6 Restorative justice (beyond Job 42)

The drama is over, and Job still does not understand how God's justice works. He's content that God knows, that God is in control of a world that's beyond our control.

Whatever God is doing, it's not retribution. Job's troubles were not punishment for his sin. That view of justice is far too simplistic. Sometimes we suffer for making foolish choices. Some of our suffering is the result of other people's sins, like when the Sabeans and Chaldeans raided Job's herds and killed his servants (Job 1:15, 17).

But that's not the whole story either. Natural disasters like lightning and storms take people's lives too (Job 1:16, 19). Health issues cause great suffering (Job 2:7). It's natural for us to think, "What did I do to deserve this?" but the reality is that the mess in the world is much more complex. God's justice is not about retribution for individual sin. As the LORD told Job's three friends, that is not the truth about God (42:7).

So let's be very careful about attributing disasters to God. When a bushfire or a flood or a plague like COVID-19 strikes, there'll always be an Eliphaz or a Bildad or a Zophar declaring it to be divine judgement on a sinful nation. The prophets of Old Testament sometimes did that because God's nation was living under a covenant that promised retribution. In the new covenant, Jesus rejected that approach:

- His followers asked why a man was born blind: was it his own sin or his parents' sin? Jesus said, "Neither." (John 9:1-3).
- When Pilate slaughtered some Galileans while they were worshipping, people asked if they were worse sinners than others because they suffered this way. Jesus said, "No."
- When a falling tower killed eighteen people, were they more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? Jesus said, "No" (Luke 13:1-5).[45]

In the same way, Jesus was not being punished by God when Pilate killed him. Job's friends are still among us, promoting the view that God relies on retribution for justice. The epilogue of Job suggests divine justice is more about restoration.

6.1 God's justice as the curtain falls (Job 42:7-17)

Job 42:7-9 (NIV)

7 After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite,

"I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. 8 So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a

[45] Jesus then warned that Roman soldiers and falling masonry would threaten the survival of the whole city if they didn't change their mind about him (repent), i.e. follow the way of peace the Messiah was bringing them (compare Luke 19:41-44). For more detail, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (SPCK, 1996), 253.

burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and
I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.
You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has."

9 So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite
did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

Verse 7 is crucial to the meaning of the book. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar misrepresented God. God is not running the world by the justice of retribution. Divine justice is not transactional as we imagine. God is not micromanaging the world to ensure that every wrong is punished and every right is rewarded.

Because they misunderstood God, they misunderstood God's *servant* Job (verse 7). In judging Job, the friends were usurping God's throne, and their judgement was aligned with the accuser. Like Zophar in the third round of speeches, they'd given up on Job.

We haven't heard from these three friends since Chapter 25. No doubt, Job's relationship with them was in tatters. What happens next providers a clue to what God's justice looks like. God does not tell Job to get even with those who falsely accused him. God's desire is not for retribution but for restoration.

Will Job forgive them? Will he pray for God to overlook what they have done? Will Job participate with the LORD in restoring relationship with his friends rather than in treating them as they deserve? [46]

This is an object lesson in **restorative justice**. Job is called to join God in *not dealing with them according to their folly* (verse 8).

Will Job forgive them after they hurt him so much? Remember how he felt:

Job 13:3-4 (NIV)

3 "I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.
4 You, however, smear me with lies;
you are worthless physicians, all of you!"

Job 19:2-3 (NIV)

2 "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?
3 Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me."

Job 26:4 (NIV)

4 "Who has helped you utter these words?
And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?"

Will the friends accept that they were wrong about God with their view of retribution? Will they accept prayer from someone they accused of *great wickedness* and *endless sins*? (Job 22:5) Restorative justice cannot be forced; it depends how people respond.

As Job's friends are restored, Job is restored too:

[46] David L. McKenna and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Job*, Preacher's Commentary Series (Thomas Nelson, 1986), 306–7.

Job 42:10-17 (NIV)

10 After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes
and gave him twice as much as he had before. 11 All his brothers and
sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him
in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the
LORD had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and
a gold ring.

12 The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former
part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand
yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. 13 And he also had seven sons and
three daughters. 14 The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second
Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. 15 Nowhere in all the land were
there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father
granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.

16 After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children
and their children to the fourth generation. 17 And so Job died, an old
man and full of years.

It would be a tragic mistake to view this restoration as a reward. God has not suddenly changed his mind and decided to "do right" by Job, after "doing wrong" by him all book long. God's justice is not about repaying what we deserve.

If you think the ten children of verse 13 are to make up for the ones he lost earlier, you may not know what it's like to lose a child. The last thing you want to say to a grieving parent is, "Have another child to make up for it." God is restoring Job after his pain, not compensating him for his pain.

And just as God restored relationship between Job and his friends, God restores relationship between Job and his family and community. The restored Job has even more honour than he had before, living out his life to a ripe old age.

Why do we hear the names of Job's **daughters** but not his sons? (verse 14) That's completely backwards to the social structures of the Ancient Near East. We know the names of Jacob's twelve sons because they became the twelve tribes of Isarel, but we don't know the names of his daughters. We don't even know how many he had, apart from the one who suffered a great injustice (Genesis 34).

What inspired Job to *grant them an inheritance along with their brothers*? (verse 15) Why did Job overturn the culture and tradition of his world like this? Did Job's sufferings give him an awareness that this was unjust? Did he develop an empathy for those who missed out as he had done in the time of his suffering?

The epilogue of the Book of Job hints at a different kind of justice. Divine justice is restorative, not retributive as people expect. Does this whet your appetite to know more about what God is doing, and how this unfolds as the story of Scripture develops?

6.2 In the Torah

Retribution was foundational to the Sinai Law. It was designed to ensure a punishment fitted the crime as people expect justice to be:

> **Exodus 21:23-25 (NIV)**
>
> 23 If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life,
> 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
> 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Leviticus 24:20 repeats this law, adding, *"The one who inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury."* Deuteronomy 19:21 repeats it again, applying it to a false witness: *"Do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party"* (verse 19).

The law of retaliation (*lex talionis* in Latin) aimed to ensure the punishment matched the crime, so an avenger of blood would not kill five of your people for killing one of ours. Retribution was the basis for the laws God gave Israel in the Sinai covenant.

God promised that he would also respond to his nation according to their deeds:

> **Deuteronomy 28:1-3, 15-16 (NIV)**
>
> 1 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his
> commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high
> above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come on
> you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:
> 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. …
>
> 15 However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not
> carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you
> today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:
> 16 You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.

This message was at the heart of the Old Testament prophets too. They called people back to obedience to the LORD'S Torah. They warned of impending doom if the people disobeyed, and promised God would save them if they turned back to him.

The wisdom writings also declared God would give his people what they deserved. The longest chapter in the Bible promises blessing on those who *walk according to the Torah of YHWH* (Psalm 119:1). The Proverbs said that *through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed* (11:11).

So, if God was managing his nation like this in Old Testament times, how can the Book of Job conclude that retribution is not how divine justice operates?

6.3 In the beginning

Job was not part of the Sinai covenant nation. He was from elsewhere. To address the question of how God is running the world, we need to go back to the time before the Sinai covenant was implemented.

Before there were nations with courtrooms to apply their own justice, God executed his sovereign authority directly. What kind of justice did God provide then?

God interrogated Cain over the matter of his missing brother (Genesis 4:9). The judge explained to the criminal that it would be impossible for him to live among his people any longer, that he was now a restless wanderer on the earth that had received his brother's blood. But the LORD did not take the killer's life. Instead, *the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him* (Genesis 4:15).

The first murder reveals a huge gap between the justice God gives and the justice we expect. This is where God's justice and human justice diverge. Cain left the presence of the LORD (4:16) to build a city (4:17) that relied on retribution for justice, It was intentionally more violent than God's justice (4:23-24).

But how is this just for the family that has now lost both their sons? If the good die out while the murder lives on, how is this just?

God's solution was not taking a life, but giving a life: *"God has granted me another child in place of Abel since Cain killed him"* (4:25). The family was still under threat of retribution from Cain's descendants, but instead of responding with violence they *began to call on the name of the LORD*, trusting the heavenly sovereign who gives a different kind of justice (4:26).

Violence corrupts our humanity. As even the descendants of Seth became violent, there was almost no one left to partner with God (Genesis 6:5-11). After the flood, God met with Noah to discuss the problem of violence. For the first time, God authorized killing animals for food, and communal retribution in response to murder (Genesis 9:1-6).

Putting the power of death in human hands opened to door for people to form nations (Genesis 10), and those nations use war to build their kingdoms (Genesis 10:8-12).

Since God had authorized retribution for the nations, it is no surprise God authorized retribution for the nation he established at Sinai. Rather than walk away from a world that had walked away from him, God accommodated polygamy, slavery, war, animal sacrifices, and retribution in the nation he founded at Sinai on the journey towards rescuing the world.

6.4 In Israel

The greatest injustice Isreal suffered in Old Testament times was constant attack from nations that had no respect for the LORD'S covenant with Israel. From the time of the Judges, Israel and Judah were under attack. It's the reason they wanted a human king *"to go out before us and fight out battles"* (1 Samuel 8:20).

But a human king was not the answer. David's Psalms are mostly laments about being attacked by their enemies. Israel fell to Assyria, and Babylon captured what was left

(Judah). For longer than they had been a nation under God's rule, they were ruled by the kingdoms of the world.

How would God resolve this injustice? Jewish apocalyptic literature imagined God bringing judgement on the nations and rescuing the godly among his people. That's what retribution expects, the human perspective of justice.

But the Scriptures spoke of God doing something else. Psalm 118 calls God's people to trust God's faithful love (verses 1-4). Then a leader of the people describes his suffering. He's attacked by enemies, yet not given over to death (verse 18). Although the builders rejected his leader, the LORD raised him up as the cornerstone of the restored people of God (verse 22). As he leads them into God's presence, his people shout, *"Hosanna! ... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD"* (verses 25-26). Israel sang this song every Passover as they waited for the LORD'S Messiah.

Isaiah also spoke of the suffering servant of the LORD who would rescue his people from oppression under the nations:

Isaiah 53:3-4 (NIV)

3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
4 Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

Like the other prophets, Isaiah is framed within the Sinai covenant, so we still hear him use cultic imagery such as sacrifice. But Isaiah 53:4 warns us not to project our view of justice onto God. As the leader of God's people, the Messiah took the pain and afflictions of his people in his own body. But he was not being *punished by God* as some people think. Projecting retributive justice onto God would be a mistake.

So, what was God doing in the Messiah?

6.5 In Christ

In bringing us a more complete revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-3), the Messiah directly challenged the view that retribution was the basis for divine justice:

Matthew 5:38-40 (NIV)

38 "You have heard that it was said, '**Eye for eye**, and tooth for tooth.'
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the
right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to
sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well."

Many interpreters have tried to soften what Jesus said here, but Jesus' words are best understood through the lens of his life. When the temple leaders sent guards to arrest him, Jesus had no doubt about their evil intentions. Peter took out a sword to resist

this evil. *"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who take the sword will destroy themselves with the sword"* (Matthew 26:52).[47]

Jesus picked up the ear of the person Peter tried to decapitate, putting the ear back where it belonged. How's that for a lesson in restoration rather than retribution?

The ensuing assassination of God's Messiah was the greatest injustice in history (Matthew 23:32-36). Where others had prayed for retribution (e.g. Psalm 137:8-9), Jesus prayed for his killers to be restored: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

God's heart is for restoration, not retribution. Instead of taking the lives of those who killed his son, God gave life to his Son. And we are restored in him (John 3:16-17).

Divine justice overturned his sufferings, vindicating him by raising him from the dead. God now calls the peoples of the earth to change our minds about him. God has declared an amnesty for the nations who recognize the Messiah as our heaven-appointed king. That's the gospel as the resurrected Jesus proclaimed it (Luke 24:46-47).

The gospel is the good news of restorative justice—the world restored in the Messiah. Unlike the Sinai covenant, God is no longer treating us according to our works (retribution). God is justifying us through faith in Christ, as we rely on the restorative justice of God that comes to us in him (Galatians 2:15-21).

God's restorative justice extends beyond the Sinai covenant. The old divisions no longer apply in the creation that's being restored in the Messiah. There is no longer Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female, for in Christ we are all being restored to what God intended in the beginning.

Does that remind you of a gentile who learned through what he suffered that his daughters should inherit along with their brothers? (Job 42:15).

6.6 In the end

In the final book of the Bible, we see how God's throne has always been established in the heavens (Revelation 4), even though what God has written for us was not playing out on earth until the Lion from the tribe of Judah was revealed as the suffering Lamb who restores God's throne. He's such a contrast to other human rulers that you could say he's the only ruler worthy of the name (Revelation 5).

As the suffering Lamb is revealed, we hear about the prayers of God's suffering people too. The elders who worship the Lamb were *holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people* (5:8). John saw all these prayers piled up on the golden altar in front of the throne (8:3). What are these prayers? Why were they not yet answered?

[47] The best way to understand the Greek word (ἀπόλλυμι) is as middle. We destroy our humanity when we respond in the same kind and take a life.

We're given one example of these prayers. The martyrs—slain for their testimony about the Lamb—cried out with a loud voice, *"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"* (Revelation 6:10). They don't question the heavenly ruler's character (*holy and true*), but they do question his delay in bringing justice, by which they mean *avenging their blood*.

That's not what Jesus prayed as his blood was being shed. That's not what the first Christian martyr prayed as he was being stoned (Acts 7:60). And even though the language of retribution is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, it's not what Job asked God to do to the friends who had hurt him so deeply (Job 42:8).

Each martyr in Revelation 6:11 was given a fresh white (unbloodied) robe, and told to wait because the bloodshed is not yet over. As the prayers mount up before the throne, the martyrs must wait to see what God is doing.

So what is God doing? Although we were introduced to the one who sits on the throne in Revelation 4, we don't hear his voice until Chapter 21. It's then that we discover what God has been doing all along.

There have been battles as those who wanted control over the earth joined forces to rebel against God's authority and build kingdoms that do so much evil, but God was not about retribution. Those kingdoms fall, and the true authority of heaven lasts, delivered to the earth by the Lamb.

So what was God doing through all the centuries and millennia of history? When God finally explains what it was all about, it comes down to this:

> **Revelation 21:5 (NIV)**
> He who was seated on the throne said, **"I am making everything new!"**

Restoration, not retribution. That's the difference between divine justice and what humans expect.

This is how Behemoth and Leviathan are finally tamed. Violence is not defeated with violence, but God is working towards a restored creation where *the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them* (Isaiah 11:6).

6.7 Conclusion

In the prologue, the LORD described Job as *"**my servant**"* (Job 1:8). While Job struggled to understand how his sufferings could be considered just, he remained loyal as the suffering servant of the LORD.

In the epilogue, the LORD says, *"**My servant** Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly"* (Job 42:8). So the suffering servant of the LORD prays for his accusers, and the LORD restores them.

After all his struggles, Job stands as a testament to God's grace. The justice of our heavenly sovereign is not about retribution (treating us according to our works), but restoration. From creation to new creation, the one who sits on the throne has been making all things new.

Further reading

J. E. Hartley:

> The conclusion focuses on the reconciliation of the various parties: Job and God, the friends and God, Job and the friends, and Job and his relatives.[48]

Stephen Cook:

> The book of Job is excellent theatre, an epic courtroom drama abounding in irony, satire, parody and humour which combine, not simply to entertain, but to challenge and possibly to ridicule the prevailing religious ideology which held to a retributive worldview, a Deuteronomistic theodicy. The drama of Job appealed to an initial audience that was wrestling with exile and the prospect of extinction, and was tortured about an apparently severed covenantal relationship with their God. It analysed the prevailing philosophies about providence and concluded that in the raw honesty of confronting the Divine about the apparent injustices and unfairness of the relationship, by articulating despair, anger, disappointment and frustration, one may speak well to God. The book of Job is an example of scripture in conversation with itself as it draws on other biblical texts, challenges their veracity and relevance, and draws new conclusions.[49]

David Clines:

> In the divine speeches, Yahweh had castigated Job for obscuring the divine plan (38:2) in not recognizing that retribution is not built into the world order as designed by its creator. But now he allows that Job has been right in asserting that the principle of retribution does not operate. Job had thought it should, though it did not; Yahweh had intended that it should not, and of course it did not. So in one respect Yahweh and Job are at loggerheads, and in another they are in harmony. That is the simple resolution of the crucial issue that has so bedeviled the relations between Yahweh and Job.[50]

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[48] J. E. Hartley, "Job 2: Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 351.

[49] Stephen Cook. "A Reading of Job as a Theatrical Work: Challenging a Retributive Deuteronomistic Theodicy" in *Literature & Aesthetics* 62 24 (2) December 2014 61-62.

[50] David J. A. Clines, *Job 38–42*, Word Biblical Commentary (Thomas Nelson, 2011), 1241.

Duane Garrett:

> Job is vindicated. Contrary to the barrages of the three friends, he suffered for his righteousness and not because of any sin. If he sometimes was too quick to claim that he had a right to complain against God's justice, he was fundamentally correct that there is great evil in the world and that it cannot be explained away by the doctrine of retribution or the traditional teachings of wisdom. The book resolves the problem of evil with the bold claim that one must simply trust that God is good and knows what he is doing. He will, in his own time and from the counsels of his unique wisdom, set things right.[51]

N. T. Wright:

> The parallel between Job and YHWH's Servant in Isaiah remains striking. The Servant, after all, is innocent just as Job is. He doesn't complain, as Job does; yet he, too, suffers indignity as well as pain and despair. To look once again at the larger context of the whole canon of scripture, there may be something to be said for seeing the entire book of Job as an anticipation of the harrowing scene in Gethsemane, where the comforters again fail and creation itself goes dark as the monsters close in around the innocent figure who is asking what it's all about.[52]

Scot McKnight:

> Forgiveness is generally granted in the Old Testament *on the condition of repentance*. One doesn't walk around Israel handing out pardons or amnesty certificates to sinners *unless and until* they repent. This requirement of repentance prior to forgiveness expresses an important system of justice in Israel. It is (at some level) simply unjust to forgive because it would be giving someone something they don't deserve. …
>
> In this understanding Christianity and Judaism differ significantly. The Jewish scholar Solomon Schimmel has written the most complete study of forgiveness. While he respects the differences among Jewish thinkers on forgiveness, he represents a representative viewpoint of how Jews understood their tradition about forgiveness. And Schimmel observes a fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity when it comes to forgiveness: Judaism overall is more concerned with guaranteeing justice than with forgiving incorrigible sinners, whereas Christianity, at least in its foundational prayer and creeds, if not in its actions, talks more of forgiveness as an act of grace, given even to the undeserving and not-yet-repentant, than of justice.[53]

[51] Duane A. Garrett, *Job*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Lexham Academic, 2024), 582.

[52] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (SPCK, 2006), 41.

[53] Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others,* (Paraclete Press, 2004), 219–220.