E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (EHASS)
ISSN – Online 2720-7722 | Print 2821-8949
Volume 6 Issue 9 2025 pp 2044 - 2057
Available online at: https://noyam.org/journals/ehass/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20256922

A Critical Evaluation of Retributive Theology in the Book of Job: Implications for Ghanaian Christians

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ABSTRACT

In Ghana, the widespread retribution worldview—asserting that suffering is a direct consequence of sin—continues to shape the theological understanding of many Christians. While this belief offers a seemingly simple explanation for misfortune, it fails to account for the lived reality in which many morally upright individuals experience intense suffering. This creates theological ambiguity and pastoral challenges in addressing pain and injustice. The Book of Job, which presents the story of a blameless man who endures immense suffering, offers a critical counter-narrative to this deterministic view. The paper sought to explore Job's experience of (undeserved) suffering through a textual and contextual approach, combining a close analysis of selected texts in the Book of Job with a comparative examination of its theological themes in relation to the contemporary Ghanaian setting. The main argument is that the theology of retribution, which assumes a direct link between sin and suffering, is inadequate for explaining the complexities of human suffering—as demonstrated in the Book of Job—and needs to be reexamined in the Ghanaian context to develop a more theologically sound and pastorally sensitive understanding of divine justice and human pain. The study is important for reorienting Ghanaian Christian theology and practice toward a more nuanced and biblically grounded understanding of suffering, divine justice, and human experience.

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Publication History
Received:
12th April, 2025
Accepted:
16th July, 2025
Published:
28th August, 2025

To Cite this Article:
Boaheng, Isaac. "A Critical Evaluation of Retributive Theology in the Book of Job: Implications for Ghanaian Christians," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 6, no. 9 (2025): 2044 - 2057, https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20256922.

Keywords: Book of Job, Ghana, human suffering, Retributive Justice, Sin

INTRODUCTION

The problem of human suffering has long preoccupied theological reflection, particularly in contexts where the cause of suffering is often interpreted through a moral and spiritual lens. In Ghanaian Christianity, one prevailing interpretation is the retributive principle—the belief that suffering is a direct consequence of sin, and that prosperity is a reward for righteousness. This outlook is not only rooted in traditional religious thought but also reinforced by certain strands of Christian teaching. More often than not, divine justice, personal hardship, and moral responsibility are understood in retributive terms. This sometimes results in stigmatization, psychological issues and hopelessness.

Since life's realities often challenge this view (as countless faithful individuals endure suffering without apparent wrongdoing), there is a need to examine the effectiveness of the retributive principle in explaining suffering among humans. In this regard, the Book of Job provides a good model for discussion. The book presents a strong critique of retributive justice by presenting the story of a blameless man who suffers intensely without cause. Job's experience disrupts the theological certainty that moral behavior guarantees blessing and that suffering is always punitive.

This research, therefore, was conducted to explore the implications that the retributive principle presented in the Book of Job might have for the Ghanaian Christian context. The paper explored Job's experience of undeserved suffering through a textual and contextual approach, combining close analysis of selected passages from the Book of Job with a comparative examination of its theological themes in relation to the contemporary Ghanaian context. It contends that the retributive view proves inadequate in capturing the complex realities of human affliction, as illustrated in Job's experience.

BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF JOB

The Book of Job is one of the oldest books of wisdom literature in the Bible. While its precise date of composition is uncertain, scholars generally consider it a postexilic book.[1] However, the setting of the story itself appears to be much earlier, possibly during the patriarchal period (around 2000–1000 BCE).[2] This view is supported by Job's lifestyle, wealth in livestock (1:3), and the absence of Israelite cultic or covenantal references, indicating a non-Israelite, possibly Edomite or north Arabian context.

The setting in the land of Uz—a region outside Israel—emphasizes the universal scope of the book. The man Job is not identified as an Israelite, which opens the message of the book beyond national or covenantal boundaries and makes its theological themes accessible to all humanity. The historical context of Israel's exile may also shape the book's themes. The trauma of exile, when Israel experienced loss, displacement, and apparent divine silence, may have prompted renewed theological reflection on the meaning of suffering, justice, and faithfulness—key concerns in the Book of Job.

Job is a literary masterpiece, rich in poetic depth and dramatic structure.[3] Its unique composition blends various genres—narrative, legal disputation, lament, hymn, and wisdom poetry—making it one of the most complex books in the Hebrew Bible.[4] It opens and closes with prose narrative (chps. 1–2; 42:7–17), which frames the central poetic dialogues. This prose frame introduces Job as a righteous man who suffers inexplicably, setting up the central theological dilemma. The bulk of the book (3:1–42:6) is written in high Hebrew poetry, featuring emotionally intense and philosophically rich dialogues between Job and his three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These speeches follow a cyclical pattern, each friend responding to Job and Job replying in turn, though the structure becomes more fragmented as the dialogue progresses—perhaps reflecting the breakdown of the conversation itself.

The book uses a range of literary features to express its deep emotional and theological themes. It is marked by Hebrew parallelism, where poetic lines reflect or contrast each other (3:11). Imagery and metaphor are also prominent, helping convey Job's suffering and human frailty, as seen in comparisons like a weaver's shuttle (7:6) or wind (7:7). Irony plays a key role too, especially in the confident but flawed arguments of Job's friends, which God ultimately rejects (42:7).[5] The book includes powerful monologues, such as Job's own speeches (10; 13) and Elihu's lengthy discourse (32–37), which add to the diversity of thought. The climax comes with God's speeches from the whirlwind, rich with rhetorical questions and creation imagery (chps. 38–41), emphasizing divine sovereignty and human limitation. Altogether, these features help the reader wrestle with life's big questions and the mystery of suffering.

Job's life invites believers into a deep and honest conversation about life's hardest questions, especially why good people sometimes suffer. It does not give easy answers. Instead, it challenges the common belief that if an individual is suffering, they must have done something wrong. Job's story reminds believers that life doesn't always follow neat moral rules. Central to the book is a picture of God's sovereignty—God is bigger and wiser than humans can ever fully grasp (chps. 38–41).[6] It also humbles believers with the reminder that human wisdom is limited (chp. 28). Not all suffering fits into

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[1] R. A. F. MacKenzie and Roland E. Murphy, "Job" In Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* pp. 466-488 (Ibadan: Society of St. Paul, 2011), 467.

[2] Roy B. Zuck, "Job" In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament,* edited by John F. Walvood and Roy B. Zuck pp. 715-777 (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 716-717.

[3] For more on the structure of Job consult Gregory W. Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (550) (1981) 139-157.

[4] For more on this consult William S. Lasor, David A. Hubbard and Frederick W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey*: *The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 486-487; see also Zuck, "Job," 715-716.

[5] MacKenzie and Murphy, "Job," 467.

[6] See Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 143-144.

categories of punishment or sin; some pain remains a mystery. And yet, Job's story shows believers that true faith holds on—not because things are easy, but because of who God is (13:15). In the end, Job doesn't get all the answers he wanted, but he does get something deeper: an encounter with God that transforms him (42:1–6). For readers today, especially in cultures where suffering is often linked to guilt or spiritual failure, Job encourages readers to trust God through the mystery, to lament honestly, and to value relationships with God over quick explanations.

RETRIBUTION THEOLOGY IN THE SPEECHES OF JOB'S FRIENDS

The expression retribution theology (principle/justice) refers to the belief that people ultimately get what they deserve in life. According to this theological framework, the righteous—those who are faithful, upright, or obedient—will experience prosperity, such as good health, success, fruitful crops, or harmonious families. In contrast, the wicked—those who are unfaithful or morally corrupt—will suffer, whether through personal misfortune or larger calamities. This principle frames life's outcomes as directly tied to one's moral and spiritual conduct: the righteous prosper, and the wicked suffer.

Job's three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—consistently affirm the principle of retributive justice. Therefore, they ascribed his suffering to his sin. N.F. Schmidt and P.J. Nel assert that, "It is important to realise that both Job and his friends place themselves wholly under the doctrine of retribution, as some religious belief practiced by God according to the retributive principle of moral order."[7] Even though they all espouse a form of retribution principle, each friend draws upon tradition, personal observations, or their theological beliefs to a different account of God's relation to Job in his suffering. Eliphaz focuses on personal experience (4:8; cf. 5:3; 15:7)[8] and inherited wisdom, Bildad defends God's justice, and Zophar urges Job to acknowledge hidden sins. This section examines the key elements of their perspectives on retribution.

Eliphaz's perspective of retributive theology is one in which suffering is understood as both punitive and restorative. John E. Hartley echoes this sentiment by asserting that, "Misfortune is God's rod of discipline; it reveals his loving character for humanity in that he does not let a person go to the grave without exerting great effort to make that person aware of the consequences of his sinful acts."[9] This understanding limits the purpose of pain—at least for the devout—to divine instruction.[10] Consequently, Eliphaz has little patience for Job's cries of innocence as he interprets them as resistance to God's corrective love.

His theological assumptions leave no room for the possibility that Job's suffering could be undeserved. His theological conviction is rooted in the idea of the universal sinfulness of humanity (5:17-26).[11] During his first speech (4:7–9), Eliphaz sets the tone for the dialogues with rhetorical questions that imply a moral certainty: "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?" (4:7). His answer is implicit—none. The above questions underline his strong commitment to the doctrine of retribution, wherein "the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer hardship in this life and face a premature death (4:7–21)."[12] He reinforces this with an agricultural metaphor: "As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more" (4:8–9 NIV). This text strongly echoes the principle of sowing and reaping that underpins retributive justice. Eliphaz gives hope that if Job were to confess and turn back to God, his fortunes could be restored—a view that underscores his belief in God's readiness to reward the penitent (cf. 5:9-26).

In his second speech, Eliphaz reiterates and elaborates the fate of the wicked in vivid, poetic imagery. In Job 15:21-35, he outlines seventeen of the troubles that befall the wicked to present a grim picture of their fate.[13] He describes how they are haunted by terror (v.21), destined for destruction (v.22),

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[7] Nicolaas Fryer Schmidt and Philip J. Nel, "Divine Darkness in the Human Discourses of Job," Acta Theologica 36(2) (2016):125-147, 134. DOI: http://dx.doi. org/10.4314/actat.v36i2.7

[8] Zuck, "Job," 725.

[9] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 125.

[10] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 125.

[11] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 104, 129.

[12] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 104; see also Zuck, "Job," 725.

[13] Zuck, "Job," 725

and unable to escape the darkness (v.22). They wander in search of food with no hope of finding it (v.23), and their lives are marked by distress and anguish (v.24). Their arrogance leads them to defy God (v.25), and they charge against Him with pride (v.26). Their wealth and indulgence cannot save them, and their cities are left in ruins (v.27–28). Even their riches and accomplishments are meaningless, as they will never enjoy the fruits of their labor (v.29–31). They are likened to a vine stripped of its fruit (v.33) and ultimately give birth to evil and deceit (v.35). Eliphaz's picture reflects a worldview in which wickedness inevitably leads to divine retribution, though this view is later corrected by God himself in the broader context of the book.

The retributive theology here is not only affirmed but dramatized. Eliphaz presents wickedness as a psychological burden that leads to divine punishment. He further describes the wicked as arrogant, defiant of God, and ultimately crushed by divine wrath. Importantly, Eliphaz implies that Job's suffering matches the fate described here, thus insinuating that Job must fall into the same moral category. In this context, Eliphaz contends that "Job must be struck with spiritual blindness and dark stupidity for wanting to regress to a state of cosmic chaos (cf. 15:4; 22:30)."[14] This reveals Eliphaz's increasing frustration and his view that Job's resistance to the retributive framework borders on blasphemy or madness. His accusations intensify from general theological assertions to personal condemnation, showing how rigid adherence to retribution theology can lead to pastoral insensitivity and misjudgment.

Bildad's understanding of the doctrine of retribution shapes his high view of God's justice. David J.A. Clines writes, "The moral universe, in Bildad's theology, is founded upon the principle of retribution."[15] This theological assumption undergirds Bildad's opening rhetorical questions: "Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?" (8:3 NIV). The obvious answer, for Bildad, is no—God is perfectly just, and his justice is never compromised. His central argument "…is that all God's ways are just."[16] According to Hartley, Bildad appeals to "the teaching of the fathers (vv. 8-10) and on the ways of nature (vv. 11-29)."[17] Bildad applies this principle directly to Job's case in verses 4–6: "When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin. But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state" (NIV). His argument is stark and unsettling: Job's children died because they sinned, and Job himself must be afflicted due to personal unrighteousness. Clearly, for Bildad, the principle of retributive justice is absolute—he holds that the righteous will always experience blessing, while the wicked will invariably face punishment.[18] Since God is inherently just and cannot act unjustly, Bildad is convinced that divine responses to human actions are always appropriate and deserved. He assumes that God is fully aware of Job's suffering and has permitted it as a just consequence of Job's own behavior. Within this rigid theological framework, Bildad can only conclude that Job's affliction is proof of guilt because, in his view, anyone who suffers must have sinned.[19] Against this backdrop, Bildad rejects Job's protestations of innocence (cf. 6:10) and rebukes his complaints about God's harsh treatment (7:12, 17–18, 20).[20] He even implies that Job is veering into blasphemy by maintaining his integrity in the face of divine judgment. In 8:6, Bildad insists that "if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state." Hartley explains that this promise directly connects Job's prosperity to his moral integrity, implying that his estate is a reflection of his righteousness.[21]

Later, in a powerful poetic discourse (18:5–21), Bildad intensifies his theological stance with a vivid portrayal of the fate of the wicked, saying, "The lamp of a wicked man is snuffed out" (v. 5). This statement introduces a grim sequence of calamities that inevitably await evildoers: snares entrap them, terrors haunt them, disease and death overtake them, and ultimately, their memory is wiped from the earth. In verse 18, Bildad warns that Job is being driven "from light into darkness," and insists that

[14] Schmidt and Nel, "Divine Darkness in the Human Discourses of Job," 134.
[15] David J.A. Clines, *Job 1-20: Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 202.
[16] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 153.
[17] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 153; see also Zuck, "Job," 729.
[18] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 153.
[19] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 156.
[20] Clines, *Job 1-20*, 202.
[21] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 156.

"terrors" and the emissaries of death await him because he failed to repent before God (cf. 18:6, 18). The closing verse delivers a chilling pronouncement: "Surely such is the dwelling of an evil man, such is the place of one who does not know God" (v. 21 NIV). Bildad's discourse is a dramatic enactment of retributive justice, where divine punishment is thorough, inescapable, and morally justified. His message is not just theological but moralistic and accusatory—Job is warned, judged, and implicitly urged to repent.

Zophar is the most blunt and uncompromising in his application of the retribution principle to Job's situation. According to Clines, "Zophar believes he owes it to God to take up the cudgels on God's behalf and to defend God's integrity. The impropriety of Job's arguments against God convinces Zophar of the propriety of his speech against Job."[22] He focuses on what has been described as "the negative tenet of the doctrine of retribution, the certain punishment of the wicked."[23] He presents God as a strict enforcer of divine justice, seemingly eager to "pronounce the final sentence against the evildoer."[24] On this point, Clines observes, "So locked into the retributionist dogma is Zophar that he cannot see Job as a sufferer but only as a guilty man. His language to describe what is happening to Job is legal because he has moved instantly from his perception of Job's distress to a theological interpretation of that distress as divine judgment."[25]

His main argument is that God assigns the "portion" or "fate" (Heb: *ḥēleq*) of the wicked.[26] The Hebrew word *ḥēleq* denotes "a person's rightful share,"[27] reinforcing Zophar's belief that divine justice ensures every individual receives what they deserve. From this perspective, God does not overlook the punishment of the wicked. Although Job laments that the wicked seem to flourish, Zophar counters that their apparent success is temporary and will ultimately be overturned.[28] Thus, Zophar, like the other friends, interprets Job's suffering as the just consequence of his sin.[152]

In 11:3, Zophar expresses frustration that no one has yet rebuked Job for his bold words. In 11:5–6, he expresses a wish that God would speak directly to Job: "Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin" (NIV). Though Zophar claims to uphold the justice of an all-knowing God, his statement ironically suggests that he presumes to know better how God should respond to Job's complaints. His indignation, therefore, appears less as a reflection of divine wisdom and more as a projection of his own rigid theological convictions—an indignation that is, at best, debatably righteous. Zophar's statement assumes that Job is guilty of more than he realizes. The final line is particularly cutting—far from being unjust in afflicting Job, God has been merciful by not fully punishing him. This represents a severe application of retributive justice, where even suffering is framed as leniency rather than cruelty. Zophar's logic intensifies the theological dilemma: if Job is suffering this much and yet God has withheld further punishment, then Job must be exceedingly sinful. This passage underscores a deterministic view of divine justice, where mercy is redefined as restrained punishment.

Having examined the speeches of Job's friends, it becomes clear that their rigid application of retribution theology reduces suffering to a direct result of sin. Their arguments reflect a conventional worldview that fails to account for the complexity of human experience and divine justice. However, the narrative does not end with their perspective. In contrast to his friends, Job offers a profound theological challenge to this deterministic view. The following section explores how Job's responses and personal lament disrupt the retribution framework and present a deeper, more nuanced approach to understanding suffering and righteousness.

[22] Clines, *Job 1-20*, 260.
[23] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 309.
[24] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 309.
[25] Clines, *Job 1-20*, 264.
[26] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 308.
[27] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 308-309.
[28] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 309.

JOB'S CHALLENGE TO RETRIBUTION THEOLOGY

Job speaks in at least 23 of the book's 42 chapters, and much of what he says takes the form of lament. His words give voice to the raw emotional and theological struggle of a person facing immense suffering. Mark Vroegop describes lament as "the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness."[29] Job's lament, then, is not just an emotional expression—it reveals the depth of his theology. As Vroegop puts it, "lament is rooted in what we believe. It is a prayer loaded with theology."[30] Lament is a means by which believers affirm that the world is broken, that God is powerful, and that he will remain faithful. Lament, therefore, inhabits the space between suffering and hope.

Job's lament portrays his friends as enemies who are only blaming him and make no attempt to intercede for him. Hartley identifies the following elements in Job's laments: "a vivid description of one's suffering (6:2-4; 7:3-6), the expression of distress at the behavior of one's friends (6:14-30), the anticipation of death (6:11-13; 7:8-10), and accusations against God (6:4; 7:11-16)."[31] In his lament, Job also argues that God has strategically attacked him. Through a number of analogies of God striking him with arrows or marshaling orders against him (6:4) he makes his point clear. Job seems to experience his relationship with God as deeply impersonal, as though he has become an object rather than a person in God's sight. Hartley writes, "He feels that he is no longer in an I-Thou relationship with God, but in an I-it relationship. God acts toward him as though he were merely a practice target."[32]

Contrary to his friends' belief that his suffering is due to his sin, Job argues that his suffering is unjust and cannot be explained by the traditional doctrine of retribution. His argument is "I am blameless, yet I suffer. Therefore, either the world is not governed by simple retributive justice, or God's ways are beyond human understanding—and I deserve an answer." In 9:22-24, Job presents a compelling challenge to the doctrine of retributive justice. He asserts, "It is all the same; that is why I say, 'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.'" This observation highlights Job's existential struggle, as he sees no moral distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous in their suffering. For Job, the seemingly indiscriminate nature of his suffering compels him to abandon the hope that suffering is always a direct consequence of personal wrongdoing. He acknowledges that both the innocent and the guilty face similar fates under divine authority. Here, Job questions the fairness of his own situation and critiques the widespread belief that divine justice operates transparently, with rewards and punishments clearly aligned with moral behavior.

In chapter 10, Job poses three piercing questions to uncover God's reasoning for allowing his suffering. He first asks, "Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?" (10:3 NIV). It is worthy of note the fact that this is the only instance in the Old Testament where God is made the subject of the verb "oppress." Job wonders if God could possibly find satisfaction in oppressing his own creation. His use of such intense language shows deep anguish and a feeling of abandonment, as one would expect a creator to cherish, not reject, their creation. Job continues this line of thought by asking, "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?" (10:4 NIV). With this question, Job challenges God's perception, implying that divine vision may be fallible, like that of a human—"which is necessarily short-sighted and may see error where there is none, or take a small error for a large."[33] In doing so, Job dares to question God's discernment, suggesting that God might be judging him unfairly. He intensifies the argument further: "Are your days like those of a mortal or your years like those of a strong man, that you must search out my faults and probe after my sin—though you know that I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from your hand?" (10:5–7 NIV). This final question likens God to a human, potentially undermining his eternal nature. If Job is not directly questioning God's immortality, he may be implying that God, in his omniscience, should

[29] Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 26.
[30] Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, 26.
[31] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 130.
[32] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 132.
[33] Duhm cited in David J.A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 245.

not need to apply such harsh scrutiny to know Job's heart.[34] Job's line of argument with such rhetorical force affirms his belief in his own innocence, which he insists is already known to God.[35]

Job 21:7–15 presents one of Job's most pointed critiques of the traditional understanding of divine justice. Here, Job raises a pressing question: "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?" He notices that those who defy God seem to prosper, enjoy long lives, wealth, and influence without facing any repercussions. He uses this to challenge the retributive logic upheld by his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Yet Job sees no clear connection between one's moral character and success in life. As he points out, the wicked appear to live without a care, basking in their riches and power while openly mocking the notion of divine justice. He critiques his friends' retributive theology, arguing from experience that the wicked thrive while the righteous—who one might expect to receive God's favor—suffer immensely. His challenge is theological and personal; if the wicked can prosper while the good people suffer, then the justice systems his friends believe in appear to be fundamentally flawed. He critiques the prosperity of the wicked to underline his disagreement with his friend's understanding of the doctrine of retribution. He states: "But their prosperity is not in their own hands, so I stand aloof from the plans of the wicked" (21:16 NIV). In Hartley's view, because Job rejects the thoughts of the wicked that prosperity is in their own hands, there is no way he can identify with them.[36]

Job 24:1–17 presents a lament regarding the apparent injustice in the world. It underscores the suffering of the righteous alongside the unchecked prosperity of the wicked. In this passage, Job surveys his surroundings and mourns the widespread injustice he perceives. He asks, "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?" (v.1 NIV). This question encapsulates Job's frustration at the absence of immediate retribution for wrongdoers. Job observes that the wicked—those who exploit the poor, steal from the vulnerable, and commit atrocious acts—seem to go unpunished, while the righteous suffer in silence. He witnesses the plight of the poor and oppressed, but the lack of divine intervention leads him to wonder why God does not act swiftly to deliver justice. The image of the wicked thriving, while the righteous are neglected, deepens Job's theological crisis. This passage broadens Job's critique of retributive justice, not only in personal matters but also on a societal level. Job's reflections confront the uncomfortable truth that, in reality, divine justice is not always evident through clear and immediate consequences for wrongdoing.

In Job 31:1–34, 38–40b, Job delivers a confession, not of guilt, but of innocence. Rather than acknowledging wrongdoing, he makes a "negative confession," denying a wide range of sins in order to affirm his moral integrity. He claims he has not committed lust (vv. 1–4), falsehood (vv. 5–6), covetousness (vv. 7–8), or adultery (vv. 9–12). He insists he has not mistreated his servants (vv. 13–15), neglected the poor (vv. 16–18), failed to clothe the needy (vv. 19–20), or acted unjustly toward the vulnerable (vv. 21–23). He denies placing trust in wealth (vv. 24–25), worshipping heavenly bodies (vv. 26–28), rejoicing over the downfall of enemies (vv. 29–30), withholding hospitality (vv. 31–32), concealing sin (vv. 33–34), or abusing the land (vv. 38–40b). Through this sweeping denial, Job asserts that he has lived justly and righteously.[37] His purpose is clear: to refute the accusations of his friends and to emphasize that his suffering cannot be the result of personal sin. This confession strengthens his case against the rigid application of retributive justice, as he maintains his innocence even in the face of intense suffering.

In grappling with the problem of suffering, Job presents two existential and theological responses for consideration. First, Job seeks an explanation from God—an intelligible reason for his pain and loss. This yearning reflects a fear shared by many Ghanaians: that suffering, if unexplained, may seem arbitrary or unjust. Yet, even in the midst of his anguish and unanswered questions, Job's faith in the justice and sovereignty of God does not collapse (cf. 13:23–24; 19:6–7). Second, Job expresses a deep desire for a personal encounter with God, believing that such an experience might grant insight into divine purposes (cf. 9:32–35; 23:3–5). This contrasts with Elihu's counsel that humans must submit to

[34] Clines, *Job*, 246.
[35] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 185.
[36] Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 315.
[37] Hartley. *The Book of Job*, 409.

divine wisdom without expecting a theophanic encounter (33:12–14; 36:26). Significantly when God finally responds (38–42), Job does not receive a straightforward explanation for his suffering. Rather, he is confronted with the overwhelming majesty and mystery of God, which leads him to humility, repentance, and a renewed trust in God's transcendence (42:1–6).

To summarize, Job strongly believes in his own righteousness and refuses to see himself as deserving of the suffering he endures. This commitment creates a dilemma: If he is truly innocent, then either the retribution principle is flawed or God is not acting justly. Instead of rejecting the retribution principle, Job holds tightly to it and then affirms that the righteous should prosper and the wicked should suffer. Job's inability to find fault in the principle itself makes him question God's justice. In effect, he maintains his belief in retribution but challenges God's fairness in applying it.

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIANITY IN GHANA

According to church historians, the planting of Christianity in Ghana was pioneered by Portuguese explorers, merchants, and Catholic missionaries who arrived at the coast in 1482.[38] Agbeti gives reasons for the visit.[39] First, the Portuguese wanted to explore beyond the Canary Islands and Cape Bojador and find a route to India. Second, they were looking for Christian trade partners. Third, their visit was meant to help them determine the strength of their Muslim enemies. Fourth, they sought to form alliances with African Christian princes to aid them in their battles against Muslim adversaries. Fifth, and most importantly, they desired to evangelize Africans. Led by Don Diego d'Azambuja, the Portuguese hoisted their flag on a tree, built an altar, and had their first Eucharistic service under the tree. They visited the chief of Elmina, Nana Kwamena Ansah, and introduced their faith to him. Nana Ansah was encouraged to accept the faith and enjoy, among others, economic and military benefits.[40] The chief accepted the faith and offered them a parcel of land to build a fort and a chapel. The ensuing years witnessed the activities of other Catholic missionaries of the Jesuit, Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, and Capuchin orders.[41] Later, other missionary agencies (including the Basel, Bremen, Wesleyan, and Anglican missionaries) joined in the evangelization of the Gold Coast.

The missionaries introduced formal education, orthodox medicine, African mother-tongue development and literacy, certain species of crops and Bible translation projects, all of which helped in the planting of the Christian faith and the expansion of the church. Through formal education, Ghanaian indigenes like J. W. De Graft Johnson, J.P. Brown and John Mensah Sarbah were equipped to pioneer the formation of the Aborigines' Right Protection Society which opposed British imperialism. The reduction of various Ghanaian indigenous dialects into writing and the production of mother tongue Bibles and other Christian literature allowed Ghanaians to access God's word in their own language and hence, understand it better in their socio-political context.

Nonetheless, the missionary approach used by early missionaries had a lot of setbacks that led to the emergence of African Initiated Churches. With an ethnocentric mindset, the missionaries considered everything African as inferior and contradictory to the gospel. They did not take the African worldview seriously in their pastoral, hermeneutical and theological models. Consequently, the Christianity presented to Ghanaians failed to address the spiritual, psychological, health and economic needs of the people. They forbade their converts from partaking in traditional festivals, singing indigenous songs, drumming, clapping and dancing. They forced their polygamous converts to divorce all their wives, which created a lot of socio-economic problems. They severed their converts from their family ties by forcing them to live in special communities built for Christians, thus undermining the African communal sense of life. Further, the structure of the formal education they introduced ended up segregating the educated from the non-educated.

Responses to this approach to ministry were in the form of confrontations and the search for an African-brewed Christianity to establish a meeting point between the African culture and the biblical worldview. The failure of the historic mainline churches to meet the needs of Ghanaians resulted in the

[38] J. K. Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations 1482-1919* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 4.
[39] Agbeti, *West African Church History,* 3-4.
[40] Agbeti, *West African Church History,* 4.
[41] David N. A. Kpobi, *Mission in Ghana: The Ecumenical Heritage* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2008), 68.

emergence of spiritual churches (Akan: *Sunsum sɔre*), which emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit. The activities of three prophetic figures—namely, Prophets William Wade Harris (the "Black Elijah" of West Africa), John Swatson, and Sampson Oppong—prepared the grounds for the spiritual churches and later Pentecostal churches. The African Initiated Churches (AICs) insisted that "Christianity must become incarnate in African cultures; that Christ is present in every human situation, in every community and every human tradition…that Africans must experience Christ in their own cultural tradition."[42] These churches addressed the existential issues of Africans and allowed for an African expression in Christian theology and praxis.[43] In addition to satisfying the spiritual needs of indigenous converts, the AICs broke the Western dominance over the church in terms of theology, worship style, governance and culture.[44] They allowed their members to sing indigenous songs, dance, drum, and clap at worship services. The AICs gained roots because of the use of the African mother tongue in their liturgy, music and sermons. They were built around charismatic figures whose charisma attracted a large following.[45] The lack of theological education, lack of succession plan, and syncretism were key setbacks that made these churches short-lived, in spite of their effectiveness in addressing African socio-economic and religious needs. The spiritual churches were influential but short-lived.

In the early 1930s, a new brand of Christian ministry emerged in Ghana through the activities of the indigenous precursors of Pentecostalism (named above) and European and American Pentecostal missionary activities.[46] Ghanaian Pentecostal Christianity is characterized by "its belief in the experience of the Holy Spirit and by the normalization of charismatic experience in religious practice."[47] In other words, Pentecostalism emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God by the Christian. This brand of Christianity stresses such pneumatological experiences as speaking in tongues, revelations, prophecies, healing, and exorcism or deliverance. Pentecostal Christianity is experiential, not creedal. Unlike the Spiritual churches, which were syncretic, the Pentecostal churches are more orthodox in belief and biblically based in discipline and practice. The Christ Apostolic Church International, which started in 1917 as the Unity Prayer Group, became the first Pentecostal denomination in Ghana.[48] Today, some prominent Ghanaian Pentecostal churches include the Church of Pentecost, the Assemblies of God Church, and the Apostolic Church.

From the 1960s and 1970s onward, Charismatism (Neo-Pentecostalism) also emerged as a new brand of Christianity. Charismatism, an offshoot of Pentecostalism, emerged from the influence of Pentecostalism on historic mission churches. Prior to Charismatic Christianity, there were a number of renewal groups that had been established in most of the historic mission churches. These groups later provided the founders of Charismatic churches which, like Pentecostal Churches, highlight Holy Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues, healing, deliverance and prophecies.[49] These churches attract middle and high-class people, often use English as the medium of communication, are concentrated in urban areas and are led by charismatic figures.

In recent times, a new brand of Christianity has emerged that is characterized by the leader's frequent visit to the spiritual world, the use of Ghanaian indigenous language (sometimes with Pidgin English), and emphasis on spiritual directions for deliverance and breakthrough purposes. Referred to as "New Prophetic Churches" in this study, these churches are "problem-solving churches" or "solution centres" where people go basically to find solutions to their problems. The leaders live extravagantly, as evidenced by their outfits, mansions, expensive cars, and use of security guards to protect them.

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[42] Aylward. Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (London: G. Chapman, 1975), 22.
[43] Joseph K. Koech, *The Holy Spirit as Liberator: A Study of Luke 4:14-30 in the African Context* (Kijabe: Kijabe Printing Press, 2008), 66.
[44] Koech, *The Holy Spirit as Liberator,* 66.
[45] Koech, *The Holy Spirit as Liberator,* 66.
[46] Richard Foli, *Christianity in Ghana: A Comparative Church Growth Study* (Accra: Trust Publications, 2006), 73.
[47] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Perspective* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013 2013:17).
[48] Peter White, "Centenary of Pentecostalism in Ghana (1917–2017): A case study of Christ Apostolic Church International." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4) (2019), 1. [Accessed online from https://doi. org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5185 on March 20, 2023].
[49] Kingsley E. Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: SAPC, 2001), 296.

As a predominantly Christian country, many Ghanaians look up to the church to provide solutions to the socio-economic and political challenges facing the country. One of the key responses of many Ghanaian churches to the socio-economic difficulties is the prosperity theology. Though the prosperity theology may also be found in other strands of Christianity, it is more prominent in Pentecostal/Charismatic circles. The Pentecostal/Charismatic group forms a high percentage of the Christian population in Ghana, constituting about 44% of Ghanaian Christians.[50]

RETHINKING GHANAIAN RETRIBUTION THEOLOGY

The doctrine of retribution is deeply rooted in the traditional Ghanaian religious worldview, shaped significantly by the belief in spiritual forces that govern the universe. For many Ghanaians, reality consists of two interconnected realms—the visible, physical world of human beings and the invisible, spiritual world inhabited by various entities, including ancestral spirits, deities, and other supernatural beings believed to dwell in sacred spaces such as trees, stones, rivers, tombs, and mountains.[51] These spirits may act benevolently or malevolently, depending on the moral and ritual conduct of individuals and communities.

Like Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar), many Ghanaians often interpret misfortunes (such as poverty, illness, infertility, failure, death, economic hardship, and accidents) as retributive consequences for violating spiritual norms and blessings as rewards for maintaining harmony with the spiritual realm.[52] In this light, when someone falls ill or endures prolonged suffering without finding relief, it is often assumed that the affliction stems from a hidden sin. The poor are also considered to be punished for their sins. Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai et. al have observed that in Ghana, "poverty is seen as a curse (driven in part by sins committed by the poor themselves or by their forefathers)."[53] One has to confess their sin and be delivered from the curse to be freed from the trap of poverty. Many Ghanaian Christians interpreted the outbreak of COVID-19 through a retributive lens, where the pandemic was seen as divine punishment for human sin, immorality, or societal corruption. With this mindset, people who are suffering are usually urged to confess any wrongdoing to be delivered from their predicament.

The notion of retribution is also evident in the Ghanaian religious practice of libation. Among the Akan, libation is not merely a sacred ritual of prayer—it functions as a moral instrument for maintaining cosmic and social balance, often interpreted through the lens of retributive justice.[54] During libatory rites, the officiant appeals to the Almighty, deities, and ancestral spirits not only to request blessings but also to invoke justice, reward, or punishment based on one's conduct. Core to these rituals is the belief that both good and evil actions elicit spiritual consequences. Libation becomes a way of affirming innocence, confessing guilt, or calling for retribution against those who disturb the moral fabric of society.[55] For example, during times of crisis or conflict, libations may be poured to seek divine punishment on wrongdoers or to vindicate the innocent[56]—a clear reflection of retributive thinking in Akan cosmology. This practice has found its way into Ghanaian Christian prayer, where individuals may call down fire or utter curses upon perceived enemies, believing these actions are justified due to

[50] Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), *PHC General Report Vol 3C, Background Characteristics.* Accra: GSS, 2021), 96.

[51] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005. *African Charismatics. Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 168, 179.

[52] Joseph W. Acheampong, *I will pass over you: The relevance of the Passover to the Understanding of Salvation in Contemporary Ghanaian Pentecostalism – A critical Reflection from an Akan Perspective* (Doctor of Theology Thesis: University of Hamburg, 2014), 53. [Accessed online, on 20/4/2020, from https://ediss.sub.uni-hamburg.de/volltexte/2015/7500/pdf/Dissertation.pdf]; Joseph K. Koech, *The Holy Spirit as Liberator: A Study of Luke 4:14-30 in the African Context* (Kijabe: Kijabe Printing Press, 2008), 48.

[53] Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, Adam Salifu, Mohammed Ibrahim, Collins Nunyonameh, Ernestina Dankyi, and Patrick Asuming, *Citizens' Knowledge and Perceptions about Poverty, Vulnerability Rights and Social Protection in Ghana: A Baseline Study* (UNICEF, 2021), 64.

[54] Isaac Boaheng, "An Akan Mother-Tongue Reading of Matthew's Version of the Lord's Prayer (Bono-Twi Translation) in Dialogue with Akan Libation Prayers," *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture (AJRPC)* 2(2) (2021): 41-58, 42-43. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-7644/2021/v2n2a3

[55] Boaheng, "An Akan Mother-Tongue Reading of Matthew's Version of the Lord's Prayer (Bono-Twi Translation) in Dialogue with Akan Libation Prayers," 43.

[56] Boaheng, "An Akan Mother-Tongue Reading of Matthew's Version of the Lord's Prayer (Bono-Twi Translation) in Dialogue with Akan Libation Prayers," 43.

the sin these individuals have allegedly committed against the worshiper.[57] The retributive thinking among Ghanaians leads to a strong cause-and-effect understanding of suffering and prosperity. The uncritical embrace of retributive theology leads to the stigmatization of the vulnerable. Victims of hardship may be suspected of secret sin, witchcraft, or generational curses. This often results in social exclusion, psychological trauma, and exploitation by self-proclaimed prophets offering deliverance for a fee.

Contrary to this position, the story of Job shows that (even though sin may attract divine punishment), suffering can be unrelated to sin. The book underlines that retribution should be understood as proverbial rather than absolute, meaning it reflects how life generally works, not how it always does. The retribution principle is not a divine guarantee or a universal promise. As such, it cannot provide a comprehensive explanation for suffering and evil in the world. In theological terms, it cannot serve as a sufficient theodicy. The narrative of Job, particularly its opening and closing chapters, exposes the limitations of using retributive logic to explain divine justice.

Job 1:1–12 is pivotal to understanding the theological tension at the heart of the book. Job is introduced as "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (1:1), yet God permits Satan to test him by afflicting him with profound loss and suffering. Importantly, this suffering is not a consequence of sin but a divine initiative to test Job's integrity. This challenges the notion that suffering is always the result of personal wrongdoing and opens space for the idea that suffering can be a mystery within the bounds of divine sovereignty. In 2:3, God affirms Job's continued righteousness even after his initial trials, stating, "…he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason" (NIV). This divine admission reveals that Job's suffering was undeserved and not linked to moral failure, thus serving as a further critique of simplistic retributive thinking.

Throughout the book, Job wrestles with this theological dissonance. While he maintains his innocence, he continues to affirm aspects of the retribution principle, expecting that his righteousness should result in divine favor. His crisis, then, is not just personal but theological: if the retribution principle is valid, then God's justice comes into question. Rather than relinquish the principle entirely, Job turns his accusations toward God, suggesting a perceived inconsistency in divine governance. This progression highlights the book's radical distinction between theology (what God is like) and theodicy (why suffering exists).

The conclusion of the book reinforces this critique. In 42:7–9, God rebukes Job's friends, declaring, "You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has" (v.7 NIV). Despite Job's emotional outbursts and bold lamentations, he is commended for speaking rightly about God, while the friends—who rigidly upheld retributive theology—are condemned. This divine verdict not only vindicates Job's moral integrity but also affirms the legitimacy of lament and protest as faithful responses to suffering. The narrative arc—from Job's testing through his sustained integrity to God's final approval—challenges readers to reject overly simplistic interpretations of divine justice. The story of Job thus calls for a more nuanced, humble posture in the face of suffering—one that acknowledges the limitations of human wisdom and the profundity of divine mystery.

This theme appears again in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Luke. In John 9, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who was born blind. Influenced by retributive theology, the disciples ask Jesus whether the man's blindness is the result of his own sin or that of his parents (John 9:2). This is a classic theodicy question, seeking to identify the cause of suffering within a framework of sin and punishment. Jesus, however, decisively redirects the conversation: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). With this response, Jesus shifts the focus from cause to purpose, turning away from backward-looking questions of blame and offering instead a forward-looking vision of divine purpose. Similarly, in Luke 13:1–5, Jesus addresses the tragedy of a tower collapse that killed eighteen people. He refuses to draw a line between the victims' moral status and their deaths, warning instead against making one-to-one correspondences between sin and suffering. Rather than engage in

[57] For more on this consult Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, "Use of Imprecatory Prayers in Contemporary African Christianity: A Critique," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 1(2) (2015): 86-104.

speculative explanations, Jesus calls his listeners to repentance and reflection, underscoring that the significance of suffering lies not in its origin but in its potential to awaken spiritual insight.

In both passages, Jesus challenges the assumptions of retributive theology and encourages a deeper theological perspective—one that aligns closely with the message of the Book of Job. Like Jesus, the book rejects simplistic explanations for suffering and refuses to reduce human pain to a moral calculus. Jesus's subsequent healing of the man not only restored his sight but also became a powerful sign that attracted many to the message of the gospel.[58] Thus, suffering can function evangelistically, creating moments in which the reality of God becomes more evident to others.[59] Both invite readers to move beyond the demand for explanations and instead adopt a posture of reverent trust in God's wisdom and sovereignty. Suffering, in this light, becomes not merely a problem to solve but a mystery to engage—a space in which faith is tested, refined, and sometimes used as a witness to God's glory.

FROM RETRIBUTION TO REDEMPTION

The persistent influence of retributive theology in Ghanaian Christianity—where suffering is often interpreted as divine punishment for personal sin—calls for critical theological reevaluation. In many Ghanaian churches, narratives of prosperity and breakthrough are tightly linked to righteousness, while adversity is viewed with suspicion, often resulting in the stigmatization of the suffering. However, the Book of Job dismantles this simplistic moral calculus by presenting the suffering of a blameless man whose afflictions cannot be explained by the retribution principle. Job's story exposes the inadequacy of equating divine justice solely with immediate rewards or punishments, and instead invites believers to embrace a more nuanced theology that accounts for the mystery of God's ways and the reality of unmerited suffering.

Within this framework, a redemptive theological model rooted in Job offers an alternative vision for Ghanaian Christianity—one that emphasizes integrity, faith, and the sovereignty of God even amidst loss and uncertainty. Job's refusal to abandon God despite his unanswered questions becomes a paradigm of faithful endurance, challenging the prosperity-driven faith that dominates much of contemporary religious discourse. For the Ghanaian context, this shift from retribution to redemption fosters a pastoral theology that prioritizes compassion over condemnation and spiritual resilience over material reward. It reorients Christian communities toward a deeper trust in God's justice and grace, especially when outcomes defy human logic. Such a reformation is not only theologically sound but also necessary for shaping a more compassionate and authentic Christian witness in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Job offers a critical theological lens through which Ghanaian Christians can re-evaluate prevailing assumptions about suffering and success. It challenges the widespread belief that suffering is always a consequence of personal sin, affirming instead that even the most faithful individuals may endure profound hardship for purposes beyond human understanding. This theological insight invites believers to respond to the suffering of others not with blame or simplistic answers, but with compassion, humility, and empathy. Furthermore, Job's narrative critiques the cultural conflation of wealth with divine favor—a view that often legitimizes unethical practices under the guise of "breakthrough." By upholding integrity and faithfulness in the absence of immediate reward, Job models a resilient and God-centered faith. His story thus calls Christians to embrace a deeper understanding of divine justice and to cultivate a faith that remains steadfast, even when God's purposes are hidden and circumstances are bleak.

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[58] Isaac Boaheng, "Oral Theology in the African Church: An Examination of the Divine Attributes in the Song Yehowa by Suzzy and Matt," *Conspectus: Journal of South African Theological Seminary* (2024): 36.
[59] Boaheng, Oral Theology in the African Church," 36.

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