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God-talk in the Book of Job

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Keulen, E. J. (2007). *God-talk in the Book of Job: A biblical theological and systematic theological study into the Book of Job and its relevance for the Issue of Theodicy*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. s.n.

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Chapter 7

Summary and Conclusions of the Biblical Theological Part

The book of Job does not fully reject that there is a relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. God shows that he punishes the wicked. Also, Job's restoration at the end of the book appears to represent a balance between one's behaviour and one's fate. Nevertheless, the book of Job does question a theology that understands God's actions in this world according to the concept of retribution. Firstly, it points to the nature of devotion that this retributive view might provoke. For Job as well as God, keeping a relationship with the other could be prompted by a *do ut des* motive. On the one hand, Job's reason for living a pious life might be reward with prosperity instead of unconditional respect. On the other hand, God might procure or force human devotion, if punishment is the consequence of a wicked way of life. Secondly, it becomes clear that the concept of retribution leaves no room for innocent suffering. This is the point where the concept fails. As long as it remains true that Job is blameless and that his suffering is out of proportion in relation to his way of life, the only conclusion can be that God deals unjustly if it is assumed that God acts according to the concept of retribution. Job's observation that the wicked prosper serves as a backing for this conclusion. This unrighteous action makes God unreliable in Job's eyes. With this impasse –the impression God acts arbitrarily and unjustly if the common concept of God is maintained– that culminates in Job 9, the book of Job demonstrates the limits of the concept of retribution. It gets stuck in cases of innocent suffering. Thanks to the prologue, the reader knows that Job rightly believes in his integrity. What is more, the prologue shows that the concept of retribution has already been broken by permitting the testing of Job's motives for living a pious life. So, the book of Job reveals some problematic aspects of a theology that understands God's actions exclusively according to retributive standards.

Job and his friends take the concept of retribution as a starting point. Eliphaz makes it clear that people reap what they have sown. The friends in particular demonstrate another implication of the concept of retribution. This is the fact that a person's behaviour is calculable. For, a person's fate reveals one's former behaviour.¹ The friends hold to their belief that God does not pervert justice. In

¹ Job is actually doing the same when he derives from his fate that God treats him unjustly.

their view, it is therefore unavoidable that Job has committed serious sins. His miserable fate can only be punishment for wickedness. While this strict nexus between deed and consequence is the basic worldview of the friends, they mention several other facets of suffering within this framework. There is the call to take account of the pedagogical aspect of a bitter fate. God warns by means of setbacks and tries to correct wrong ways of life. When human beings unconsciously act sinfully, their trouble should make them aware of their behaviour. However, divine punishment is not irreversible. If a sinner abandons his wicked way of life, his miserable fate will change for better. In order to protect God's righteousness from each possible attack, some modifications to the concept of retribution are introduced. The motif of human imperfection limits the chance that a human being is completely righteous. In its view, being righteous is mainly a theoretical possibility. However, the fundamental difference between God and human beings entails that practically nobody is righteous before the Creator. With this, the friends undermine in advance Job's conviction that he is blameless. Nevertheless, the concept of retribution is broken once by a summary remark of Zophar. Zophar suggests that God has forgiven some of Job's sins. Paradoxically, this excursion outside the concept of retribution actually serves to defend it. For, the notion of forgiveness is mentioned in order to reject the fact that God has treated Job unjustly.

While Job initially appears to accept his innocent suffering, a struggle with his miserable fate unfolds in the dialogue. The patiently suffering Job of the prologue changes into a rebel against God in the dialogue. In his speeches, Job considers several aspects of God's involvement in human suffering. The image of the lawsuit offers a pattern by means of which Job is able to put the impasse of his situation and his desires into words. On the one hand, Job understands his misery as God's accusation against him. Apparently, God considers Job as an opponent. On the other hand, Job uses this image in order to express his desire to denounce what is in his eyes God's unjust treatment of him. Job defends his righteousness extensively. For him, God has become one who besieges him unjustly because God does not act according to the concept of retribution. So, Job does not reject this retributive concept. It is because Job holds on to it that he can only infer that God perverts justice. At the same time, the image of the lawsuit also indicates Job's impotence. For, it is impossible to have a fair case with God because of the fundamental difference between God and human beings.

This experience of being treated unjustly by God makes Job wonder whether God is different from how he thought or whether God had other motives for creating human beings than is commonly accepted. Was the Creation of human beings meant for having a toy to play with and hunt instead of having a mutual

relationship based on respect? Or, does God lack some divine attributes such as omniscience, through which he can not observe Job's case correctly? While Job charges God with unjust actions and suggests that God had dubious motives for the Creation of human beings, the only possible way out of his misery is an appeal to this same God. With this, the ultimate consequence of a monotheistic concept of God comes to light in all its intensity. When God has turned against someone, only God himself is able to cause a change. Among other things, the image of the lawsuit demonstrates the impotence of human beings before God. They are unable to enter into a legal case with God. Therefore, a solution in Job's case can only come from God himself. Only God himself is a match for God. Therefore, Job calls on God as his witness and his redeemer in order to act against God. Even though God is hostile towards Job, the only realistic hope for an outcome is placing his trust and hope in this same God.

God's answer discusses two different aspects with regard to the concept of retribution. On the one hand, it does not fully reject this concept. God gives the wicked their just reward. At the same time, Job's new prosperity in the epilogue also displays the awareness that Job's suffering 'for no reason' and his remaining faithfulness to God need to be acknowledged by means of restoration of his former state. On the other hand, God criticizes that human beings can determine and observe God's actions by a theology in which there is a close relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. Job's strict reasoning according to this scheme darkens God's counsel and frustrates God's justice. God's actions are more diverse or at least surpass human frames of reference. This entails that a person's previous behaviour can not simply be deduced from one's fate. Hence, the concept of retribution is not generally applicable to God's actions. This has already been confirmed by the prologue where the battle of prestige between God and the satan was the cause of Job's trouble. So, God is not only an automaton that calculatedly rewards human beings according to their conduct; God's actions are more complex and go beyond human observation.

There is some substance in God's answer to Job, in which he uses a counter picture in order to respond. In reply to Job's impression that God acts arbitrarily, perverts justice, and benefits the wicked, God makes it clear that divine actions are creative, preserving, provide with life at unexpected places and punish the wicked. The fundamental problem is Job's lack of insight into God's counsel. The order and considerations which are at the basis of the Creation and God's actions in it go beyond Job's ability to observe. God confronts Job with the fundamental difference between God and human beings. Actually, God manifests his transcendence. Paradoxically he makes this clear by revealing several elements of his counsel. Job lacks knowledge of God's counsel because he does not adopt a similar position to God. He does not have God's eye view. This is the reason for Job's inadequate assessment of God's treatment of him. After God's overwhelming exposition, Job

admits that there is a fundamental difference between him and God. He is indeed impotent before God and unable to reply to God anymore as he foresaw earlier. God's answer makes Job aware of the fact that he has spoken about divine matters without having sufficient knowledge. Therefore, Job ceases making further charges or replying with counter arguments.

Whereas the book of Job wants in particular to denounce some implications of a theology in which God's actions are understood according to the concept of retribution, it also demonstrates how to cope with life in times of distress. Job's continued faithfulness to God might be exemplary for those who suffer innocently. This is shown to have an extra dimension due to God's remark in the epilogue that Job has spoken rightly of God. Even though Job's impression of God's actions was not correct, his protest and his conclusion that God did not treat him correctly were right within the frame of the interpretative tools that was at his disposal. Apparently Job was allowed to have this battle with God when misfortune affected him. If the book of Job is also meant to give some instruction on how one should behave in times of trouble, it offers a frame within which the struggle with trouble can be pursued. This ranges from despair and rebellion to holding on to and maintaining hope in God despite everything that happens. Hence, the correct way to behave is not restricted to unconditional acceptance according to the book of Job.²

² See also E.J. Keulen, "Van acceptatie tot rebellie. Job als paradigmatisch gelovige", *Schrift* 218 (2005) 55-59.