

Examine the concept of the justice of God in the Old Testament, with special reference to the book of Job, and consider the relevance of this concept in the contemporary world

The concept that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a just God is a central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures. This may seem unremarkable but it is really quite significant as many of the deities of the ancient pagan religions were anything but just and demanded appeasement. Men were often considered the playthings of the pantheon.

God's character is asserted very early on in Genesis in the story of Noah, the Lord had been "grieved by the wickedness of men on the Earth and that every imagination of their heart was evil". The implication here is that God in his justice would wipe the Earth of men and restore the Creation. That Noah "found grace in His sight" is an indication that justice and mercy are frequently paired in God's dealing with men. Justice is sometimes mitigated by the considerations of mercy and the wider purposes of God. This is a recurring theme throughout the prophetic writings in particular where God is seen to be acting in the name of universal justice because righteousness demands it. He is entering into judgement with His people because of their injustice, Isaiah of Jerusalem cries, "

17. learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

18. "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."
19. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land;
20. but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Undeniably, the concept of justice is strongly connected with action. Abraham in Genesis challenges the Lord to be just, "will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen 18:23) as he intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. In that story God demonstrates he will rescue the righteous from amongst the wicked even when the righteous man in question, Lot, has questionable standards of righteousness himself.

The historical books position starkly side by side the success of the nation in relation to the justice embodied in the Laws and Precepts of the Mosaic Law, "do these things and you shall live" the Deuteronomist summarises the salvic dynamic of the Law. In the late prophetic writings such as Malachi, God is contending with his people regarding the justice of marital relationships. There is an inescapable connection between justice, righteousness and the dealings of God with His people. God's people are His people when their social and personal ethics reflect the justice, righteousness and mercy of His own.

The wisdom literature retains this theme of the ultimate justice of God but challenges the simple formulation of the earlier tradition that the righteous

man is blessed and the wicked do not prosper. Suddenly the question is asked, “why do the wicked prosper?”. Ps 73 is a snapshot of this new realisation that the wicked do apparently prosper in this life and the innocent are seen to suffer. The resolution of the problem for the Psalmist here is a theological one – he goes into the sanctuary to pray, realises his arrogance and foresees the real end of the wicked.

In the prophetic literature, the people are seen accusing God of “hating them” because of the triumph of their enemies over them. The major prophets have to engage with the people to provide explanations for the experience of exile. The prophets frequently reflect the feeling of abandonment of the people and that the people were accusing God of breaking His covenant unjustifiably. The author of Lamentations is struggling to retain his faith over the decimation of the entire nation and the exile into Babylon. They were challenging the justice of God in allowing this ruination of the nation. The thinking of Ezekiel is novel in that Ezekiel emphasises the individual responsibility before God to address the charge of injustice against God for the Deuteronomic “visiting of the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation”.

However, the simple prophetic answer to the question of God’s justice was nearly always a variation on “because of your sins you suffer”. It is to the book of Job we need to move to see a deep challenge to and examination of the nature of God’s justice. Although some commentators challenge that God ever answers the charge of Job that He is behaving unjustly towards him, there is a dramatic and searching narrative that plays out the vivid struggle

late 2nd Temple Judaism was having with the concept of what it means for the innocent to suffer and whether it is just for God to permit this.

The prologue of Job in itself vividly begins the remarkable challenge to the integrity of God. Some scholars assert that it is only because of the literary structure of Job as a historical drama that allowed Job to be admitted into the canon, so fundamentally and explicitly does it explore and question the character of God. Some see the insertion of the Elihu speeches as an attempt to vindicate God and to align the book more closely with the traditional view of God's justice and righteousness. How could God be seduced by Satan (the Accuser) into a wager to permit Job to be stripped of his family, wealth, riches and health to vindicate God's initial statement about Job? It would seem, by God's own admission, that he was provoked by Satan. He is seen to react, very much as an emotional man. There seems to be no remote transcendence or inscrutability that was developing within Judaism at the time as a response to the death of the prophetic and a rejection of anthropomorphisation of YHWH. Satan's initial response to God when asked where he had been, is idiomatic, "to wander to and fro in the earth and up and down it" is a Hebrew idiom that emphasises that Satan is bragging to God that the world and everything in it belongs to him. God points out that in fact he does not own everything because Job is referred to as "my servant Job..who eschews evil". Satan, as expected, takes issue with this and asserts that Job is only content to serve God because of what he gets out of it. Astonishingly, God seems to give Satan permission to strip Job of his wealth to prove to Satan he is incorrect.

This interpretation is debated by some scholars whom argue that Job's reliance on ritual for cleansing and his later confession in 3:25 that "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me" indicated a theological failing of Job that made him vulnerable to Satan's attack. Faith and fear are mutually exclusive; fear is the *modus operandi* of Satan and God was simply making Satan aware of this weakness. Teleologically jumping to the restoration of Job at the end of the story, His aim was to take Job to the next level of a relationship with Him. This is an example of a novel modern attempt to rescue God's character in the story but some scholars have asserted the "happy ending" was another addition to the story to help align it with the traditional theology of the good being vindicated at the end. Some posit that the "Satan episode" itself was a late addition as Satan only emerged as "Satan" late within the 2nd Temple Judaism. Others point to the existence of a "Babylonian Job" story and this was a Hebrew appropriation of the story. It was the "price of admission" for the inclusion of Job in the canon. However, such an assertion remains a hypothesis and most textual critics only reject Elihu's dialogue as added after the fact.

Job initially responds as one would expect a man of faith and integrity to respond. Job delineates at later stages in the story how he has had an interactive relationship with God. He fulfils the social obligations of "righteousness" by ministering to the poor and defending those wrongly accused. He is hospitable and obviously ministers to the community he is

part of. On all levels he is seen to correspond to what the ancient Mesopotamian tradition considers the righteous man.

The reader is then confronted with God's apparent admission of fallibility or weakness, Satan had succeeded in "provoking Him without cause" (Job 2:3) but what shocks the reader even more so is that He then rises to Satan's second challenge that it is because Job still has his health and vitality that he is maintaining his integrity. God is prepared to enter into a second wager with Satan to demonstrate that Job chooses God because he believes in the justice and goodness of God:

4. "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life.
5. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."
6. The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

Scholars traditionally interpreted Job after the quotation of James in the New Testament as the supreme example of patience and faith in suffering. Christological undertones and a primitive conception of the Resurrection were seen in the famous passage "my Redeemer liveth...I shall see Him face to face" (19:25-27). However, as scholars began to engage with the primary theme of the suffering of the innocent and the associated doubts about the character of God, it was possible to engage with the text and to see how closely it paralleled the New Testament teaching.

Job's friends criticism of Job is mild at first through Eliphaz where he is simply rehearsing the traditional view that Job must have obviously sinned. If he repents, God will restore. God's justice is vindicated. Bildad suggests that the sin must be more subtle in response to Job's first speeches asserting his integrity. God would not kill his children unless there was a reason. Zophar seems to represent the supremely religiously confident school that Job obviously needs to accept the judgement of the transcendent God and repent for his sin to bring his suffering to an end. There seems an implicit criticism here by the narrator of the refusal of these moral, well-meaning men to engage with the reality of Job's experience and to consider the implications for their beliefs if Job does not stand condemned in sin.

Job in the midst of his mental depression is struggling not with answering the assertions of his friends but in a forensic challenge to God. He is petitioning God to appear in the best traditions of human justice in a courtroom situation (31:35).

35. ("Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense--let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing.

36. Surely I would wear it on my shoulder, I would put it on like a crown.

37. I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him.)

YHWH does indeed accept the summons and also reverses the summons on Job (42:4). Implicit within this appearance is that YHWH has accepted the claim of Job for vindication and is prepared to vindicate Job before his friends. In doing so, He invalidates their dogmatic and traditional interpretations of

suffering and the judgement of Job. The appearance of YHWH is normally interpreted as a simple corrective experience for Job where he realises the magnificence of God, drops his case and the controversy is over.

In this sense, the question of Job's suffering and the question of why do the innocent suffer, or why does God behave as He does are not answered explicitly. Many scholars point to the conclusion as the same as the Psalmist – there is an ultimate vindication of the righteous even if it pushed to the *eschaton* as in the apocalyptic vision. However, the readers are left with the additional knowledge that Job and his friends seem completely unaware of that the plot against him was orchestrated by Satan. Scholars have been loathed to make much of the involvement of Satan as his appearances are brief and fleeting. However, in the light of John 10:10 and Ephesians 6 there is a case to be argued that God in the counter-summons of 40:7 and Job in his response in 42,4-6 are renewing a covenantal position. Job can address the threat of the Devil and future disaster by calling upon and demanding of God.

Some scholars would see that the issue of suffering of the innocent and the good in the will of God is never satisfactorily resolved as God never addresses it directly. The ending is seen as an artificial appendage. However, in light of New Testament references to 'suffering as discipline' it can be argued that God was not being provoked at all by Satan but that He was engaged in the active disciplining of Job in response to Satan's challenge. When these covenantal ideas and the exhortations of Hebrews 4,16 are

viewed together, Job no longer an unsolved paradox but a clear shadow of many New Testament ideas of spiritual warfare and the nature of evil. They provide a direct relevance for today that we can be sure that God will take the part of His people when they call upon His name. Out of the midst of any suffering, they must see the appearance of the Lord and they will have no more questions.