

Bible and the Headlines: Hamlet's Choices

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Hamlet is in the headlines. Not Shakespeare's play, but the question posed by the prince of Denmark about the nature of revenge: "Which is nobler, forbearance or revenge?" Here are a few articles on this theme.

The Wall Street Journal started off the conversation with its August 17th article, "The Science of Revenge' Review: Vengeance Isn't Benign." This was an examination of the arguments made in the aforementioned book. The author is a professor of psychiatry at Yale. The professor believes, "Our compulsion to hurt those who have hurt us . . . lies deep in our brain chemistry." According to his theory, when a slight takes place it activates a region of the brain. The thought of revenge releases chemicals to satiate this pain. Addiction to the brain's pleasure chemicals is what keeps people locked in unforgiveness.

Hamlet's option two was taken by the subject of The Times' August 18th article, "Zelensky Exacts His Revenge Over Trump Suit Debacle." The title refers to the February meeting at the White House where Ukraine's president did not wear the traditional garb for a state visit. His faux pas was commented on by a White House visitor. The same visitor was present at President Zelensky's most recent trip and the visitor apologized for his previous comments. In true Hamlet fashion, the article notes, "Zelensky smiled . . . and exacted his revenge. 'And you are in the same suit [you wore in February],' he said, to laughter." Touche.

On August 18th, Psychology Today featured, "Could Retaliation and Revenge Be Adaptive 'Superpowers'?" The article is an evolutionary exploration of the survival benefits of revenge for early humans. In one study the researchers assert, "Mechanisms for revenge may have been naturally selected for their efficacy in deterring would-be aggressors by virtue of the revenge's ability to signal the avenger's aggressive potential." In layman's terms, retribution deterred subsequent attacks by the offender and those who witnessed the vengeance.

The Bible contains many examples of both sides of Hamlet's question. At Mount Sinai the Israelites were taught to select Hamlet's second option, "If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Ex 21:23-25). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded believers to take Hamlet's first option of suffering "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Jesus reminded the people about Exodus 21 but changed this command saying, "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. And if anyone sues you and takes your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles" (Matt 5:39-41). This is further emphasized in the prayer Jesus gave to the Church which says, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4).

While evolution may offer an incentive for Hamlet's option to take up arms, Jesus showed the eternal advantage of letting bygones be bygones, "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"

(Matt 6:14-15). Hamlet would have had a much less tragic ending if the prince had taken this option.