HOW GOD PAYS BACK - RETRIBUTIVE CONCEPTS IN THE BOOK OF JOB[1]

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ABSTRACT

Five Old Testament concepts of retribution are presented. Then the Book of Job is evaluated under the aspect of its retributive concepts. Because of the lack of compensation in Job's life-experience, Job as well as his friends are led to cancel individual elements of the retributive concept. While Job's friends stick to a rigid concept, Job undergoes different stages of development that finally lead him to the denial of retribution. By this he agrees with his wife, but both come to opposite conclusions in their reasoning. Job's wife argues in favour of a nihilistic approach while Job is a proponent of a faith-approach. Therefore he is an example of a New Testament believer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Old Testament Theology, Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Egyptology developed a different vocabulary as they dealt with the concept of a cause-effect-relation or its failure. Old Testament Theology talks about retribution. In Ancient Near Eastern Studies and in Egyptology the "accusation of god" (Otto 1951; Fecht 1972; Sitzler 1995) is a common term for the delay of it. In Egyptology, Jan Assmann introduced the term "connective justice" (1996:192). These different terms may sharpen our view for the connotations involved in it.

2. CONCEPTS OF RETRIBUTION

2.1 The classic concept

Retribution is a cause-effect-relation. It is based on the causality of a deed-consequence relation. Every action has an adequate result. Retribution is a dogma of repayment or revenge. It is based on a principle of causality. Every action will get an adequate result. The responsibility for maintaining the concept of retribution lies with God, who guarantees the result. God is

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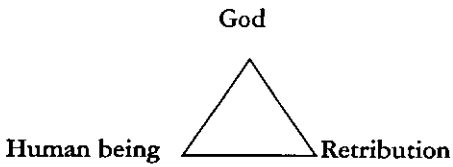
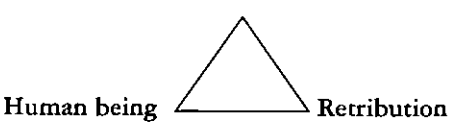
actively involved in this cause-effect-relation. The retributive concept can be shown in a triangle with its three coexisting elements (Tsevat 1980:36).



2.2 The world-order concept

Kurt Koch reinterpreted the concept of retribution. He changed the classic concept and talked about a destiny becoming sphere of deeds (Koch 1955:30). He sees an indivisible connection between action and consequence. They are not brought together later by a repaying God, but every action reflects immediately back on the one who caused it. Retribution is not a forensic act, which is executed by an external power, that is an external act of judgement, but the consequence that comes into force.[3] It is an immediate connection between deed and consequence, in which the involvement of God can hardly be seen. Gese (1958:34) speaks about an "internal world-order" as a basic principle of creation. God binds himself to this world-order, but he is actively absent *(deus absconditus)*. A wise person is the one, who knows the principles of this world-order and acts accordingly.



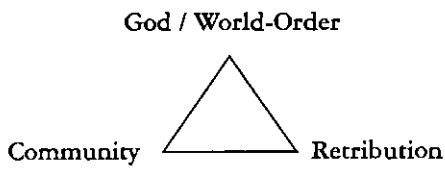
2.3 The concept of retribution with an extension to the community

This concept extends the retribution of an individual to the community. The Western emphasis of the individual should not make us blind to the view that the retribution is not limited to the individual but to the community. From an individualistic viewpoint this might be called an indirect retribution, because the individual might not prosper from it. But from a community-oriented viewpoint this is probably a misleading term.

3 Therefore Skladny (1962:72) calls it "Lebenshaltung-Schicksal-Zusammenhang".

The idea of being blessed in one's offspring is prominent in the Ancient Near East as well as in the Old Testament. The promises of the Decalogue are typical for that:

> You shall not bow down to the idols or worship them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, who punishes children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but shows steadfast love to the thousands generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Ex 20:5, 6).

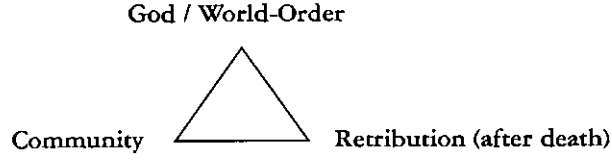


2.4 The concept of retribution with an extension to the community in the time after death

The extension to the community opens the way for a continued retribution, which might be awarded even after death. The time after death should not be confused with an afterlife. The deceased doesn't inherit an afterlife but continues to exist in his descendants. In this regard the blessing of the patriarchs (Gen 17:4-7) has a world-immanent function of eternity. A person lives on, either in her descendants or in being remembered by them. Qoheleth polemics against this position (Eccl 2:16; 6:3), but still, it prepared the way for a belief in the afterlife. In this way it is stated about the Maccabean Eleazar

> So he gave his life to save his people and to win for himself an imperishable name (1 Macc. 6:44).

This is a first step into a hope of an individual reward in an after life. It is the hope of an extension of the life in this world, even if somebody has passed away.



2.5 The concept of retribution for the individual in the afterlife

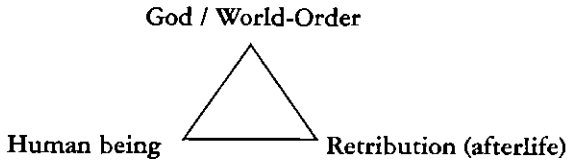
The expectation that retribution takes place for an individual in an afterlife is only sparsely found in the Old Testament.

> Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Dan 12:2, 3; cf Is. 26:19).

It became common in the intertestamental literature (Eichrodt 1957:318 n.74). The seven brothers in their martyrdom express their hope:

> The King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws (2 Macc 7:9).

This hope is dominant in the New Testament and has become an essential Christian belief. Christians, from all over the world, confess with the words of the Apostolic Creed: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead."[4]



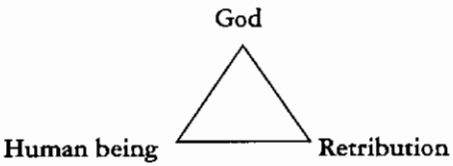
3. CONCEPTS OF RETRIBUTION IN THE BOOK OF JOB

3.1 Traditional retributive concepts

The theme of the Book of Job is "the problem of human existence in the face of the suffering" (Fohrer 1991:80). Therefore the question of retribution is at the core of it. If retribution delays, the question comes up, which are the reason, purpose, solution, and cause of it? We will have to see how far satisfying answers are given and how they affected the retributive concepts.

4 There is no space to discuss the different interpretations of it. Originally it had an antignostic objective and emphasised therefore the resurrection of the flesh.

3.1.1 The classic concept



The classic concept is maintained in the frame-narrative[5] of the Book of Job. The theme is the test of the faithfulness of a righteous man, who loves God merely because of God himself. Job's faith is challenged as he looses all those elements which made life easy and seemed to be a reward for his righteousness.

On the whole the concept of retribution is maintained. If the life circumstances give the impression that the retributive system does not work, it is taught that there is a reason behind it. In the case of Job the reason is a bet between the newly introduced figure of an Accuser and God.[6] The Accuser causes the suffering. Therefore human beings should endure. Job receives retribution in his lifetime as the epilogue tells us. At the end Job is not only restored but receives from God more than before. His wealth is doubled.[7] God maintains retribution in this world even if retribution might be delayed. The delay is a test for the human being and a warning not to rely on an automatism of retribution, but on God.[8] In this way James (5:11) understood Job as an example of endurance.

5 Several scholars suggest that the frame-narrative existed as an independent folk tale. For our question the redaction process is not important, even if Ez 14:14,20 makes it likely that Job together with Noah and Dan(i)el was known as a righteous man from a distant past. But the role of retribution in the isolated texts of the prologue and epilogue are of interest. Especially, if they are compared to the retributive concept of the epilogue in its function as the closing chapter of the book of Job.

6 Murphy (1999:120) points out that the accusation of God takes place in the heavenly court with the angels, who are "demoted deities ... with whom God takes counsel".

7 Cf Ex 22:4-9. The Book of the Covenant demands the double award from a thief. This might allude to God who acted like a thief by taking from Job what was his (Murphy 1999:102).

8 This concept is also found in Ancient Near Eastern pessimistic wisdom texts like "*Ludlul bel nemeqi* ("I will praise the Lord of wisdom"), "Dialogue about human misery" ("Akkadian dialogue on the unrighteousness of the world", "Acrostic Dialogue", "Babylonian Theodicy" or "Babylonian Koheleth"), and the "Sumerian Job". In reason and solution they are close to Job. To the sufferer no reason is revealed, but the solution lies in submitting to the god. The solution does not solve the reasnn for the divergence between reality and the expected outcome but teaches how to deal with it. The purpose of these texts is to praise the god. This might also be implicit in Job. The cause of suffering is seen in a demon or lower god. This one might have left the one who suffers. This cause of suffering is notable because the frame-narrative of Job knows with the Accuser a similar cause for suffering.

3.1.2 The concept of retribution for the individual in the afterlife

Sometimes Job 19:25-26 is taken as an example for the hope of resurrection and by this for a retribution in the afterlife:

> For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.

I am not convinced that this text speaks about seeing God in the afterlife after a resurrection. For me it is a juridical statement, expressing Job's hope in God against his friends. However sophisticated their arguments are, at the end God will be on his side, but it is not stated, when this will be (Zimmerli 1985:144). This verse is the voice of a desperate trust in God.

The author of Job knew about the idea of an afterlife. He discusses a second life on this earth, but he denies it. That he knew about such ideas is no surprise if we keep in mind that, especially in Egypt, very clear concepts of an afterlife had been developed.[9]

> For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant. But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep (Job 14:7-12).

Nowhere does the retribution in an afterlife get any support in the Hebrew text of the Book of Job. This is different in the LXX which does not only see a reward for Job in his life but adds the resurrection to it. Job will have an eternal life:

> And Job died as an old man and full of days: and it is written that he will rise again with those whom the Lord raises up (Job 42:17 LXX).

But even there, the afterlife is not played off against the traditional thought that a righteous person is blessed with a long life. It is an additional thought.

9 There, the beautiful West is described in human terms, and it was taught that the dead could take part in this life in their Ba.

3.2 Misapplications of the retributive concept

There are times when the expected outcome of the retributive system fails to materialise, as it is the case with Job. In such a case a fundamental mistake can be made, that is turning the deed-consequence relationship upside down. This is the basic mistake of Job's three friends, Elihu, and Job himself. All of them draw their conclusions backward from the present life-situation to its origin and turn against one of the components of the retributive concept.[10] They do not question the retributive concept, but display in their argumentation "the impossibility of the coexistence of these three ideas and the consequent logical necessity to give up one of them" (Tsevat 1980:36).

3.2.1 The classic concept and the cancellation of the human being

Elihu, the Israelite,[11] maintains retribution and does not solve the problem of Job. He turns against Job's accusation that God does not answer and points out that God answers in dreams and sickness (Job 33:14-22). He emphasises that God actively intervenes to exercise retribution.

> For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them (Job 34:11).

This emphasis on and defense[12] of God is Elihu's contribution to the book. He stresses the personality of God more than his friends do.[13] But still God has no freedom. He is bound to the retributive concept: "God does not bow the right." (Job 37:23). Elihu gradually shifts away from Job's suffering to God's awesome power and prepares for God's own speech.[14] The concept of retribution is still the classic one. God maintains retribution and Job is guilty:

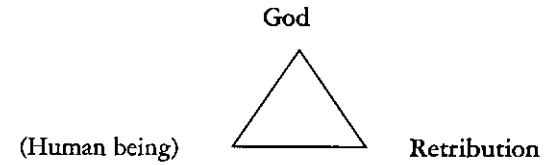
10 A special peculiarity of dealing with the delay of retribution can be found in the Egyptian Maat concept. In Egypt creation is set up against the non-existing. But creation is always endangered because of chaotic powers. The gods initiated the world-order to maintain creation. If there seems to be no retribution then the connective justice has been disturbed. But this is only temporary until the world-order has been re-established. A lack of compensation belongs to the contingency of life, but the validity of this world-order is not doubted. Therefore, an accusation of God is out of question (Assmann 1996:270).

11 Job 32:2 presents Elihu as belonging to the Buzite clan. Buz was a nephew of Abraham (Gen 22:20,21).

12 Elihu defends attributes of God. Waters (1999:143-159) pointed out eight of them.

13 That Elihu emphasised God more than his friends might be because he is the only Israelite. In Israel the personal relationship to a self-revealing God had gained more importance than a world-order.

14 Pleins (1994:233) evaluated the book of Job under the aspect of God's silence and showed that Elihu "in terms of the movement of the entire book ... represents a mediating voice".



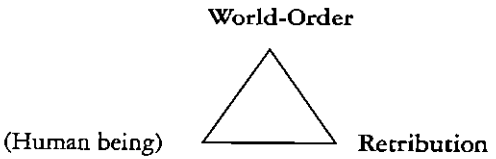
3.2.2 The world-order concept and the cancellation of the human being

Job's three friends, Zophar, Bildad and Eliphaz are representatives of the world-order concept. In their understanding God does not have freedom. Prosperity seems to be an automatism for the righteous as suffering is the consequence of sin. Therefore God has been equaled to a world order. Fortune is the result of obedience or of living wisely. Job's misfortune is the result of sin. The friends respond that God is just and that he is the one who pays retribution. But their emphasis is not on God but on the world-order that maintains the concept of retribution. If Job keeps it, he will be righteous in the eyes of God. Consequently they turn against Job. Job must have sinned because he suffers. Therefore they cancel Job:

> Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression. If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place (Job 8:3-6).

They verify this view from their own experience:

> Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same (Job 4:7-8).



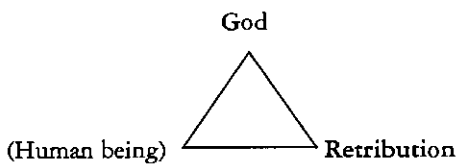
The three friends appear as men with a petrified wisdom who only see what they expect to see.

3.2.3 The accusation of God

While the friends of Job appear as static figures, Job gradually changes during the discourse. In the beginning Job is very much downhearted. He would prefer to be dead than to be alive.

> Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? 12 Why did knees receive me, or why breasts that I suck? ... 16 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light? (Job 3:11,12,16; cf 10:18).

Job curses his day of birth and longs for his death. Death does not appear negative but desirable because it equalises unjust social structures (Job 3:13-19), brings injustice to an end, and gives rest for the sufferer (Job 7:15). This is not an intellectual consequence out of the failure of a retributive system but the voice of a depressed person. But still, Job cancels himself.

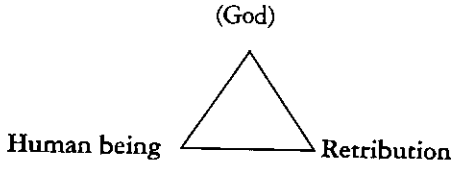


Later Job seems to change from depression to desperation. He reaffirms his innocence. He has done nothing that deserves suffering. He has lived righteously (Job 27:4-6). He is innocent and could stand a test of it. He even makes self-imprecatory oaths (Job 31).[15] If he would be weighed on a scale his innocence would become evident (Job 31:6).

This leads him to the absurd result that God is not fulfilling his duty to bless the righteous. Job accuses God of failure within the retributive system. This failure escalates in two steps. God denies Job what he is obliged to pay him and, even more, he turns into an enemy of Job. It is God who fails within the retributive system.

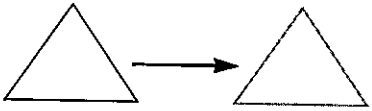
> Know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me. Behold, I cry out, 'Violence!' but I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped from me my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, and my hope has he pulled up like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me and counts me as his adversary (Job 19:6-11).

15 To express this he even uses a formula that is known from the Egyptian negative confession, even if interdependence has not been sufficiently proved (Pope 1983:227). Job's innocence does not exclude that he has sinned in a general way, as every human being is a sinner.



3.3 The denial of the retributive system

Until now, the retributive concept has always been maintained. But there are two approaches that deny the retributive concept instead of cancelling one of its components. This is indicated in the change of the triangle:



They are both initiated through empirical evidence. They diametrically oppose each other but represent two conclusions, which, even today, people draw out of the failure of a closed worldview. These are nihilism and faith.

3.3.1 The nihilistic approach

Job's wife said to him,

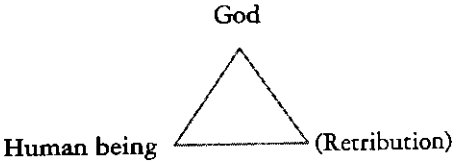
> Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die (2:9).

The suggestion of his wife to curse God and die is the logical consequence of a concept of retribution that does not function. She denies the whole retributive concept by cancelling all three elements. First she cancels retribution. This is even more evident in the LXX:

> How long will you hold out, saying: "Behold, I will still wait for a little while, expecting the hope of my release?" For, behold! Your memorial is abolished from the earth, even your sons and daughters, the birth-pains and sufferings of my womb which I bore in vain with sorrows. And you yourself sit down to spend the nights in the open air among the corruption of worms. And I am a wanderer and a servant from place to place and house to house, waiting for the setting of the sun, that I may rest from my hardships and my sorrows which now trouble me (Job 2:9 LXX).

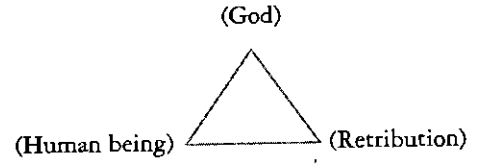
In the prologue Job deals with his suffering in a temporary manner (Job 1:21). She instead looks at what they have lost and does not expect it to

come back. Job's riches, his memorial, and his children are gone. These three elements stand for the classic concepts of retribution in this world, as they were common in the Ancient Near East. Now they had disappeared and she faced a new situation: no riches, no remembrance, and no descendants. There is no retribution for being faithful.



Secondly, she denies God, not in an atheistic sense but as not keeping retribution. A God, who does not keep retribution, is not reliable for man and worth nothing. Therefore she advises her husband Job: "Curse God." She cancels the second component of the retributive triangle. She questions God and retribution.

Finally she advises Job: "Die". Without retribution and without God there is no hope for a change of his fate. It is better to be dead than to live such a life. Suicide is the way out for the one who has lost hope. The three components retribution, God, and Job are cancelled. She is left with nothing.



3.3.2 The faith-approach

In 3.2.3 we had seen that Job, after the interim of cursing his birth and longing for death, turns into a plaintiff of God. Even if Job is aware of his

position before God, he works himself up in a state of accusing God. It is God, who refuses justice.

But during the discourse Job gradually abandons the retributive concept and finally denies it entirely. The three friends provoke this. In striking contrast to them, Job admits that the concept of retribution fails not only in his case of a rich man suffering. There are poor people who suffer and God does not intervene. There are wicked people who prosper and God does not intervene to punish them.

> Why are times not kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know him never see his days? ... From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help but God is deaf to their appeal (Job 24:1, 12).

Similar to Qoheleth he observes that the time and way of death is not in accordance to a retributive concept (Eccl 6:2, 3). God executes death in a mysterious way.

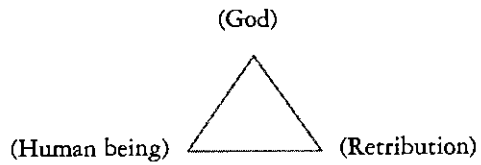
> Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those that are on high? One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, his body full of fat and the marrow of his bones moist. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them (Job 21:22-26).

Job turns against God and doubts retribution. He comes to a similar conclusion as his wife in her second stage; only the order is different. He first turns against God, and then he questions retribution.

At the end of the discourse Job is silenced by the speech of God. The change of the length of the speeches assigned to the main figures of the book provides a macrostructure for the value of their contribution on the overall question.[16] The speeches of the three friends are already shorter in the second cycle. In the third cycle Zofar disappears entirely and Bildad's speech (Job 25) has only six verses. Their speeches were impressive, but they fizzle out. Job's speeches are long until God appears on the scene. Then his

16 Under this aspect Elihu is out of place in the Book of Job.

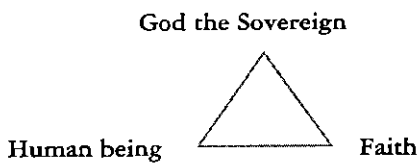
speeches become very short and God's speech dominates the scene. God silences him by his majesty instead of responding to his questions.[17] Not an intellectual solution but the acknowledgement of God's majesty provides an answer, which enables Job to realise that his approach to retribution is wrong. He had already cancelled God and retribution in his retributive system. Now he undertakes two steps. First he cancels himself in the system and then he cancels, as his wife had done, all three elements of retribution.



But he overcomes this nihilistic stage and comes to a new understanding not only of retribution but also of faith. He reintroduces God, not as the keeper of retribution but as the one who is sovereign. Job retracts his words. He changes his mind. As he stands before God he realises the impertinence of his speech about God and accepts his mere humanity, being just dust and ashes. He reintroduces himself as the one who sits silent before God.

> I had heard of you by hearsay, but now my eye has seen you; therefore I despise myself and change my mind, being dust and ashes (Job 42:5, 6).[18]

Therefore he overcomes the stage his wife is left in to deny everything and reintroduces God as the sovereign in a faith relationship. Nihilism is replaced by faith.



In this new constellation Job is not anymore looking for a retributive reward. Job sits before God for nothing. Here we find within the poetic part

17 Prof S D Snyman, UOVS, made me aware that the psalm in Habakuk 3 has a similar function. It does not answer Habakuk's probing questions but solves them by acknowledging God's majesty.

18 For this translation see LXX: "δὲ ἐμαυτὸν γῆν καὶ σποδόν" (42:6b) and Murphy (1999:100).

the answer to the question of the frame-narrative, if Job will love God for nothing (Job 1:9). Now, after all, Job serves God for nothing.

This has also an effect for the interpretation of the epilogue. If this is seen in connection with the epilogue, the reward in the epilogue gets a different meaning. Job's restoration is not a retributive reward for his endurance, but God's free gift.

Here we have the challenging point of the narrator. For the outsider it seems that the concept of retribution still functions. Retribution may delay, but it still works. For the knowledgeable insider it is evident that it has changed. What Job gets is not a retributive payment but a free gift of God, who is above all systems.

4. JOB AN ANCESTOR OF NEW TESTAMENT FAITH

The writer of Hebrews presents Old Testament figures as ancestors of faith (Heb 11). Job is missing there. But we may introduce him as a representative of faith. In the Book of Job a connective justice as a cause-effect-relation to God is denied as well as a conclusion drawn backward from the stage of a person to her faith. Job replaces a retributive concept by a faith approach. The cross fulfils and cancels retribution at once. The sins of the world are paid for, but the new life in Christ does not fulfil the expectations of a blessed life according to an Old Testament believer. Suffering can hit the believers and teach them endurance (Rom 5:3), like Job. Suffering is not a retributive result but part of being like Christ. The mystery of the cross cancels any mechanical concept and replaces it by a faith relationship. When Jesus healed the one who had been born blind, his disciples erred in the same way as Job's friends had done. They drew a backward conclusion, asking

> Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?". Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:2, 3; cf Lk 13:1, 5).

Also Paul did not see his sickness as a punishment from God but as temptation (2 Cor 12:7). He was glad that the Galatians did not see it as a proof of sin (Gal 4:13, 14) (Van Selms 1985:159).

As in the Book of Job, a causality of a deed-consequence relation for daily things is accepted, even if other aspects like an eschatological perspective play into it:

> Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up (Gal 6:7-9).

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