"Who, being innocent, ever perished?" (Job 4,7)

The book of Job and the doctrine of retribution

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1. Introduction

In Christian tradition, Job was and is often portrayed as a paragon of the man who patiently and resignedly undergoes his pain, and despite all the misery – he loses all his possessions, his children die one after another, and he is eventually afflicted in his own health as well – does not turn his back on God[1]. No doubt because of these qualities, he is regarded in Catholicism (and in some Orthodox churches) as one of the few Old Testament saints[2]. There are churches and chapels dedicated to him all over the Christian world[3].

We partly owe this depiction of a submissive, deeply believing and even thanking God for his suffering to the biblical story itself. However, this is where the shoe pinches. For we find this image of Job resigned in his suffering only in

1 The scholarly literature on the book of Job is very extensive. It suffices here to refer to the recent study, with extensive bibliography, by Mies, 2022. For the reception of the book of Job in Western culture, see Ausloos & Bossuyt, 2010.

2 According to the Catholic calendar of saints, 10 May – the day I read this paper at the "Job: justiça e sofrimento" conference in Aveiro – is celebrated as his feast day.

3 Among other things, Job is considered the patron saint against leprosy, syphilis, skin rashes, ulcers, scratches and bumps, but also against melancholy. Especially from the 15th century onwards, Job was also venerated as the patron saint of musicians – the reason why is unclear (possibly the reference to music in Job 21,12 and 30,31 played a role in this), an honour he later had to cede to Cecilia. See for this Denis, 1952, pp. 253-298.

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a small part of the book, especially in the so-called frame narrative, in the first two chapters and in a few verses of the last chapter (Job 1-2; 42,7-17). In the bulk of the book, in the middle section (Job 3,1-42,6), on the contrary, we encounter a very different Job. Here Job is anything but someone who resignedly accepts his suffering[4]. In these chapters, Job rather revolts against his suffering, and against God whom he considers responsible for it. This immediately brings us to the question: what do God and suffering have to do with each other? For although we like to think of God as a loving father, in the biblical tradition there is indeed a close connection between suffering and God. To get a better view of this, we should deal with the so-called doctrine of retribution, which already turns out to be one of the keys to adequately understanding the book of Job.

2. The Old Testament and the doctrine of retribution

Contrary to what the term might suggest, the so-called Old Testament doctrine of retribution is anything but a clearly defined "doctrine". On the contrary, in Biblical literature, the idea of retribution rather emerges as a complex idea, with many nuances. A clear definition is nowhere given. This is no doubt related to the fact that Hebrew, the language in which most of the Old Testament was written, does not even have a specific word for the notion of "retribution". It is only through a reading of the Old Testament in all its constituents that we come across the various facets of this concept[5]. Nevertheless, E. Pax's description summarises well what the Biblical idea of retribution is about: "Die lohnende und strafende Reaktion Gottes auf die guten und schlechten Taten der Menschen" ("The rewarding and punishing response of God to the good and bad deeds of human beings")[6]. Retribution in the Old Testament is about reward or punishment by God. It is important to note here that retribution is not exclusively negative. Indeed, despite the appearance to the contrary, the term retribution is a rather neutral concept. As a result, the term retribution can imply both reward and punishment. Anyway, the etymology of the Latin-derived word "retribution" – a compound of *re*-(return) and *tribuere* (pay, give) – makes it clear that the concept has to do with reciprocity. Retribution is a response to a stated behaviour. To put it neutrally, it is a reaction because of an action.

Even though the concept of retribution is relatively simple to define, the Old Testament doctrine of retribution is highly pluralistic: retribution can be indivi-

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4 This dual representation is undoubtedly also related to the literary composite nature of the book of Job. The very style in which the various sections are written – the frame story is narrative literature, while the middle section is poetry – betrays this. Moreover, when in the frame narrative, which presents Job as submissive, God is mostly called YaHWeH, a rather rebellious Job in the central section of the book usually addresses God as "El". Based on these observations, it was often concluded that the frame story would go back to an ancient folk saga, to which a later poetic author would have wanted to respond.

5 For a detailed discussion of the concept of retribution and the vocabulary used in this regard, see Ausloos, 2023. See also Ausloos, 2019, pp. 27-41.

6 Pax, 1960/61, p. 62.

dual or communal. Moreover, it can affect its responsible, but it can also affect his or offspring. In individual retribution, the person who does something good or bad is rewarded or punished for it individually[7]. With this form of retribution we – even as contemporary people – have the least problems. After all, it is only human to desire that a criminal be punished, and that we get a wage for our work. We may have more difficulty with retribution that affects an entire community. Nevertheless, this form of retribution is also prominent in biblical tradition. Here, however, one must still distinguish between what is called collective retribution on the one hand and corporate retribution on the other. Collective retribution presupposes that an entire community is rewarded or punished for something for which the entire community is also responsible[8]. As such, collective retribution is nothing more than a collective form of individual retribution. Corporative retribution, on the other hand, rewards or punishes the entire community, even if not every member of the community is directly and personally involved or responsible[9]. In this case, it is rather retribution in the name of the solidarity of the community, based on the idea that each individual member represents the whole group. Even if this form of retribution seems strange to Westerners in the 21st century, this corporate retribution is not as strange as it may seem. One thinks, for example, of (economic) sanctions against an entire people or nation in order to punish the criminal behaviour of their leaders.

Both individual and collective/corporate retribution can be immediate: the acting subject and/or his or her companions are punished or rewarded. However, this is not always the case. Indeed, in the Old Testament, retribution can also pass to the next generation(s). In this case, one speaks of transgenerational retribution. Here again, several variants can be recognised. Sometimes children are punished or rewarded for what their parents have done. Then again, it is even several generations that will feel the consequences of the ancestors' behaviour[10]. Although this variant of retribution also appears alien at first glance, and is even felt to be unjust – as a matter of fact, there are biblical texts that dispute the legitimacy of transgenerational retribution[11] – yet again, it is not entirely alien to life. After all, the biblical texts were written by authors who stood with their feet in day-to-day reality. They too experienced how many generations were sometimes able to rejoice in the memory of a progenitor who had succeeded in building an empire and as a result had become wealthy – in Old Testament terms "blessed by God". Just as the mob often continues to associate children and grandchildren with misdeeds of their ancestors, and they even have to directly bear the consequences of their ancestors' missteps.

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7 See, e.g. Gen 19,15-26; Exod 32,33; Num 12,1-10; 2 Sam 6,6-7; Sir 28,2; Prov 11,19.

8 See e.g. 2 Kings 17,7-8.

9 See e.g. Num 16; 2 Sam 24,1-17; 1 Kings 14,16.

10 See e.g. Exod 20,5, Num 14,18; Jer 32,18.

11 See, in particular, Ezek 18,20: "The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own".

In most Old Testament texts, God emerges as the judgmental authority that retaliates for good and evil. Yet there are also passages in the Bible where retribution seems to be rather "automatic" or "mechanical", without the intervention of God. It is especially the German Old Testament scholar K. Koch who drew attention to this mechanical aspect of retribution[12]. He was even of the opinion that God was not originally presented in Old Testament literature as a giver of good and evil. One thinks of texts such as Proverbs 22,8: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity". However, this does not take away from the fact that, according to Koch, God also had a role to play: He was, like a kind of watchmaker who put the world together in this way, at the origin of this mechanical deed-effect principle[13]. In other words, even if God is not mentioned by name, according to the biblical authors, the whole retributive mechanism is of divine origin.

3. Retribution theory and Wisdom tradition

The Biblical doctrine of retribution is inextricably linked to the Biblical concept of Wisdom[14]. Although, as for the doctrine of retribution, it is not at all easy to define biblical wisdom unambiguously, there are nevertheless three facets that constitute it: wisdom has its origins in everyday life, aims to make people live good lives, and is rooted in a deep trust in God.

(1) Biblical Wisdom literature finds its origins first of all in everyday life, in which common sense plays a central role. Wisdom is not a theoretical concept, but rather has to do with "savoir vivre". This may be evident from Old Testament texts such as Exodus 35,25-26 and 1 Kings 7,14, where the spinster and the black-smith are called "wise" respectively, and where it becomes clear that Wisdom has its origins in everyday life. Wise is the one who is able to make sense of his life, staying far from falsehood, corruption or envy.

(2) Next, wisdom sets the goal of making people live good lives. To achieve this goal, all Wisdom literature starts from the experience-based insight that cause and effect are related: "one who does good, meets good" and "evil harms". It is especially here that we see how the retribution theory and biblical wisdom are inextricably linked. As part of Wisdom tradition, the doctrine of retribution aims to be a day-to-day pedagogy that encourages people both individually and collectively to devote themselves to good and keep away from all evil. Since this basic axiom applies both to the one who commits the good/bad act and to the whole community, it is assumed that one actually knows what is good and

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12 Koch, 1655, pp. 1-42.

13 This is clear from Ps 7,16-18, for example. The "immanent law" that speaks from verses 16-17 ("They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends") the psalmist relates in verse 18 to God's justice: "I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness". According to Koch, it was only with the Greek translation – the so-called Septuagint – from the 3rd century bce onwards that this representation of God as rewarding or punishing was systematically introduced. On this point, however, Koch went too short of the mark.

14 See e.g. Freuling, 2004.

bad for individual, community, state and even world order. The great focus on "order" in Old Testament Wisdom literature should therefore be understood as an extension of this pedagogy.

However, it is difficult to adequately define the concept of "order". In order to bring some clarity to this, we take a diversion via Egyptian Wisdom literature. Here, the concept of "order" is closely related to the goddess Ma'at. She played an important role in judging the dead: the ancient Egyptians believed that by weighing up the heart of the dead, she determined whether the deceased could either continue his journey in the kingdom of the dead or be devoured by the destructive crocodile. As sister of Isfet – goddess of chaos – and wife of Thot, the goddess Ma'at was also responsible for the regularity of the sun, which had to be concretised by the pharaoh in peaceful and just governance. Consequently, one could say that the goddess Ma'at was the guarantor of the universal laws that had to be translated into all areas of earthly life. Perhaps the term Ma'at can therefore best be understood as "universal world order": order in nature, for human beings and in ethics. Those who violate universal laws will be punished by them. However, if one lives an orderly life, one will live happily and enjoy all good things because one lives according to the laws of the universal world order.

This short excursus to Egyptian wisdom has made it clear that the concept of Wisdom within the ancient East is related to fathoming the universal world order. "Wise" is the one who knows how to formulate this order penetratingly and also conforms to it by acting properly at the right time and thereby living an orderly life. However, such a wise attitude also implies timely recognition that the ultimate secrets of this universal world order cannot be fathomed. A wise person knows that he is never accomplished. Nevertheless, the representation of the concept of Ma'at continues to advocate a relatively optimistic view of the world and of life, presumably due to the sage's high standard of living. If one is able to grasp the universal world order and one conforms to it, this would, as it were, naturally entail a good life. In line with this optimistic view, Old Testament Wisdom shows its enormous power precisely here. At the same time, it is also problematic for those faced with unintelligible and "unjust" suffering, suffering that one undergoes, through no fault of one's own. But this already anticipates the theme of the book of Job.

(3) Finally, despite the emphasis on human, everyday life, Old Testament Wisdom literature is about much more than profane folk wisdom. Indeed, the Old Testament Wisdom texts are underpinned by the principle of a deep trust in God as Creator of the world, who calls for doing good and fighting evil to make a good life possible. The fact that God's part in the doctrine of retribution enjoys such great emphasis – whether explicitly or not – is quite logical, since YaHWeH is considered the supporting principle of Old Testament Wisdom. After all, the origin of all order is located with God, who, according to the creation poem in Genesis 1, is considered the Creator of order par excellence.

This concise introduction to the Old Testament doctrine of retribution as part of the wisdom tradition may suffice here. Let us return to the book of Job, and to its first verses, which are a wonderful illustration of this retributive prin-

ciple. It may not surprise therefore that, within Christian tradition, the book of Job is counted among Old Testament Wisdom literature[15].

4. Job's trials

After a brief introductory note in the first part of the first verse of the book ("There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job"[16]), we are confronted – still in the first verse and without mentioning the concept by name – with the so-called doctrine of retribution. Here it is said that Job

> 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)

Job is not only called "blameless and upright". At the same time, he is characterised as "one who feared God". In other words, both horizontally and vertically, Job conforms to the lifestyle of a "wise" man. Job not only behaves morally and socially as he should but, in all this, is apparently also "in awe of God". On a religious level, he thus recognises God as master of the order of the world to which he tries to direct his life. He lives according to this order and avoids causing chaos. He even does more than is necessary by offering sacrifices to God in case his children have done something wrong. Job is therefore presented as

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15 In Roman-Catholic Bible editions, Wisdom literature includes the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon and Wisdom of Jesus Sirach. Apart from the fact that the theory of retribution plays an important role in it, there are other reasons why the book of Job is considered as Wisdom Literature. First, there is no mention in the book of Job of the promises made to the patriarchs, the exodus or the covenant-making at Sinai/Horeb – events considered typically Israelite, and related to Israel's history. Moreover, the text of Job itself refers several times to "the wise". Thus Eliphaz, one of the three friends who comes to see Job when he is stricken by suffering, regards himself as standing in the tradition of the sages, when he says: "I will show you; listen to me; what I have seen I will declare – what sages have told, and their ancestors have not hidden" (Job 15,17-18). Elihu too presents himself as a teacher of wisdom (Job 33,33: "Listen to me; be silent, and I will teach you wisdom"), while Job himself then speaks ironically about the wisdom of his friends: "If or God's sake keep quiet, if you have even a shred of reason" (Job 13,5). Throughout the book of Job, by the way, one finds references to 'wisdom' (the characteristic Hebrew words *ḥokmâ* [wisdom] and *ḥākām* [be wise] occur frequently). Finally, as a hymn of praise to Wisdom, Job 28 takes the crown.

16 Both this vagueness about Job's name – contrary to the Biblical custom of paying attention to the lineage of important characters, we learn nothing about Job's origins – and the vagueness about his place of residence, show that Job does not count as a historical person, but as a timeless character. He functions as a kind of "Everyman", standing for all of us and valid for all times.

extremely pious. He is considered the paragon of the perfect man, who even cares about the disorder that misbehaviour by his children could possibly cause.

Against the backdrop of the theory of retribution, therefore, Job can only be doing well. Precisely because Job behaves morally, socially and religiously as he should and is completely in tune, he is doing well. This good life as a result of his righteousness manifests itself on three levels[17]. First, Job has the perfect family – there is no mention of Job's wife for the time being; she only appears briefly in the remainder of the story. He was given seven sons and three daughters, numbers that refer to perfection. Job, moreover, appears to be stone-rich. Besides the many servants, the round numbers indicating the number of sheep, goats, camels, cattle and donkeys refer to his enormous wealth. Job's good fortune is unending. Finally, Job also enjoys immeasurable fame. Not for nothing is he called the most considerable man of the East.

If only everything in life were as simple as the doctrine of retribution suggests. Indeed, this optimistic vision of Wisdom that underpins it – "he who does good, meets good" and "evil harms" – has an important downside. The book of Job is a prime example of how this optimistic vision of Wisdom also experienced serious crises in ancient Israel. After all, as long as all goes well in the lives of individuals (and with Israel as a people), the retributive principle poses few problems. Success is seen as the deserved consequence of effort. However, conversely, this optimistic view of wisdom can lead to enormous problems. For how then does one explain that a righteous person must suffer? According to the principle of retribution, a bad life can only result from bad behaviour. Especially for those facing undeserved suffering, this implication of Wisdom doctrine is impossible to accept. This is even more true for people who put all their trust in YaHWeH, the supporting principle of retributive thinking. How can one still believe in a good and powerful God when he would answer justice with punishment? Already in Prophetic literature, Jeremiah aptly laments this difficulty: "You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (Jer 12,1). Protests against this simplistic retributive doctrine, however, are strongest in the book of Job, where Job emerges as the prototype of the righteous man who is tested with undeserved – and thus unjust – suffering.

In order to break the link between good deeds and reward, the author of the book of Job introduces the character of "the satan" – apparently a member of God's heavenly court – who tests Job twice[18]. Where God fully recognises Job's moral, social and religious values with some pride (Job 1,8: "Have you considered

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[17] Contemporary pastors – mostly with an evangelical background – are all too happy to rely on this theory of retribution: they regard their often excessive wealth as divine reward for their religious zeal.

[18] Contrary to many modern translations of the book of Job, in Hebrew, the term *haśśāṭān* (with article) does not appear as a proper name, but is rather a title or indicating a function. Literally, this term means: "he who opposes", or "the accuser". "Satan" therefore does not mean the "devil". Rather, he acts as the "devil's advocate". Satan in the book of Job is not the goat with the horns and cloven hooves that tradition has made of him. He is rather a mythical figure who moves

my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil"), the satan's true nature soon seems to surface. Indeed, immediately he is bent on questioning the supposed harmonious union between Job and God. In doing so, the satan assumes the reverse theory of retribution: as long as Job is doing well, he behaves in an exemplary manner on an interpersonal and religious level. But what if Job were to lose all his possessions? The satan's critical questions therefore call into question the gratuitousness of Job's faith. After all, according to the satan, Job's exemplary behaviour is based on everything he gets from God ("Whose bread one eats, whose word one speaks"). How would Job behave if he lost everything? Would he not then show himself from a very different side?

The disasters do not fail to happen when the satan seizes his opportunity and proceeds more than thoroughly. Since, according to the text, the feast takes place at the eldest son's house (Job 1,13) and thus it is normally the first day, the four calamities happen exactly on the day Job offered his sacrifices in the morning. This is incomprehensible. God himself has just acknowledged how blameless Job is. He even appeared so pious that he tries to erase any sins of his children by making sacrifices. Nothing can explain the disasters. At least, if one thinks within the scheme of the retributive doctrine. After all, Jobs exemplary life fully respects "order" and thus should have led to nothing but happiness, while the opposite turns out to be true: the same attitude to life suddenly leads to unhappiness. This is pure chaos for wisdom theology.

The "unwisdom" of the disasters is even more sharply highlighted by emphasising the severity of the calamity that afflicts Job's possessions (Job 1,14-19). The coverage of the disasters has four parts and is very stereotypically structured: a messenger comes while the previous one is still speaking, briefly gives the story of the disaster and finally declares that only he could escape. Each messenger follows up the others so quickly that Job does not even has time to replicate. The first and third disasters are caused by people who came from north and south. First, the Sabaeans (a tribe from southern Arabia) rob Job's cattle and donkeys and kill his servants. Later follows another raid by the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) on Job's camels and servants. Job is besieged from all sides. The threat even seems to come from God himself when devastating lightning from heaven kills Job's sheep, goats and servants. Finally, natural phenomena also turn against Job: a violent storm from the desert robs him of his children … So the calamity that afflicts Job comes from everywhere: from north to south, from heaven and earth.

Through the encompassing calamity, Job loses everything that belongs to him. Even his most precious possession – his own children – are taken away from him. However, as much as the satan wanted to be right, Job's reaction shows the opposite. He responds in deed and word. He tears his robe and shaves his hair, two signs of penitence and mourning (Job 1,20). Moreover, he throws himself on the ground in an attitude of worship and reverence towards YaHWeH. In addi-

between heaven and earth, and as such occasionally wanders the earth. From close by, he therefore observes everything that happens on earth.

tion to the actions stated, Job expresses his response to the message because of the four messengers in a short poetic text, strongly recalling Genesis 3,19: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return". Job expresses it as follows:

> Naked I came from my mother's womb,
> and naked shall I return there;
> the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
> blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1,21)

Both in deed and word, Job displays an almost superhuman attitude. For although it would be quite understandable for Job to curse YaHWeH in the face of all this suffering – the satan had predicted this too, by the way – Job blesses his God. However naked and vulnerable he feels now that his greatest possession was taken from him, Job shows only sorrow, not despair. Job seems to have passed the satan's test. He looks for the explanation of his suffering in the concept of retribution: he had always feared that his sons would curse God, the suffering that now afflicts him is surely the result of a sin committed by his children. Job himself did not sin and he did not blame God in any way the text concludes (Job 1,22). The story could end here. However, the storyline is continued by the introduction of Job's second trial (Job 2,1-6).

Again, the satan steps forward. Now he proposes to God to strike Job in his own body.

> So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2,7-10)

The text does not pay attention to the exact diagnosis of this disease. Nor is this important. After all, the focus is on the reality that Job has not only lost his wealth and children, but is now affected in his health and consequently loses the ability to have contact with other people. Indeed, the Hebrew text literally states that Job is sitting on the ash heap – it was always outside the city. The "most considerable man of the East", who was once honoured by all, is no longer part of the community. In the dust and outside the city walls, Job scratches himself with a potsherd. He has sunk deep. Possibly this scratching reflects his hope of relief from the pain the sores cause him. But it is equally possible that the author sees Job scratching as a sign of repentance. After all, in Jeremiah 16,6 one reads how the prophet reproaches his peoples' lack of repentance: "There shall be no gashing, no shaving of the head for them".

At this point, Job's wife also appears on the scene for the first – and last – time. Like God in the previous passage, she marvels at the fact that Job remains blameless despite everything. However much physical illness often manages to affect morality, Job indeed manages to maintain his internal equilibrium miraculously. But where God rejoiced at Job's fear of God, for the wife this brings an

upset. The role of Job's wife has given rise to many interpretations. Some compare the woman to Eve and label her as a "helper of the devil". After all, the satan had bet that Job would curse God. With no reproach passing Job's lips even after the second trial, the satan is still trying to achieve his goal through the words of Job's wife. Others, however, draw the wife as a nurturing and loving wife who can no longer stand her husband's suffering. She almost begs her lover to curse God. After all, whoever curses God will die and consequently be delivered from all suffering (cf. Lev 24,16). As such, Jobs wife would incite her husband to "theological euthanasia", as it were, which would make the satan equally the winner of the bet …

Once again, however, Job seems to resist every temptation. Even his wife's reaction he calls "foolish". If "fearing God" is Wisdom, one can indeed characterise "cursing God" as foolishness. Moreover, Job makes a very pointed observation in his response. When misfortune threatens, we are quick to feel inadequate, while we often regard happiness and prosperity as the normal state of affairs. If we accept all the good from God, why not the bad? This intriguing thought-provoking question keeps Job from rebelling against God as yet.

5. The prologue and the doctrine of retribution

The prologue immediately highlights the central issue in the book of Job: how to deal with the doctrine of retribution when good people go bad. At first, for Job, the doctrine of retribution seems to work: Job is righteous and fears God, and therefore blessed by God. However, how will Job react when faced with undeserved suffering?

God's involvement in suffering will be crucial in the rest of the book of Job, in which, as it were, different "languages of faith" regarding suffering are presented. Already in the prologue, different responses regarding the relationship between God and suffering emerged. For instance, after his first trial, Job testified to a typical "popular faith". His spontaneous response was probably guided by traditionally learned formulas of faith: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1,21). Although the pious man also passes the second test, something has evidently changed in his attitude. After all, Job no longer blesses God. In his reply to his wife, he only emphasises accepting his suffering: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2,10). Job's wife's reaction, finally, reflects the other extreme of dealing with her husband's suffering. Indeed, she exhorts Job to turn away from God by cursing Him. His wife cannot (any longer) believe in a God who allows such misery. After all, if there is a just God, He could and should also prevent all this suffering of a pious …

6. The three friends of Job (Job 2,11-13)

At the end of the second bet between the satan and God, the story might have come to an end. After two terrible trials, Job did not say anything wrong

about God. The story therefore needs a new impetus. This comes at the moment when three new characters – friends of Job – enter the scene.

Eliphaz, the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar, the Naamathite heard of all the calamities that had struck him. They left home to show Job their sympathy and comfort him. Already from afar they saw him, but at first they did not recognise him. Loudly they began to complain, tearing their clothes, and throwing up dust over their heads. For seven days and seven nights they sat on the ground with him without saying a word, for they saw how great his suffering was (Job 2,11-13).

Different views exist about the names and origins of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Sofar. Some argue that their regions of origin are related to Edom, just as, for that matter, the aforementioned Uz (Job 1,1) is also considered part of Edom. Although Edom was considered one of Israel's enemies, yet the region was known for its wisdom, according to Jeremiah 49,7: "Concerning Edom. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?". As such, the three friends are often presented as the great wisdom teachers from Edom who have come and will be able to explain the how and why of Jobs' suffering. Others associate the place names with Edom, Mesopotamia and Lebanon, which would refer to wisdom from north, east and south.

Often Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are portrayed as heartless moralists. However, this portrayal would detract from their original and well-meaning intention to be close to Job in his suffering in the first place. They therefore show themselves as true friends, coming not because of what Job has – meanwhile, he has literally nothing – but because of who Job really is. They find the sight of their friend so terrible that they burst into a loud lament and tear their clothes, making themselves like Job, who is also sitting on the ash heap with torn clothes. Moreover, the three friends throw dust upwards, towards heaven. Possibly their act expresses the hope that YaHWeH would cover the one who is the cause of Job's great suffering with dust. After these acts of mourning, they shroud themselves in deep silence. Again, the book of Job here shows itself to be a child of Wisdom tradition, which often speaks of the art of controlling the power of the tongue: "To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble" (Prov 21,23). In the face of immeasurable suffering, one can only remain silent.

Job's friends initially realise that only their faithful silence can support Job in the midst of his misery. The seven days of silent compassion are therefore in sharp contrast to the previously mentioned seven days of exuberant rejoicing in better times (Job 1,4). Eventually, Job himself will break the silence. However, before turning to the central, poetic section of Job (chapters 3-41), it is useful to first pay attention to the book's epilogue (Job 42,7-17). After all, this is also how the book of Job has been read for centuries.

7. The epilogue (Job 42,7-17)

After more than thirty chapters of dialogues and monologues, the book switches back to prose at the end of chapter 42:

> And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days. (Job 42,10-17)

The prologue (Job 1-2) focused on Job's believing resignation to his suffering. If one were to read the epilogue (Job 42,7-17) as the immediate sequel to the opening chapters, it undoubtedly gives the impression of going one step further. Indeed, it seems to suggest that this attitude of acceptance and religious resignation to suffering is bears fruit. Job ends up where he started: as a rich man. Moreover, the enumeration of blessings that Job receives after a period of calamity shows that twice as many accrue to him from all that he had apparently lost in the opening chapters. First, Job's possessions are doubled: where the prologue spoke of three thousand camels, five hundred spans of cattle and five hundred donkeys, the epilogue mentions six thousand camels, a thousand spans of cattle and a thousand donkeys. Job, moreover, once again becomes the proud father of seven sons and three daughters. His children will share in the abundance of Job's present situation – transgenerational retribution. Where order in Job's family was disrupted by the satan's undertakings, perfect harmony is apparently restored and even multiplied in the epilogue. The description of the more than good life Job is again allowed to enjoy, is concluded with a reference to his age. Indeed, as the double of seventy, one hundred and forty years is considered the perfect age.

While it is not explicitly stated that Job is restored to his possession because he continued to speak properly about God, the impression is nevertheless given that Job is rewarded for his patience and resignation in the face of everything that happened to him. At least this is how the book of Job has often been read within tradition. The New Testament letter of James seems to suggest this interpretation:

> As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5,10-11)[19]

[19] It is not impossible that this New Testament passage was co-influenced by the Testament of Job, which also puts forward a patient Job. See, for example, the Testament of Job 27,7: "Now then, my children, you also must be patient in everything that happens to you. For patience is better than anything".

When one reads prologue and epilogue one after the other, the prevailing doctrine of retribution – "he who does good, meets good" – seems to be reaffirmed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Job's wife is the great absentee amid the perfect family order reflected in the last verses of the book of Job[20]. Indeed, it was she, of all people, who questioned her husband's believing resignation in all his misery. More than that, she was the first to doubt that one can still have faith in a just God when goodness is met with misery.

An interpretation that only reads the frame story of the book of Job, and on that basis tries to save the theory of retribution at all costs, leads to a total trivialisation of human suffering. Moreover, the reasoning "the greater the suffering, the greater the reward" discourages people from opposing suffering in the world. Or how the book of Job can be misused to justify people's misery on religious grounds. This abuse was possibly also made possible thanks to the oldest translation of the Bible, the so-called Septuagint. After all, the Greek translation of the book of Job, which probably dates from the 2nd century BCE, has a *plus* over the Hebrew text. After stating that Job died old and very elderly (Job 42,17), the Greek text of the Septuagint continues: "And it is written that he will rise again with those the Lord raises up". This verse could further strengthen the implications of the doctrine of retribution: unlike the Hebrew text, the Septuagint gives the impression that Job is not only rewarded during his lifetime for his resigned and pious acceptance of suffering. Even after his death, Job will reap the benefits of this[21].

Fortunately, this selective reading of the book of Job objectionably does justice to the full scope of the book. After all, the view that God will show mercy, if only one submits to his suffering enough, makes up only barely ten per cent of the book. In the remaining ninety per cent, a very different picture of Job emerges: a Job who shouts and rants against God, a Job who denounces God's lack of justice, a Job who questions and doubts the meaning of life. For how can one justify God as both good and powerful when the world is burdened with so much suffering? For this very different Job, we must return to the beginning of the book (Job 3).

8. Job's indictment: retributive thinking debunked

The silence of Job's friends that marked the last verses of the prologue is radically broken in Job 3. Whereas Job initially testified to a rock-solid faith in God that could not be unbalanced by any suffering, and he then cloaked himself in the language of silence when visited by his friends, he now raises his voice. The

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[20] In the apocryphal Testament of Job (1st century BCE-1st century CE), Job, after the death of his first wife Sitis, remarries Dina, the daughter of Jacob and Leah (Testament of Job 1,5-6). For an English translation, see Spittler, 1983, pp. 829-868.

[21] On the resurrection idea in the book of Job, see Ausloos, 2012, pp. 55-71 and Ausloos, 2016, pp. 159-171. The reception history of Job 19,25-26 ("For I know that my Redeemer lives …") has also played an important role herein. On this, see Ausloos, 2011, pp. 17-23.

second part of the book (Job 3-31) begins with an extended complaint on account of Job (Job 3). Job not only curses his life. More than that, even the moment he was conceived should never have been there. With the orderly existence of peace, tranquility and security beset by nothing but pain, only death seems to be able to bring him salvation. What is the meaning of existence if no sun breaks through the darkness anymore? And where is God now? Why?

In response to Job's complaint, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar also now break the silence. Although Job's words do not constitute an argument, but first and foremost bear the character of a cry and weep from despair and bitterness, the friends feel called to respond. In three rounds of conversation, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar attempt to explain and even legitimise their friend's suffering. The name "wise men" granted to Job's three friends in Christian tradition does not fall from the sky. Indeed, apart from their origins (cf. *supra*), they all adhere to the traditional retributive logic so characteristic of Wisdom literature in their attempt to reason out Job's suffering as yet within the scheme of cause and effect.

Although Job's friends may speak their words with the best of intentions, they are like oil on fire for Job. It does not seem bad enough that so much suffering befalls Job, when his friends blame Job to be the cause of his misery. Job, however, refuses to accept the explanations given by Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar for his suffering and tries to justify his right to complain.

While the friends continue to insist on God's justice, Job insists that he did not deserve this suffering. The misery he finds himself in can only come from God Himself who wanted to afflict him. Job 6,4 puts it like this: "For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me". Unlike the friends, Job blames God for his suffering. "I am blameless!", he cries out (Job 9,21). If the theory of retribution makes sense – righteousness is rewarded with a good life – Job sees no other option but to hold God himself responsible for all his suffering. Job therefore takes yahweh to court, as it were. This accusatory attitude of Job towards God is tellingly expressed in Job's long monologue (29-31), concluding the three rounds of conversation. It is clear from the following quote that after more than twenty-five chapters, no progress has actually been made:

> Far be it from me to say that you are right;
> until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
> I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go;
> my heart does not reproach me for any of my days. (Job 27,5-6)

After so much palaver, there is still no answer to Job's question: why does the righteous suffer? The answer – or better: the impossibility to answer – to this question is perhaps most clearly revealed in Job 28, the so-called "poem in praise of wisdom". Often Job 28 is perceived as foreign to the book of Job. Indeed, as a poem of praise to Wisdom, this poem seems completely beside the point – what does Job's suffering have to do with Wisdom? Job 28, however, clearly indicates the direction: man is simply incapable of the ultimate ordering of reality:

But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living. (Job 28,12-13)

Nor is it possible for a human being to reason out and conclusively answer the great why question of suffering. In doing so, the poem also simultaneously calls into question the retributive principle, which purports to explain the world from the too-simple scheme of cause and effect. The three friends tried to save the retributive theory to the end. And in fact, Job too clung to this doctrine by taking God, who should be the guarantor of the connection between cause and effect, to court. Praise to Wisdom breaks this spiral of retributive thinking: no matter how wise man is, he cannot fathom the course of life. The meaning of life and (nonsense of) suffering ultimately remains a mystery to man. At no point does God challenge Jobs integrity. Nor does God criticise Job's cry. In the end, He even says that Job spoke more purely of Him than his friends, who called for resignation. God even seems to be sympathetic to Job's revolt.

However valuable the principle of retribution as a wisdom principle may be, in suffering we bumped into its limits. Perhaps therein lies the strength of the book of Job: warning man to beware of making nonsensical statements about things about which one knows nothing in the end.

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Abstract

The book of Job can only be understood against the background of the so-called doctrine of retribution: "he who does good, meets good", and "evil harms". This doctrine sought not only to encourage doing good and leaving evil, but also served as an explanatory mechanism: good things are due to good actions, while bad consequences must have been caused by bad actions. Old Testament authors often invoked this doctrine in an attempt to explain the dire situations Israel found itself in throughout history. Even if, in many cases, the notion of retribution seems to be a useful concept to explain calamity and suffering, when evil strikes good people, one hits its limit. Not surprisingly, several Bible texts are critical of the doctrine of retribution and the supposed idea of justice on which it is based. The book of Job is perhaps the best example of this.

Resumo

O livro de Job só pode ser entendido tendo como pano de fundo a chamada doutrina da retribuição: "quem faz o bem encontra o bem" e "o mal prejudica". Esta doutrina procurou não só encorajar fazer o bem e abandonar o mal, mas também serviu como mecanismo explicativo: as coisas boas devem-se a boas ações, enquanto as más consequências devem ter sido causadas por más ações. Os autores do Antigo Testamento invocaram frequentemente esta doutrina numa tentativa de explicar as terríveis situações em que Israel se encontrou ao longo da história. Ainda que, em muitos casos, a noção de retribuição pareça ser um conceito útil para explicar a calamidade e o sofrimento, quando o mal atinge as pessoas de bem, atinge-se o seu limite. Não é de estranhar que vários textos bíblicos sejam críticos da doutrina da retribuição e da suposta ideia de justiça em que se baseia. O livro de Job é talvez o melhor exemplo disso.