CHAPTER XXIV

THE LIMITED VALIDITY OF RETRIBUTION IN THE BOOK OF JOB

The book of Job begins with an account of its central figure that suggests he is in every respect an ideal man. Indeed, Satan uses this unblemished virtue and prosperity as a point of departure for an attack that is directed equally against God and Job himself: “Does Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (1:9–10). It seems plain to Satan that Job’s attitude to God is based on self-interest, since in his eyes it is impossible for human beings to do otherwise. And that is not all. Satan also reproaches God directly, claiming that, by rewarding Job’s fear of God generously in material terms, his attitude of reverent fear has been made far too easy a posture to adopt.¹

Satan’s reproach reflects an opposite extreme to the usual biblical demand for an unconditional loyalty to God, flowing from a sincere heart and free from self-interest. Mirrored in it even more evidently is a complete contrast to the biblical postulate of the sublimity and utter freedom of God’s activity. Satan envisages a God dependent upon external human deeds—one who is consequently a servant of humans. According to him, God deals with mundane activities on the characteristically human principle of the quid pro quo. Satan therefore presents an unavoidable challenge as much to Job as to God. Both will reply, God speaking only when Job has finished. Job will first make clear his point of view in a series of stressful dialogues with his friends. God will then reply, speaking alone and in sovereign might.

The entire weight and conviction of the book of Job lie in the fact that its protagonist’s response does not have its origin in that condition of blessedness that had been Satan’s starting point, but in his subsequent state of “condemnation.” Job must prove his fear of God at a time when he has been divested of everything and is at the brink of death, a situation that gives rise to the most extensive and most characteristic discussion of divine retribution in the entire Bible. Let us first consider the dialogues between Job and his friends, and we shall then be in a position to assess their standpoints critically in the light of God’s reply.

1. Understanding of God’s Retribution in the Dialogues

The three cycles of dialogue between Job and his three friends (chaps. 3–28), Job’s soliloquy (chaps. 29–31), and Elihu’s speeches (chaps. 32–37) range over the spectrum of divine and human activity, but all alike serve to illustrate differing views of God’s retribution. This is the core of the colloquy.

1.1. The First Cycle of Dialogues (Chapters 3–11)

Out of distress of unsurpassable intensity, Job curses the day of his birth. He has sensed that the terrible hand of God has struck him (chap. 3). Eliphaz attempts to reawaken his hope with a declaration on the law of retribution. In 4:7–8 he says:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?