

STUDENT ESSAY

The Mystery of Life in the Book of Job



The Book of Job is one of the most profound, inspiring, and striking books of the biblical wisdom writings. It is a masterpiece of biblical poetry and concerns the problem of suffering. Job's innocent suffering calls into question the concept of justice defined by rewards and punishments in this life, despite the vain efforts of his friends to shore this

concept up by urging him to admit his guilt, or at least his pride, or even that he must have sinned unwittingly. The uncertainties, frustrations and mood-swings of the sufferer are presented with fearless vigor. In protesting his innocence, which we know right away from the prologue (Job 1:1-5), and rejecting the shallow solutions of these sages, Job clings "blindly" to God. Even when shrinking from God's torments, Job continues to appeal to God. In the end his trust is justified by an overwhelming experience of the majesty and the wisdom of God (Job 38-42). The reader is left with a feeling that the author did not intend to produce a simple and easy solution to the problem of suffering but rather to suggest a resolution that we discover the closer we get to God.

From the very beginning of the Book of Job, it seems that the author wants to ask whether our reverence for God is based entirely on God's blessings upon us or whether it is unconditional. According to traditional Israelite wisdom, good deeds were rewarded with blessings and evil deeds were punished. Suffering was understood as a punishment for one's wickedness or rejection of God. This is why the author has Satan ask: "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing?" (Job 1:9). The author is disturbed by the question of how one can continue to serve God even when God seems not to be near. Job, a faithful servant of God, finds it very difficult to understand where his sufferings are coming from, whether from God directly or whether as part and parcel of being human.

The opening narrative of the book is constructed in such a way that Job and his friends are unaware of Satan's intrigue. This lack of information creates a basis for the final divine revelation in Job 38-42. The questions of justice and suffering that are raised

rotate around the divine mystery in human life. In the Book of Job, this mystery is related to lack of knowledge of what goes on in the heavenly realm. Job's friends simply remind him of, and even try to defend, the interrelated Israelite wisdom concepts of reward and punishment, good and evil, life and death.

There are three cycles of exchange between Job and his friends in which God is silent. God is a spectator of both the attempts of Job's friends to uphold the traditional principles of retribution and Job's attempt to prove his integrity. Because his wise friends cannot give an adequate explanation of his situation, Job is left alone. So he challenges and calls God to a face-to-face dialogue. Job's words shift from being addressed to his friends to being addressed to God: "Then call me, and I will respond; or let me speak first, and answer me. What are my faults and my sins? My misdeeds and my sins make known to me! Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (Job 13:22-24).

Chapters 38-42 bring a new twist in the dialogue. Job has been longing to meet God, to speak and argue with him to defend his cause. Finally God appears and speaks. God appears out of the storm (Job 38:1) as He sometimes does in the Old Testament (Exod 19:17-20; Ps 18:7-17). The Lord now enters the debate and answers in a way Job did not expect. God gives Job no direct answers but rather poses questions like, "Where were you when I founded the earth?....Who determined its size; do you know?" (Job 38:4-5). These questions open up a vast scope of wisdom for Job. The divine questions instill in him a deeper and greater fear of (reverence for) the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10; Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Sir 1:16). God's puzzling questions help Job to think. As a father gives instruction to his son, so does God instruct Job. God shows that He has a plan and that it is He who controls the energy of chaos, and even evils (Job 38:8-15). God is the designer, mover, and provider for all creation: creation is not dependent on itself or on man but on God. God uses irony to stress that Job was not present at creation, nor does he understand what it means to create all things: "You know, because you were born before them, and the number of your years is great!" (Job 38: 21). Thus God shows Job how ridiculous it has been for him to question God. God increases Job's insights into the wonder of the world indirectly, so that he is able to understand God more clearly and to answer his own questions.

In Job 39 there is a shift in God's questions from natural phenomena to living creatures in order to give Job a more precise picture of God's wisdom and care for creation. Job is directed to look at who gives life even to the wild animals which may be of no use to, a threat to, or even much bigger than man himself. God's wisdom in governing the world is far beyond human wisdom. God knows and takes care of even the untamable creatures. Human beings only know about the regions in which they live and the animals they have domesticated. In a mixture of pain and wonder Job discovers his ignorance and limited power. What a tragedy it is to be human and to have to suffer;

what a wonderful thing it is to be human and to be able to search for truth in dialogue with God and to know God!

After God's questions in chapters 38–39, Job is overwhelmed and humbled. He can only say, "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. Though I have spoken once, I will not do so again; though twice, I will do so no more" (Job 40:4-5). He recognizes his limitations and acknowledges God's greatness and holiness: before God's plan for the world Job can only stand in awe, speechless. To all that God has presented before him, Job has no answers. He is dumbfounded, full of fear and trembling. But God does not want Job to stay in mere fear of him. God leads him in a second speech (Job 40:6-41:26) to a greater understanding of the capacity of God, who protects the wild animals and all living creatures.

The descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40:15–41:26 are quite interesting. Leviathan and Behemoth are mythical sea monsters symbolizing primeval chaos (Ps 74:14, 104:26; Isa 27:1). Leviathan is a monstrous form of a crocodile and Behemoth, of a hippopotamus. By implication we have to understand that Job cannot stand up against these great, violent monsters of chaos. Yet God, in spite of their strength and ferocity, can subjugate and silence their claims and threats and use them for His purposes, which are hidden from human beings. These powerful forces are part of God's plan for the universe, although Job has no knowledge of them and cannot control them. It is a comfort to Job to realize that though these monsters seem uncontrollable—like his suffering—God is in control.

In his second speech with God (Job 42:1-6), Job has found God: "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be hindered" (Job 42:2). The dark night is over because God has deigned to let Himself be discovered by Job: "I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you" (Job 42:5). Job disowns his presumptuous speculations and complaints. He even discards his last support, his famous integrity: "Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). In the theophany and in the words of God, Job meets Him, and this experience surpasses all the traditional wisdom he had before. Job acknowledges that his wisdom was limited and repents in accepting that God can do all things. Job is thereupon vindicated both by God and in the eyes of the community.

Job is our spokesman, our model for a difficult journey: from a dreadful experience and intellectual reflection to a contemplation of God Himself. Job's lamentation, his complaints, and his anger are ours: his drama symbolizes the destiny of human beings. Like us, Job suffers and wrestles, seeks and hopes, and tries to understand. But only by gazing on God's face—seeing and hearing from God—can we fully understand our situation. Job cannot barter his justification from God but must accept it as a gift. No reason other than God's goodness is required for God's bestowing gifts on us. Job's final marvelous and beautiful experience in his search for God is the

human satisfaction of discovering God in a world full of distractions, anxieties, suffering, temptations, and even death.

In conclusion, we must note that Job's complaints are not necessarily the cause of God's appearance to him, which arises out of God's own loving care and concern for Job. God does not act under compulsion in response to our complaints. We have to understand God's grandeur and love and then accept and rely upon him. The Book of Job is not about why human beings suffer but rather about how all that happens is subject to the wisdom of God as Creator. Even when we feel He is absent, neglectful, or apparently unjust, God knows each of our concerns and lives. What we have to do is hope and trust. It is when we acknowledge our limitedness and weakness that the power of God rests upon us. It is in humility that we are exalted.

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