

THE PROBLEM OF RETRIBUTION IN THE PSALMS¹

The God of the Hebrews was very powerful and very near. He was not only the omnipotent creator: the "maker of heaven and earth, of the sea and all that is in them" (CXLVI.6), but he was active in his creation. He knew all his creatures intimately, preserved them in existence and controlled them in all their doings. So absolute was his power in the government of the world, and so dependent on him were his creatures that everything that happened was attributed directly to him. If a man suffered, it was because God was punishing him (e.g. XXXVIII.3-4). If he prospered, it was because he had won God's favour (e.g. XLIV.4). But though God upheld and cared for all his creatures, he was peculiarly the God and guardian of his people Israel. He had made an explicit covenant with them promising to reward obedience to his commands with the blessings of victory and peace, of prosperity and plenty, and to punish disobedience by poverty and affliction, as the twenty-sixth chapter of *Leviticus* records in detail. And the word of God, once given, stands firm:

My covenant I will not profane,
Neither will I change what is gone forth from my lips. (LXXXIX.35).

Consequently the just man confidently expected to be rewarded with all the temporal benefits that God had pledged himself to bestow, and as confidently expected the wicked to be struck down in his iniquity. He expected to see God rendering "to a man according to his work" (LXII.13), guarding all that love him and destroying all the wicked (CXLV.20). And, since he knew of no revealed doctrine of a future life where wrongs could be righted, he expected the reckoning to take place in this life, before death made it too late. In practice, however, this did not always happen. There were glaring discrepancies between the merits of men and the treatment they received. The wicked flourished: the just suffered. God punished those who had sought to please him, and heaped his blessings on those who had deserved his punishment. For the Hebrew this apparent failure of God's justice was a mystery, an enigma which puzzled him and caused him, very often, great distress. In the *Psalms* this problem, in one form or another, is constantly recurring, demanding an answer.

The first reaction of the just man when calamity came upon him

¹ The Westminster Version with its numbering (according to the Hebrew) has been used for all quotations, except that Yahweh has been substituted for Jehovah.

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was to connect his misfortune with some sin of his that had deserved punishment. Often he confesses that God's infliction of suffering or defeat is no more than he has deserved :

There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine indignation :
There is no health in my bones because of my sins.
For the flood of mine iniquities hath overwhelmed me :
Like a heavy load they are too heavy for me.
My weals stink and fester
Because of my folly. (XXXVIII.4-5 ; cf. CVII.10, 17.)

But sometimes the psalmist is conscious of no sin to which he can attribute his sufferings—at least no sin great enough to merit such punishment, for there is a proportion between sin and its punishment ; the psalmist's principle of justice, as it is God's own principle, is the *Lex Talionis*. Consequently when he sees this disproportion he declares his innocence and asks for justice :

Hear in justness Yahweh, attend to my cry.
Hearken to my prayer uttered with no guileful lips.
Let my vindication go forth from before thee :
Let thine eyes behold aright.
If thou prove my heart, observing it in the night :
If thou try me, thou wilt find in me no evil purposes. . . .
. . . My steps have held fast to thy tracks :
My feet have not slipped. (XVII.1-3, 5.)

Meanwhile, the wicked are reacting in a completely different way to the just man's plight and to God's apparent lack of interest in the doings of men. Their attitude is one which afflicts the just man still further. They laugh at him for trusting in a God who has no care for him :

All that see me mock at me :
They open wide their lips, they wag their heads :
"He committed himself to Yahweh : let him deliver him !
Let him rescue him, for he delighteth in him !" (XXII.8-9.)

This mockery is hard for the just man to bear, not merely because it is a personal attack upon himself, but also because it is a blasphemy against God. In mocking him for having been deceived by God's promises, his mockers impute deception and faithlessness to God who promised, and suggest that he is indifferent to injustice. Acting on this belief they deny God's providence :

The fool [and that means the wicked] hath said in his heart :
There is no God ! (XIV.1.)

That is : there is no God who is interested in man's doings, who cares whether a man keeps the Law or not. We can do what we like :

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They say, "Yahweh seeth not,
Neither doth the God of Jacob perceive." (xciv.7.)

We can say what we like : "Our lips are our own : who is lord over us ?" (xii.5).

God hath forgotten :
He hath hidden his face, he never seeth. (x.ii.)

And indeed it does seem as if God has forgotten, as if he has made void his covenant and deserted his servants. The wicked are encouraged by their uninterrupted success, and the ordinary people seeing it are led to follow their example :

All have turned aside, they are become corrupt together,
There is none that doth good,
There is not even one. (xiv.3 ; cf. lxxiii.10.)

This deplorable state of affairs leads the psalmist to expostulate with God :

Why standest thou afar off, Yahweh,
Hiding thyself in times of distress ? . . .
For the wicked boasteth of his covetousness,
And in his greed curseth, nay, contemneth Yahweh . . .
Arise, Yahweh : O God, lift up thy hand :
Forget not the cry of the needy.
Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God
And say in his heart, "Thou wilt not require it ?" (x.i, 3, 12, 13.)

My Lord, how long wilt thou look on ? (xxxv.17.)

And he calls on God to make it clear to all the world that God is not mocked, and that he is still executing justice, still hating the wicked and frustrating their designs, still loving the just man and bringing him happiness :

Let men know unto the ends of the earth
That God ruleth in Jacob. (lix.14.)

And men shall say, "Verily there is a reward for the just :
Verily there is a God that judgeth on the earth !" (lviii.12.)

Since the only way that men can be brought to see this is by the visible failure and violent overthrow of the wicked, for this the psalmist prays with all his heart :

Condemn them, O God :
Let them fail in their counsels. (v.ii.)

Requite them according to their iniquity. (lvi.8.)

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O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God . . .
Men who rebel against thee with wicked intent. (CXXXIX.19, 20.)

He speaks against all the workers of iniquity with the language of a violent hatred, and is he not right to do so? Has he not, in fact, a duty to do so? For he is moved not by any spirit of personal revenge, but by zeal for God's honour which his enemies blaspheme. Psalm CXXXIX expresses well the motive behind his savage imprecations :

Do I not hate those who hate thee,
And loathe those who rise up against thee?
With utter hatred I hate them :
To me they are enemies. (CXXXIX.21, 22.)

Such an attitude is a natural result of the vehemence of his desire to see God vindicating his good name, fulfilling his promises and manifesting his justice, and a sign of the firmness of the confidence with which he believes that God is just and faithful, and the irreconcilable enemy of evil.

This confidence is the constant theme of the psalmist. It is perhaps the dominant characteristic of the psalter. God is God, the unshakable rock of justice. He stands firm however men rebel against him. However injustice seems to be successful, his justice will inevitably prevail. Sometimes this confidence is so great that it allows no room for any doubt or impatience or anxiety.

God is our refuge and our strength,
A very present help in troubles :
Therefore shall we not fear, though the earth should change,
And the mountains be moved into the heart of the seas. (XLVI.2, 3.)

For Yahweh will not abandon his people,
Neither will he forsake his possession :
For judgement shall again be just,
And all the upright of heart shall follow it. (XCIV.14, 15.)

The first answer of the just man, then, to the problem of the apparent failure of God's retributive justice is : "Trust in God". This is not strictly an answer at all. Rather it is a refusal to admit that a problem exists. It may be that appearances suggest that justice has failed, but in reality, so long as God is God, justice cannot fail, for "God is a just judge" (VII.12). In spite of all appearance he will eventually punish the wicked and reward the just as their works deserve.

But there are times when evil is so triumphantly successful that the psalmist cannot deny that there is a problem to be answered. On

these occasions, in order to sustain his own confidence and to counteract the envious longings of the common people, he works out his answer in more detail. In Psalm XLIX, for example, the psalmist, speaking as a teacher, encourages his hearers not to exchange God's protection for the protection that wealth can give. He recognizes in his solemn announcement to "all the dwellers in the world" which introduces the Psalm that the subject is one which puzzles men :

I will incline mine ear to a mystery :
I will expound a riddle upon the lyre. (XLIX.5.)

Why do worldly men who ignore God enjoy such untroubled security? On the face of it, it seems as if a happy life is ensured by the possession of wealth and not by obedience to God.

The psalmist's answer is that wealth, in spite of its apparent power, is frail and helpless, and the wealthy man, in spite of his apparent stability, is "like the chaff, which the wind driveth away" (I.4).

For the man in honour abideth not :
He is like to the beasts that pass away. (XLIX.13, 21.)

For all his wealth he must one day die and leave his goods to another :

For the ransom of a life is too costly,
And shall never be paid. (v. 9.)

Though he may have lived in affluence :

And men praised him, because it went well with him,
Yet shall he go to the abode of his fathers,
Who shall nevermore see the light.
The man in honour abideth not :
He is like to the beasts that pass away. (vv. 19-21.)

Since wealth is powerless to overcome death, it would be folly to prefer its protection to that of God, who has power over life and death. God can and will do for the just man what wealth cannot do for the rich man :

But my life God will ransom
From the power of the nether-world,
For he will take me. (v. 16.)

In Psalm xxxvii it is again this aspect of the illusory and transient character of the wicked's prosperity that the psalmist emphasises. First comes the acknowledgement of the temptation to envy the wicked their prosperity, and of the danger of becoming exasperated by it.

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Fret not thyself because of evil-doers :
Be not jealous of the workers of unrighteousness. (xxxvii. 1.)

Desist from anger, and forsake wrath :
Vex not thyself—it leadeth but to evil. (v. 8.)

And^v again the constant advice to have confidence is given :

Trust in Yahweh, and do good. (v. 3.)

Be resigned to Yahweh, and hope in him. (v. 7.)

In the rest of the psalm the psalmist provides the reasons for trust, developing at some length the double theme that :

Evil doers shall be cut off,
But they who look to Yahweh shall possess the land. (v. 9.)

This is the refrain of his song.

First, the success of the wicked is short-lived,

For the wicked shall perish,
And their seed shall beg bread :
Yea, the enemies of Yahweh shall be as the splendour of the meadows :
They shall vanish as smoke. (v. 20.)

Secondly, by contrast, the reward of the just is lasting,

For Yahweh loveth right,
And forsaketh not his pious ones.
The unrighteous shall be destroyed for ever,
And the seed of the wicked shall be cut off.
The just shall possess the land,
And shall dwell thereon for ever. (vv. 28-9.)

This contrast between the seed of the wicked begging bread and being cut off and that of the just dwelling on the land forever was a consoling one for the Hebrews. For even though the wicked man himself lived out his days unscathed, yet if he suffered in his posterity the balance of justice was redressed, for a man was considered to live on in his children, they were part of him, an extension of himself.

This second answer which the just man gives, or rather the considerations with which he supports his confidence, namely that the prosperity of the wicked will not last forever, does not explain the mystery. It provides a persuasive argument against the temptation to envy, by showing that anything so ephemeral as the prosperity of the wicked is not enviable when compared with the unfailing permanence of the blessings that are bestowed by God. It is however essentially a negative answer. It teaches that the wicked man is not as happy as

he appears, but it does not explain why he should be happy at all, nor, still less, why the just man should be suffering.

There is, however, a fuller and more positive answer, which is best put forward in Psalm LXXIII. In this psalm the psalmist has felt the force of the temptation acutely. He has in fact been so sorely tempted by the prosperity and unchecked violence of the wicked that he declares that he was on the point of giving up his belief in God's goodness to those who kept his commandments. All his painful efforts to live a good life seemed to him to have been a waste of time :

My feet had almost stumbled,
My steps had wellnigh slipped :
For I was envious of the boasters,
When I beheld the prosperity of the wicked. (LXXIII.2, 3.)

Surely in vain have I kept my heart clean,
And have washed my hands in innocence !
For I am stricken all the day,
And chastised every morning. (vv. 13, 14.)

He struggled against this temptation to despair, but it remained a perplexity in his eyes (v. 16), until in the Temple God revealed to him the truth. In the light of the revelation he sees the folly of his envying the wicked, for, in the first place, the wicked are doomed to a sudden and unhappy end [so much is a repetition of the argument in Psalm XXXVII and Psalm XLIX]. But, secondly (and this is the positive teaching), the just man, whether he prospers or not, merely by possessing God possesses the highest good that any man is capable of. In one of the most beautiful passages of the psalter the psalmist tells of the transcendent happiness of his companionship with God :

Yet am I always with Thee :
Thou holdest my right hand.
Thou guidest me with thy counsel,
And afterwards shalt receive me into glory.
What have I in heaven but thee ?
And having Thee, I delight in nought upon earth.
My flesh and my heart faileth,
But God is my portion for ever. (vv.23-6.)

Here the psalmist is not merely trusting in God to punish the wicked and reward the just at some future date. He sees in the flash of revelation that, here and now, for all his prosperity, the wicked man is miserable, and that the just man for all his suffering is, here and now, happy, made blessed by his possession of the greatest good. Already in Psalm XXXVII.16 the sentiment is expressed :

Better is the little of the just
Then the great abundance of the wicked.

And this insight into the true nature of things is shown also in Psalm XVII, where the psalmist contrasts his own desire for God with the worldly ambitions of carnal men. His portion is God, but their—

. . . portion in life is of this time,
 Whose belly thou fillest with thy treasure,
 Who are satisfied with sons,
 And bequeath their abundance to their children.
 But myself, in justness may I behold thy face,
 May I be satisfied, upon awaking, with thy form. (XVII, 14, 15.)

The wicked, that is, enjoy all those earthly blessings commonly regarded as being the reward of God's favour. But these in the psalmist's view do not compare with the possession of God, their source. He has seen, at last, that though these benefits are signs of God's favour, they do not constitute it, and he has realised that the reality of God's favour is far more precious than any external sign of it.

It is true that he was sometimes bewildered and saddened by the reflection that this ineffable companionship with God must one day come to an end in the dark silence of Sheol (e.g. XXXIX ; LXXXIX.47 sqq.), for that was the only doctrine of an after life to which he could appeal. Yet in spite of the incomprehensible separation from God that he expected death to bring he is so carried away in his moments of exaltation, so vividly conscious of the truth that God is the greatest good, and life with him the only true happiness, that death fades from his view. Some commentators (e.g. Mgr Bird on Psalm LXXXIII in the *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*) believe that in these moments of inspiration the psalmist found and expressed the solution to the problem of retribution in rewards and punishments after this life. If this be so then the Psalms contain the fullest and most complete answer to the problem that man can give, and the psalmist was the first of the inspired writers in the Old Testament to attain to a knowledge of the truth. Other Catholic writers, however (e.g. E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J. *The Old Testament and the Future Life*), give good reasons for believing that this claim cannot be maintained, and it seems most probable that the psalmist did not envisage any future state of happiness that would compensate for present sorrow. If he did not, then the solution he gives, although less complete, is even more admirable. Without any concrete hope of future settlement, without any promise of reward, he acts with utter purity of intention. He expects no reward and asks for none. His only desire is to be with God. He has known and savoured the truth that

For me, to approach unto God is good. (LXXXIII.28.)

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And absorbed in that truth he prescinds from death and Sheol, and sets earthly prosperity at naught. He has learnt, in the sublime words of Psalm LXIII.4, that "Thy kindness is better than life".

This then is the profoundest and most satisfying answer to the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the just that the Psalms contain. Without knowledge of a future life of reward and punishment, it was not possible for the psalmist to give the only completely satisfactory solution to the problem. Yet in spite of the limitations of the revelation made to him, he possessed in his recognition that God was the source of all good and friendship with him the supreme happiness of man, an answer which not only set at rest all his own troubled questionings, but which, in God's providence, was the seed from which sprang the fruit of the later revelation of eternal happiness with God.

Thou makest known to me the way of life :
In thy presence is fulness of joys,
In thy right hand are delights for evermore. (XVI.II.)

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