

A BUFFET OF DESERTS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF DESERT IN JOB

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Abstract

Job challenges the theological milieu of retributive justice prevalent in Near-Eastern society by daring to ask the veritable question: can people deserve? This article examines the theories of desert, agency, and righteousness embedded within the Job manuscript. Bracketing the question of theodicy, this study utilizes contemporary philosophical, theological and exegetical considerations to examine what Job declares concerning the concept of Desert. This article uncovers a basic underlying Theory of Desert, which seems to correspond with the current compatibilist perspective in lieu of libertarianism or hard determinism. Though a basic moral desert finds a level of affirmation within the pages of Job, the book bears witness to the restricted nature of desert theories. Insofar as desert exists, God's awesome power diminishes its significance. Human desert has boundaries and demands humility in light of the power and omnipotence of God. Humans are at once deserving, free, responsible agents and bounded, desert-less individuals without liberty before God.

Key words: Job, desert, deserving, retributive justice, compatibilism, agency, liberty, theodicy.

Desert and its Relation to Job's Challenge of Retribution Theology

What does it mean to deserve something? Common sense supposes that to deserve something, the deserving subject should, in some way, contribute to the basis of their desert (Feinberg, 1974, p. 122). Desert usually carries with it an earned or deserved object merited by the subject via a basis. In other words, desert generally has three basic ingredients: deserving subject (person, persons), deserved object (praise, blame, compensation), and desert basis (effort, advance, contribution).

Thus one might say a particular person deserves praise in respect to her efforts or blame in light of her failures. Humans often relate to one another via desert. Society claims people are capable of deserving, among other things, punishment, reward, compensation, praise, blame, wages, grades, and property. In claiming or imposing these deserts, people make several underlying claims: causality, agency, indeterminism, and responsibility.

The idea of desert constitutes one of the moral foundations which frame the context of a religious philosophy of retribution theology. Thus, it occupies a position of extreme importance in the Book of Job, a writing that challenges this societal belief structure. The book questions the central issues surrounding divine justice - namely whether the fortune of an individual person has any relation to the manner in which that individual lives. Ancient theologians sought an explanation for suffering with a construct of moral causality, looking backward for a causal connection between previous sin and subsequent suffering. One often supposes that righteous living results in deserved blessing while wickedness results in adversity. But assuming that the fabric of reality contains a fair consideration of individual deserts seems problematic insofar as the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Job focuses on present suffering within this life, avoiding any eschatological answers to the issue of righteous suffering. The Israelite teaching that people reap what they sow provides the scaffolding for the fundamental ethical dilemma in Job (Anderson, 1976, p. 65).

Though both Job and his friends seem to work from the same theological frame - the would-be consolers support a traditional stance while Job tries to push the concepts to uncover the source of their seemingly illogical nature. Zophar lays out a fairly succinct retributive theology frame (Job 20). He proposes that the wicked will receive their just deserts and the righteous will gain deliverance and compensation. Job revolts against the present understanding of this theory of justice within the cosmos. He pushes the barrier by pointing out reality. The wicked thrive (Job 21). If sin causes calamity, then why does Job suffer without cause - without desert? How can this be fair, let alone righteous (Anderson, 1976, p. 68)? By addressing this issue Job unfolds a complex philosophy of desert which contains several key ingredients which will be discussed below. It does not ratify any specific understanding of desert but nonetheless maintains the basic theory that humans are capable of deserving at some level.

Righteousness: Desert Assumed

While Job never utilizes the modern philosophical jargon of desert, the concept inherently resides within its pages. Job is righteous. He is innocent, pure, upright, God-fearing, and he shuns evil. He is the opposite of the wicked described in

chapters 21 and 24 (Hoffman, 1996, p. 229). The concept of righteousness cannot exist without earned moral and existential deserts. How can one conceive of a truly righteous person who does not deserve his own righteousness since righteousness is a quality attributed to a person?¹ The presentation of Job's absolute righteousness is axiomatic: "there is none like him on the earth" (1:8; 2:3). Desert is assumed. Indeed Job affirms this by maintaining his innocence and upholding his integrity throughout the book. He is "a just and blameless man" (12:4). In chapters 27 and 31 Job explains the depth of his integrity in detail and defends his righteousness. In the epilogue, God reaffirms Job's righteousness in 42:7-9.

Can People Deserve?

The basis of desert must in some significant sense relate factually to the subject of the desert (Feinberg, 1974, p. 134). Furthermore, the deserving subject should be *responsible* for said basis (Cupit, 1996, p. 83; Feldman, 1995, p. 63; Feldman, 1996, p. 165). Thus, **A deserves x in virtue of y only if A is responsible for y**. The book of Job does not ignore the questions posed against desert. Rather, as seen above, the writing engages it head on from the beginning.

Satan's Challenge of Job's Righteousness

Appealing to the story of Job, one can easily fit the dilemma into this syllogistic framework. God sees that Job is righteous and therefore in virtue of his righteousness; in the prologue, God challenges Satan to a look at his servant. Satan counters by questioning Job's responsibility for his righteousness. Does he "fear God for no reason" (1:9)? On what basis is Job responsible for his righteousness - how can he be deserving of a condition that God has bestowed on him? Satan proposes that if God did not pamper Job then Job would rebuke God and cease to fear Him. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land" (1:10). Thus Satan challenges Job's desert capability: both the deservedness of his own righteousness and the deservedness of his possessions with which God has blessed him.

The proposed test is meant to uncover the source of Job's righteousness and from whence it originates - it is meant to decide whether or not Job is responsible

1 If one attributes her righteousness to God or the Holy Spirit, as often occurs in the N.T., the agent of desert is brought into a complex debate of metaphysical conjecture. Fortunately, this story does not allow for such conjecture because the opening scene contains an affirmation of Job's righteousness from God. (1:8; 2:3). Job's righteousness is not a result of God's actions; rather, it is affirmed as his just desert.

for his own righteousness. God maintains that Job is righteous, but Satan challenges the very idea that humans can be righteous. After all, people are not responsible for any part of their earthly existence. This robust denial of desert is refuted by God's ratification of Job in 42:7-9 but the less forceful claims made by Job's friends are not so easily dismissed.

Job's Friends: Humans Deserve Nothing

The words of Job's would-be comforters also show a sapiential move to dismiss the idea of desert. "Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker" (4:17)? The issue brought to bear here by Eliphaz is whether any creature can claim purity in relation to God. The question is rhetorical for Eliphaz because he assumes it is self-evident. Job, a mere mortal based on his moral imperfections, cannot stand as righteous before God. Indeed, no one can (Balentine, 2006, p. 129). The idea is once more restated in chapter 15: "What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous" (15:14)? Here Eliphaz once again restates his premise regarding the place of humans before God.

Chapter 15 closes in a focused debate about the role of humans in God's masterpiece. What are people in relation to God? What is their appropriate character, calling, and fate in a world where arbitrary goods comfort them and evil assaults them in a way that is neither fully foreseeable nor fully intelligible (Balentine, 2006, p. 247)? Eliphaz's answer is that God is incontrovertibly just and any relationship with him requires humans to recognize their proper place in the hierarchy of creation. It is not their place to argue with God over moral desert. Rather it is the place of humans to speak constructively of God even when faced with seemingly irrefutable evidence contrary to divine justice. Individual experience cannot refute divine justice because people are in no place to judge (Balentine, 2006, p. 242). Humans have no merit on which they can claim deserts over and against God.

These arguments by Eliphaz represent one way around the problem of desert. He maintains that people are in fact deserving of nothing because they are not responsible for any of the causal aspects of their existence. Thus, every possible basis for desert finds its foundation in grounds for which people have no responsibility. Genetic makeup, rearing, and environment - only these can impact desert. Thus no one can be held accountable for possessing any possible basis for desert. Desert basis does not signify a foundational origin for deservedness. No one deserves (Rawls, 1971, p. 310).² According to Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, and

2 John Rawls, in his book, *A Theory of Justice*, represents this idea in the context of contemporary political philosophy.

143 it seems clear that humans are sinners (Miller, 2000, p. 239). Since humans cannot deserve, Job's testimony regarding his undeserved punishment becomes obviously invalid. One understands that Job as an individual has confused the situation. God created humans to obey God and to defer to Him in trust. People find that trusting God and obeying Him represents the only alternative to anxiety (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 459; Miller, 2000, p. 243). Thus Job entangles himself in a quandary, and God has shaken his trust by His seemingly chaotic and capricious actions. Job's present experience and understanding of desert cannot explain these happenings. He cannot accept Eliphaz's counsel which brings him no comfort. Although Job continues to place his trust in God, anxiety and loneliness seep into his devastated world.

Robust Refutation of Desert Rejected

Though the book of Job proposes many tempting theories for allowing one to disregard the idea of desert, the treatise actually contradicts this type of philosophical rope-a-dope; indeed God confirms Job's righteousness which seemingly confirms his desert. Job remains persistent in righteousness even after God allows Satan to strip away everything the tempter has claimed responsible for Job's righteousness. This seems to prove his desert, and in truth one cannot ignore the fact of Job's righteousness. Job's virtuous recognition of divine sovereignty proves the purity and selflessness of his religious and ethical motivation. He fears God based on his own desert; "Job does not worship Yahweh because it pays" (Perdue, 1992, p. 238). Since Job is seen as righteous, a quality attributed to his person and continually reaffirmed throughout the book, one might ascertain that the argument for human inability to attain any degree of desert is rejected entirely.

Retributive Justice Debunked

Many scholars have supposed that theodicy is the central question in Job, but this categorization seems too broad. Job presupposes what modern theodicean devices attempt to prove - the righteousness of God. Therefore, the book might be more accurately characterized as an attempt to dispose of the erroneous theology of retribution that engulfed the Israelite culture at the time of its inscription.

Wisdom teachers maintained that the application of human reason could, in fact, bring success and happiness. Wisdom literature primarily focuses on "the multi-faceted dimensions of human existence" (Perdue, 1994, p. 132). By observing divine law, humans can, in fact, influence the course of their lives for the better. Ignoring the Lord's precepts results in suffering and misery (Gordis, 1965, p. 38). Wisdom helps to produce insight and happiness, and just observance of the law claims beneficial desert. Does the social convention of wisdom actually offer

humans the capacity to obtain just deserts? Do desert bases follow directly from the institution? If this is indeed the case, then is the basis for desert determined by the rules or purposes of social institutions.³ This is one of the positions asserted by Job's contemporary colleagues who busy themselves trying to reintegrate Job into the social construct of retribution theology. Eliphaz claims that Job's experience is subordinate to conventional wisdom. He calls Job to "submit personal experience to the consensus truth that is vouchsafed by majority opinion" (Balentine, 2006, p. 246).

The three contestants offer an explanation of creation and of human belief radically different from their suffering opponent. They call upon the anthropological tradition to stress the extreme separation between God and humanity, refer to the corrupt nature of humanity, and declare the justice of God who arbitrates against the wicked. The general agreement of the society in which Job lives supports this sapiential view, proposing a causal relationship between good fortune and righteousness. Suffering serves to teach people about the consequences of sin and gives them the wisdom to live correctly. Thus, wisdom identifies and characterizes individual responsibilities to God and other humans by emphasizing and investigating the vast extent of life and knowledge (Perdue, 1991, p. 134). Suffering is a common burden of all humanity and the lonely burden of each person. But Job serves to point out that not all suffering is penal, remedial, or redemptive. Some suffering is meaningless (Anderson, 1976, p. 71).

In chapters 4 and 5, Eliphaz confirms the reliability of the world's moral order. The fate of the righteous is plenty and the recompense for the wicked is tribulation (Balentine, 2006, p. 106). From where might desert come if not from observing the universe and its ordered reality? If someone can in fact deserve something, then from where does their deservedness come? Does desert evolve from the person's phenomenologically conscious will? Certainly God finds error in all (4:18). Or might desert originate in causal biological makeup? Are not humans merely vessels of clay (4:19)? Perhaps desert might be conceived from collective societal circumstance? To rephrase, does it come from the human ability to reason, to experience pleasure and pain, to make decisions, to err, from their physical attributes, or is desert merely relative to some overarching social system? In light of the fact that Job's experience has overturned wisdom, where can one search for the underlining foundations that hold up the universe and its moral code?

Job himself points out the absurdity of the test at hand - that *his desert* of blessings is being tested via all types of emotional and physical torment, torment

3 For further reading, this type of desert basis is posited by current scholars such as David Cumiskey in his article "Desert and Entitlement: A Rawlsian Consequentialist Account" and Owen McLeod's "Desert and Institutions."

that he clearly *does not deserve*. If Satan is right and he cannot deserve his righteousness, then can the wicked deserve punishment? Thus praise and blame become arbitrary distinctions. Revolting against the current institutional tradition, he negates the theological anthropology of his day (Perdue, 1991, p. 142).

If, indeed, Job is proven righteous, then the catastrophe of Satan's curses become unjust. Thus, Job's righteousness is tested via unjust punishment - which in turn has been divinely ordained. Unfortunately for Job, "God tries the righteous" (Green, 1982, p. 6). It seems that **Job [A] deserves punishment [x] in virtue of his righteousness [y]**. This situation seems inherently counter to all reasonable moral law and justice, and yet the reader is forced within the story to accept its reality and decide whether the accepted social formula of retributive justice is indeed valid. In effect, the book requires the reader to realize the depth of the problem (the righteous suffer) by displacing conventional wisdom.

Thus, Job challenges the theology of retributive justice in regard to the cosmos (Hoffman, 1996, p. 222). He does not maintain that he deserves wealth and prosperity because of his righteousness. Rather, he maintains that he does *not deserve* suffering (Weinburg, 1994, p. 286). Job's tests transpire as Satan rips away all the good blessings that God has bestowed upon him. Indeed, Satan strips Job of everything that might have supposedly produced his fidelity to God. The intensity of Job's suffering seems to surpass any contemporary speculation regarding the world's moral justness and presses the issue of the righteous sufferer and the thriving wicked.

Because sin directly results in separation from God and a return to the chaos that causes suffering, Job's friends perceive their companion's desperate situation as follows: **Job [A] deserves punishment [x] in virtue of his sinfulness [y]**. Though reason teaches the sense of this equation, the Book of Job has confirmed another formula - **Job [A] deserves punishment [x] in virtue of his righteousness [y]**: Job's suffering is actually the result of his righteousness. This, then, is reality. It is in virtue of his righteousness that Job is tried. And in fact, throughout the book, Job defends his righteousness against his friend's inferences that he is somehow sinfully deserving of his pain. Despite these charges, he continues to maintain that he does *not deserve* the torment that has been rained upon him.

God's condemnation of His three would-be advocates (42:7) points to the degree of Job's innocence. While God does not lend *carte blanche* validation to Job's indictment, He does condemn the friends for their erroneous attempts to explain Job's suffering as punishment for his sins. Job's sufferings are not the result of God's punishment for sin. Job's friends have slandered him and misrepresented God's purpose. Job's denial of the validity of retributive justice - that sin is always punished by suffering - and his claim that he is blameless of any transgression in opposition to God - epitomize what is true and correct (Hooks, 2006, p. 480). By

validating Job's blamelessness, God, in turn, corroborates the antithesis of blame - namely praiseworthiness. Since both praise and blame are direct corollaries of desert, one can see this endorsement of Job's righteousness as a confirmation of the human capacity for moral desert.

God is reproofing the three for their incorrect assertions of Job's wrongdoing, forming a causal link to his present situation. To support this claim, Hook points out the absence of any critique against Elihu's comments. Interestingly, Elihu does not indict Job of wrongdoing that deserves punishment. Thus, God's verdict excludes any rebuke of Elihu. This indicates that Elihu is not accountable for making the false accusations arrayed against Job (Hooks, 2006, p. 481). God is not condemning the entirety of Job's friends' speeches. He is merely condemning their invalid accusations against Job. This fact brings into question *which* views of desert, causality, and theology possessed by the three might be valid. Indeed all of their assumptions might show a glimpse of divine justice. Conversely, Job's speeches are also confirmed as valid. Even though Yahweh's prior speech debunks elements of Job's attempt to bring God to task, God does not entirely refute Job's contentions. Thus, it seems that the writer proposes many contradictory views. The two judgments of God do not allow a clearly articulated conclusion to the narrative (Balentine, 2006, p. 707). Rather, the contradictions were canonized *and* held in tension.

Justice and the Individual

The book of Job presents many unique perspectives concerning the question of desert. Problematically, though, it does not present an overarching solution to the problem. Instead, the book canonizes confusion. Job is allowed to ask, as did Abraham (Gen. 18:25), whether the God of justice will treat him justly. The quality of Job's agency here indeed testifies to a normative foundational justice which entails that Job deserves his just deserts. While Job's friends testify that God *is* just and righteous, "Job argues that God *should* be fair, reliable, and bountiful to those who are innocent (24:18-25; 27:13-23; 29:18-20)" (Nam, 2003, p. 105). Indeed, the text seems to suggest the existence of a normative aspect of justice to which even God may be held accountable. Job criticizes the doctrine of retribution by pointing to the absurdity of God's unjust, inconsistent, and irrational actions in the world (9:22-24; 12:4-6; 21:17-26; 24:1-12).

Job's friends take an opposing position, undermining Job's idea of normative deserts and focusing on the traditional understandings of God's absolute justice. If one suffers now, then it is for the greater good; the scales will be balanced in the end. From an eschatological viewpoint this claim seems potent, but Job protests this point, emphasizing the persistent company of his present suffering. Job is

not satisfied with post-mortem vindication. Rather he presses the issue of his problem in the here and now. He is determined to press the issue of his innocence and his blamelessness before God (Nam, 2003, p. 105). Job challenges the notion present in wisdom literature that creation is inherently good and sapiential life leads to prosperity (Perdue, 1991, p. 132). Thus, on the present desert basis of his integrity and righteousness, Job assumes that he has the right to challenge God in a court-like setting and to accuse God of not being *just* based on His own normative standards of justice. Job insists on taking the position of the plaintiff who will prosecute God (Nam, 2003, p. 105). He asks the question: Is God's divine power subordinate to His divine justice and mercy, or does God's power frequently overwhelm His righteousness (Nam, 2003, p. 107)?

It is interesting that God does not call Job out - nor does He directly refute Job's charges and claim that His actions are entirely just. Rather, God affirms His stance in spite of shaking the world with dramatic interludes. The powerful scenery of God's speech confirms His power, but God never states that His power is subservient to His own righteousness. The reader is left only with the affirmation of Job's assertion that God is indeed a God of justice, a stance which Job maintains in spite of his questioning demeanor (27:2-6 and 31:35-37). Job calls for vindication of his beliefs in this life, asking God to reward his faith in His eternal righteousness. He defends his integrity, claiming his autonomous ability to attain righteousness (Gilkey, 1992, p. 164).

Basic Moral Desert

Job claims his just deserts throughout the book. "I insist on arguing with God" (13:3) because "I am right; God has deprived me of justice" (34:5). Job presupposes that he has the basic moral right to challenge God, to question His moral authority and justice. No one is responsible for his or her personhood; yet in virtue of being a person, everyone seems to deserve a modicum of respect. Here Job falls in line with the traditional biblical teaching regarding what it means to be an individual. Psalms 8 argues that the esteem of the Lord is a part of our nature; humans are regarded by God because they are human (Miller, 2000, p. 230). These rights seem to be independent of institutions or customs and set the foundation for the creation of society. Thus Job is able to appeal to his friends on the basis of his humanity - on the basis that he is more than just an object within the created order (Ticciati, 2005, p. 140).

But on what basis do humans deserve basic moral rights? The Bible places basic moral deserts at the forefront of its argument for the inclusion of foreigners and support of social justice concerns. However, it is *not apparent how* possessing the capacity to reason or experience or live as a subset of a larger society makes

a person deserving.

The answer frequently given that humans are made *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27) attributes our deservedness for our basic moral desert to our nature, something for which we cannot claim responsibility. In Genesis 1:28 and Psalms 8:5-8, humans are entrusted with dominion over the earth (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 452). The commission of domination - caring for the world - grants a certain amount of inherent basic rights - responsibility, agency, accountability, etc. Job represents a model example of God's entrusted dominion. No one since Adam has so fully realized the commission to be fruitful and multiply and rule as has Job (Balentine, 2002, p. 504). Thus the commission to realize the potential of our nature - to be good stewards of the gifts God has given - is how our basic moral desert is realized and justified.

Job is not only blameless - a quality patently linked to desert - there is "no one like him" (1:8; 2:3). The phrase gives superhuman emphasis to Job's righteousness. "By God's estimation Job is righteous beyond comparison. On earth he is a near-equal to God. More than anyone else, he embodies what it means for humankind to be created 'in the image of God'" (Balentine, 2006, p. 52).

Conclusion

What does Job say regarding the concept of human desert? One might say that the writer of Job bounces from one category to another, without regard for or attempt at a logical conclusion. On the one hand, the book speaks against an outright disregard of human deserts. As noted above in sections *Satan's Challenge of Job's Righteousness* and *Retributive Justice Debunked*, Satan flatly fails in his attempt to discredit Job's righteousness by withdrawing God's blessings. God's confirmation of Job's mastery-level performance in the test of righteousness seems to confirm some level of desert as well.

But, as espoused in the above subsection, *Job's friends: Humans Deserve Nothing*, the book of Job testifies to the limited nature of any sufficient theory regarding desert. While it maintains human individuality and undermines an overarching theory of retributive justice, the writing nonetheless bears witness to the fact that these aspects of human nature are subordinate to the awesome power of God. Humans are seen not only as free, responsible, deserving, and in control of their environment, but also as constrained, subordinate, and without right before their Creator.

Though the book affirms a notion of desert, it does not assert that this is a basis by which one can validly question divine justice. It does not answer the question of theodicy, but rather brings into focus the complex nature of the human experience of agency and its effect on the condition in which humankind

is immersed - whether that condition is one of suffering or blessing. The Book of Job documents various explanations for suffering but does not codify a coherent theodicy or theory of desert. It considers many possible explanations and seems to warn against simplistic, “pat,” or packaged philosophies. In fact, the writer intentionally lures his reader to explore the many routes to understanding Job’s situation of underserved suffering. Yet the sphere of human discourse never fully uncovers a fruitful answer to the painful problem regarding God’s motive in regard to human suffering. “Human dialogue cannot penetrate God’s inscrutable character” (Pleins, 2001, p. 490).

Rather, Job affirms the *presence* of God - even in the midst of torment. Insofar as it does not claim a distinct theory of desert, the reader who remains intent upon the mystery must continue to seek and examine valid answers to those questions posed within its pages. “This alone is what God offers Job - not answers, but the opportunity to grieve; not divine speeches, but the dark reality of God’s silent presence” (Pleins, 2001, p. 491).

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Sažetak

Job osporava teološko okruženje retributivne pravde koje prevladava u bliskoistočnom društvu, usuđujući se postaviti pravo pitanje: mogu li ljudi zaslužiti? Ovaj članak razmatra teorije o zasluži, posredništvu i pravednosti, smještene unutar rukopisa o Jobu. Podupirući pitanje teodiceje, ovo proučavanje koristi suvremena filozofska, teološka i egzegetska sagledavanja da bi se razmotrilo što Job objavljuje u vezi pojma zasluge. Ovaj članak razotkriva temeljnu teoriju o zasluži, što razvidno odgovara trenutnoj perspektivi kompatibilizma umjesto libertarijanizma ili tvrdog determinizma. Iako temeljna moralna zasluga nalazi određenu razinu potvrde unutar stranica Joba, knjiga svjedoči o ograničenoj naravi teorija zasluge. Ukoliko zasluga postoji, Božja impresivna moć umanjuje njezin značaj. Ljudska zaslužnost ima granice i zahtjeva poniznost u svjetlu Božje moći i svemoći. Ljudi su istovremeno zaslužni, slobodni i odgovorni činioци i nezaslužni pojedinci bez slobode pred Bogom.