

The Problem of Suffering: Some Reflections from Job

1-2 Prologue--Prose

- 1:1-5 Introducing Job on earth: Job rich and pious
- 1:6-12 first assembly in heaven: Satan given permission to take things away
- 1:13-22 first test on earth: Job loses animals, servants, and children
- 2:1-6 second assembly in heaven: Satan given permission to touch his life
- 2:7-10 second test on earth: Job has sores; his wife turns on him.
- 2:11-13 third assembly--of friends, on earth

3-27 Dialogue of Job with his friends; 3 cycles

28 Wisdom. God knows the way to it (v 23). The fear of the Lord--that is wisdom; to depart from evil is understanding (v 28).

29-31 Job's Soliloquy (29 good old days; 30 But now; 31 oath affirming Job's innocence)

32-37 Elihu--not mentioned in Prologue, Epilogue, or Divine speeches. Secondary? Retards the plot and serves as anticlimactic foil to divine speeches. An arbiter, but hardly the one Job desired.

38-41 Divine speeches

42 Epilogue--Prose. Job spoke the truth and friends did not. Job recovers family and property. Retribution is affirmed at the beginning and end of the book.

Answers to Suffering Proposed by the Book of Job

1. Suffering is the result of a test or of a contest between God and Satan (cf the Prologue; for Satan in the OT see Zech 3 and 1 Chr 21). Of course, this perspective is unknown by the other participants in the book, nor does it have much relevance for other humans who suffer. And its view of God is problematic.

2. Suffering has demonic or Satanic causes (cf. Prologue). But this proposal is ignored outside the Prologue. What is its modern relevance?

3. The patience of Job. At first Job willingly accepts suffering and does not ignore the past benefactions of God. Cf. 1:21, 2:10. *What God gave God took away.* Cf. James 5:10-11: As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job....

4. The protests of Job against God's "brutality" are acceptable (per contra Exod 17:7: "Is Yahweh among us or not?"). Am I the sea or a sea monster that you set up a guard over me? (7:12) "My adversary [God] sharpens his eyes against me...he sets me up as his target...he rushes at me like a warrior." (16:9-14). Though I am innocent, God would prove me perverse (9:20). If I wash myself with soap and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you [God] will plunge me into filth, and my own clothes will abhor me (Job 9:30-31). Contrast James 5:11. Consider this strategy: Let Job the patient be your model so long as that is possible for you; but when equanimity fails, let the grief and anger of Job the impatient direct itself and yourself toward, or even against, God, for only in encounter with God will the tension of suffering be resolved.

5. The problematic relationship of sin and suffering. Job is innocent.

Job says so

6:24 Make me understand how I have gone wrong

6:30 Is there any wrong in my tongue?

9:15 Though I am innocent.....

chap 31 Job's oath of clearance

The narrator says so:

1:1 The man was blameless and upright.

2:10 In all this Job did not sin with his lips [but what about his heart?].

Yahweh says so:

42:7 My servant Job spoke what was right.

The friends, however, defend the doctrine of retribution and side against Job. In 22:5-9 Eliphaz accuses him of sin: "Is not your wickedness great? You have stripped the naked of their clothing. You have sent widows away empty-handed." The friends claim in 4:7-8 that no innocent person ever perished [hence Job too must be guilty] and in 8:4 they insist that Job himself or his children must have sinned. Zophar even says that Job suffers less than he deserves (11:6).

Job presupposes that sin and suffering are related: "I'm innocent and should not suffer" ("My face is red with weeping...though there is no violence in my hands 16:16-17; cf. 11:4 "I am clean in God's eyes")

6. Resurrection is not an answer to suffering in the OT times since all die without mention of a hope for resurrection. Job would only like to be an exception to the laws on life and death so that he could hide out in Sheol until God's anger would cool. 14:7-13.

7. The sufferer needs/desires a mediator in dealing with the power differential (9:33-35 [there is no umpire between us {God and Job}, who might lay his hand on us both]; 16:18-22 [my witness is in heaven and the one that vouches for me on high]; 19:25-27 [I know that my "redeemer" is alive and at last he will take his stand on the earth after my skin has been thus destroyed, **but** I want to see God in my flesh. I want to see him for myself and my eyes will see him and not some other person]). Instead of a mediator, the sufferer gets Elihu! After chps. 38-41 a mediator is no longer needed.

8. Elihu: suffering educates and is a merciful warning. God teaches through dreams (33:15) or pain (33:19; 36:15 [He delivers the afflicted by their affliction]; cf. 5:17). This ought to lead to confession: I sinned, and I perverted what is right (33:27). {But God actually brings Job to a state of equilibrium through his word}.

9. Elihu: God is detached, remote: If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? If the old wisdom of retribution seems passe, the new wisdom of Elihu is pompous. Elihu's views are ignored--and so implicitly rejected--in the divine speeches and in the epilogue.

10. God does respond to human complaints despite the opinion of Elihu in 37:23-24: The Almighty--we cannot find him...he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.

11. Humans and God could "work it out" if they just talked face to face. "But I would speak to the Almighty" (Job 13:3). "I would give him an account of all my steps; like a prince I would approach him" (Job 31:37). Seeing God (19:26) should bring an answer though this answer in fact was hardly what Job expected (38-41; 42:5-6), assuming we can even understand what God is saying in the divine speeches. The rules for God's governing the world may transcend the rational.

12. Retribution is a partial truth. Elihu is right, at least on this point: the Almighty will not pervert justice (34:12). God sometimes delays punishment (24:1-12, 18-24; 27:13-23 [The wicked go to bed with wealth; they open their eyes and it is gone]). The Divine Speeches do not comment on the doctrine of retribution though the Epilogue reports that Job got a new family and twice as much wealth as before; he lived another 140 years. The last word in the book is thus a reaffirmation of retribution (But does a new family ever replace the first family?). Retribution may not explain human fate in every instance, but in the main it is affirmed by Job as the truth about the moral universe.

13. Wisdom is inaccessible (chap 28: mortals do not know the way to it even if God does), or it is too complicated for human beings to understand (38-41).

14. There is another type of wisdom that is accessible through faith active in love (28:28 Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding), but this wisdom is often contradicted by reality (see the case of Job in chap 1 and chaps 29-31).

Some conditioning factors on reading the book today:

15. Much of the book is wrong. Job's whole argument is based on his ignorance of the real reason for his suffering. The friends are wrong. Elihu is wrong. Divine speeches are in part irrelevant.

16. Job is a story about a rich man, told by a rich man. Job is a rich and pious man--not our usual experience--who temporarily loses wealth only to become richer than ever at the end. Is Job ever really poor? Even in his worst days he has maids, a valet, and house guests, and he is never worried about the next meal. His wealth is not considered problematic in itself (as it is in large parts of the Bible).

17. There is a strong male bias in Job. All the principal characters are male. Women's interests are ignored (Job's wife too lost her whole family and her wealth). There are no wise women in Job--only foolish ones. His wife, who disappears after 2:10, eventually bore 20 children--180 months of pregnancy!--so that everything could come out even. His sons inherit because they are sons; his daughters inherit because Job is charmed by them. He "proves" his own sexual integrity by wishing that his wife would be sexually violated if he is lying (31:9-10).

18. What Job and his friends are debating turns out to include some important issues that feminist theology has been raising in recent years: the significance of personal experience as a source of religious insight, the importance of solidarity among those who are oppressed, a critique of traditional models of God, and the relationship between human existence and the whole of creation.

19. What is the meaning of Job's wife's remarks: "Do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." Does she mean: Where has all your righteous living gotten you? Forget it! Curse God and die. Or does she mean: If you are so full of honesty and integrity, tell God what's really on your mind. Curse God and die. Did Job follow his wife's advice in chap. 3?

From J.B.:

Sarah: You wanted justice and there was none--only love.

J.B. God does not love. He Is.

Sarah: But we do. That's the wonder.

20. Job knows that his friends' common sense and their traditions, their rationality, and their revelations are inconsistent with his own experience. For Job, to hold fast to his integrity means to insist on the validity and authority of his own experience, even when it seems to be contradicted by "what all the world knows to be true."

21. Much of the suffering we observe today is caused by prejudice, oppression, or the "system." It is not individual, private, or inexplicable. The protest of suffering peoples is not (or not only) against the unfair rule of God, but against the attitudes and actions--or even the indifference--of fellow human beings. The complacency of the friends about Job's suffering is rooted in their own privileged position. Job was noble in attitude toward the poor (29:12-16), but he does not address the fundamental changes in society that would prevent the sense of powerlessness and destitution experienced by people like widows and orphans.

Which of these reflections is true?

Or are they all partially and dialectically true--and false!--at the same time?

Ralph W. Klein, March 3, 1999; revised March 3, 2002

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