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REPENSER LA RÉTRIBUTION

RETHINKING RETRIBUTION

ÉDITÉ PAR / EDITED BY

SOPHIE RAMOND
RÉGIS BURNET
EMANUELLE PASTORE



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INTRODUCTION

This book is the fruit of two colloquia held at the Institut Catholique de Paris (Catholic University of Paris) on 7-8 January 2020 and 18-19 March 2021.

The idea of retribution appears to be well grounded in biblical texts and Ancient Near Eastern literature. However, the concept is so familiar in the western world and Judeo-Christian culture that the possibility cannot be excluded that it is being incorrectly used to characterise the contents of texts or to qualify their theology. If the etymology of the term *re-tribuere* literally means "to pay/to give in return", and if retribution is thus that which is received in return (reward or punishment) for a specific act, how can retribution be defined with greater precision to probe the texts of the Bible and the corpus of the Ancient Near East? Which lexical registers would serve, in the latter, to give it consistency? What criteria should be used to justify reading a text through the prism of this notion?

It therefore seemed important to begin with a deconstruction process which encompasses the definition of the idea of retribution as well as the scope of the corpus of texts of the Bible and neighbouring cultures which refer to it. For this reason the first series of contributions in this book attempts to clarify the idea of retribution and to engage in philological and lexical studies in order to propose a reasoned definition of the concept.

Patrick Pouchelle examines the choices made by the translators of the Septuagint in interpreting the Hebrew language expressions in biblical literature related to the idea of divine retribution. He studies the use of ἀνταποδίδωμι and the verb from which it is derived, ἀποδίδωμι, words of the same lexical family, in Greek literature, in papyri, and then in the Pentateuch. While the notion of divine retribution appears to be multifaceted in Hebrew, it seems more unified in Greek, with ἀποδίδωμι and ἀνταποδίδωμι having provided Greek-speaking Judaism with a sufficiently precise technical vocabulary.

Matthieu Richelle shows that the prophetic corpus, although infused from one end to the other with the idea of retribution, nonetheless contains elements of a counter-discourse which contests certain aspects of the concept. The prophetic texts make clear the perplexing difficulties of this notion and especially its inability to express the entirety of what was understood of

divine will in relation to human beings. Richelle thus explores the "crash test" to which the prophetic corpus subjects the notion of retribution and the effects which it produces.

Sophie Ramond proposes a preliminary definition of retribution for surveying texts, which she applies to the books of the corpus of the Writings (*Ketuvim*) on the basis of syntagmas that are capable of expressing the contents of the idea as it has been defined. Ramond's investigation gives rise to a modification of the preliminary definition and shows that the Writings convey a concept of divine retribution that is judicial in nature, but which does not really reflect a proportional relationship: Justice is presented as being both excessive and above all intended to restore social and political order.

By means of a lexical as well as syntactical study of the formulas used in the Gospel of Matthew to express a retributive idea, *Laurent Pinchard* puts into question the ineluctable character of this retribution. These references to retribution are always spoken by Jesus and relate to the behaviour of the disciple, his relationship to Commandments, to God and to his neighbour. While this retribution is sometimes envisaged in the present and sometimes in the future, Matthew's purpose is not to indicate *when* the retribution will be carried out, but rather to emphasise the certainty that it will be carried out.

Sébastien Dehorter concentrates on identifying the lexical registry of retribution in the Pauline corpus and analyses the passages which make explicit reference to this idea. He highlights the Pauline insistence on the divine character of retribution, or rather on the attribution to Christ of the retribution. He also shows how the concept of divine retribution, taken over as a traditional scriptural teaching, is clarified and reworked in different directions. This concept is articulated with statements about God's mercy through which the nature of divine retribution is ultimately disclosed; this can be seen in the influence of Psalm 61 on Rom 2:6.

This first set of contributions shows that retribution appears most frequently in the larger context of a reflection about evil and is in fact less present in biblical texts than is usually thought. The Bible more frequently evokes the perspective of a divine reparative justice which is not proportional to the act that was committed. When references to divine justice do correspond to the idea of retribution, this concept is articulated with those of mercy, justification, pardon and grace.

The question thus arises whether a legal system, or even a moral one, is possible without retribution, whether justice – including divine justice – can be conceived without an underlying perspective of retribution. This is the subject of reflection in the second series of contributions.

Béatrice Bizot shows that the divine preference for Abel's offering over that of his brother (Genesis 4), as well as the consequences of the fratricidal murder that result, remain enigmatic in the Masoretic Text. This version does not evoke any qualitative distinctions between the two offerings, nor does it explain God's action. In contrast, the Septuagint describes the divine response to Cain as a sanction for an offering that was not properly made. Thus, the Septuagint presents a narrative that considers a divine logic of retribution.

Innocent Himbaza highlights the different forms taken by the concept of retribution in the book of Malachi, which develop in a linear fashion. First, the book makes use of a bilateral dispute, a *rîb*, in which God, the people and the priests mutually accuse each other and attempt to exonerate themselves. Then, the book invokes *mišpaṭ* to explain that God has promised to intervene as a judge to decide the outcome of the current crisis. In the final part, God is portrayed as a merciful saviour. Thus, the emphasis is sometimes on proportionality, sometimes on mercy, before a complete cancellation of the concept of retribution is proposed.

Martin Leuenberger addresses the central question in the book of Job, namely the disappearance of the just order of the world. The author defends the hypothesis that the relationship between Job and God systematically breaks with and radically surpasses traditional notions of retribution, which he demonstrates with an analysis of the parts of the book written in prose. In the prologue, Job's reaction to destiny's blows is that of pure and simple acceptance. He blesses God notwithstanding his suffering and preserves his relationship with him. It is in this sense that the biblical story of Job offers a narrative variation on the Ancient Near Eastern figure of Job and a critique of the so-called traditional wisdom based on a theology of creation.

Andreas Dettwiler invites readers to take seriously the fact that the Pauline positions on judgment cannot be correctly understood if the context of each position is ignored. Having set out the methodological framework, Dettwiler analyses a first type of judgment – the judgment of condemnation which has in 1 Thessalonians the principal function of reaffirming and stabilising the new religious identity of the community which Paul is addressing. Then he shows the different persuasive functions of a second type of judgment – the judgment of evaluation which Paul uses in several passages in 1 Corinthians to reduce existing tensions within the community and to clarify the level of authority of one or another charismatic figure. Finally, he establishes that in Romans 2 the invocation of divine judgment as rewarding and punishing everyone according to their acts has the effect of levelling the ethnic-religious differences between Jews and non-Jews.

Régis Burnet investigates the causes of the radical change in the interpretation of the Lucan narrative of Lazarus that has occurred in the modern era. Over nearly twenty centuries, the pericope has been read as proof of the existence of hell; today, it is no longer interpreted from the perspective of *post-mortem* retribution. Have we become incapable of thinking about retribution?

Finally, *Damien Agut-Labordère* analyses the presence of the demon Petbe, a retributive entity, in the great Demotic wisdom (*Insinger Papyrus*), a text in which the divinity appears to be indifferent to human actions. The author highlights the contradiction that arises when a divinity, whose purposes are unknowable and who is presented as being indifferent to human behaviour, is associated with a vindictive and punitive power acting as the instrument of social justice. This may point to the difficulty that Egyptians of the Hellenistic and Roman periods had in pushing the logic of transcendence to its final stage.

We see that retribution cannot be understood without considering other notions with which it is associated, and which often give it a slightly different sense. However, we have also seen how the same concept can take on varied meanings as a result of successive readings and re-readings.

As discussed, biblical texts seem to invoke a perspective of divine justice that is clearly reparative while not being proportional to the act that was committed. Can it be said that the perspective of biblical texts is basically to render justice to victims? Although the concept of retribution reflects a concern for justice, does it not also attempt to make sense of suffering? Questions of this nature will be addressed in the third series of contributions.

By means of a journey through the Psalter, *Sophie Ramond* observes that the phenomenon of contrasting characterisations of individuals, the righteous and the impious, traverses the Psalter as does the expression of hope for the manifestation of divine justice. Ramond wonders about what is being shown in the process of elaborating a guiding principle of the collection. She shows how certain psalms confront the question of the scandal caused by the well-being of the impious and call for retribution, while others use the rhetoric of exaggeration when describing the divine punishment that awaits the iniquitous. In the context of Hellenistic cultural domination, recourse to divine retribution may in fact be a strategy seeking to encourage faithfulness to the Torah and to ancestral traditions.

Jean-Claude Reichert focuses on the Latin translation of the Greek version of Psalm 102 (103 in the MT) in which a specific vocabulary of retribution has been introduced. The question is whether this translation choice should be attributed to a Christian interpretive rereading of the psalm and whether

it enables the reader to rethink the theological category of retribution. What is the significance of the fact that the Greek word ἀνταπόδοσις is translated by the Latin term *retributio*? More generally, Reichert shows that the language of the Latin text seems to require the reader to read the psalm based on Christ and his propitiatory act. The reader is encouraged to understand retribution as God's "giving back", which gives a share in the inheritance of Christ. In the final analysis, the Latin version of Psalm 102 is an exhortation to think about divine giving back based on the grace that God firmly established in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Like Dehorter, *Christophe Raimbault* reads Rom 2:6, underlining the debates of interpretation concerning this verse. He analyses it in its literary context and measures the displacement that the text operates on the idea of retribution. He also considers what the parenesis of Romans 12 evokes about divine retribution. Raimbault shows that, in the letter to the Romans, retribution is not opposed to salvation by faith. It appears as a promise for all, an incentive to persevere in accepting the love graciously manifested by the blood of Christ.

Régis Burnet analyses the different forms – positive as well as negative – that retribution takes in the Epistle to the Hebrews, including the violent formula "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). However, even though the text encourages the fear that it will be impossible to repent in the future, the author of the Epistle is exhorting his listeners to remain hopeful.

Tobias Nicklas observes that although the vocabulary of retribution is almost entirely absent from the Book of Revelation, the text nonetheless develops a narrative in which the idea plays a central role. Retribution thus constitutes one of the guiding threads in the plot of Revelation, which constantly returns to the themes of victory over evil and the often-unforgiving vengeance of the punishment. The multiple battles and the numerous victories over evil that are evoked are milestones of the final victory that will occur in the future. Nicklas argues, however, that if God's victory over evil forces is clearly affirmed, the power of evil is described as continuing to rage for an undermined period. The situation of suffering that is evoked explains why the text places an accent on vengeance and destruction.

José Costa explores the possibility that ancient rabbis might have conceived the idea that divine justice is excessive: could it be that, in certain cases, God exceeds the measure regarding punishment? The guiding thread in his investigation is the biblical verse Ezek 21:8, in which divine justice is presented as being overcharged because it strikes people who have not committed any fault. Costa analyses the diverse interpretations of the verse by

ancient rabbis. Far from attenuating the excesses of a divine justice which appears to be too severe, certain interpretations seek to find a justification for the excess, while others do not hesitate to denounce what they consider to be divine arbitrariness. Possibly, the criticism of the forms of divine justice being a delicate subject, it appears as a self-criticism by God himself.

The fourth series of contributions examine the functions that the idea of retribution can serve, when the idea is assumed to be present, in various literary contexts and different discursive registers (legislative, parenetic, exhortatory, etc.). The question is to identify the narrative, exhortatory or parenetic categories that invoke retribution as well as the other notions with which it is associated (magical thinking, purity-impurity, etc.).

Olivier Artus observes that Numbers 14 makes use of different, and often seemingly contradictory, conceptions of retribution. He shows that the text puts into debate different theological positions: First, that of the non-priestly narrative, which describes the people's revolt, its desire to return to Egypt and the sanction that follows (not to be able to enter the land). Second, that of the Pentateuchal redaction, which sets out the inevitable consequences of a voluntary offence and valorises Moses in his role as an intercessor between the people and its God. Third, that of a late priestly narrative that insists on individual retribution. This analysis of Numbers 14 reveals a process of intra-biblical hermeneutics. If the notion of retribution is presupposed by the text, it is subjected to successive redefinitions, and even, in the intercession of Num 14:13-20, to a questioning.

Béatrice Oiry analyses the lists of blessings and curses that close both the Holiness Code (Leviticus 26) and the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 28), which have as their purpose to present the consequences that flow from the commitment that has been made and to warn those who transgress it. Oiry seeks more precisely to study the conception of retribution that underlies each list in its final form by focusing on the expression of the causal link. Retribution, as a mode of causality, serves in part to classify phenomena and to understand the relationships among them. Towards this end, the author pays particular attention to one of the elements of the retribution, i.e., the two sides of food – abundance and famine. She shows that Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 present two irreducible conceptions of causality, two different manners of organising the world, its phenomena and the way God intervenes in response to human actions, and eventually two fundamentally different conceptions of retribution and its processes.

William Krisel analyses a selection of passages in which these two different conceptions of curse retribution are presented near each other, i.e., Num 5:20-24, Deut 28:15-20, Zech 5:3-4 and Dan 9:11-14. These examples of curse

vocabulary support the notion that bad acts carry with them a "curse" that will ultimately come into effect to punish the transgressor without the need for subsequent divine intervention. However, these examples also indicate that this conception of curse punishment as a direct and inevitable consequence of the bad act itself was superseded by a later theological conception of God as a divine judge who intervenes to sanction a transgression after it has been committed. Krisel's hypothesis is that a judicial understanding of retribution was introduced into biblical texts to replace an older conception of punishment as the direct and inevitable consequence of transgression.

Geert Van Oyen analyses the meaning of retributive language in the texts composing the literary genre of the apocalypse in the synoptic gospels. He argues that it is indeed a language requiring an interpretation rather than a literal understanding. The use of such a language involves threats and is above all intended to strengthen each person's own responsibility to construct the Kingdom.

Gabriella Gelardini addresses the concept of retribution used in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which conveys severe judgment on what is interpreted to be the "worst" sin of the Exodus generation; i.e., idolatry and worship of the golden calf (Heb 8:9). The author notes, however, that the Epistle actually interprets the entire episode in Exodus 33–34 and applies it to the situation of the Epistle's addressees. Thus, emphasis is not only put on a story of human failure but also on the mediation of Moses and the grace and pardon of God. In making use of this narrative matrix for the Epistle to the Hebrews, Gelardini shows how a positive and a negative retribution are articulated: God grants positive retribution to mediators whom he has appointed (Moses, Jesus) to prevent or at least attenuate the negative retribution that he inflicts on their flock, the people of God.

For their part, *Carole Roche-Hawley* and *Robert Hawley* take on the question of retribution in Ugaritic literature through an analysis of the sanctions, as used in legal contexts as well as more poetic and literary forms, which disclose the cultural and religious imagination of the region. The first category includes legal stipulations concerning penalties and monetary sanctions to be applied in the case of a breach of certain provisions in a legal document. However, the local legal corpus in Babylonian language envisages certain sanctions in the form of divine curses, which gives these texts a strong element of dissuasion. Sanctions to be inflicted by the gods also have their place in the second category. However, retribution in these texts is also an instrument for redressing justice and social order.

While the lexicon of retribution appears in biblical texts, the very idea of retribution has endured over time. It has progressively become the subject

of ample debate until the present era, as *Jean-Louis Souletie* reminds readers in the penultimate contribution to this book. Souletie shows that the notion has been radicalised by Christianity and that it has been the subject of debate in the controversy between Catholics and Protestants over justification by faith. But in the twentieth century, theology worked towards mutual understanding, which was taken a step further in the document "The Doctrine of Justification". Souletie thus shows ways of overcoming certain aporias bequeathed by the internal controversies of Christianity.

The final contribution goes beyond texts to explore artistic, pictorial and sculptural representations of retribution. In examining the decorative repertoire of funerary art in Jerusalem during the first century BCE and the first century CE, *Caroline Arnould-Béhar* considers whether the notion of divine retribution in the future life, the belief in which is expressed in literature, is reflected in funerary art. Towards this end, she analyses three themes which can be seen as echoing the idea of retribution in the hereafter. These include certain botanic motifs, astral symbols, and the crown. Arnould-Béhar concludes that the crown motif is probably the most explicit reference to eschatological retribution. But the astral symbols could refer to the rewarded righteous living in the light, and the vegetal iconography also alludes, in a more indirect way, to the fate of the righteous enjoying eternal life as a reward.

Sophie RAMOND
Régis BURNET
Emanuelle PASTORE