

THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING, RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, AND PROPOSED MORALITY IN THE BOOK OF JOB

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Abstrak:

Penderitaan adalah bagian dari hidup manusia. Manusia berusaha memahami mengapa ada penderitaan dan bagaimana harus menyikapinya. Kebijakan Israel kuno berusaha memahami misteri penderitaan itu, salah satunya adalah Kitab Ayub. Melalui studi pustaka, artikel ini menyelidiki jawaban Kitab Ayub terhadap persoalan penderitaan manusia dan bagaimana manusia menjalani hidupnya (moralitas) tatkala penderitaan menimpanya.

Keywords:

Problems of suffering, retributive justice, morality

INTRODUCTION

The problems of suffering are part of our human problems. From the beginning people ask why there is suffering. The ancient wisdom of Israel seeks an explanation to this problem through the doctrine of retributive justice. Retributive justice is related with the justice of God. God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Suffering is a punishment from God because of the evil they did. Is this right? The book of Job questioned this doctrine.¹ This book discusses the suffering of the

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¹ Robert EISEN, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York (NY) 2004, 224, 227, 302, "the Book of Job is speaking out against the notion of retributive justice found in the Hebrew Bible".

innocent, named Job, retributive justice, and shows his morality, how he lives his suffering life.

1. JUSTICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are two different Hebrew terms regarding justice, that are *mišpāṭ*, “justice,” and *dîn*, “judgment.” The substantive *mišpāṭ*, like the root *špṭ* from which it is derived, has various meanings i.e; “justice,” “judgment,” “rights,” “vindication,” “deliverance,” “custom,” “norm.” Although some contexts of *mišpāṭ* show that the root *špṭ* and the substantive *mišpāṭ* were also used in a forensic sense, there is strong evidence that attests that originally the substantive *mišpāṭ* referred to the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony (*šālôm*) in a community. When referring to purely legal matters, the Semitic root normally used is *dîn* (“to judge”) and the substantive *dîn* referred to a decision reached in a legal court. Both *dîn* and *špṭ* are used in parallel contexts which present them as synonyms in several biblical passages (1Sam 24:15; Jer 5:28; 21:12; Isa 3:13-14; Prov 31:9; Ps 7:9; 72:1-4).²

1.1 GOD AS JUDGE AND GUARDIAN OF JUSTICE

According to the Israelites, God was the Judge of the whole earth (Gen 18:25). This belief was based on the fact that it was He who created the world and established equity and justice (Ps 99:1-4). He was thus regarded as the source and guardian of justice because justice and righteousness are his very nature and attributes (Ps 97:2). The two terms “righteousness” (*šēdāqā*) and “justice” (*mišpāṭ*) are used synonymously in several biblical passages (Amos 5:24; Gen 18:19). Justice was central among the Israelites because they were very much concerned with social relationships among themselves as a people covenanted to God and also among the nations surrounding them. God, as Judge (*šōpēt*), would administer justice by punishing those whose conduct made the lives of others very difficult in the world (Ps 94:2-4). God was thus summoned to judge the nations for their disregard of justice in their social dealings with

² Cf. Temba L. J. MAFICO, “Just, Justice”, in David Noel FEEDMAN (ed.) *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, New York (NY) 1997, 1992.

other people (Ps 9:7-9). God appreciated justice and righteousness more than piety (Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). God's justice is manifested in his retribution to all people and nations according to their just deserts. Those who felt unjustly treated by others in social, economic, and political relationships summoned God to judge them, that is, to do them justice by saving them from their enemies or oppressors (Ps 7:6-11). When the Israelites summoned God to judge (*špt*) them, they were calling him to avenge them of their enemies simply as vindication for their own uprightness (Ps 17:2; 26:1-3; 28:3-4). It appears that the Israelites based God's retributive justice on the principle of judgment by ordeal. The innocent or the righteous (*šaddiq*), would be vindicated while the wicked would be requited according to their unrighteousness.³

1.2 RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

The problem of evil, suffering and pain are part of our human problems. The ancient wisdom of Israel seeks an explanation to the problem of evil through the doctrine of retributive justice. What is retributive justice? Retributive justice is related with the justice of God. God rewards the righteous (Prov 3:9-10; 10:27-32; 14:26-27) and punishes the wicked (Prov 3:33; 5:21-22; 10:27-32) during human life on earth. If they are being suffering, it is because of the evil they did. If they are rewarded, it is because of the good they did. It is based on the relation between action and consequence. The doctrine of retributive justice of God was closely tied to earthly life, because at that time Israel lacked of faith in human life after death (Cf. *Bibbia e morale* 137; this faith developed later in Israel, starting from the third century before Christ). So "no harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble" (Prov 12:21).⁴

It looks that the observations of essays on the different fate of the righteous and the wicked do not come from dogmatic positions, but from

³ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁴ Cf. Gabriel WITASZEK, *Giobbe, l'antropologia dell'uomo che soffre: ribelle o sottomesso? La sofferenza dell'innocente e il cammino della fede*, Academia Alfonsiana, Roma 2011, 62, 72. Cf. Kevin J. VANHOZER (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids 2005, 387. See Paul J. ACHEMEIER, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York (NY) 1996, 928.

the experience. The essays are convinced that there is a very close relationship between human action and its result. It is written in the Proverbs: "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich" (10:4). At other place: "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling" (Prov 26:27) and "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail" (Prov 22:8). The results are simply the logical consequence of human actions. God's action follows this line, "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked" (Prov 10:3).⁵

But is it true that all who do good will be rewarded and those who do evil will be punished and all this will happen in this life? The experience of the Babylonian exile to Israel marked a very strong crisis that put into question such beliefs. Some wise men of Israel questioned this idea of retributive justice and between fourth and third century before Christ, they wrote the book of Job and Ecclesiastes. Both texts have launched an assault on the idea of retributive justice. Very often, indeed, it seems that God intervenes in this world to punish the wicked and reward the righteous, not infrequently, the reality seems to work just the opposite. From the experience of life, Job and Ecclesiastes saw that there were cases in which the righteous are suffering from endless sufferings, while the wicked live in happiness and well-being.⁶

2. RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN THE BOOK OF JOB

In the second half of the fifth century before Christ, the author of the book of Job questioned the idea of retributive justice. He discussed the problem of the suffering of the innocent. Eventhough he did not give the clear and precise answer regarding the suffering of the innocent, he refused the concept of retributive justice.

⁵ Cf. WITASZEK, *op.cit.*, 62-63.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 63.

2.1 SUFFERING OF THE INNOCENT, JOB

The book of Job has a fairly simple structure. Job 1 and 2 are the prologue, written in prose. Job 3:1-42:6 is poetry that consists of a cycle of speeches between Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and later Elihu, and then the dialogue between Yahweh and Job. Job 42:7-14 is the epilogue, which is written in prose.

The book of Job starts with telling who is the central figure of this book:

“There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was *blameless* and *upright*, one who *feared God* and *turned away from evil*. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another’s houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and *sanctify them*, and he would rise early in the morning and offer *burnt offerings* according to the number of them all; for Job said, “It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” This is what Job always did.” (Job 1:1-5).

This prologue mentions five qualities of Job, that are: (1) blameless; (2) upright; (3) God-fearing; (4) turned away from evil; (5) offers sacrifices for any sins committed by their children. Job is ideal person that the Bible presents to us.

According to August H. Konkell the most important aspect of Job’s life is his character; “he was blameless—a man of complete integrity” (Job 1:1). The terms used suggest uncompromising ethical conduct. This is not perfection (as is frequently ascribed to Job), for that is beyond human capability; but it signifies a person of impeccable morality. The conduct of Job was based on his reverence for God, which inspired a desire to perform God’s will at all times. Such a man was blessed, not only in terms of his relationship with God and others but also in the material provision of life. In Hebrew thought these aspects of blessedness were never separated from each other: Job’s family was the first item of blessedness, for children are a heritage from the Lord, a reward and a source of

strength (Ps 127:3-5). All those who fear the Lord will be blessed; all those who walk in God's ways will eat of the fruit of their labor. They will be prosperous—their children around the table will be like olive shoots (Ps 128:1-3). Job's wealth is given in terms of cattle and servants in keeping with the patriarchal setting. The numbers are perfectly realistic for a wealthy person; Nabal had 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats (1Sam 25:2). Nevertheless, it is not the author's concern to provide a precise inventory of Job's wealth; the number seven, a symbol of fullness, is added to three to provide the number ten, another symbol of fullness. Job's greatness does not consist of his wealth; his greatness is his character, which is seen in all the accretions that pertain to such a person.⁷

However the life of Job changes to become a man of suffer. Satan destroys Job's life. Job loses all of his sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys, and many servants (Job 1:6-19). Not only that, Satan acts further, he inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head (Job 2:7). A terrible suffering. This is the theme of this book: the suffering of the innocent.

2.2 THE DEFENSE OF RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE BY JOB'S FRIENDS

"Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home--*Eliphaz* the Temanite, *Bildad* the Shuhite, and *Zophar* the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:11-13).

Then there is a dialogues (Job 3-31) between Job and his three friends, that are structured as follows: The first cycle of speeches (Job chapter 3, Eliphaz 4-5, Job 6-7, Bildad 8, Job 9-10, Zophar 11) by Job's friends has the overall theme for the sins he committed. The second cycle (Job Chapters 12-14, Eliphaz 15, Job 16-17, Bildad 18, Job 19, Zophar 20) focuses on the Judgement of God comes to the wicked. The third (Job Chapters 21,

⁷ Cf. August H. KONKEL, "Job", in Philip W. COMFORT (ed.) *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, volume 6, Tyndale House Publisher, Inc., Carol Stream 2006, 30.

Eliphaz 22, Job 23-24, Bildad 25:1-5, Job 26; 27-28; 29-31) exalt the wisdom of God and the way he governs the life implies that Job is an ignorant fool and is not entitled to respond to God.⁸

The retributive justice is based on the relation between action and consequence. When someone receives lot of luck and blessing, he is a right man. On the contrary when the things go wrong, it mean that he is a sinner and is punished by God. Job's friends represents the theory of retributive justice (Job 4-27). Eliphaz, a man of law, said that the innocent can not perish (Job 4:7), sin requires punishment (Job 4:8-9) and God finds fault in every man (Job 4:17-19; 15:14-16) including Job (Job 22:6, 10). However, the punishment is for the correction (Job 5:17, 18). Bildad, a sage, acts as apologist of God (Job 25:1-6; 26:5-14). Zophar, a prophet, is aggressive, subtle, pessimistic. It aims to afflict Job (Job 11:2-4), considered the inevitable doom of sinners (Job 20:5-29), even if unconsciously sin (Job 11:5, 12). The summary of argument of retributive justice in these first 23 chapters are as follows: (a) the wicked are always punished by God; (b) the right are always happy, the innocent is never punished; (c) no man is pure before God. So, why Job suffered? In the opinion of the three friends, since God is just, it must be to think that Job have sinned; he must pay for his sins. Job is guilty, so he is punished. The punishment of God is a drug. Therefore, Job has to be converted, ask God's forgiveness, convicted and only then will return to being happy. However, Job defends himself firmly that he is not guilty, he is not a sinner, he is innocent (Job 9:21; 13:23, 16:16-17; 30:25, 37; Job 29-31).⁹ The retributive justice fails to give answer to the problem of the suffering

⁸ Cf. WITASZEK, *op.cit.*, 57.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 58-71. Cf. Marvin H. POPE, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2008, 89. See EISEN, *op.cit.*, 208, 224, 229. See Carol A. NEWSOM, *The Book of Job. A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Oxford University Press, New York (NY) 2003, 217. See Gregory W. PARSONS, "The Structure and Purpose of the book of Job", in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 138 (550) (April), Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas 1981, 144, 146. See John E. HARTLEY, *The Book of Job*, = The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids 1988, 352, 361. See D. J. A. CLINES, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 17: Job 1-20*, Word Incorporated, Dallas 2002, 290. See D. J. A. CLINES, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 18a: Job 21-37*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville 2006, 561. See Robert L. ALDEN, *The New American Commentary. Vol. 11: Job*, Logos Library System (electronic ed.), Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville 2001, 85.

of the innocent. Even Michael D. Oblath states that retributive justice is non-valid.¹⁰

2.3 THE BOOK OF JOB CHALLENGES THE RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

According to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Job's friends are examples of those who have ignored the flexibility of Proverbs (as seen in Prov 26:4-5), and simply read off a person's spiritual state from their circumstances. The prologue to Job (Job 1-2) reveals that Job's suffering is not a consequence of his sin, and God's failure to rebuke Job in chapters 38-41 clearly shows that his honest protests throughout the dialogue are seen as legitimate. The book of Job is not rejecting the doctrine of retribution, but simply insisting that retributive justice is not the only principle on which God runs his world. While God is undoubtedly just, his ordering of the world is broader than a reductionistic human concept of retributive justice in which he can do no more than reward righteousness and punish wickedness. The book never denies the flexible doctrine of retribution evident in Proverbs, but refuses to distort this into an ironclad dogma that shackles God. He also cited Holmgren who said that the book of Job protests not against Proverbs, but against a fossilized misunderstanding of retributive justice that had misrepresented the mainstream wisdom tradition of Proverbs.¹¹

For J. G. Janzen the Book of Job helps to make a critique of the prophetic tradition in the degree to which that tradition over-moralizes the mystery of suffering.¹² Larry J. Watres conclude that "A retributive/recompensive theology distorts God's ways and confines Him to human standards of interpretation."¹³

A sharp analysis put forward by Witaszek. The basic problem is that Job's friends have a conception of God only legal and even marketable. God rewards and punishes in an almost mechanical: the devotion and

¹⁰ Michael D. OBLATH, "Job's Advocate: A Tempting Suggestion", in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 9, Institute for Biblical Research, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake 1999, 200.

¹¹ Cf. VANHOOZER, *loc.cit.*

¹² Cf. J. G. JANZEN, *Job. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Atlanta 1985, 224.

¹³ Larry J. WATERS, "Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job", in *Biblioteca Sacra*, 154 (October–December), Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas 1997, 14.

morality are necessary to avoid punishment and reap the rewards. Job's friends have an idea of religion very tragic that a religion is something, a sort of insurance policy against disasters, like a supermarket of happiness whose currency is the moral. Good behavior makes sense only if it can obtain a real advantage. That is why Job is dangerous - if he was right, this kind of religion would be destroyed.¹⁴

Paul J. Achtemeier writes that the book of Job is a sustained polemic against the rather simple reward and punishment ideology of the popular religion of the day, such as that reflected in the "Psalms of the Two Ways" (e.g., Ps 1, 37). The entire case of Job is absurd because a completely righteous man suffers what appear to be the punishments announced in Deuteronomy 28 as coming upon the ungodly. But God is not the author of Job's sufferings, so his sufferings cannot be explained in some retributational scheme. The conclusion of the book (42:5-6) suggests that God's comforting and saving presence more truly reflects God's nature than does the unwarranted and inexplicable suffering of the righteous. Rather widespread in the wisdom tradition of Israel is the acknowledgment of what has come to be called "the destiny-producing deed." When a sage remarked that "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling" (Prov 26:27; cf. Ps 7:14-18; Eccles 10:8-11; Eccles. 27:25-26), he was making the observation that human beings are capable of launching cause-and-effect sequences that can bring disastrous results upon themselves and upon other people. God plays no role in these chains of events and is not responsible for these results.

One should see larger framework, said Achtemeier. Most important, however, is the import of the larger framework within which the biblical notion of retribution is nested. The Bible can be viewed as a drama that begins with God and human beings living in right relationships with each other. Those relationships are then broken from the human side, and the human community consequently must endure many vicissitudes until at last God restores the original right relationships in the new age. Viewed this way, the story of the Bible is not finally the story of reward and punishment but rather of God's success in restoring the

¹⁴ Cf. WITASZEK, *op.cit.*, 70.

original harmony of the good world. In such a larger context, divine retribution is embraced by divine redemption; biblical writers can therefore speak of a divine determination not to destroy that which deserves destruction (Hos. 11:8-9). Even on the cosmic scale, promises Paul, the day will come when “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21; see other expressions of this hope in Phil. 2:10-11; 1Cor. 15:22-28).¹⁵

3. PROPOSED MORALITY IN THE BOOK OF JOB

The Church document *Bibbia e morale* talks about “the moral teaching of the wise” (no. 30-40). There is something interesting for our moral discussion, it is written in no 40 that Israel belief that all life is under God’s control (from the the book of Sirach). If all life is under God’s control, likewise suffering is under God’s control. Unfortunately this document does not touch the book of Job.

For the writer, the most interesting thing in the book of Job is Job’s response to his suffering,

“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! **For I know that my Redeemer lives**, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19:23-27).

In the mid of his terrible suffering, Job says confidently “my Redeemer lives”. This is the truth. Job faces his suffering with deep trust on God “my Redeemer lives”, eventhough his skin has been destroyed. And the Living God does not disappoint him because finally “the Lord restored the fortunes of Job... and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10)¹⁶. Learning from Job, we must also put faith “my Redeemer lives” in our moral lives, in our action.

¹⁵ Cf. ACHTEMEIER, *loc.cit.*

¹⁶ The epilogue as a whole, of course, presents problems for many interpretations, since it seems to return to the paradigm of retributive justice. Read Carol A. NEWSOM, “Re-considering Job”, in *Currents in Biblical Research* 2007; 5; 155, 174.

CONCLUSION

From our discussion, we can conclude some points:

The retributive justice fails to give answer to the problem of the suffering of the innocent.

The book of Job is not rejecting the doctrine of retribution, but simply insisting that retributive justice is not the only principle on which God runs his world. His ordering of the world is broader than a reductionistic human concept of retributive justice in which he can do no more than reward righteousness and punish wickedness. The book never denies the flexible doctrine of retribution evident in Proverbs, but refuses to distort this into an ironclad dogma that shackles God. The book protests not against Proverbs, but against a fossilized misunderstanding of retributive justice that had misrepresented the mainstream wisdom tradition of Proverbs.

The prophetic tradition over-moralizes the mystery of suffering. Job's friends have an idea of religion very tragic that a religion is something, a sort of insurance policy against disasters, like a supermarket of happiness whose currency is the moral. That is why Job is dangerous - if he was right, this kind of religion would be destroyed.

The story of the Bible is not finally the story of reward and punishment but rather of God's success in restoring the original harmony of the good world.

We must put faith "my Redeemer lives" in our moral lives, in our action.

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