

God's Premium on Honesty as Revealed in the Book of Job

by

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Introduction:

Speaking correctly about God is an important issue in the book of Job. In the final chapter of the book, God said to Job's friends, "My wrath is kindled against you [Eliphaz] and against your two friends [Bildad and Zophar], because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has."¹ He emphasized the point of speaking rightly by repeating the same indictment in the following verse, "...you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."² The repetition of this charge clearly indicates that God was pleased with something in Job's words while equally displeased with something in the words of his friends. The implication of this charge is clear; our God-talk matters. Therefore, the main objective of this short essay will be to address what it means to speak correctly about God, based on the book of Job.

Background Information:

Seemingly overnight, Job's life was brought to ruin: his children were killed, he lost his fortune, and not long afterward, he lost his health. Ultimately, all that remained to him was his wife, but she brought him little consolation. Her only counsel to him was, "Curse God and die!"³ It was at this point that Job's friends came into the picture. Initially, they did not even recognize Job because of the disfiguring sores that covered his body. Once they realized that the pathetic creature, who sat among the ashes, was their friend Job, they tore their robes, raised their voices, and wept.

For seven days and seven nights, they sat with Job in utter silence; no one uttered a word because of Job's agonizing condition. Alas, Job broke the silence with a bitter lament, in which he cursed the day of his birth. Immediately following the lament, Eliphaz, one of the friends, began to counsel Job toward restoration. Surprisingly, Job responded to the counsel by accusing his friends of being deceitful. In response to Eliphaz's restorative counsel, Job said, "my brothers have acted deceitfully,...."⁴ Naturally, the question arises, "why did Job charge his friends with deceit, what had they done to merit such a rebuke?" Understanding Job's response is the first step in discovering how it is that Job's friends spoke falsely. However, understanding Job's response necessitates understanding their particular world view.

The Doctrine of Divine Retribution:

Throughout the book of Job, the dialogue between Job and his friends plainly reveals a fundamental conviction which keenly shaped their world view. These men believed in God's just governance in the world wherein the righteous were rewarded and the wicked were punished. In one of his speeches, Eliphaz said to Job, "According to what I have seen, those who plow

¹Job, 42:7

²Ibid., 42:8

³Ibid., 2:9

⁴Ibid., 6:15

iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it.”⁵ Zophar said, “...the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless momentary.”⁶ Bildad said to Job, “Lo, God will not reject a man of integrity, nor will He support the evildoers”⁷ to which Job replied, “In truth I know that this is so;...”⁸ These examples demonstrate that each character in this story believed that God would reward the righteous with blessings and punish the wicked with curses.

Many scholars have referred to this belief system as the doctrine of divine retribution. Throughout the book of Job, it becomes clear that the author was directly attacking this doctrine, as it was culturally understood by the people of his day.⁹ The cultural understanding of retribution is reflected in the way that the poet makes this doctrine a focal point of great debate. The poet’s portrayal of retribution reveals that his audience understood it to be more than a general maxim about life; it represented for them the very foundation of the cosmological order.

Job’s Conflict with the Doctrine of Divine Retribution:

In the prologue to the book of Job, the author not only informs the reader that Job is “...a blameless and upright man,”¹⁰ he communicates that the calamity which would overtake Job was not owing to any fault of his own. Job, however, did not know this; as such, his misfortunes became for him a monumental theological problem. This is to say, his experience of suffering was not squaring up with the doctrine of divine retribution. In the midst of his affliction, however, Job was confident about one thing; he knew that he was innocent. Because Job was confident that he did not merit such adversity, he sincerely struggled with how to understand God’s justice.

Job’s Response to Eliphaz:

Implicit in Eliphaz’s counsel was the thinly veiled assumption that Job was guilty of sin, since, by their understanding, there were no exceptions to the rule of divine retribution. Therefore, based on this doctrinal understanding of God and reality, Job’s situation could only be explained in one of two ways: 1) Job was guilty of sin and God justly punished him or 2) Job was innocent and God unjustly punished him. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar opted for the first choice. This became evident to Job after Eliphaz offered his restorative counsel. Essentially, Eliphaz was saying to Job, “If you repent from your sin, God will restore you.”¹¹

⁵Ibid., 4:8

⁶Ibid., 20:4

⁷Ibid., 8:20

⁸Ibid., 9:2

⁹According to Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Old Testament Library). Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985., “One point at which wisdom philosophy and the theology of Yahwism converge is in the doctrine of reward and retribution. According to Deuteronomy, those Israelites believers who obey the covenant laws are promised the blessings of Yahweh, while those who violate his covenant and rebel against Yahweh are threatened with a divine curse. In wisdom teaching the expectation was similar: all who walked in the way of wisdom could anticipate a reward of happiness and prosperity, while those who ignored the maxims of wisdom would bring about their own destruction. A real dilemma arose when the assumption was made that those who suffered misfortune were being cursed for specific deeds of wickedness, or when flagrant sinners prospered in the community without ever facing the judgment of God. These issues are some of the major concerns of the book of Job. True to good wisdom tradition, the poet of Job challenges these and similar accepted teachings of Israelite theology by testing them in the crucible of human experience.” pg.4

¹⁰Job 1:8 & 2:3

¹¹No doubt, adherents to the doctrine of divine retribution suffered from spiritual pride. Wherefore, any

Guilty of Partiality:

On one level, it is understandable that Job's friends would assume that the fault was owing to human frailty rather than Divine Justice. On closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had become guilty of partiality. They had concluded that Job had sinned so as to merit his sufferings. In so doing, they had to overlook a major inconsistency; which was, they knew their friend to be a righteous man. What is more, Job was pleading his innocence - a plea which was supported by an exemplary lifestyle of integrity and righteousness. Job reminisced about the days before adversity befell him:

When I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat in the square, the young men saw me and hid themselves, and old men arose and stood. The princes stopped talking and put their hands on their mouths; the voice of the nobles was hushed,...¹²

Before calamity struck, Job was greatly revered by both young and old, royalty as well as nobility. If strangers knew Job to be an honorable man, how is it that his closest friends did not?

What Job found utterly deceitful, on the part of his friends, was their willingness to plainly deny what they knew to be true of his character.¹³ They knew him to be a righteous man, not a candidate for the severe suffering which had befallen him. According to the doctrine of divine retribution, a just God would ensure that the punishment fit the crime. Job's adversity was cataclysmic. To assert, therefore, that Job justly deserved his sufferings would have been to equate him with the vilest of sinners. Job charged them with deceit because they were, in a sense, "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness."¹⁴ They were willing to impugn him with guilt in order to protect their world view.

He accused his friends of being heartless, saying, "You would even cast lots for the orphans and barter over your friend."¹⁵ In other words, "You would glibly exchange the lives of innocent children, as well as the life of your friend, in order to preserve your peace and serenity?" Job pleaded with his friends to be honest about the matter, saying, "Now please look at me, and see if I lie to your face."¹⁶ Furthermore, Job admonished them, "Will you speak what is unjust for God, and speak what is deceitful for him?"¹⁷ "Will you show partiality for Him? Will you contend for God?"¹⁸ "He will surely reprove you if you secretly show partiality."¹⁹

person bearing the mark of being cursed, i.e. sickness, financial hardship, etc...would have been looked down upon as morally inferior. As such, according to the principle of divine retribution, an individual with the flu does not have a health problem, that individual has a moral one.

¹²Job 29:7-10

¹³Matitiah Tsevat, in his very insightful commentary on Job, "The Meaning of the Book of Job" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966), sheds some light on retribution in Job's cultural context: "Job and his friends,...share one belief;...the world is founded on justice,...reward and punishment, which will hereinafter be referred to as the principle of retribution...Job and the friends hold fast to this belief because they have been raised in it; because everybody has it; because man has an intense need to abide by it. The need is so great that he goes to the remotest extremes to uphold it. When reality does not agree with the principle of retribution, whose function is to structure and interpret reality,... Man distorts his experience of reality,... What accounts for this phenomenon? The fact that this principle of retribution is the touchstone of man's life and his conduct within his society."

¹⁴Romans 1:18

¹⁵Job 6:27

¹⁶Ibid., 6:28

¹⁷Ibid., 13:7

¹⁸Ibid., 13:8

¹⁹Ibid., 13:10

Job knew from the start that his friends were not being honest.²⁰ Although they knew Job to be an upright man, they had no way to reconcile Job's experience from within their framework of reality. Instead of giving credence to the obvious theological dilemma, they willingly condemned the innocent. Sadly, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, in their self-deception, were unable to give Job what he really needed; they failed to give him spiritual support. Job said to his friends, "For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty."²¹ Job needed a believer in Yahweh who would *enter his world* and suffer the incongruence with him. At the lowest point of his life, Job was left to struggle with this monumental theological dilemma alone.²²

Job's God-Talk:

The only consolation Job's friends offered him was in the form of a call to repentance. As the dialogue progressed, their accusations of his guilt only intensified. Eliphaz said to Job, "Is not your wickedness great, and your iniquities without end?"²³ As Job's friends became more confrontational and insistent upon his repentance, Job became less interested in talking with them and more resolved to address the matter directly to God. In fact, their pressure served to solidify the conviction that he was innocent, and therefore, undeserving of such suffering. The only other option in Job's mind, however, was that God was unjust to afflict him.

Several times throughout the dialogue, Job expressed his sentiments about being wronged by God. In one place, he plainly stated, "Know then that God has wronged me and has closed His net around me."²⁴ Job, crushed by his devastating circumstances, displayed his distrust of God's justice when he said, "Though I am guiltless, He will declare me guilty."²⁵ Thus, filled with distrust and conflicted over his belief of divine retribution, Job was driven to the desperate measure of challenging God:

Even today my complaint is rebellion; His hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my cause before Him and fill my mouth with arguments.²⁶

Job desired justice; he wanted to be vindicated. Therefore, he sought Yahweh for his *day in court*. Some of Job's last words before the special revelation of God were, "Behold, here is my signature; let the Almighty answer me!"²⁷

²⁰David Clines, in his commentary on Job, *Job 1-20* (Word Biblical Commentary). Dallas: Word, 1989., makes the point that "The friends have already, in Job's view, been 'lying' in their speeches about God. But now, events are about to take a more serious turn. Job is about to enter the formal judicial process with God...If they continue in their present vein, they will be siding with one of the litigants [God] against the other [Job], which is not permitted, and they will be uttering 'lies' on his [God] behalf, which is a crime. They will be, legally speaking, false witnesses." pg. 307

²¹Job 6:14

²²Norman C. Habel, in his article, "Only the Jackal is My Friend: On Friends and Redeemers in Job," Interpretation 31 (1977)., insightfully says, "When Job needs a friend, he is confronted with theologians; when he calls for sympathy, he is given doctrine. His friends feel compelled to justify God before man....Eliphaz makes no apparent attempt to enter Job's world of distress and doubt; he confronts Job with the "truth" of tradition, regardless of the pain." p.229

²³Job 22:5

²⁴Ibid., 19:6

²⁵Ibid., 9:20

²⁶Ibid., 23:2-4

²⁷Ibid., 31:35

Special Revelation:

Although many theologians disagree over their interpretations of God's speeches to Job, I contend that the discourse was meant to reveal Job's misconstrued view of God and reality. God's first question for Job was, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"²⁸ Right from the beginning, God makes clear that Job's problem was his lack of knowledge. From the time that he was stricken with affliction, he had been unable to reconcile God's just governance with his own innocence. He was theologically confounded because he had been viewing life through the flawed lenses of divine retribution. God, through a series of questions, removed Job's flawed spectacles.

God asked Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"²⁹ Matitiah Tsevat, in his article, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," provides good insight into God's question. He summarizes it in the following way, "You were not present when the universe was created. You do not know its blue print or the stuff that went into its making."³⁰ He continues, "What, then, makes you assume that it is justice which is its foundation?"³¹ In other words, the retribution model assumes that justice is the foundational principle of the universe. This, however, relegates God to being nothing more than a "cosmic vending machine."³² - a machine which meticulously evaluates every thought and action in order to dispense rewards or punishments accordingly.

Job and his friends had been mistaken; the universe is not governed by retribution, nor was God shackled to their neat theological paradigm. God continued questioning Job. His subsequent questions demonstrated His freedom, creativity and pleasure in creating, maintaining and sustaining his world and the creatures therein. God's freedom and pleasure appear to be at the center of His heart, not the principle of retribution.³³ Not only had God enlightened Job, He has enlightened Job's readers.

God's Evaluation of Job and his Friends:

The question of what it means to speak correctly about God has yet to be answered. After supplying what was lacking in Job's faith, God rebuked Eliphaz and the others saying, "You

²⁸Ibid., 38:2

²⁹Ibid., 38:4

³⁰Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," pg. 98.

³¹Ibid.

³²Dr. James Butler makes an insightful point about the "cosmic vending machine", OT504 Writings Syllabus "Generic Affinities of Job", he says, "If we may invoke the image of the "cosmic vending machine" to suggest the model of a divine-human relationship determined by retribution--what you put in is equivalent to what you get out, and God guarantees the operation of the machine--then we must remember the great failure of the model: we have no quarters that the cosmic Vendor needs (cf. Elihu in 35:1-8)!" pg.10

³³I believe that God's speech provides an answer to the age-old question of why the innocent suffer. God's speeches seem to reveal that His freedom and pleasure are the "foundational principles." As such, God was pleased to give human beings freewill. This is to assume, therefore, that God was more pleased to create people with the capacity to love Him freely, than He was to create people who had no choice but to love Him. On the flip side, human beings are ultimately blessed with the pleasure and freedom to make choices. Nevertheless, human beings are not really free unless they can freely love. A world which is governed by divine retribution invariably kills the incentive to love God for God. Therefore, a world which allows for genuine freedom must allow for situations in which the innocent will suffer.

have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has.”³⁴ What our study has revealed, however, is that Job and his friends were equally mistaken about God and reality. Each man had bought into the faulty retribution model. While Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar used the retribution model to accuse Job of sin, Job used the model to accuse God of wrong-doing. The truth of the matter is that each man was doctrinally incorrect; and as such, each of them spoke things which were not true. This leads me to conclude that it was not the actual words that pleased and displeased God, but rather it was the integrity and honesty of each man in his dealings with God and with one another.

Conclusion:

God’s commendation of Job had not so much to do with the words that he spoke, but rather with the fact that he was honest. That is to say, Job was truthful with the knowledge that he possessed. When calamity struck Job, he was forced to reckon with two incompatible propositions within the retribution model. Job was certain about his innocence. For Job, denying his innocence would have been tantamount to denying the truth. Based upon the only reality which he knew, however, this meant that God had unjustly afflicted him. Instead of redefining his definition of innocence, settling for a world view of paradox, or subscribing to the common philosophy of “let go and let God,” Job stood his ground, and challenged the Almighty. Job was honest and determined to be vindicated, even if it might cost him his life; and God commended his noble approach.

His friends, on the other hand, were not so noble. Though they knew their friend was a righteous man, they impugned him with guilt so as to keep life safe and orderly. When their honorable friend, in his weakened state, declared his innocence, they hushed him. Blinded by self-preservation as well as the confines of their strict doctrinal model, they could be of no help to their friend in his darkest hour. They could only watch from afar as their friend struggled to stay afloat amidst the waters of uncertainty. Therefore, I believe that what God condemned in Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar was their unwillingness to deal honestly with their friend.

It seems to me that the blinding effects of doctrinal paradigms can be so strong that they can result in dishonesty and consequently offend God. Furthermore, protecting doctrines instead of loving people will invariably lead to the suffering of the innocent. Therefore, we must guard ourselves against sacrificing our integrity upon the bronze altar in order to maintain doctrinal allegiance. God forbid that we should fail to enter into messy theological struggles for fear that our whitened garments of doctrinal clarity might become soiled. May God teach us how to worship him in spirit and in truth.

³⁴Job 42:7 and repeated in verse 8 as well.