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*Original Paper*

## The Imperatives of Retribution in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature

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### Abstract

The question of retribution seems to interconnect the texts that comprise the bible's wisdom literature. Many scholars are reluctant to recognize the reality of any type of harmony among them. Some researchers see these texts' perspectives on retribution as being incompatible that they would argue that they are contradictory. Thus, one is left to wonder about how to make sense of the tension among these books when they address the issue of retribution in the Old Testament. This paper opines that the book of Proverbs is the "grammar" of the wisdom literature, while the books of Job and Ecclesiastes interpret and apply the rich concept of God's justice in real human life experience. It is also affirmed here that it is possible to understand these books of wisdom literature in the context of progressive revelation in which one book progressively prepares the mind for others. This work emphasizes that human knowledge is limited in understanding God especially as it relates to retribution. Therefore, rather than trying to use logic and philosophy to solve God's mysterious acts, it is better to put our faith in him and glorify him as Paul recommends in Romans 11: 33-36.

**Keywords:** Retribution, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Tradition, Israelite, Human Life

### 1. Introduction

One of the interesting and amazing literatures in Biblical scholarship is the Wisdom Literature. It is interesting because it has a lot to teach us and it is amazing because in those days among the primitive people such high level knowledge was in existence. The primitive people especially the Israelites were very spiritual people and believed in a wise saying that states that 'as you sow so you shall reap'. Let me endeavour to analyze the 'Doctrine of Retribution' which is very well presented in the Wisdom books of the Old Testament.

There is a proverb in nearly every society that states that 'whoever throws ashes around, same ashes return to him'. What is understood here is that whatever you do; the same comes back to you. The concept of retribution is found in all cultures of the world and used freely in the wisdom of the sages. Correspondingly, Wisdom and Folly are gifts freely given to humans who have the capacity to choose between wisdom and folly for the prosperity or the destruction of the human being.

The concept of retribution is important in the wisdom literature and it is a major link that connects the literature. Although the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes emphasize the concept, they do not have the same perspective in understanding it; in fact their emphases seem contradictory. While the book of Proverbs emphasizes retribution, the book of Job and Ecclesiastes seem to argue against it. In this essay we will discuss how to understand this tension. We will firstly discuss how the concept of retribution in Old Testament should be understood; then, we will discuss the tension on the concept of retribution that exists in wisdom literature; and lastly we will compare our observations with other Old Testament traditions.

Wisdom and folly are practical not theoretical virtues as can be seen by their equivalence with justice and wickedness in the book of Proverbs. Thus, it is believed that the attitude and actions of the wise beget prosperity, while folly leads to disaster. According to R.E Murfly (1990:449) this optimistic doctrine of the sages was not presented without reservations, but it was the dominant view, and it

shared in the general biblical belief in divine retribution (Deut. 28: 30). According to the book of Proverbs “Trouble pursues the sinner, but the righteous are rewarded with good things” (13: 21); secondly “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them” (26: 27). These are key scriptures that project retribution in the wisdom literature. Retribution in Proverbs is the belief that unethical actions will bring retribution while ethical conduct brings blessing.

## **2. Definition of the Term Retribution**

For a purposeful definition of retribution, we need to situate this concept within the context of wisdom literature. Thus, Bartholomew and O’Dowd (2011:24, 28-30) define wisdom as that which “is about how all ... activities (saying, working, etc.) find their meaning in the whole of God’s created order”. Since wisdom had ability to adopt other traditions and to preserve her own tradition, wisdom formed a tradition with distinctive characters in which they built a teaching from experience, and on the other hand, everything in real life was interpreted in the perspective of God (cf. Prov. 1: 7). Gerhard Von Rad is considered an important scholar who succeeds in showing that wisdom tradition is another perspective/tradition in the Old Testament (cf. Child, 1992:188,190). There are four characters of wisdom tradition, namely (i) it begins with the ‘fear of Yahweh’, (ii) it is concerned with the general order and patterns of living in God’s creation, (iii) it provides discernment for the particular order and circumstances of our lives, (iv) it is grounded in tradition (cf. Bartholomew & O’Dowd 2011:24-30). According to Clements (1992: 23-26) wisdom tradition developed in three phases i.e., (i) when it was used as folk wisdom, (ii) when it was used in the royal court, (iii) when it was collected to be a compendium/book and wisdom collection in the post-exilic period. This tradition is called the wisdom tradition. There is the debate among scholars in understanding the line between “wisdom and other genres” (Bartholomew & O’Dowd 2011: 22-24). In my opinion, since the wisdom tradition existed in the wisdom literature and others, it will be better that the wisdom in the Old Testament is identified both as the collective book that preserves the wisdom tradition as a genre and as a way in understanding life. Indeed, the Old Testament books (Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes) that preserve the tradition are identified as the wisdom literature as is discussed by Clifford (1997:1-2).

The Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary defines retribution as severe punishment for something seriously wrong that somebody has done. Divine retribution refers to the punishment from God. It refers to the idea that God rewards those who regard and obey him with good things while punishing those who disobey him. Retribution also has been believed to exist in the various systems of supernatural powers which men in various ages and climes have accepted as true. Under these systems, some things are required and some things forbidden, and rewards and punishments are expected in accordance with obedience or disobedience.

Walton (2008: 647) defines retribution as “the conviction that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer, both in proportion to their respective righteousness and wickedness”. The concept of retribution is not particularly preserved in Israelite tradition. Walton (2008: 647-649) shows that this concept is also preserved in the ancient Near East society. While the logic that is used in understanding retribution in Israelite tradition and its milieu is different, Walton (2008:647-649) shows that the ancient Near East people believed that God’s concern with retribution is not caused by their character that is just but because of their vested interest. On the other hand, the ancient Near East people believed that evil is not under God’s control. The existence of this concept could be an indication that retribution is a part of ancient world view. On the other hand, although the concept of retribution is not hard to be defined, but according to some scholars there are some different perspectives used in the Old Testament in understanding the concept. Let me discuss some proposals on this issue.

## **3. Retribution as Principle**

Walton (2008:647) believes that retribution in the Old Testament is seen as a principle. The fundament of this principle is laid on God’s character that is just and will commit to justice; on the other hand, Israelite belief on ethical monotheism leads them to hold that evil is under God’s control so that God has absolute ability to commit his justice and should act justly (cf. Laato & De Moor, 2003: xx; Vannoy, 1996:1140). Walton (2008: 650) believes that besides the character of Israelite tradition that emphasizes God’s monotheism, the absence of the concept of reward and punishment after death influences the belief system of Israelite tradition. However, this conclusion is based on the assumption

that the post-death concept does not exist in the Israelite tradition; the problem here is that this assumption is based on the argument from silence. In addition, according to Vannoy (1996:1142) there is indication in Ps. 49: 5-15; Dan 12: 2 that reward and punishment will be committed in the “*eschaton*”.

In my opinion, it is arguable to identify “retribution” as a principle. Although the concept of retribution is important in the wisdom literature and other Old Testament books (such as in the prophetic books), but this concept is not as prominent as the theme of “history of redemption” or “covenant” in the Old Testament. Therefore, it is more reasonable to identify the concept of retribution as a great theme in the Old Testament rather than as the principle.

#### **4. Retribution as Logic of Justice**

In the ancient Near East culture, people believed that gods were not responsible and had nothing to do with human suffering, therefore, they did not face philosophical issue in understanding the relation of “retribution” and injustice/suffering that is experienced in their life. Laato and De Moor (2003: xxx-xxxviii) show that there is the influence of ancient Near Eastern culture in the concept of retribution theodicy of Israelite tradition. The Mesopotamian law documents and Egyptian sages believed that punishment and suffering are caused by disobedience or evil deeds. This world view and together with the deuteronomistic tradition on “curse and blessing” form the concept of retribution theodicy in Israelite tradition. In my opinion, it is arguable whether the evidence from the Mesopotamian law and Egyptians sages could be used as sources in understanding Israelite tradition on theodicy since there is significant difference between Israelite wisdom tradition and ancient Near East wisdom. In addition, it will be reductionist to understand the covenant theology only in the light of “curse and blessing”. In contrast, the Israelite tradition had a different belief system. They believed that God is just and will act in accord with his justice, and God is the only God and there is no other power (including the evil power) that existed equally to the God of Israel. As a consequence, they would face difficult question with injustice in which they experienced (cf. Walton 2008: 647, 650). The logic that was used to answer this issue is called theodicy.

How did Israelite tradition deal with this issue? There are different approaches used to understand this issue and one of them is “retribution theodicy” (cf. Laato & De Moor 2003: xxx-liv). In this approach, retribution was used as logic in understanding theodicy. And as a result, suffering would be seen as an indication of sinful life. The existence of this perspective could be seen in the theological perspective of Job’s friends (cf. Crenshaw, 1981: 118-119). According to Laato and De Moor (2003: xxxii-xxxiii) the retribution theodicy could be found in many texts of the Old Testament such as in Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Ezra, Nehemiah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Proverbs. On the other hand, they also believe that the “retribution theodicy” grew under a particular suffering experiences (such as the exile) and under the influence of deuteronomistic tradition (the covenant theology).

In my opinion, it is debatable that in the Old Testament (including wisdom literature) the concept of retribution was used to answer the issue of theodicy. Even in the book of Job in which theodicy is probably the main issue, the concept of retribution was not used to answer the issue; the question on “why the suffering” was kept open and there was no definite answer on it.

#### **5. Retribution as a Principle Enunciated in the Old Testament**

From the beginning of Israel’s history, God assured His people of preservation and material blessing if they would be faithful to the covenants which God made with them. When God called Abram out of Ur, he promised “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12: 2). This blessing took the form of land, livestock, and servants (Gen. 13:15; 12:16; 13:16; 20:14). Abram fulfilled the conditions (Gen. 16:2) and was rewarded with wealth. The promise of land, however, was only fulfilled when Israel conquered Palestine (Exod. 6: 2-8, Josh. 11: 23).

The terms of the covenant at Sinai called for love, obedience, and exclusive worship of the Lord. Faithfulness on the part of the individual and the nation would be rewarded with children, bountiful crops, success in business, and wealth (Deut 28). God committed himself to respond to Israel with blessing or curse according to her faithfulness or unfaithfulness as the case may be. Should Israel fail to

follow God and be driven into exile and there repent, he promised to “make you more than prosperous in all that you do in the fruit of your body and your cattle and in the fruits of the earth” (Deut. 30: 9). So this principle of giving or withholding material blessings in response to faithfulness or disobedience extends beyond the Babylonian exile. While it may undergo qualification or modification it is never withdrawn or replaced. The witness of the remaining historical, prophetic and wisdom literature of the Old Testament canon sustains that principle.

## **6. Qualifications and Modifications of Retribution Principle in the Old Testament**

In both the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants God committed himself to reward faithfulness with material prosperity and to withhold that prosperity when his people sinned. This is a general statement of consequences applicable to the nation as well as to the individual. But the promise and the threat did not always follow immediately and when they came they did not always seem appropriate to preceding obedience or disobedience. Limitations and qualifications of the principle were built into Israel’s legislation and experience.

In the legislation of the year of Jubilee, in which all land was to be returned to its impoverished original owners (Lev. 25), as well as in other legislation regarding the poor and the Levites, there is no hint that poverty had originated in lack of faith or disobedience. There seems to be a healthy and realistic recognition in Israel of other reasons for poverty or riches. Even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were forced to leave the land of promise because of famine, as were Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons.

The generosity or injustice of people could also determine one’s economic station and circumstances. David lived a subsistence existence during the years he evaded Saul. Elijah and Jeremiah nearly died of starvation in the service of their Lord (1 Kings 17, 19; Jer. 28:1-13). Conversely, the reign of Jeroboam, who was a wicked King, was characterized by exceptional wealth. (2 Kings 14:23-29, Hos. 7:1-6). According to A.R Guenther (1997:3), the poor found recourse only in God, a God who did not always vindicate them by conferring material blessings. This trust sometimes had to be expressed in spite of the evidence of experience. As a result the poor became identified as the godly, those who humbly waited on the Lord. This meant that while the general principle remained intact, it was not possible to deduce a person’s faith or lack of it on the basis of his poverty or wealth. One should not argue from result back to a necessary cause.

The dilemma this created for the Israelite who lived by the covenant and trusted the Lord to fulfill his promises called for a reexamination of the application of divine justice as evidenced by material prosperity or poverty. God explained to Israel that his patience and long-suffering, as well as his great love for their faithful fore-father, forestalled the judgments which they deserved (Ps. 103: 6-14; Deut. 8: 27-29). So it was understood that God delayed judgment on the ungodly. Where then was the justice of God? One answer was to affirm that God’s justice, though delayed, was always expressed before the death of the person (Job 5: 17-27, Ps. 73: 2-17, Ezk. 18; 33: 12-20). An alternative solution was to extend that period of delay up to the third or fourth generation (Exod. 20: 5-6). This latter solution meant, however, that whole generations could live and die without personally experiencing prosperity or poverty for their own faithfulness or sin.

By the time of the Babylonian exile Israel was prepared to receive further light and to probe for new answer to the question of divine justice as expressed in material form. First, human life is extended by the development of the doctrine of a physical resurrection and a conscious existence beyond death (Dan. 12: 1-3; Ezk. 37). Whereas “eternal life” had been understood as existence in one’s descendants, it now comes to include, and gradually to give priority to a life of blessing in God’s presence beyond the grave. And one who was wicked in his lifetime will experience judgment after the resurrection. Second, the suffering of the godly and the effective role of intercessory prayer, particularly of the prophets, form the sources for the idea of vicarious suffering. Thus, God’s faithful ones ultimately and most completely, his unique suffering servant, the Messiah-represent the means for the salvation of those who live in the exile of disobedience. So the Old Testament promise of material blessing for godliness and the converse for disobedience developed implicit qualifications and modifications as God’s people struggled to understand God’s providence. This new formulation accompanied God’s people into the New Testament.

## 7. Temporal Retribution in the Old Testament

The remarks on the predominance of temporal retributions in the Old Testament are not meant to affirm or imply that there was not some belief in a future state and its retributions among the Old Testament saints, going beyond any express revelations of the Mosaic Law, and disclosing itself in their recorded experience. What is meant here is that in the Law of Moses, taken as a law, a rule of life, individual and national, there is not one motive derived from a future state and its retribution. All is derived from this world and the present life. The same also is true of the Patriarchal dispensation, and of the world before the flood. It is true that the Christian Fathers carry back to the retributions of the Old Testament their ideas of future retribution. This is owing to the fact that the analogical relations of this material system to the spiritual world are such that these punishments may be intended as types of spiritual disease and death; natural defeat and bondage, of spiritual defeat and bondage; natural darkness, of spiritual darkness; natural fire, of spiritual fire. But, even it is so; nothing is expressly said about it in the Law of Moses. The system of temporal punishments is set forth without any express reference whatever to the spiritual world and a future state. Nevertheless, the analogies are often so striking that, in after-ages, they have been extensively regarded as types and shadows of coming events in the spiritual world. Thus the judgments of God on Pharaoh, and the redemption of Israel out of Egypt, have been regarded as types of God's judgments on the great adversary, and the redemption of the Church. Yet of this the Law of Moses says nothing. It may have been God's purpose since the Mosaic dispensation was typical, to keep always within the typical sphere of the material world, so as not to mingle the two spheres and anticipate the spiritual dispensation. This may be the reason why no direct reference is made to the spiritual world and the future life, even when otherwise we should expect it. As a general fact, we little realize how long this world was under the system of temporal retributions. It is not yet four thousand years from Abraham to our day. How long is such a period to us! But from Adam to Christ was fully four thousand years. In these years there was a long progress of thought and of revelation. In order to form any distinct conception of it, we need to unfold it somewhat, and not, as is often, to attempt to present in one comprehensive summary what is called the teaching of the Old Testament.

The four thousand years before Christ, according to the common chronology, may be divided into five periods. The first of two thousand years, from Adam to Abraham; the second, of five hundred years, from Abraham to Moses; the third, of five hundred years, from Moses to Solomon; the fourth, of five Hundred years, from Solomon to the return from the captivity in Babylon; the fifth, of five hundred years, from the return from the captivity to Christ. Without going into detail; the outline or illustration of temporal retributions during these periods will next be set forth.

## 8. Natural Death Pronounced on Adam

In the first period, the first and most striking instance of retribution was the sentence of natural death pronounced upon Adam and Eve because of their transgression. This sentence, as interpreted by Paul, included in its scope all their posterity. Great efforts have been made under dogmatic influences to carry back the idea of spiritual death to the sentence pronounced on Adam and his race. But that sentence is its own interpreter. "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19). The Jewish writers of the Alexandrian period and the Greek Fathers took this view, and their interpretation is confirmed by the Apostle Paul. Any other view is contrary to the whole genius of the Old Testament typical dispensation. Another instance of threatened retribution was the future punishment of the tempter by the seed of the woman. It is the first hint of a redeeming and avenging Messiah, which, in after-ages, was so fully developed as the central theme of revelation. The deluge, also, was threatened and inflicted by God during this period. To this divine retribution our Saviour emphatically refers as an illustration and warning of coming judgments on Jerusalem.

In the second period occurred the judgment of God on Sodom and Gomorrah, to which our Saviour also refers, as a solemn warning to the men of his age, in view of the impending ruin of Jerusalem. In the third period were the divine judgments on Egypt, the redemption of the Israelites from bondage, and the development of the Mosaic economy in the wilderness, and the establishment of the nation in Canaan. Is it not wonderful that the civil and criminal law of the nation thus established should be sustained by temporal retributions? But it is very remarkable that the providential rewards of fidelity to

God and his system were derived entirely from the material sphere. If the nation was loyal and obedient, God promised that they should have health, long life, fruitful seasons, and military ascendancy among the nations, national wealth, honour, and power. If disobedient and idolatrous, God threatened that they should be scourged by famine, disease and defeat in war, captivity, poverty, shame and contempt. The power of language is exhausted in giving intensity to these motives. A brief experiment easily made will bring the whole subject before the mind and for the sake of vividness of conception it is well to make it. Let anyone read attentively the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus, and then ask, what are the rewards and punishments by which God here sought to induce the Israelites to obey? Is there any allusion to a future life and eternal retributions? Do they not relate to fruitful seasons and health, and victory in war, and the protecting presence of God, on the one hand, and drought, famine, disease, defeat, captivity, and death, on the other? Then read the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, a still longer and more earnest and eloquent chapter, full of promises and threatening, and see if one can be found that does not relate to this life. In that whole chapter we shall find not one reference to a future life, not one motive derived from it. The same is true of the whole law.

During the wanderings of the nation in the wilderness, temporal rewards and punishments were always close at hand, of the most powerful kind. During the period of the Judges, the fortunes of the nation varied with their obedience or rebellion, as God had threatened. The ascendancy of the kingdom under David was the result of fidelity and obedience to God. The division and decline of the nation in the fourth period, and their final ruin, were owing to the apostasy of Solomon, and to subsequent relapses into idolatry, till the ten tribes were led into captivity by the King of Assyria, and the rest by the King of Babylon.

The great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in all their warnings of the apostatizing nation, did not refer to future punishments in the spirit-world or to redemption from them, but to the terrors of the siege, of famine, of the capture of the city, and of captivity in a strange land, or to redemption from such captivity. In the fifth period, after the return from the captivity until Christ, the system of temporal retributions was still pursued, and finally culminated in the terrible destruction of Jerusalem, in anticipation of which the Saviour wept.

### **9. Retribution as Theology**

In this approach retribution is not understood as logic of justice but as a theology (Walton 2008: 649). As the theology, retribution was discussed primarily to understand God rather than human suffering. There are two different perspectives in understanding retribution in this model, namely, to understand it as a mystery and to understand it as a part of God's revelatory action.

In the first perspective retribution was believed as definitive but how it works is beyond human understanding; it is also possible that retribution will not be committed in this world but will be extended to the after-death realm (Walton 2008: 650). In this perspective, God's people are required to have faith in God rather than to question God's mysterious work. This perspective could be seen in all books of the wisdom literature (particularly in the books of Job and Qoheleth). Walton (2008: 650) shows that although this approach existed in the Christian tradition, it was not part of pre-Christian Israelite tradition. Walton's conclusion is probably represented nowadays by Old Testament scholars. However, this conclusion basically is based on the argument from silence. In the second perspective, retribution is understood as God's revelatory action (Walton 2008: 650); God sometimes allows that the righteous suffers or the wicked seems blessed; but it does not happen because God fails to commit his justice, conversely, it happens because he has particular purpose for his people. In my opinion, this approach and perspective seem more reasonable to be used in understanding the concept of retribution in the wisdom tradition.

### **10. The Theology of Retribution in Wisdom Tradition**

Retribution existed in the wisdom tradition and also in other traditions such as deuteronomistic tradition (cf. Deut.28-29). On the other hand, the concept of retribution also exists in some poetic books such as the Psalms. Whybray (1974: 31, 43, 54, 69) discusses "The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament" and concludes that the "wise man" refers to a man who "was accustomed to read for edification and for pleasure", rather than refers to a professional teacher or professional advisor or

professional author or Sage. Some of the wise men had literary ability and wrote extraordinary books such as in Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth. Since the book of Psalms and prophetic tradition also give much attention to the issue of retribution, it is reasonable to compare the theology of retribution in wisdom tradition with them so that we could have a broader understanding on how the theology of retribution is understood in the wisdom literature and how it is related to other Old Testament tradition. The main theme that is important in wisdom tradition (such as retribution) could be seen clearly in the prophetic tradition, but the main theme in prophetic traditions (such as covenant) does not get much attention in the wisdom literature (cf. Grant, 2008: 858-863).

### **11. Retribution in the Wisdom Literature**

According to Walton (2008: 649) there is a tension in the wisdom literature in understanding the retribution. On the one hand, the wisdom tradition understands retribution as a theology, but on the other hand there is also indication that it is used as logic in understanding the problem of theodicy. However, the issue of theodicy in wisdom literature seems to exist only in the book of Job; moreover it is debatable if the book of Job is written to answer the issue of theodicy. Therefore it is reasonable that I will focus my observation primarily on the retribution and not on the theodicy.

In the book of Proverbs, retribution is clearly seen and is formulated in the sequential narration. Some scholars understand the concept of retribution in the book of Proverbs as mechanical and impersonal system (cf. Miller, 1982: 132-134). There are some sayings that have this model (such as in Prov. 13.22, 25, 14.14). On the other hand, van Leeuwen (1992: 28-34) shows that there is also theological exception in the book of Proverbs in which it is shown that the righteous have to face suffering, but they are still better than the wicked who live in prosperity, since in the future God will overturn their condition (cf. Prov. 24: 20; 28: 20). According to van Leeuwen (1992: 34), the existence of futuristic hope in the book of Proverbs is difficult to understand since in the Old Testament this kind of hope was rare; therefore, he argues that the book of Proverbs seems to maintain the "Yahwistic faith". Therefore, it will be reductionist if the theology of retribution in the book of Proverbs is only seen as a deed-consequence process/system.

The theology of retribution also has important role in the book of Job. Walton (2008: 340) shows that the dialogue in Job takes a setting like a court in which there are three claims that are discussed i.e. (i) "God is just" (ii) "Job is righteous" (iii) "the retribution principle is true". In this book, the theology of retribution is probably face-to-face with the issue of theodicy. Crenshaw (1981: 116) believes that the Job's spiritual crisis represents "a decisive stage in Israel's dealing with God [in which] ... divine justice is threatened to collapse because of the burdens placed upon it by historical events". The concept of mechanical retribution is preserved in the belief of Job's friend (such as in Job 4:7-9; 8:8-13; 10:13-20). They believed that justice is the greatest principle, and that even God is under this principle (cf. Crenshaw 1981: 118-119); but Job who is the representative of Israel protested against this perspective (such as in Job 9:15-22). According to Brueggemann (1997: 388-389), Israel through Job's words argues against Yahweh and asserts that "Yahweh violates Yahweh's own command ... Yahweh is unreliable and morally indifferent". The book Job seems not to answer Job's question but also does not justify the friends of Job, the question on "where is God's justice in the suffering of the righteous" was left as a mystery (cf. Goldingay 2006:590). Therefore, Walton (2008:649) is correct that "the book of Job is to perform the radical surgery that separates theology and theodicy, contending that in the end Yahweh's justice must be taken on faith rather than worked out philosophically".

In the book of Ecclesiastes the author sees that retribution is not working (such as in Ecclesiastes 9:1-2). Perdue (1994: 239) believes that in the book "there was ... a deep-seated erosion of confidence in the providence of God. One problem is the retreat of the creator into the impenetrable darkness of the heavenly regions". The problem becomes worse when God seems to ignore the injustices that happen on earth and abandon "God's retribution principle" (cf. Whybray, 1989: 73-75). This is the reason that Ecclesiastes was pessimistic that even wisdom could lead the cosmos to be a better place (such as in Ecclesiastes 1:13-14; cf. Perdue 1994: 239-240). But this does not mean that Ecclesiastes had no trust in God since he also emphasized that God is sovereign and he rules over the cosmos and humanity (Ecclesiastes 11: 9). Whybray (1989:74) discusses that God's control in the cosmos and humanity is seen ambiguously by Ecclesiastes in which in one hand it is seen as impersonal power, but

on the other hand it is seen as the act of God's justice. Whybray believes that the tension in Ecclesiastes' theology in which in one hand God will not distinguish the righteous and the wicked, but on the other hand God will reward man based on what is deserved was not solved by Ecclesiastes. In other words, rather than questioning God's justice, Ecclesiastes teaches that retribution is a mystery (cf. Whybray 1989: 76).

Brueggemann (1997: 318-319, 400-401) who uses the model of court in his approach finds that there are some different voices and tensions in understanding the theology of the Old Testament and Yahweh's sovereign fidelity. On the other hand there is counter-testimony from Israel that emphasizes "Yahweh's hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity". In Brueggemann's perspective, the theology of retribution in the book of Proverbs could be seen as a part of the counter-testimony in which the emphasis on "Yahweh's hiddenness" is maintained (pp. 336, 338, 346-347, 348-351). In this context, Brueggemann believes that the book of Proverbs did not emphasize a deed-consequence teaching but emphasized the "the hidden, final, free governance of Yahweh". On the other hand, the theology of retribution in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, in Brueggemann's theological construction, are also the counter-testimony in which the emphasis on "the negativity perspective" and questions on retribution to God is maintained (1997: 368-398). Brueggemann (1997:393-396) believes that in the book of Job the counter-testimony is articulated in the passion and persuasive approach, but in the book of Ecclesiastes the counter-testimony is addressed in the direct and unpersuasive way. On the other hand both believe that although God is the source of human life and he is sovereign and will judge men, but his work and judgment do not depend on "earth side of creation".

Goldingay (2006: 796-631) discusses the theology of retribution under the theme "*How Life Works*", and he shows that life works mysteriously. He shows that the theology of retribution existed in the wisdom literature and Old Testament; and it is clear that God works through retribution (2006:604-610).. On the other hand, Goldingay (2006: 615-631) shows that retribution does not always happen; the reason that it exists behind the "failure of the principle of retribution" is also uncertain. Thus, the suffering faced by God's people could be seen as corrective, testing, or others. Just as Brueggemann basically believes that there is a tension in wisdom literature on understanding the theology of retribution, he does not interpret the tension as the testimony and counter-testimony rather he interprets it as a mystery.

In my opinion, there is an alternative to understanding the different perspectives of the theology of retribution in the book of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. It is possible that the three books were written and collected to argue against those who misunderstand the teaching of retribution. Longman III (2006:61-63) believes that the teaching of retribution in the Proverbs is closely related to Job and Ecclesiastes. He believes that Ecclesiastes and Job corrected those who misunderstand the book of Proverbs. In my opinion, although this approach seems able to harmonize the tension between Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, it depends on the assumption that there is a theological redaction in the canonical process of wisdom literature; however this conclusion lacks evidence and is difficult to be proven. The concept of retribution that is attacked in the book of Job and Ecclesiastes is not the same with the theology of retribution that is taught in the book of Proverbs. The concept of retribution that is attacked by Job and Ecclesiastes is a kind of "mechanical retribution" and, as clearly shown by van Leeuwen, Proverbs did not teach it. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret that the book of Proverbs attempts to teach the correct concept of retribution in which retribution is seen as God's dynamic work. In other words, the three books could teach the same teaching (teaching of retribution) but they use different perspectives and speak from different contexts. The book of Job was written from the perspective and the context of suffering, and the book of Proverbs was written from the perspective and the context of education, and the book of Ecclesiastes was written from the perspective of philosophy.

## 12. Retribution in the Psalms and Prophetic Tradition

In the book of Psalms, the theology of retribution is used as the theological ground in facing suffering or injustice; although the Psalmist would wish to see retribution effected but he does not doubt God's justice. In fact, retribution becomes the reason for the psalmist to put his faith In God. Firth (2005: 141-142) who observes the perspective(s) of Psalms on the issue of violence and its implication to the



issue of retribution says, “Although all the psalms examined reflected a consistent position of violence that was currently suffered and in which retribution was sought, in no case did the psalmist seek approval for the enactment of personal retribution. And based on Ps. 27.6 the psalmist believes that there is no need to seek personal retribution because the world view of the psalm assumes that Yahweh acts on the behalf of the righteous against the wicked.

The theology of retribution is also the primary message in the prophets in which disobedience and unfaithfulness to Yahweh will lead Israel to suffering (as a consequence) and punishment (Miller 1982:134-137). Here, Miller (1982: 137) is correct in that the punishment in the prophetic traditions is not only a matter of deed and its consequence, such punishment could be the judicial act of God, and also could be his instrument in purifying his people. On the other hand, the family metaphor used in the prophetic tradition such as God as the merciful father (Isa. 63: 16; Jer. 3.19) and the faithful husband (Isa. 54: 5; Jer. 31: 32) indicate that there is another important side of the covenant beside retribution, namely love, mercy and forgiveness. Additionally, in the book of Jonah the concept of mechanical retribution seems to collapse since God chooses to forgive Nineveh the sinful nation rather than to punish them in accord with their sinful deed (Jon. 4: 11). Thus, just as in the wisdom literature, God’s work is not under the control of “system of retribution”, but God’s work is beyond that system. Thus, wisdom tradition, psalms and prophetic traditions are in harmony.

### **13. Related Themes to Retribution in Wisdom Literature**

#### *13.1 The Righteous Sufferer Compositions*

Some brief words about the categorization of “Righteous Sufferer” are necessary. This category of texts includes those that highlight the afflictions of righteous individuals, and provide an example of the composite nature of wisdom texts (cf. Mattingly, 1990). In the Hebrew Bible, the most developed example of this theme comes in the book of Job. It is widely acknowledged that the book of Job consists of more than one component. First, there is a narrative story that frames an account of a righteous individual who loses everything (Job 1-2). After great suffering and a debate between him and his colleagues (Job 3-37), Yahweh eventually responds (Job 38-41), and finally Job is reconciled and restored to his former state (Job 42). This debate between Job and his friends is quite similar in form to the Babylonian theodicy. This text also concerns a sufferer who debates with his friend whether traditional values are worth the effort; however, unlike Job, discussion is much more civil; they trade compliments rather than the accusations that sometimes fly in the book of Job (eg. Job 11:3; 12:2; 13:4; 16:2).

There is another group of compositions that mirror the book of Job in its progression from the loss of status, to suffering, and finally to restoration. These texts may be called the Sumerian Job, the Babylonian Job, and a text from Ugarit which we will call the Ugaritic Job despite its composition in Akhadian. There is some debate as to whether these texts should be included within Wisdom Literature. Part of the contention question will be discussed below, but the important criterion for inclusion into the Wisdom Literature category is that a text has an explicit purpose to advocate a way of living life. Although they generally do not accuse the gods of wrong-doing, these compositions address the question of suffering that does not seem to be deserved. One does not necessarily have to give a negative conclusion to question the gods. For example, Jeremiah knows full well he will be wrong, but is undeterred. He says, “You are always righteous, LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1). This is a question that is mostly absent within traditional wisdom.

In the Babylonian Job, the purpose of the composition is quiet clear. After the sufferer’s eventual recovery, his personal god gives him a charge, “You must never, till the end of time, forget (your) god... I will see to it that you have long life. So, without qualms, do you anoint the parched, feed the hungry, water the thirsty, but he who sits there with burning eyes, let him look upon your food” (2010:35). Here, it is clear that part of the purpose of the narrative is to teach that after one has gone through such trials it becomes one’s duty and obligation to care for those who find themselves in similar circumstance.

#### 14. The Vanity Theme

One of the main categories of the Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature according to Lambert and Alster is the “Vanity Theme”. It has also been shown that these texts often bear the common idea that human action and mortal existence are ephemeral, often exemplified by the wind. The attitude is explained by the author of Ecclesiastes in this statement: “Everyone comes naked from their mother’s womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart.

They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. This too is a grievous evil: As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind?” (Ecclesiastes 5:15-16). Whereas the “Righteous Sufferer” compositions, as a whole, highlight the importance of relying upon the gods rather than one’s own actions, the texts of the “Vanity Theme” dwell more on the fact that death is the final negation of prosperity from which no hope of restoration is present. Although obedience and piety are not rejected, reliance upon the mercies of heaven becomes only one part of “good living” as it did within the “Instructions” genre. Another similarity between these “Instructions” and those texts of the “Vanity Theme” is their lack of similarity with cultic texts. Where the “Righteous Sufferer” texts bear remarkable affinity to lamentations and penitential elements regularly performed in the cult, these compositions provide no such link.

The assertions that mortal existence is fleeting are usually coupled with accompanying injunctions to nevertheless, enjoy life and prosperity while one has it. There are a number of texts in Sumerian that bear similarity to one another, each bearing as their initial line, “Nothing is of value, but life itself should be sweet-tasting”. This declaration that one should enjoy life even though all is “vanity” has been labeled the *carpe diem* theme. This theme finds itself in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Ballade of the Early Rulers, and in Qohelet of the Hebrew Bible (2:24; 3:12-13; 3:22; 9:7-10).

This category of the “Vanity Theme” covers a wider number of genres and text types than those of the “Righteous Sufferer” compositions. The setting and purpose of many of these texts are not altogether known. There is one *Dialogue of Pessimism* which contains a clear example of the vanity theme, but without the normal *carpe diem* advice. The end of the composition concludes that humanity cannot answer the question of “what is good”? Thus, the best thing to do is commit suicide. It has been argued that this text is an example of a humorous mood rather than a deadly serious one. It has also been proposed that the Ballade of early rulers, which enumerates the silence of the long dead heroes of Mesopotamian lore, “may be a song intended for a joyous symposium in which the students of the scribal schools enjoyed excelling in literary allusions at a good meal”. This has prompted Alster to caution readers against taking its pessimistic attitude too seriously. These observations are important cautions, but the fact these themes appear over a large span of time in a number of texts, even if it is for humour and enjoyment, bears testament to their prevalence.

#### 15. The Theodicy Question

It becomes almost an impossibility to discuss retribution in wisdom texts and not come in contact with the modern term “theodicy” (Feinberg, 1984). This word was made popular in the eighteenth century by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1998). Theodicy in its original sense seeks to answer the dilemma created in monotheism when it is observed that 1) God is compassionate and good, 2) he is also omnipotent and omniscient, but 3) evil and suffering exist (Parkin, 1984; Feinberg, 1994). Because of these questions are raised in correlation with ethical monotheism, Max Weber (1963) attempted to broaden the category to use the term in other cultures and religions, thus “in Weber’s usage, the theodicy problem referred to any situation of inexplicable or unmerited suffering, and the theodicy itself referred to any rationale for explaining suffering”.

In speaking of this concept I will adopt Max Weber’s definition for the “theodicy problem” as referring to unmerited suffering and a “theodicy” as an answer to this problem (cf. Adair-Toteff, 2013: 87-107). A fundamental difference exists in the questions posed concerning unmerited suffering in the ancient world and in post-Enlightenment thought. Where the classical philosophical question is trying to reconcile God’s nature with the existence of evil, the ancient authors appear more interested in the personal reaction to such a dilemma. The compositions in the “Righteous Sufferer” and the “Vanity Theme” are for the most part interested in what reaction people should have to the fact that suffering

seems undeserved or that divine will is inscrutable. The question is pointed earthward not heavenward. It is a question of how humanity should react, that is why the conclusions are either total submission to deity, or the injunction to “seize the day”.

Despite the fact that the compositions provide answers to questions that are more centered on humanity’s reactions to life’s injustices, there are answers given for why suffering often seems unmerited. These are sometimes more implied than explained. In this sense we may say that there are theodicies within Israel and Mesopotamia. The benefit of defining terms in this way is that one spends less time deciding if an author’s views lie outside the realm of modern theodicy and more time on the answers to the problem of suffering provided by the authors.

Thus, the theodicy problem can be applied to Mesopotamia and Israel if this is broadened to mean the problem of inexplicable or unmerited suffering. The answers to this question are then regarded as theodicies. Although cuneiform and biblical sources may espouse certain theodicies, the compositions spend time advocating the human reaction to life’s apparent injustices. Unlike the classical dilemma that is concerned with the heavens, these works are largely concerned with earthly reactions.

## 16. Conclusion

The wisdom tradition that is grown and developed and used in the real life situation shows that even in the context of suffering, the theology of retribution was applied primarily as a theology rather than as logic of justice or a system of justice. The theology of retribution leads God’s people to put their faith on God who is just and not to question his justice. This perspective is amply seen even in the book of Job. The reason that it occurred behind this perspective is the character of wisdom tradition that begins its searching from fear/reverence of the Lord (Prov. 1:7). Goldingay (2006:581,592,596) interprets the phrase “fear of Yahweh” as an attitude and not a feeling that leads one to acknowledge, to submit and to obey Yahweh. The reverence of the Lord becomes the centre of wisdom because it implies humility to recognize the limit of human understanding and implies trust in God who is capable to see the whole life of men and able to lead them in the wise path. In other words, wisdom is not ability to answer human question but ability to live with the mystery. Goldingay (2006: 576) is therefore right in that wisdom could not answer every question about human life and God. In this way the man-God relationship remains a *sine qua non*. Therefore, this relationship is meant to direct God’s people to trust, to submit and learn to live with mystery daily.

There are some possibilities to understand the different perspectives in Old Testament teaching on retribution. For Brueggemann, this understanding is counter-testimony, Van Leeuwen observes that this is a contradiction, and Goldingay understands it as a mystery. However, another possibility of positing a different perspective on retribution in Old Testament as harmony exists. While the book of Proverbs becomes the “grammar” of the wisdom literature, the book of Job and Ecclesiastes interpreted and applied the rich concept of God’s justice in real life and human experience. On the other hand, it is also possible to understand the three books of wisdom literature in the context of progressive revelation in which one book progressively prepares the mind for others.

Our discussion necessarily leads to another important issue. There is still a question that needs to be answered related to the function of retribution in salvation history. This then is how the theology of retribution could help researchers to understand the theology of justification in Old Testament? This is justifiably followed by how the concept of salvation in the Old Testament should be understood when God’s retribution does not always work in a consistent way? Finally, one needs to ask how the Old Testament soteriology should be formulated in the light of the theology of retribution.

Contemporary scholars emphasize that human knowledge is limited in understanding God. Frame (2013: 703) says “One reason God is incomprehensible is that he has chosen not to reveal to us everything about himself ... God is incomprehensible not only in what is unrevealed, but also in his revelation”. This approach and understanding are important and is in accord with the wisdom tradition. Therefore, rather than trying to use logic and philosophy to solve God’s mysterious acts, it is better to put our faith in him and glorify him as Paul recommends in Romans 11: 33-36.

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