

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People: A Medieval Icelandic Perspective

Why do bad things happen to good people? This question is one that has been contemplated for ages and was especially common in the Middle Ages because people faced death on a daily basis. Icelandic sagas, which were written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are particularly interested in exploring this question. Two sagas-- “Thidrandi Whom the Goddesses Slew” and “Hen-Thorir”-- give us four ideas about how people in the Medieval Iceland would have answered this question. This is important because the way the Icelandic people answered this question back then may help people answer the same question for themselves, today.

I’ll briefly give you a summary of the two Sagas I will be talking about to help you better understand my evidence. Thidrandi Whom the Goddesses Slew is the tale of Thidrandi, a virtuous, kind-hearted young man, who receives a warning from a seer not to go outside on a particular night but he ignores this advice. As a result he is murdered by nine wraiths that are angry with Iceland’s Upcoming Conversion to Christianity, even though nine women in white tried to save him. The other Saga, Hen-Thorir, is the story of Blund-Ketil, a just and honest landlord who tries to buy hay for his tenants from the disagreeable Hen-Thorir. When Hen-Thorir refuses, Blund-Ketil steals the hay and is later burned by Hen-Thorir’s men. It is important to note that in these Sagas are many names and nuances, but for the sake of this presentation I’ve limited myself to these major characters, and narrowed my focus to four reasons explaining why bad things happened to good people.

The first reason is that it was their fate. In the Middle Ages, fate was often considered to be the cause of tragic events. The book *Icelandic Spiritualism* tells us that “in the sagas, fate is a supratheological force: that is, even the gods are subject to fate” (Swatos 158). If fate is so

powerful that even the gods must bend to its will, then it is impossible for a mortal to evade its designs. We see this sentiment in *Thidrandi Whom The Goddesses Slew*. In the beginning of the saga, a seer states, “what is fated must go forward” (Jones 159). In other words, Thidrandi’s death is inevitable. Moral character doesn’t matter to fate. If a person is destined to have a hard life, they will, regardless of what kind of person they are. This is also evidenced in the saga of *Hen-Thorir*. Blund-Ketil was a good man described as “a man well-blest with friends and brave as they make them” (Jones 7). Despite all of Blund-Ketil’s virtues, he is burnt alive. He had no control over the chain of events that lead to his death, rather, his life was left up to luck, which in Icelandic sagas is the same thing as fate. One of Hen-Thorir’s supporters tells Hen-Thorir “we may well find that you and good luck don’t go together, and that some great mishap will arise because of you” (Jones 16). The role luck, or the lack thereof, played in how a person fared in life was a common theme in Norse ideology as Bettina Sejberg Sommer, author of *The Norse Concept of Luck*, explains. “It is not unreasonable to assume that to Norse thought lucklessness might be the result of possessing a nature that relentlessly drives one toward disaster” (Sejberg Sommer 291). Hen-Thorir was driven to disaster, but he was not the one who was affected by the bad luck surrounding him. It was Blund-Ketil who would face the disastrous effects of Hen-Thorir’s luck. There was nothing Blund-Ketil could do to escape it.

The second reason why these tragedies occurred may be because altruistic people, such as Thidrandi and Blund-Ketil, often allow themselves to be subjected to cruelty in order to prevent others from getting hurt. If the Wraiths had not taken Thidrandi’s life as retribution for the coming religious change they would have carried out their revenge in some other way, killing another in his stead or everyone who was gathered for the harvest feast. His death may have prevented the murders of numerous people. Blund-Ketil’s deeds were also driven by a desire to

ease the burdens of others. Many of his tenants were struggling to keep their animals alive through the harsh winter. They sought his aid and even though it was their fault (Jones 9), Blund-Ketil did what he could to help them. He went to Hen-Thorir on their behalf knowing that Hen-Thorir would have hay, but that he could be unreasonable (Jones 9). He was aware that if his renters went on their own, Hen-Thorir would give them nothing. Helping his boarders spared their animals, but it cost Blund-Ketil his life.

The third reason why these tragedies occurred is because of the choices Thidrandi and Blund-Ketil made. Thidrandi chose to disregard the seer's warning to stay inside (Jones 160), which led to his downfall. If he had heeded the seer's admonition the wraiths wouldn't have been able to kill him. Blund-Ketil's choice to take Hen-Thorir's hay even though Hen-Thorir insisted that he did not want to sell triggered the events that lead to his death (Jones 12). Hen-Thorir is compensated, but he never agrees to the purchase and feels that he is being robbed. Although Blund-Ketil thought that his actions were justified, and most people agreed with him, he still forced Hen-Thorir to sell his hay.

The fourth and final reason is because these characters are not Christian. Although the sagas were written after Christianity came to Iceland, they portray a time before the Christianization. At the time these sagas were written Christians believed that those who had not conformed to their teachings were damned and could not be saved, no matter how upright they were. Blund-Ketil was described as, "the richest and most righteous-hearted of all men of the old faith" (Jones 3). Though he was a righteous man, he was not spared. Perhaps if he had been a Christian, things would have turned out differently. As a Christian he would not have been condemned to rely on the mercies of luck because the coming of Christianity overturned Pagan luck as Sommers explains in the "Norse concept of luck". In Thidrandi's case "The better spirits

must have wished to help him, but did not arrive in time to do so” (Jones 161). These “better spirits,” or the women in bright raiment, symbolized the coming of Christianity (Jones 161). Since Christianity was considered to be the only thing that was truly wholesome and Thidrandi had not adopted it yet, a terrible thing happened to him.

My argument is significant not only because they help us understand medieval ideas of fate and justice, but because these sagas (and others) are still relevant today. They continue to be topics of study because they resonate with people. One of the reasons why interest in these stories has persisted over centuries is because they address the universal question, why do bad things happen to good people? In this presentation I have given four reasons that could explain why bad things happened to Thidrandi and Blund-Ketil. These same reasons, fate or luck, altruism, choices, and religion are still probable answers for people today. Bad things do happen to good people and have been happening to good people for ages. People will continue to wonder why and will keep searching for the answers and these Sagas can lead them to the answer that is right for them.

Works Cited

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