

Reflection Paper

Chapter 21 - A Survey of the Old Testament
Andrew E. Hill and John Walton.

David Flynn
ATS/NY City

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The righteous will prosper, and the wicked will suffer. However, there are exceptions to this principle that man may or may not understand in the natural order given his limited wisdom in comparison to the wisdom of God. These exceptions do not negate the justice and righteousness of God. Rather, it is in His wisdom that we can confide and trust.

In keeping with their format in reviewing each of the books of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton present an adequate review of the authorship dynamics, the historical context and timing, a clear outline, the literary genres, and even a comparison of similar narratives from the near east at the time. Yet they set forth the main purpose of the Book of Job as providing a biblical perspective on God's policies concerning justice and suffering, and not necessarily a reason for it, specifically as it relates to apparent injustices and the suffering of seemingly righteous people.¹ It is not (the) Satan or Job who are on trial, but rather God's policy itself (Hill and Walton, 2017, p. 408). The philosophical questions considered in Job are ones that man has pondered for millennia. As disappointing as it might have been for Job, for his friends and for those who have subsequently read this book, God does not provide the answer in the direct way or words we would expect. Rather, God points to His wisdom, in which Job rightfully submits and is vindicated in the end.

Regarding the composition of the Book of Job, the authors recognize the unity in the structure of the book, despite criticisms from some scholars concerning the narratives of Elihu, and the belief that it was written much later than the events could have occurred.

One of the main differences between other literature in the ancient near east and the Book of Job, the former material simply resigns to the conclusion that one can never reach a rational conclusion between apparent unjust suffering and the economy of the gods, even to the point of confessing "unknown and uncommitted crimes... as a means of appeasing a

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, ePub Edition 2017), 402.

largely irrational deity” (Hill and Walton, 2017, p. 411). Job's friends also maintain the traditional point of view at the time, that only the wicked suffer while the righteous prosper. This “retribution principle” is discussed at length by the authors, and further on in this report.

The authors concur that Elihu's arguments seem valid, but reject his final conclusion as to the cause of Job's suffering. Since the reader of the Book of Job has the advantage of the prologue, where the dialogue between God and (the) Satan is revealed, we know and can see what was taking place behind the scenes that was hidden from Job, his friends and Elihu. In the end, the authors conclude from God's speeches that the basis for understanding God's justice does not depend on the retribution principle as a formula, or consistent policy to which God is constrained to follow in the natural order. Rather, God changes the direction of the argument to focus on his wisdom, which man cannot fathom. Even what little wisdom we do possess, this comes from God. Speaking of God, Job states “Who has put wisdom in the heart, or has imparted understanding to the mind?” (Job 38:36).

In the end, it is observed that Job did not negate God's policy of blessing the righteous by cursing God and thus proving (the) Satan's accusation. Job maintained his integrity, and was vindicated in the presence of his friends. Ultimately, since it was God's policy that was “on trial” here, this was also exonerated by the declaration of God's supreme wisdom (Hill and Walton, 2017, p. 413).

Hill and Walton end the chapter with a brief discussion concerning the retribution principle, along with closely connected themes of the Wisdom, Justice and Sovereignty of God and the idea of mediation.

Theoretical Framework

In considering the topics that will follow in the next three sections, I am leaning on Scripture as I understand it as well as insights found in the text and various other resources to support the subjects, issues and questions I am posing.

Relationship to the Old Testament

The main principles found in the Book of Job are echoed elsewhere in the Old Testament. In particular, the retribution principle can be found in numerous other verses. For instance, even though Psalm 37 acknowledges that the wicked seem to prosper (Psalm 37:1), it repeatedly encourages the reader that they will suffer and the righteous will prosper:

“Wicked men will be wiped out, but those who rely on the LORD are the ones who will possess the land. Evil men will soon disappear; you will stare at the spot where they once were, but they will be gone. But the oppressed will possess the land and enjoy great prosperity.” Psalm 37:9-11²

The Book of Proverbs is permeated with numerous such verses that reflect this principle:

“The righteousness of the blameless will make their way smooth, but the wicked will fall through their own wickedness.” Proverbs 11:5

Nonetheless, we also find in the Old Testament examples of the exception to this principle. The writer of Ecclesiastes states:

“During the days of my fleeting life I have seen both of these things: Sometimes a righteous person dies prematurely in spite of his righteousness, and sometimes a wicked person lives long in spite of his evil deeds.” (Eccl.7:15).³

Joseph is another prime example of this exception. Among all of his brothers, he was the most upright and blessed by God. His integrity was proven even while under the bondage of servitude and imprisonment. Yet, unbeknownst to even Joseph, God was orchestrating something much larger than Joseph’s prosperity, ultimately saving the Israelites from famine.

David is another example of a righteous person who suffered. While some of the things he faced admittedly were a result of his sin (i.e., his sin with Bathsheba and in killing Uriah – 2 Samuel 11, or in taking a census of Israel – 2 Samuel 24), it was in other areas of his life where this exception can be more clearly seen. Gene Edwards, in his book *A Tale of*

² This and all scripture verses are taking from *The Holy Bible: New English Translation* (Richardson: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), at <https://www.biblegateway.com>.

³ Interestingly, each of these previous citations can be found in books of the Bible which, along with the Book of Job have been categorized in what has been called the Wisdom or Poetic Books. As such, it is not necessary to conclude that the dialogue is a word for word rendition of what took place (Hill and Walton, p.403). Rather, accepting it as wisdom literature which could have been composed much later than the actual events took place allow for more freedom in understanding and appreciating the value of each section.

Three Kings,⁴ shows how David did not take matters into his own hands when faced with seemingly unjust situations. Despite the advice given to him by his contemporaries to go against and kill Saul and Absalom, both who were trying to kill David, he would not raise his hand against God's anointed in Saul, nor against his own son in Absalom. Rather, he left this to the judgment and will of God. In the end, he was vindicated in both instances, as both Saul and Absalom were killed, and David was restored to his role as King.

The Retribution Principle and the New Testament

The New Testament provides a clearer, more direct presentation of the exceptions to the retribution principle (and its corollary that all good people prosper and all bad people suffer) than the Old Testament does. While there are verses that would reinforce the idea of the righteous prospering and the wicked suffering (Matt 25:46, John 3:18, John 3:36, 2 Cor 11:15, 1 Pet 3:12, 1 John 3:10), Jesus own life clearly demonstrated the suffering of The Righteous One, who was without sin. He also proclaimed at the very beginning of his ministry that suffering will befall those who are seeking righteousness:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way.” Matt 5:10-11.

We may also consider Paul's sufferings from city to city as he proclaimed the gospel as found in the book of Acts, and his own description of these in 2 Corinthians 11. If the retribution principle was a consistent formula for living without exception, than Paul would be considered wicked.

One response to the reality of righteous suffering is the suggestion of a postponement of prosperity or blessing (or, in NT terms, a reward) being realized in eternity. The idea of eternal reward is mentioned in Job 14:14. Job refers to this transition as a positive thing, and

⁴ Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings* (Carol Streams: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992).

it has been translated differently as a “change”(KJV), “release”(NET), “relief” (NASV) or even “sweet death”(TLB). This hope for an eternal reward emphasized in the parables of Christ, and was at least partially existent in the theology of the Pharisees back then.⁵ It might even be suggested that the age old questions that the Book of Job raises have found their answer not in Job, but rather in Christ. Job did maintain his integrity, but he was not without sin or fault. The hope of a resurrection (as mentioned above) is critical to explaining why Paul, Stephen, and countless others since their time have suffered for their righteous faith. Like Job, these calamities have nothing to do with one’s character.⁶ If we cannot hope in a blessed resurrection, then we remain dead in our sins. “If Christ be not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness; His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered.”⁷

Practical Themes

Perhaps the best way to approach the question of why the righteous suffer not only concerns the wisdom of God, as the Book of Job concludes. As there are many things in life that we cannot answer (What existed before the universe began? What lies beyond the universe?), we must be willing to concede that there are simply something things we will not be able to answer on this side of eternity. Chuck Swindoll refers to this as trying to “explain the unexplainable.”⁸ With Paul we can echo “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how unfathomable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). As in the case of Job, perhaps there are things happening in the spiritual realm

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Paul used the belief in the resurrection to divide his persecutors in Jerusalem in Acts 23, which ultimately caused a great division among them concerning the accusations about Paul. Also, one rich young ruler approached Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life (Matt 19). This might suggest that at least some in Israel, who were living under the oppression of Roman rule, were looking forward to an eternal deliverance.

⁶ John Piper, “How Should I Read the Book of Job”, June, 2008, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-should-i-read-the-book-of-job>

⁷ A.McLaren Expositions of Holy Scripture: Job, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/macLaren/job/14.htm>

⁸ Chuck Swindoll, “The Wisdom Books; Job” <https://www.insight.org/resources/bible/the-wisdom-books/job>

that we cannot see. “Righteous sufferers must trust in, acknowledge, serve and submit to the omniscient and omnipotent Sovereign, realizing that some suffering is the result of unseen, spiritual conflicts between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan -- between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.”⁹

Perhaps for the believer, we need to reconsider the question itself. Swindoll suggests: “Instead of asking where God is in the midst of your pain, the book of Job affirms God’s control and asks us, ‘Where are we in our pain? Are we trusting our Creator, even though we cannot understand our circumstances?’”¹⁰ Does Paul’s admonition to “rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope” still apply in the Christian’s life (Rom 5:3-4)? Piper states “Any suffering person I’ve ever talked to bears witness to the fact that they have seen more of God and have come to know and trust God more deeply than if their suffering hadn’t come.”¹¹

Lastly, though it runs against the modern “enlightened” mind that values freedom, independence, and free will above all, we must consider the sovereignty of God in this discussion. Do we as finite humans have any right to even challenge an all wise, sovereign, omnipotent Creator, who does not let the sparrow fall without his knowing, and can count every hair on our heads? Are we not like clay in the hands of the potter, who has every right to “make from the same lump of clay one vessel for special use and another for ordinary use? (Rom 9:21).

Job described the disposition of evildoers who have known prosperity towards God: “Leave us alone! We have no desire to know your ways.” But then he asks a question on their behalf, one that believers perhaps should be asking as well: “Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?”(Job 21:14-15). Why do we serve God? Is it because of the good stuff we will receive? After all, Jesus used reward several

⁹ “Introductions to the Books of the Bible: Job”, NIV Study Bible, 2002 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/job/>

¹⁰ Chuck Swindoll, “The Wisdom Books; Job”

¹¹ John Piper, “How Should I Read the Book of Job” 2008.

times as the compensation for obedience, righteousness and good works. There is a particular subset of Christianity that misuses Scripture to promise financial and material blessing for those who have enough faith (and who give financially to their ministries). Yet aside from such an extreme, would we serve God if there were no reward?

Perhaps we serve God because we are afraid of having bad things happen to us. This is the motivation of most religions, both in the ancient world and contemporary, who fear dying with more unrighteousness on their souls than righteous.

I believe the answer lies in something I often did when I was a kid of maybe 12 years old. My Dad worked hard to provide for his family of seven. On Saturday mornings, I would get up early and eat my own breakfast. Then I would get everything ready for a mega-breakfast for my Mom and Dad that would include everything; special omelettes, home fries, bacon, toast, juice, fruit and coffee. As soon as I heard them stirring upstairs, I would begin cooking. By the time they would smell the bacon and come downstairs, breakfast was served. I did this, not to win their approval, or get them to give me something. Nor was I trying to make myself appear better than my siblings. I simply wanted to make them happy, and that I did. Perhaps we serve God for that reason. We are so grateful for who He is, for what He has done, that we are simply following the great commandment to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Yes, that translates to obedience and righteous living. However, it also manifests itself as faith, even when we do not understand what we are going through or why we might be suffering something. In this, we display the hope of Christ to a dying world that so desperately needs hope.

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