this point: God does judge. The narrative is explicit about this. Again, we have come to a watershed issue. If we reject God's right to bring retributive justice upon those who sin, we undercut the message of the Scriptures and ultimately we undercut the possibility of distributive (redemptive, uplifting, restorative) justice because God must first remove (retributive justice) the oppressor (e.g. Pharaoh and the Egyptians) in order to bring deliverance (restorative justice) for the Israelites. Distributive justice, which we shall define more fully as we proceed, is a justice, which restores, lifts up, rescues, defends, redeems (see Psalm 72).

d) A hint of mercy: 3:21-22

Is retributive justice the only response of God? We are told that the "LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." Kidner (1967:72) cautions that "It is unduly subtle, and a distraction, to foresee the atonement here. God is meeting the immediate rather than the ultimate needs..." But even limiting God's mercy to clothing and not reading sacrifice into the providing of animal skins does not take away from the fact that God responded to the disobedient couple both in judgment and in mercy. We shall watch to see the pattern recurs.

SCENE TWO: FLOOD: INJUSTICE IN SOCIETY: Genesis 6-9

Essential scripture reading: Genesis 6-9;

Suggested scripture reading: Matthew 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-30; II Peter 2:4-8

In this second scene, the writer of Genesis introduces his readers to the ever-widening circle of sin and its effects. Once the rock of disobedience is dropped into the calm Eden pool, the peace is disrupted and the ripples of sin's effects continue in ever widening circles. At first, the effects are evident in the disruption of the family, Adam and Eve and then Cain and Abel. Second, the effects of sin are evident at the societal level in the story of the flood: God saw "how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). Such wickedness of the heart and mind generated patterns of social behavior that God grieved over (6:11-13).

"Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways (patterns of behavior). So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them..."

The term "wickedness" stands as a general description of the condition of humans at the time and is a term, used along with its related terms such as "the wicked", etc. This term, is often used in contrast to "righteous" and its related terms, such as "righteousness" (cf Gen18:25,26; Ps 1:1). The terms "corrupt" and "violence" refer to societal relations (Wenham, 1987:171). Wenham notes that violence "denotes antisocial, un-neighborly activity. Very often it involves the use of brute force, but it may just be the exploitation of the weak by the powerful or the poor by the rich..."

He also observes that violence is often paired with the term for "oppression." Humans had become corrupted in their behavior and as a result they became violent (cf. Lamech in Genesis 4:23, 24). Those who gained power and became corrupt used their power to oppress those beneath them. The powerful afflicted the powerless with violent acts.

RIGHTEOUS OF NOAH: 6:9,10; 7:1

In the midst of all of this injustice stands Noah who is marked with the adjective "righteous" which is used for the first time here in Genesis. Surely, this is instructive and puts us on alert to watch for other men and women who are called righteous. What does righteous mean in this context? Genesis 6:9 tells us that *"Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God."*

Righteous is an adjective and modifies what kind of man Noah was (see also 7:1 "I have found you righteous in this generation."). Righteous simply means that he was the sort of man who kept the standards of God either revealed in nature and/or through God's speech. Wenham (1987:170) says to call Noah righteous is like calling a man in our day and language a "good" man. We shall return to this matter of calling a person righteous.

We shall keep our eyes open as we move through the Scriptures for the adjective "righteous" as applied to persons. Is this an ideal type?

The next term is "blameless." How does blameless relate to righteous? Is it a synonym? Is it a further refinement of righteous? Some (see Wenham, 1987:169 referring to Cassuto) think that blameless is not an adjective like righteous but an adverb modifying righteous, i.e. perfectly or wholly righteous. Wenham (1987:170), himself, thinks that there is "a progression build-up" from righteous to blameless to walked with God. I am not sure I see much difference between righteous and blameless. Both refer to behavior in society. "Walked with God" is only used of Enoch (5:22, 24) and Noah, although the expression "walk before God" is applied to Abraham ("walk before me and be blameless", 17:1) is a close parallel.

I have left open a more precise definition of righteous and blameless because the context does not give us much help. Noah clearly stands in contrast with wicked, corrupt and violent behavior of his neighbors. He is selected on the basis of God favor or grace (6:8 "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD."). For those of us like myself who started with the New Testament and especially with Romans and then came later to read the OT, the tendency is to read back into the story of Genesis what we know from later revelation, especially Paul.

When the original reader of Genesis 6 read "righteous", their minds did not immediately go to the concept of justification by faith as taught by Paul. Of course, Genesis 15:6 says, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Paul cites this text (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:6).

This leaves us with what for some will be a problem: How can a human being be called righteous when other passages (Ps 14:1-3) say that there is none righteous. We shall keep our eyes open concerning this matter. Others, such as Job, Abraham and even David, will be called righteous. There is no hint in this text that Noah was righteous in the sense of justified before God as Paul speaks of it. The interesting thing is God responds to human injustice in society in a consistent way, just as he dealt with injustice in the family.

JUDGMENT: 7:2-14

What will God do with his disobedient and violent creatures? In what way(s) will he involve himself in this mess? One of the most amazing passages in the Bible is found in Genesis 6:6: ***"The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."***

How can the Almighty be grieved? How can he feel pain? I do not know! However, his involvement, his emotional involvement, with his creatures is obvious. Such emotional involvement leads him to declare, "I will wipe out from the face of the earth every living creature I have made" (7:4; cf. 7:23).

The response of the LORD to injustice is judgment, i.e. retributive justice. The flood was one of the greatest acts of divine retributive justice in the history of humankind. This mighty act of justice signals to the reader the seriousness with which God takes sin and its results. A pattern is emerging. Sin is followed by judgment, i.e. retributive justice. This judgment, like those upon Adam, Eve and Cain, is called a "curse", "never again will I curse the ground because of man..." (8:21).

MERCY: THE BLESSING RENEWED (8:17; 9:1, 7) & A COVENANT MADE (9:8-17)

In Genesis 9:1 ***"God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth'"*** (cf. 9:7). This is the blessing of Genesis 1:28. God set alongside the judgment the blessing. God renewed his blessing of fertility upon animals (8:17; cf. 1:22) and humans (9:1, 7). One might think that because of the disobedience of humans the original blessing upon humans has been withdrawn and that God's creation commandment "to be fruitful and increase" has been replaced by some other commandment.

God's mercy upon humans was also manifest in his covenant with Noah (9:8-17) in that he promised that he would not bring such a flood upon the earth again. The sign of this covenant was the rainbow. The pattern that is emerging is one of sin-judgment-mercy. The Noah scene is connected to the next scene, Babel, by a genealogy (ch 10; cf. ch 5). This so-called Table of Nations lists the three sons of Noah, Japheth, Ham and Shem and takes them up in that order. This genealogy differs from those of chapters three and eleven in that it is "segmented", i.e. it is concerned about the horizontal relations as well as the vertical (father-son). Israel, of course, comes from the line of Shem whereas some of the neighbors of Israel such as Canaanites (10:15), Babylonians (10:10) and Egyptians (10:13)²⁷ come from Ham. The genealogy shows that the blessing to be fruitful and increase is being effective. Furthermore, this table of nations is critical for understanding the phrase "families of the earth" (12:3) in the promise made to Abraham. The families of the earth are those found in this table of nations/families.

SCENE THREE: BABEL: INJUSTICE AMONG THE NATIONS: 11:1-9

Essential scripture reading: Genesis 11:1-9

Suggested scripture reading: Isaiah 13, 14

The story of the tower of Babel is one of the most cryptic events in the Old Testament. What was the sin, or injustice, being committed? It was twofold: idolatry and failure to obey the command to "fill the earth", i.e. to scatter.

Idolatry

The intention of those at Babel to make a name for themselves was contrary to God's purposes: ***"Come...that we may make a name for ourselves..."*** (11:4). They attempted to make a name, i.e. find their identity and/or make themselves famous by building a tower, or more accurately a temple. The integrating point of ancient societies was religion. This temple was a ziggurat.

Failure to scatter

The second aspect of their sin was their refusal to scatter. This angered God (11:4, 8, 9; cf. 10:18). ***"Come let us make a name...and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth"*** (11:4). God wanted them to fill the whole earth, not to remain in one place (1:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). God is not anti-city. The culmination of God's work on earth is the New Jerusalem, a city. However, God is "anti" the tendency not to fill the earth for God wills that humans should care for the whole earth.

JUDGMENT AND ITS RESULTS: 11:5-9

Confusion of language

"Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (11:7). Brueggemann (1982, 103) suggests that we translate the Hebrew word *shama'* not as "understand" but as "listen" (cf. Genesis 42:21-23). This suggests that the division between the nations is not merely a linguistic problem that can be transcended by a mastery of

the language of other people, but also and fundamentally a moral problem. We do not desire to listen to the point of view of others, even after we master their language.

Scattering

As a result of the confusing of their language, they scattered. ***"So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth"*** (11:8, cf. 11:9b). The scattering is the result of the judgment of confusing their language. Scattering was God's original intention.

In the cases of Adam, Eve, Cain and the flood, judgment has been followed by mercy. But where is the mercy in this passage? Perhaps the scattering is a mercy. We suggest that the most important merciful response of God to Babel and indeed to the whole of Genesis 3-11 is to be found after the end of the genealogy (11:10-32) which links the temple of Babel (11:1-9) to Abraham and Sarah (12:1f). God's call and promise to Abraham and Sarah was an act of great mercy. The blessing pronounced by God upon Abraham (12:2, 3) off sets the curses found in Genesis 1-11.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT GENESIS 3-11

Genesis 3-11 has at least three major themes that are crucial in developing an adequate biblical theology of justice. They can be stated in three words: injustice, justice and mercy.

INJUSTICE OF HUMANS

The selectivity of the author of Genesis is straightforward. Out of the thousands of events that occurred during this long period (6,000 B.C.-2,000 B.C.), he selected only three events: *the disobedience of the first couple including their son Cain, the flood and the temple of Babel*. All of these point directly to human injustice.

The author conveyed to his first readers (and to us) that humans are unjust. Unjust in their relation to each other, unjust in their relation to God and unjust in their relation to the environment. Strikingly the emphasis falls upon the social relation: Adam-Eve, Cain-Abel, the corrupt and violent society of Noah's time and the corporate attempt to build a temple. I suggest here, that if you carefully follow this throughout the rest of the Bible, you will notice that *societal relations and therefore social ethics are to the fore. Personal ethics are always set within the larger framework of social ethics*. The preaching/teaching of Jesus is primarily about how people should relate to each other, i.e. societal. Reread the Sermon on the Mount.

We have noticed that:

Human injustice is monistic: it encompasses both the spiritual and the physical, which can be distinguished but not separated. If this is a correct interpretation of the divine diagnosis, we have a major clue as to the nature of the cure.

Human injustice must be taken with the utmost seriousness. Failure to take seriously both the depth and the breadth of human injustice will make unnecessary the redemptive actions of God. The text fairly shouts at us: "HUMANS ARE SINNERS!" To act as if what humans need is a bit of remedial attention, a dash of therapeutic counseling, a little encouragement to do better, an updated self-help book, is to miss the point completely. ***"The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually"*** (6:5, NRSV). Such corruption of the heart was mirrored in the corruption and violence of society (6:11f).

Maybe I can help make the point this way. We all know that until the 1990s Americans thought that the communists personally and socially were evil. This was so much the popular thinking that an American President could with all seriousness call them the center of evil, or something like that. In fact, each of our communities think the other is evil.

We think that evil is something that infected others. Something in their system, their culture, their history, their race or their tribe that makes them evil and us, by unspoken inference, good. What blindness! When I hear capitalistic Christians complain about government restraints--and I do not doubt that some of the restraints of government are unnecessary--but when I hear them say, "If they would just lift the restrictions and let us get on with it" I shudder. I also shudder when I hear socialistic Christians talk as if all that was needed was to restructure society and then all would have an equal share. However, do humans wish to share their goods? In addition, will they share them fairly? What of Animal Farm where all animals are equal but some are "more equal" than others? No system or no person is immune to the penetration of sin. Sin is universal and deep. Sin knows no racial, ethnic, national, gender, religious, or economic boundaries. Rich and poor, socialist and capitalist, male and female, are all under the judgment of Genesis 3-11. We must take seriously the depth of human injustice. Apart from God's redemptive activity, we are all lost and under judgment.

What is God's response to this human injustice? In the opening chapters of Genesis the pattern of his response is narrated--sin, judgment (retributive justice) and mercy (or distributive justice).

MERCY AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE OF GOD

The reader also encounters the first indications of the mercy of God, which leads him to distributive justice. For Adam and Eve he provided garments of skin (3:21). For Cain, the “mark” which protected him from being murdered (4:15). To Noah and his sons and daughters, he renewed his blessing of fertility and made a covenant (9:1-17). In addition, in response to the judgment of the temple of Babel we suggest that the blessing promised to Abraham (12:2, 3) and his seed is the greatest of all his acts of mercy and distributive justice.

JUSTICE AND MERCY MEET

Already we are into one of the deepest mysteries of the Word of God. How is it that God can be both a God of distributive justice and a God of retributive justice? How is it that God can simultaneously be a God of anger and wrath on the one hand and a God of mercy and loving kindness on the other? Anger and mercy are what motivate God to do acts of distributive and retributive justice. Genesis 3-11 proclaims in story form that the LORD is both a God who out of a heart of pain and grief sends retributive justice on humans and a God who out of a heart of mercy seeks to restore sinful humans (distributive justice). The story holds the two in tension. We must do the same. A biblical theology that omits or even downplays the terrible retributive justice of God is an inadequate biblical theology, assuming that the Bible is our real authority and guide to life. On the other hand, a theology that stresses only or primarily the judgment of God is a harsh and wicked distortion of the character of God. Those who break the standard of God are subject to his terrible judgments. However, mercy and deliverance are available.

Against this awful darkness of social corruption and violence, stands the bright hope shining out of the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah. The light shines in the darkness, and as we shall see, the darkness does not overcome it. Even today for the most corrupt, most violent nations of the world, the promise of light shining into that darkness is still valid. We must restrain ourselves and not go far beyond the boundaries of this narrative text, a text of hope.

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