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## Would you Impugn My Justice? A Nuanced Approach to the Hebrew Bible's Theology of Divine Recompense

Joel S. Kaminsky  
*Smith College*, [jkaminsk@smith.edu](mailto:jkaminsk@smith.edu)

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# Would You Impugn My Justice? A Nuanced Approach to the Hebrew Bible's Theology of Divine Recompense

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**Joel S. Kaminsky**

Smith College, Northampton, MA

## Abstract

Recent scholarship has tended to see the book of Job as sweeping away an earlier, mechanistic theology of divine recompense. This essay argues that the widespread biblical notion that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked is more complex than generally recognized and that recovering its nuances not only helps one better understand the theological outlook of books like Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Psalms, but also helps one better grasp the debates within Job. The essay is framed by some reflections on why our contemporary culture regularly misreads the Bible's language of divine retribution in spite of the fact that many contemporary readers affirm analogous ideas of reward and punishment.

## Key words

Divine recompense, Divine justice, Theology of retribution, Job, Psalms, Deuteronomy, Reward and punishment, Religious language

## Introduction

A number of years ago I attended a Passover Seder at a Reconstructionist Jewish household. Reconstructionist Judaism is an American movement that seeks to reclaim many Jewish traditions by giving them new meanings that are compatible with modernity. After the festive dinner, when the liturgy resumed, I noticed that the host and his family omitted a short Hebrew excerpt from Psalm 37 in the final paragraph of the grace after meals. In English this verse states: "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Ps 37:25). Somewhat confused, I inquired why this verse was omitted. Paraphrasing the host's reply, he responded as follows: "Inasmuch as we all know of cases in which poor righteous people suffer from hunger and malnutrition, what this verse proclaims is clearly not true. Therefore, we should strive to eliminate these kinds of affirmations from our prayers." Although I did not respond at the time, it immediately struck me that the host articulated a widespread and troubling

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### Corresponding author:

Joel S. Kaminsky, Smith College, Northampton, MA, United States.

Email: jkaminsk@smith.edu

contemporary outlook, both about the nature of prayer and about the overarching theology of retribution that pervades much of the Tanakh.

Reconstructionist Judaism is known for being liturgically innovative, so this change in the prayers and the host's response were not unexpected.<sup>1</sup> Yet the truth is that contemporary biblical scholars have expressed almost identical sentiments about this verse and others like it in the Bible. John Barton, a distinguished expert on biblical ethics, describes the person who authored Psalm 37:25 as "surely someone who should have got out more," suggesting that the psalmist was sheltered and naïve about life's difficulties and implying that such language is theologically trite.<sup>2</sup>

Although I have honed in on a certain type of response to the language in Psalm 37 that lay readers may see as prayer-language, most biblical scholars describe Psalm 37 as a Wisdom psalm.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, one can find many analogues to John Barton's statement above regularly echoed in discussions of Wisdom books like Proverbs as well as in descriptions of the theology of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. It will therefore be useful to begin by exploring the broader critique leveled by both lay and expert contemporary readers of the Bible against what I am here going to call the "standard view" of divine retribution. While there are many nuances in the "standard view" of divine retribution, I am using this term to describe the wide array of biblical texts that affirm that God indeed punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Toward the end of this essay, I will explore how one might more productively read the prayer language found in Psalm 37.

In my view, the whipping boy at the theological center of this issue is the supposedly flat-footed and unrealistic but widespread biblical view of the nexus between one's behavior and one's recompense. Thus, for example, the theology found in Deuteronomy regularly asserts that if Israel is obedient to God she will be rewarded, and if Israel is disobedient she will be punished for her sinful behavior (e.g., Deut 11:1–32 or 28:1–68). It is less clear that Deuteronomy ever asserts that this means if someone is suffering they must have committed a sin, or that the righteous would never experience any adversity. Yet many interpreters presume that this is indeed what Deuteronomy and texts like Proverbs and Psalms affirm. In turn, when scholars look to the book of Job, they frequently see Job as a revolutionary book that overturned this older biblical view of retribution,

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1 I have since learned that even some more traditional Jews also omit Psalm 37:25 from the grace after meals.

2 John Barton, "The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament," in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (ed. Claudia Camp and Andrew Mein; LHBOTS; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 122–34 (132).

3 Scholars have developed a sophisticated set of categories to describe the various genres one finds in the book of Psalms. They describe Wisdom psalms as part of the school of thought that produced Proverbs, in that they tend to contain a similar theological outlook and make regular use of short proverbial sayings. There is much disagreement over exactly which psalms should be classified as Wisdom psalms, but Psalm 37 is widely viewed as a parade example of this genre. For a general introduction to the scholarly classification of psalms, see Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

inasmuch as Job's friends slavishly represent this theological stance but ultimately lose their argument with Job.

## Job Overturms Mechanistic Ideas of Retribution

Notice the way in which much recent scholarship contrasts books like Proverbs with the viewpoint introduced by Job. We will begin with a quotation from Katharine Dell that illustrates how scholars frequently see Proverbs as containing a simplistic representation of reality, which was challenged and ultimately exploded by the book of Job:

While Proverbs maintained an optimistic belief in the doctrine of retribution, Job is seen to be a refutation of this. Job represents the experience of the righteous man to whom suffering unexpectedly came. . . Did this not show that the exhortations to lead a good life in order to expect material rewards found in Proverbs were bankrupt?<sup>4</sup>

Speaking more specifically of the arguments put forward by Job's three friends (and later by Elihu), Norman Habel makes the following generalization:

In accord with widespread ancient Near Eastern belief, they [Job's friends] contend that the just are rewarded and the wicked punished. But they also endorse the converse of that principle: those who are suffering affliction must be sinners who deserve the suffering.<sup>5</sup>

Similar notes are sounded in James Crenshaw's discussion of Job:

The older simplistic understanding of divine providence hardly reckoned with powerful empires led by deities other than the Lord, nor did it take sufficiently into account the status of individuals making up the collective whole. The convenient explanation for suffering—that adversity arose as punishment for sin—may have sufficed for a brief interval, but eventually this idea produced a mighty outcry.<sup>6</sup>

Crenshaw goes on to describe the theological outlook of Job's friends as follows: "Suffering invariably exposed guilt, and grievous misfortune signified heinous offense."<sup>7</sup> In a recent popular book on the Bible's place in Western and American culture more specifically, Timothy Beal speaks about how Job provides a direct critique of what he sees as the binary and rigid outlook found in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History: "Keep God's commandments and you, and your

4 Katharine Dell, *"Get Wisdom, Get Insight": An Introduction to Israel's Wisdom Literature* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 32. I drew this particular example from the recent dissertation of Anne W. Stewart, "A Honeyed Cup: Poetry, Pedagogy, and Ethos in the Book of Proverbs" (Emory University, 2014). In chapter 7 of Stewart's work she critiques the scholarly tendency to depict the worldview found in Proverbs as quite simplistic and thus ultimately as retrograde.

5 Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 61.

6 James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 112.

7 Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 114.



Eberhard Wächter (1762–1852). “Grieving Job and His Friends.”  
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany.  
Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

society, and your world will thrive and be blessed. Disobey them and everything goes to hell in a handbasket. . . . The book of Job directly challenges the faith in that moral universe.”<sup>8</sup>

Beal goes on to say that Job’s friends “defend God’s moral universe, and insist Job must’ve done something wrong to deserve such misery.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, to demonstrate just how widely this sentiment is shared, one need only turn to Robert

Frost’s poetic reflection on Job in which God, at one point, tells Job:

You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist  
And change the tenor of religious thought.<sup>10</sup>

There is little doubt that various recent mind-numbing tragedies have affected how people today understand books like Job in relation to other books in the Bible. The Shoah and other contemporary monstrous evils either inflicted by humans upon other humans or inflicted by nature upon helpless humans have led to a growing sense that one must reject the central biblical theological belief that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. To do otherwise, so the argument goes, only further victimizes the victims of such tragedies by implying that their suffering is a punishment for their misdeeds. I would suggest that this type of thinking has become so pervasive that we are no longer capable of reading Job as a real argument between two equally compelling viewpoints. Rather, contemporary readers tend to interpret the arguments of Job’s friends as pietistic and somewhat hollow attempts to uphold the standard view, while these same readers embrace

8 Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2011), 163–64.

9 Beal, *Rise and Fall*, 165. The tendency of modern critics to link all biblical instances of suffering to sin prompted Samuel Balentine (*The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983], 52) to deliver a much needed critique of an analogous “widespread tendency to interpret the [motif of the] hiding of God’s face as an indication of divine punishment, often where there is no clear confirmation of such an interpretation in the text itself.”

10 Robert Frost, *A Masque of Reason* (New York: Henry Holt, 1945), 4.

Job's own views with little, if any, reserve. Maintaining this narrow point of view completely overlooks the nuances of the Bible's various theologies of divine justice, and it in turn makes the dialogues in the book of Job much less interesting than they in fact are if one reckons with the merits and weaknesses in both sides of the argument.

## The Nuances of Divine Recompense

Let me begin my response to this dismissive portrayal of key aspects of the Bible's understanding of the economy of divine recompense by noting a number of nuances found within texts like Deuteronomy and Proverbs that suggest the Bible's more standard views on God's management of the world are quite a bit more complex than commonly asserted by many contemporary interpreters.<sup>11</sup> Even in texts like Deuteronomy one can see that adversity is sometimes understood not as a punishment but as serving other purposes, such as a form of training or instruction. For example, Deuteronomy 8:2–5 (cited just below) puts forward a rather innovative understanding of Israel's long wilderness wandering and the many deprivations it involved (one that is quite different from the punitive explanation found in Numbers 14):

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you.

In this passage we hear rather explicitly about God humbling, testing, and disciplining Israel in a manner that suggests one cannot simply assume every experience of adversity is a form of punishment for some previous sin. It is worth noting that Deuteronomy as a whole and chapter 15 in particular underline the importance of being generous to the poor and marginalized in Israelite society. Now if one's current situation were simply a reflection of what one deserved, then these injunctions to help the poor and marginalized would make no sense. After all, ameliorating a needy person's situation would interfere with God's punishment of them. Clearly, the authors of Deuteronomy think one should be generous to the dispossessed because they have a moral claim on us and in

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11 There are of course several scholars whose work on books like Proverbs fully acknowledges and even highlights these types of complexities. Thus Michael V. Fox, (*Proverbs 1–9* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 153) states the following: "Much in Proverbs contradicts the oversimplified view that Wisdom held to a mechanical retribution concept." He points out that "the vicissitudes of fortune were well known to the predecessors of Proverbs" and that Proverbs itself has a more flexible understanding of retribution than often recognized. See similarly Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 83–88. Inasmuch as Deuteronomy is set as a final speech delivered by Moses to an Israel preparing to enter the land, its retributational language should be seen as primarily hortatory, an attempt to encourage obedience. As I argue below, the authors of Deuteronomy also knew that righteous people experienced adversity.

fact deserve to be helped. In short, Deuteronomy recognizes that one can be poor and righteous, an idea widely attested in Psalms and Proverbs, as well (e.g., Ps 10:2; 70:5; Prov 19:1, 22).<sup>12</sup> Like Deuteronomy, the book of Proverbs also affirms the notion that the righteous may be chastised and receive discipline, not because they are wicked, but precisely to help them avoid becoming one of the wicked, that is, one who does not know how to interpret and properly respond to the various types of adversities one inevitably encounters in life.

In fact, these nuances in the Tanakh's understanding of human suffering are also affirmed in the central narrative of the Torah. It is hard to think of any instance in which the biblical text ever explicitly links Israel's 400 years of exile, affliction, and eventual enslavement in Egypt to some sin on Israel's part, clearly suggesting that biblical authors always had acknowledged that certain instances of great adversity and suffering may have nothing to do with punishment or chastisement. One of the few biblical explanations offered for Israel's lengthy enslavement in Egypt is that it would take that long for the sins of the Canaanites to accumulate to the point where God would drive them from the Holy Land (Gen 15:12–16). The book of Exodus itself provides no real rationale for Israel's intense suffering and the near genocide she experienced, aside from mentioning that at some point the cries of the Israelites finally stirred God to remember the divine promises to the patriarchs (Exod 2:23–25).

Israel's extended exile and enslavement in Egypt provides a natural segue to examination of another wrinkle in the more traditional understanding of God's justice and the human experience of evil. Within both Proverbs and Psalms one also finds a prominent and very interesting wrinkle surrounding both the exactness and the timing in which God's justice prevails in the world. Psalm 9:18 is instructive on this point: "For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever." This verse has many analogues throughout Psalms and Proverbs. In fact, a host of lament psalms are based around the notion that the person suffering may be suffering even though he is righteous. Thus Psalm 10:3–11 articulates exactly this view at length:

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD. . . . Their ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of their sight; as for their foes, they scoff at them. . . . They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net. They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might. (10:3, 5, 7–10)

Note how the author of this Psalm not only recognizes that righteous people may suffer, but states that at times they might even be murdered, a statement also echoed in Psalm 94:6.

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<sup>12</sup> In the later book of Sirach 12:1–7 (found in the Apocrypha), he tells his audience that they should indeed help the poor but only the righteous poor, not those who are sinners. Ben Sira may be suggesting that some people are poor because they are suffering divine punishment.

A number of psalms, including Psalm 10, also openly acknowledge the inverse: the wicked may indeed prosper for a time. Martin Luther King, Jr. (who was loosely paraphrasing Theodore Parker) summed up this element of the standard biblical view of God's justice when he said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."<sup>13</sup> King acknowledged the biblical affirmation that some who suffer may not personally live to see the punishment of the wicked. While this very question deserves attention (and is indeed taken up by Job himself at length in Job 21), it is important to realize that the biblical writers who asserted that God's justice would, in the end, become manifest, were not ignorant of the fact that for a time the wicked might prevail and that during such intervals some innocent people might suffer in a manner never fully requited. This should lead us to suspect that scholars like John Barton who think the author of Psalm 37 really needed to get out more often may be interpreting the text in a wooden and not particularly helpful way.

### Looking at Job through Fresh Eyes

If I am correct that most people in the early biblical period did not naively assume that the righteous never suffered, then this may help us regain a more balanced reading of Job and of the larger biblical discussion surrounding divine retribution. Job's friends assert a number of the complexities I have highlighted within what I am calling "the standard biblical view of God's justice," a point acknowledged by both Habel and Crenshaw. Yet, while scholars like Crenshaw recognize the existence of these nuances, they often depict them as late, last ditch efforts to shore up a belief in "a rational deity who was enslaved by a greater principle: justice."<sup>14</sup> In fact, when one examines the arguments made by Job's friends in detail, one sees that they are more subtle and compelling than many critics suggest. Here it is important to point out that the speeches in Job progress over the course of the book. But, for nearly twenty chapters Job's friends do not describe him as a wicked person. Rather they see him as a normal human being who is experiencing tribulation and who may indeed be classed among the righteous, depending on how he reacts to this situation. His friends initially see Job's suffering as part of the common pattern of someone who will be vindicated in the end.

How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you. In famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword (Job 5:17–20).

In this passage Eliphaz makes clear that Job's current state of suffering is not proof that he is wicked. Both the wicked and the righteous experience tribulations. The difference is that the righteous, time and again, come through such trials. One finds a similar but slightly different point made in Job 11:13–20.

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13 From a speech entitled "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 30, 1967, accessed at <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/riversidetranscript.html>.

14 Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 114.



If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure, and will not fear. You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness will be like the morning. And you will have confidence, because there is hope; you will be protected and take your rest in safety. You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid; many will entreat your favor. But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last.

Here Zophar tells Job to pray to God and to keep clear of sinning, if he has indeed engaged in any such behavior in the past. Zophar does not view Job as a wicked person, as the final sentence (11:20) illustrates, but rather as a normal human being who naturally, in the course of events, may have sinned. While we happen to know that Job is not suffering because of any sin he committed (1:1–2:6), there is no way for Zophar to know what we know. Rather he assumes that Job, like other normal people, may on occasion slip up. In any case, Zophar thinks that by praying to God and ceasing any sinful behavior, Job will again prosper in the future. He also indicates that Job's current tribulation does not make him a wicked person. One sees a similar argument offered by Bildad in chapter 8, where his call that Job seek out God is based around the idea that God will respond to Job's pleas because he may be a righteous individual worthy of restoration: "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" (8:5–6). Even when Bildad considers whether the fate of Job's children was a consequence of their sins, this linkage is phrased only as a possibility, not a certainty. "If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression" (Job 8:4).<sup>15</sup>

Elihu, a fourth interlocutor whose somewhat distinct arguments appear to have been added at a later editorial stage, vividly depicts the onset of a severe health challenge and near death experience in Job 33. He explores how one who recovers from such a harrowing experience may come to view it in a purgatorial fashion. Elihu quotes this person as admitting that his sinful behavior may have played a role in his suffering. Yet, while intimating that there may be a connection between general human sinfulness and the various travails we experience, this passage never suggests that a person who goes through such tribulations is in fact a wicked person, although he may be someone who sinned. Both the angelic mediator and God speak of restoring such an individual because he is upright and righteous (33:23–27). And while one might be uncomfortable at the thought of linking a health crisis to one's moral state, this occurs quite regularly with many who are ill even today. That such a posture can at times go too far and lead to further victimizing one who is suffering

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15 Others argue that since Job's children are dead the hypothetical nature of this statement should be read as an affirmative statement: "when your children sinned" or "your children sinned." I remain unconvinced that Bildad is declaring that he knows that Job's children of a certainty died because they were sinful. He is saying that this is indeed a possibility and truth be told, Job had himself worried about the possible sinful behavior of his children when he took preemptive action by offering sacrifices on their behalf just in case they had sinned.

does not mean we should never conduct a self-inventory when disaster strikes. Although it is not always the case, in some instances patients will admit that the way they lived or failed to take care of themselves in the past contributed to the onset of their health crisis. And it is not uncommon for someone who recovers from a severe illness to commit to living in a more meaningful and healthful fashion in the future, which implies they had in some ways previously fallen short.

I acknowledge that as the dialogue proceeds and becomes more heated and as Job's indictments of God's justice grow more vituperative, his friends in turn reach a point where they start accusing him of being obstinate and classifying himself among the wicked, that is, among those who are unwilling to recognize their shortcomings and repent. Yet, even in chapter 22, where this tendency is perhaps most pronounced, Eliphaz does not see Job as so wicked that he is beyond redemption. The chapter ends with a call for Job to repent before it is too late. In any case, my point in this essay is not that the friends were right and Job was mistaken. Nor do I wish to suggest that there are no problems with the theology of God's justice that the friends are articulating. Rather, I am trying to show that the friends have a more sophisticated argument than often acknowledged and that similar subtleties are found in many other reflections on divine retribution throughout the Tanakh. Our inability to hear these nuances and take them seriously impedes our ability to understand fully the argument within Job and it also at times prevents us from recognizing that the Bible's standard account of God's justice captures truths we still affirm today.

A side point worth underlining is how radically disjunctive many current readings of the text are when compared to the ways earlier generations understood Job. Many contemporary readers see Elihu as an arrogant interloper who is the least sympathetic voice in the book. Yet in previous ages he was often viewed as the only "correct" human voice in Job. Thus the tenth-century Jewish philosopher Saadiah Gaon notes that while Job is rebuked in chapter 40 and the other three friends in 42, "[God] did not, however, blame Elihu, but expanded on Elihu's speech to Job, thus confirming what Elihu had said."<sup>16</sup>

With these thoughts in mind, let us turn to another prominent theme emphasized by Job's friends, touched upon in our earlier discussion of Psalms and Proverbs. This is the assertion that the wicked are punished. In the quotation from Job 11 cited above, Zophar concludes his soliloquy with a proclamation that while Job may yet be restored to his previous state, the wicked have no hope. Although the book of Job is commonly understood as a meditation on the question of why bad things happen to good people, much of Job is about why the wicked not only at times escape punishment, but frequently appear to prosper. Many interpreters of Job see the friends as applying a "mechanical application of the dogma of double retribution" that assumes "the prosperous are righteous and the suffering are wicked."<sup>17</sup> However, this view implies that the friends must be

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16 *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job by Saadiah ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi* (trans. L.E. Goodman; Yale Judaica Series 25; New Haven: Yale, 1988), 130.

17 J. E. Hartely, "From Lament to Oath: A Study of Progression in the Speeches of Job," in *The Book of Job* (ed. W. A. M. Beuken; BETL 114; Leuven: University of Leuven, 1994), 99.

rather sheltered or thick-headed, both of which are unlikely. Carol Newsom makes the following insightful observation about the claim regularly made by Job's dialogue partners (and by other texts like Deuteronomy, Psalms and Proverbs) that affirms not only that the righteous are rewarded, but that the wicked are indeed punished.

Yet if such statements were intended as universal, exceptionless claims, only a deluded fool could believe them, and whatever the friends may be, they are not fools. . . . In some sense their stories "rang true" for many people though they, too, knew that these were not exceptionless descriptions of events.<sup>18</sup>

Newsom correctly describes the book of Job as a real "contest of moral imaginations," hence the subtitle of her work. She, more than most other contemporary interpreters, has helped us hear the friends' arguments more sympathetically in their ancient Near Eastern context. I think she is less adept at seeing how the theology of retribution found in Deuteronomy, Psalms, Proverbs, and articulated by Job's friends still carries much weight today. For although contemporary readers frequently have great difficulties in sympathizing with the arguments made by Job's friends, many of these same contemporary readers actually affirm a nuanced belief that the righteous are ultimately rewarded and the wicked ultimately punished, a belief not that different from the standard biblical view of divine recompense, when it is understood in its full complexity.

Peter Berger, in his *A Rumor of Angels*,<sup>19</sup> relates several powerful and pertinent examples that suggest the affirmation of order and justice in the world is not simply a primitive wish-fantasy of a few last holdouts who have not yet surrendered to secular modernity. Rather, and despite protestations to the contrary, such views are widely held in the so-called secular West. The first scenario Berger draws is of a mother who reassures her child, who may have been awoken after a frightful nightmare, not to be afraid because *everything is all right*. Berger asks whether we want to assert that the mother is lying, albeit out of love to shield the child from the terror of death and cosmic meaninglessness, or whether the mother is rather making an affirmation of cosmic proportions. Is she affirming that the world has meaning and order that transcends even our own eventual death? If we are not simply lying to our own children, this affirmation implies that in spite of the reality of evil and chaos in the world, we affirm at the deepest level that the world is actually shaped in a way that makes ultimate sense. Not just scientific sense, but moral sense.

The other particularly poignant example is Berger's discussion of our unconditional condemnation of certain monstrous human atrocities like those committed by the Nazis. The examples Berger gives are in tune with the Bible's view that the world is ordered and that those who engage in truly inhuman and immoral actions call forth from us an impulse to affirm not just that such individuals ultimately will be punished, but that they have cut themselves off from the human community and God. In other words, they are damned. There "are deeds that demand not only condemnation, but damnation in the full religious meaning of the word—that is, the doer . . . separates himself in a

18 Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 118.

19 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (exp. edn.; New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 55–85.

final way from a moral order that transcends the human community, and thus invokes a retribution that is more than human."<sup>20</sup>

Before we dismiss much of the Bible's theology of reward and retribution, it is worth noting that even the most secular parents today tend to tell their children that good behavior eventually will be rewarded and bad behavior brings negative consequences, although such recompense may take time to become manifest. For the record, it is likely that much of biblical language in texts like Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Proverbs that is seen as promoting rigid and mechanistic views of retribution served a similar hortatory and pedagogical function.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, many of our most culturally resonant films and books continue to affirm a similar understanding of reward and retribution even though we are aware that stories like Job's and certain historical experiences like the Holocaust challenge the notion that the world is indeed ordered and just. The fact that in the face of certain events and experiences it becomes difficult to affirm the standard view does not mean that this theology of divine recompense never holds true, or that it has no ability to describe the world in which we live.

Interestingly, contemporary readers who claim that Job has once and for all dispatched the standard biblical view of divine retribution tend to overlook the shape of the complete book of Job, which concludes with Job's restoration, itself an affirmation of this theology. While many today find the ending of Job unsatisfying because it seems false to experience, it actually captures the real life trajectory of certain survivors of the Shoah, survivors who lost everything and then lived lives filled with new blessings that sit quite uneasily with their experiences during the Holocaust. This is not to say that events like the Shoah pose no challenge to the standard view, but it is to highlight that even disturbing events which one might think could never be fitted into this theological outlook, may at times or in part also bear witness to the continuing truth that the righteous eventually will be rewarded and the wicked will indeed be punished.

## The Metaphoric Language of Prayer

Now let us return to the question of how we should understand the verse from Psalm 37 with which we began, or for that matter the language of blessing and curse in Deuteronomy. I would contend that perhaps the largest impediment to understanding the Bible today is our inability to grasp the metaphoric nature of much religious language. Carol Newsom draws a sympathetic view of the arguments articulated by Job's friends by paying close attention to the way these friends use metaphors to tell a larger compelling story about the shape of the world. Yet, scholars have been slow to recognize and take full account of the metaphorical register of much of the biblical language surrounding divine retribution.

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20 Berger, *Rumor*, 76.

21 See the on-target remark by Samuel Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*, 92–93: “The discourses in Proverbs 1–9 can be compared to parental pleadings for level headedness on the Thursday before the high school prom, rather than the administering of punishment following any weekend infraction.”

I suspect that this tendency may in part flow from a larger contemporary cultural bias toward authenticity and against set ritual. Thus I am inclined to agree with the recent analysis put forward in the collaboratively produced book *Ritual and its Consequences*, that we are currently at a cultural moment in the modern West in which the notion of sincerity reigns supreme.<sup>22</sup> The result is that when readers encounter statements like “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (Psalm 37:25), they tend to react by saying this is obviously not true and therefore should not be part of the liturgy. While not the sole reason for the spate of liturgical innovation, our inability to pray things that do not reflect our inner emotions or the shape of the outer world at any given time certainly is a prominent factor in the drive to create personalized rituals and prayers with which we are comfortable. The difficulty is that much in religion, most particularly its ritual and liturgical aspects, are not sincere statements of how reality is currently experienced. Rather, rituals and liturgical prayers have a strong subjunctive dimension that expresses how reality at its deepest level *should be*. Religious language and religiously imbued actions tend to highlight the gap between reality as we often experience it and reality as we religiously affirm it should be and ultimately will be. In short, the grammar of religious language and action cannot be understood properly in a worldview that only tolerates totally sincere expressions of how life is currently being experienced.

Now the truth is, when the standard model of God’s justice affirms that the good will be rewarded and the wicked punished, it is spoken as both an affirmation and a prayer. Yet it is not simply a fanciful wish inasmuch as this type of religious orientation shapes the world we inhabit through prayers, rituals, and understandings of how the world should indeed work when it is fully under God’s reign. While such statements uttered in the wrong circumstances can seem tone deaf, it is equally tone deaf to read ancient Israel’s religious and prayer language in a wooden fashion that overlooks its subjunctive and prayerful quality. Few today would castigate someone who told his children that “truth will prevail” or that “a just cause will in time be vindicated.” This is because, like ancient Israel, even though we acknowledge the gap between our reality and these words we utter, such expressions are not fanciful platitudes, but affirmations of realities we glimpse and that we work and pray to bring fully into being.

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22 Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford, 2008).