

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 7

Theological Foundation: Retribution Principle, Triangle

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Walton, Job, Session 7, Theological Foundation: Retribution Principle, Triangle, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from John Walton's "The Book of Job" session seven explores the "retribution principle"—the idea that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer—as a foundational concept within the book. Walton uses a "retribution triangle" to illustrate how Job's suffering challenges this principle, forcing a reevaluation of Job's righteousness, God's justice, and the principle itself. He examines the perspectives of Job's friends and Elihu, showcasing their differing approaches to resolving the tensions within the triangle. Finally, Walton contrasts theodicy (explaining suffering) with theology (understanding God's nature), highlighting how Jesus shifts the focus from cause to purpose in addressing similar questions.

2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Walton's, Job, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms & Wisdom → Job → Walton).



**Walton_Job_Session
n07.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided excerpts of John Walton's lecture on the Book of Job, focusing on the concept of the Retribution Principle.

Briefing Document: John Walton on the Book of Job - The Retribution Principle

Source: Excerpts from "Walton_Job_Session07.pdf"

Introduction

This document summarizes John Walton's analysis of the Book of Job, focusing on the theological foundation of the book, specifically the "retribution principle," which posits that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer. Walton argues that this principle, while seemingly intuitive, is challenged and ultimately reframed by the Book of Job.

Key Concepts:

1. The Retribution Principle:

- **Definition:** The idea that "the righteous will prosper, and the wicked will suffer," implying a direct correlation between one's actions and their life circumstances. As Walton states, "people get what they deserve."
- **Ancient Near East Perspective:** Belief that circumstances (good or bad) reflect one's favor (or lack thereof) with God or the gods was common.
- **Modern Relevance:** This idea persists today; people often assume that good fortune is a reward for good behavior and vice versa. This is evidenced by casual phrases such as "Oh, I must've done something right" or "What did I do to earn this?" when things go well or badly.
- **Application to Job:** The Book of Job places the retribution principle "under the microscope" because Job and his friends firmly believe in it. They assume that suffering indicates wickedness. Job's extreme shift in circumstances – from the highest heights to the lowest depths – exacerbates this problem, prompting the conclusion that he must have done something terrible.

1. The Challenger's Question & the Retribution Principle:

- The Challenger questions if Job serves God for nothing. This leads to an examination of how the retribution principle affects Job's faithfulness.

- The claim is that if prosperity is a result of righteousness, it undermines true righteousness by creating an ulterior motive (the anticipation of gain).
- Conversely, if the retribution principle is not enforced, then God's justice becomes suspect.

1. **The Retribution Triangle of Claims:**

- Walton introduces a visual aid - a triangle to illustrate the tension created when Job suffers.
- Corners of the Triangle:
- **Retribution Principle:** The belief that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer.
- **Job's Righteousness:** The assertion that Job is a righteous man.
- **God's Justice:** The belief that God acts justly.
- Triangle Dynamics: As long as Job is prosperous, all three corners are in harmony. However, Job's suffering breaks this harmony. Walton explains, "When Job begins suffering, we look at that triangle, and something's got to go. You can't hold onto all three corners."

1. **Perspectives on the Triangle:**

- **Job's Friends:** They "build their fort" on the Retribution Principle. This leads them to conclude that Job must not be truly righteous. They maintain God's justice and the retribution principle, sacrificing Job's perceived righteousness. They cannot imagine any scenario where someone is righteous, suffers horribly and God is also acting justly.
- **Job:** He "builds his fort" on his own righteousness. He struggles to reconcile this with his suffering, leading to accusations against God's justice. Walton notes, "Job builds his fort in his own corner, and he's giving up God's corner as he holds onto the retribution principle."
- **Elihu:** He "builds his fort" on God's justice. However, rather than challenging Job's righteousness, he redefines the retribution principle. He argues that the principle may be a preventative measure and that Job's suffering is due to his self-righteous response to suffering, not past sins. Walton observes, "Elihu is more right than any of the other human characters in the book...he really sees Job more realistically, more appropriately."

- However, Elihu still operates within the paradigm of the retribution principle, merely redefining it instead of refuting it, therefore his understanding, while advanced, is not ultimately the solution.

1. **Resolving the Tensions of the Retribution Principle:**

- **Ancient Near East:** They often compromised on the nature of God to maintain the retribution principle.
- **Purpose of Suffering:** Some people qualify suffering as educational, character-building, or participation with Christ.
- **Timing:** The Psalmist sometimes addresses the issue by referring to the concept of timing. They acknowledge present suffering but anticipate God's future vindication, that God will "smooth things out." This view is further extended in Christian theology by considering eternity with God in heaven.
- **Justice and the World:** The world is fallen, and therefore, does not fully reflect God's justice, so the lack of clear justice is the product of a fallen world.
- **God's Complex of Attributes:** God's actions are not dictated by one single attribute (like justice), but by the entirety of his character. Walton says that "Justice is a part of that constellation but doesn't trump all the other attributes that God has."
- **The Proverbial Nature of the Retribution Principle:** The principle is often true, but not a universal guarantee. It is "how things often act, but not how things always work." It does not offer a complete theodicy (explanation for suffering) and should not be used to explain all suffering.

1. **Theological vs. Theodicy:**

- Walton differentiates between theology (understanding God's nature) and theodicy (explaining suffering and evil).
- He argues that the Book of Job intentionally separates these two, so that we don't incorrectly conclude that theology leads to a theodicy.
- The retribution principle, is part of God's identity, but does not explain the totality of his actions.
- Ultimately, God is not subject to the limited parameters of the retributive principle; his ways of action are much more complex than that.

1. **God Needs No Defense:**

- God's justice should be accepted on faith, not worked out philosophically.
- Attempts to defend God through theodicy are, in some ways, an insult to Him, because He is far beyond the ability of humans to adequately defend Him.
- God desires trust, not defense, and his actions are complex and coordinated, often employing justice, mercy, compassion and all of his attributes.

1. **Jesus' Shift from Cause to Purpose:**

- Jesus often redirects questions about suffering from "cause" to "purpose."
- John 9: The disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" concerning a man born blind, showing that they're operating under the Retribution Principle; Jesus responds that neither sinned, but that God's glory can be revealed through him. Jesus doesn't give a cause, but a purpose, looking to the future rather than the past.
- Luke 13: The falling tower is not a result of the people's sin, but a warning to think about life's fragility.
- This pattern from Jesus indicates that we need to move from questions of *cause* to questions of *purpose*. Ultimately, "no explanation of the suffering is forthcoming. None is possible; none is necessary." We should seek to understand God's purposes, rather than his reasons.

Conclusion:

John Walton's analysis of the Book of Job emphasizes that the retribution principle, while seemingly straightforward, is inadequate to explain the complexities of life, suffering, and God's actions. The book ultimately challenges the principle and asks us to trust God's wisdom and seek out His purposes, recognizing that His actions are not solely governed by justice, and that the retributive principle is only a small aspect of His complex character. We must move away from simply seeking explanations for suffering and trust that God is good and working out His divine purposes.

4. Job Study Guide: Session 7, Theological Foundation: Retribution Principle, Triangle

The Book of Job: A Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the retribution principle, and how does it function in the ancient world?
2. How do Job and his friends initially view the retribution principle?
3. How does the "Challenger's" question challenge the retribution principle in the book of Job?
4. Explain the "triangle of claims" presented in the text and how it relates to the different perspectives in the Book of Job.
5. How do Job's friends use the retribution principle to understand Job's suffering?
6. Where does Job build his "fort" in the triangle, and how does that impact his views?
7. How does Elihu redefine the retribution principle, and why is this significant?
8. What are some ways people resolve the tensions of the retribution principle, as mentioned in the text?
9. How does the text distinguish between theology and theodicy, and why is this distinction important?
10. How does Jesus shift the focus away from cause and toward purpose when addressing the retribution principle?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The retribution principle is the belief that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer, a concept common in the ancient world where people's circumstances were often seen as reflections of their moral standing before God/gods. This principle suggests that good actions lead to rewards, and bad actions lead to punishment.

2. Job and his friends both strongly believe in the retribution principle, assuming that prosperity is a sign of righteousness and suffering is evidence of wickedness. They also believe that these principles can be reversed; therefore, if someone is suffering they must have done something wicked.
3. The "Challenger" questions whether Job serves God out of genuine devotion or merely for the benefits the retribution principle offers him. This implies that the principle might be detrimental to the development of true faith, suggesting it encourages reward-seeking behavior rather than genuine righteousness.
4. The "triangle of claims" consists of the retribution principle, Job's righteousness, and God's justice. Initially, all three are in harmony, but Job's suffering causes a tension forcing individuals to choose which corner of the triangle they believe.
5. Job's friends build their arguments upon the retribution principle, asserting that Job must be wicked because he is suffering. They believe if God is just and Job is suffering then that means that Job must have done something to deserve the suffering, therefore they question Job's righteousness.
6. Job builds his "fort" in the corner of his own righteousness, which leads him to question the justice of God when confronted with his suffering. He holds onto the retribution principle, which creates tension in his thinking.
7. Elihu redefines the retribution principle to be preventative, suggesting suffering is not just a response to past sins, but a warning against current or future behavior. This allows him to critique Job's self-righteousness without questioning Job's past.
8. People attempt to reconcile tensions within the retribution principle by compromising the nature of God, qualifying the purpose of suffering, thinking of timing, and noting that justice in this world is not always guaranteed. They might say that suffering is educational, or that justice will prevail in the long run (or in eternity).
9. Theology is the study of who God is, while theodicy is the attempt to explain suffering and evil in the world. The text emphasizes that the retribution principle is not a comprehensive theodicy, as it does not always account for the complexities of suffering and evil.
10. Jesus does not try to explain the cause of suffering. Rather, when confronted with the man born blind, Jesus shifts the focus from cause to purpose. Rather than answering who sinned he states the man's suffering is a result of the glory of God.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the roles of Job, his friends, and Elihu in the book of Job, focusing on their differing perspectives on the retribution principle and the "triangle of claims."
2. Discuss the ways in which the Book of Job challenges and redefines the retribution principle. Consider the arguments presented in the text and why this challenge is necessary.
3. Explore the relationship between theology and theodicy, as presented in the lecture. How does this distinction help us understand the purpose of the Book of Job, especially considering its treatment of suffering?
4. Examine the significance of the shift from cause to purpose in understanding suffering, as illustrated by Jesus' responses in John 9 and Luke 13. How does this shift change the way we understand the nature of justice and God's role in the world?
5. Critically evaluate the various ways people resolve the tensions of the retribution principle as mentioned in the text. Which resolutions are more compelling, and why?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Retribution Principle:** The belief that the righteous will prosper, and the wicked will suffer; the idea that people get what they deserve.
- **Symbiosis:** A mutually beneficial relationship between two different organisms; used in the text to refer to the ancient belief of a reciprocal relationship with the gods.
- **Theodicy:** The attempt to explain why there is suffering and evil in the world, especially in light of the belief in a just and omnipotent God.
- **Triangle of Claims:** A model consisting of the retribution principle, Job's righteousness, and God's justice; these must be balanced or challenged in the face of Job's suffering.
- **Self-righteousness:** The quality of being convinced of one's own righteousness, especially in a moralistic way.
- **Theology:** The study of the nature of God and religious belief; the nature and character of God.
- **Lament Psalms:** Psalms that express grief, complaint, and sorrow, often in the context of suffering and injustice.
- **Proverbial:** A statement of general truth or advice; usually a concise way to state an observation, though they are not universal guarantees.
- **Cause:** The explanation for how something came to be; the reason or rationale for something.
- **Purpose:** The reason for which something exists or is done; the goal or intended outcome of something.

5. FAQs on Walton, Job, Session 7, Theological Foundation: Retribution Principle, Triangle, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on the Book of Job and the Retribution Principle

1. **What is the retribution principle, and how does it relate to the Book of Job?** The retribution principle is the belief that the righteous will prosper, and the wicked will suffer; essentially, people get what they deserve. It's the idea that circumstances reflect whether one is in favor or out of favor with God or the gods. The Book of Job puts this principle under scrutiny as Job and his friends firmly believe in it. They assume that if someone is suffering, they must be wicked and vice-versa. Job's dramatic reversal of fortune challenges the validity of this principle.
2. **What is the "triangle of claims" and how does it apply to the Book of Job?** The "triangle of claims" is a concept used to understand the different perspectives within the Book of Job. The three points of the triangle represent: the retribution principle, Job's righteousness, and God's justice. When Job prospers, all three points align. However, when Job suffers, one point must be compromised. Job's friends defend the retribution principle and God's justice, concluding Job must be unrighteous. Job defends his righteousness, questioning God's justice while still acknowledging the retribution principle. Elihu defends God's justice but redefines the retribution principle to address Job's self-righteousness.
3. **How do Job's friends interpret his suffering, and what is their perspective on the retribution principle?** Job's friends firmly believe in the retribution principle and build their argument upon it. They believe that since Job is suffering, he must have done something wrong, thus compromising his righteousness. They maintain that God is just, and if Job is suffering, it's a consequence of his hidden sins. They are champions of the retribution principle, unwilling to consider that Job could be righteous despite his suffering.

4. **How does Job respond to his suffering and the accusations of his friends, and what does he believe about the retribution principle and God's justice?** Job believes firmly in his own righteousness and builds his argument around this fact. He struggles to reconcile his righteousness with his suffering. He can't deny the retribution principle and because of that struggles and comes to question God's justice. He doesn't believe he deserves his suffering, and as his speeches continue, he becomes more doubtful and even accusing of God. He is stuck in the conundrum of being righteous and suffering, thus creating tension with God's justice.
5. **Who is Elihu, and how does his view on the retribution principle differ from Job's friends and Job?** Elihu is a fourth character who enters the narrative later in the Book of Job. He positions himself as defending God's justice. Unlike Job's friends, he does not immediately assume Job has sinned in the past to cause his suffering. Instead, Elihu redefines the retribution principle by saying it can be preventative and a response to present developing wrong behavior instead of things in the past. He accuses Job of self-righteousness in how he has responded to his suffering, saying that this self-righteousness is the actual reason for Job's suffering. He's closer to the truth than the other human characters but he's still using the retribution principle as a basis for understanding how things work.
6. **How does the text resolve the tensions created by the retribution principle and what alternatives are considered?** The text does not offer a simple resolution of this tension. It considers how people often compromise one of the three points. In the ancient Near East, they compromised on the nature of God. Others qualify the purpose of suffering by seeing it as educational. Some use timing as a qualifier where God will eventually make things right. Others view justice not as the only mode of how God works in the world and God having a complex of attributes beyond just justice which makes things complicated. In the end the text emphasizes that we should view the retribution principle as proverbial and not always how things work.

7. **How does Jesus address the retribution principle in the New Testament, and what does this reveal about cause and purpose?** Jesus turns away from questions of cause (theodicy) to focus on purpose (theology). In John 9, he denies that the man born blind was either the result of his own sins or his parents, instead saying the man's situation allowed the glory of God to be revealed. In Luke 13, he does not attribute the fall of the tower to any specific sin, instead highlighting the event as a warning. Jesus' approach shifts the focus from explaining suffering to finding God's purpose within it, emphasizing trust in God's wisdom rather than searching for direct cause and effect explanations.
8. **What is the main point of the book of Job in relation to the retribution principle and how can it impact the way we understand suffering?** The Book of Job performs a "radical surgery" separating theology (who God is) from theodicy (why there is suffering). It challenges the idea that suffering is always a direct consequence of sin, a core element of the retribution principle. Ultimately the book emphasizes that God does not need our defense or explanations of his actions. We should trust God's wisdom and seek out his purposes instead of expecting explanations for suffering based on cause. The book helps us realize the retribution principle isn't a reliable formula for explaining suffering and instead invites us to approach our experience of the world with more nuance, humility, and trust.