

Finding Job

Many Christians revere the book of Job as being the first definitive theodicy. However, this is not the only way to read Job. By first comparing the book of Job to the framework for theodicy, the classical problem of evil, and contrasting the two, it will be seen that Job fails as a definitive theodicy. Furthermore, even though this may seem like a loss, it actually allows room for another reading of Job that places it firmly within the Jewish wisdom tradition. Another feature that will be highlighted is that Job leaves the theological issues unresolved, yet it does create a response to the issue of religious ethics. Taking into account the historical interpretation of Job in Rabbinic literature, it will be seen that the book of Job laid part of the groundwork needed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE to re-imagine Judaism as a diasporic religion.

The classical problem of evil is the cornerstone for all theodicies that have arisen in the West. As its name may imply, the primary issue is that of evil. By first formulating that God is a benevolent, all-powerful, all-knowing entity that created and maintains the world, it becomes difficult to conceive of anything occurring contrary to God's design and/or will. The tension is brought to light when one then adds the existential observation that evil exists in the world. The problem is further amplified when one also notes that not only does evil exist but also that evil is prevalent in this world. So then the problem restated takes this form: If God exists as mentioned, how

and why does evil exist in such great force? Theologians look to the book of Job for their answers.

In the book of Job, one is presented a unique story that seems to address the issue of evil. It begins with a prologue of sorts written in prose, detailing the person of Job and followed by a debate between God and a character only called “the Adversary.”¹ This “bird's eye view” of the situation makes it a seemingly black-and-white, straightforward world. Job is named “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”² This is despite the fact that Job lives in the land of Uz, a land near the Hebrew world, where his exposure to Hebrew ideas and theology would have been minimal.³ With this introduction of Job complete, the scene shifts to somewhere in the heavens with the Adversary and God having a conversation about Job's character. Satan accuses Job of honoring God only because his life is well. If Job were to have an accursed life, he would not honor God. God, sensing a gable, allow the Adversary to do anything to remove all of these blessings as long as he does not “stretch out [his] hand against [Job].”⁴ The entire unfolding of this heavenly drama has the feel of a Woody Allen movie, “poking fun at God's alleged ethical perfection.”⁵

The drama then shifts to Job enjoying a day. Job first gets news from a messenger that the Sabaeans surprised the servants and oxen, killed all the servants except for this messenger and took all of the oxen. While this messenger was speaking, another entered and said that “fire from heaven” killed

1 The Hebrew can be transliterated as *haSatan*.

2 Job 1:1b, NRSV (all quotations from the NRSV).

3 Robert J. Sherman, “Reclaiming a Theological Reading of the Bible,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2:2 (July 2000): 178.

4 Job 1:12.

5 Howard Wettstein, “Against Theodicy,” *Judaism* 50.3 (Summer 2001): 345.

all the sheep and servants except for him. Yet another servant enters and says that the Chaldeans raided the property, stolen all the camels, and killed all the servants except him. Finally, a fourth servant enters and tells Job that all of his children were killed when the house they were in collapsed due to wind gusts.⁶

Thus begins Job's response to the problem of evil. He tears his clothes, shaves his head, and begins to worship God without charging God with wrongdoing. The problem for Job does not end there. The scene shifts back to the heavenly "court" and God maintains that Job is blameless and upright. Satan then begs God to curse Job himself. God allows this as long as Job's life itself is spared. As a result, Job's body is inflicted from head to toe with sores. Job moves himself to an ash heap and takes with him something to scratch himself.⁷ Job's wife appears and tells him to "curse God and die." He rejects her suggestion and maintains his loyalty to God.⁸ Job's three friends arrive after hearing of his troubles in order to comfort and console him. After seven days and seven nights, Job curses the day he was born.

The simple prose of the prologue ends and poetry begins. Job's "curse" in chapter 3 begins a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the world: "Job adopts the verbal pattern of the Priestly creation account to initiate an inversion of divine speech. Creation, now a parody of divine order, will be negated."⁹ The next part of the poetic dialog, then, can be read as a slow devolution of order, justice, and creation. The three friends attempt to support God by trying to find

⁶ Job 1:13-19.

⁷ It is believed that this tool was to help stop the disease from spreading further.

⁸ Job 2:9-10.

⁹ Valerie Pettys, "Let there be Darkness," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (June 2002): 92.

fault in Job. As they consistently find, Job has done no wrong to deserve such catastrophic judgment from God. His options are reduced to one: “[Job's] only option for faithfulness to a just God is confrontation.”¹⁰ With Job's constant desire for *faithfulness* to God, the entire dialog should be seen more as the creation of a morality or religious ethics than of a theodicy. Job is not interested in defending God against the problem of evil. He is interested in remaining faithful to God, even if it means confronting God for an answer. This type of response does not fit well with Christian theology because Christianity generally holds to a view of God that places God beyond question. As a Jewish book, however, Job fits in well with the wisdom literature found in the Hebrew Bible.

During the course of the deconstruction, Job's friends seek to find an answer for Job's condition. Eliphaz is the first to speak and suggests that Job has sinned in some way. Eliphaz's logic follows the form that the innocent and upright are not destroyed and since Job is currently being destroyed, Job must have sinned. Eliphaz furthers his argument by suggesting that no human is righteous before God.¹¹ Job responds by demanding someone point out his sin. If he were to be given guidance, he would follow it. Bildad pushes Job further by asking Job if God perverts justice and good. If Job is righteous, then he shall be vindicated by God. Job again responds that his catastrophe will not end; God will not relent. Zophar then retorts that Job should repent—even if Job did nothing wrong. It is better that Job repents than to question God even if Job has the right. Job retorts that the wicked prosper and that he, as a righteous man, suffers. For Job, then, the world

¹⁰Pettys, 101.

¹¹Job 4:17.

is backwards and he must question God in order to remain faithful to God. The dialog between the four cycles two more times as Job stresses his innocence and his friends stress his wickedness. The dialog's deconstruction culminates in chapter 31, where his "Oath of Innocence" is "designed to defend order and re-establish what has been torn down."¹² Job cannot continue to simply trust God without reason. He gives an ultimatum to God to listen and answer: "Oh that I had one to hear me! Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me! O that I had the indictment written by my adversary!"¹³

Thus enters a new figure, Elihu. He enters the dialog, rebukes Job and his three friends, then disappears. The three friends are rebuked because they concede to Job in the debate. In other words, the three friends were not able to find an adequate reason for Job's suffering. Elihu condemns Job because he is self-righteous. Finally, Elihu proclaims that God has a reason for all this suffering and that God's reasons must be just. Following directly after Elihu, God responds "from the whirlwind."¹⁴ What is this whirlwind? Why does God issue a response from a whirlwind instead of the "still small voice" in Isaiah?

The whirlwind has significance that is often lost in reading the response. One interpretation finds a parallel in no less than *The Wizard of Oz* in that the whirlwind represents a concealing of God, much like the doorman to the Emerald City who states that "'not nobody, not nohow' ever gets in to see great Oz."¹⁵ Yet this restriction winds up being more flexible than it seems as Job claims to "have

¹² Pettys, 101.

¹³ Job 31:35.

¹⁴ Job 38:1.

¹⁵ Tod Linafelt, "The Wizard of Oz," *Biblical Interpretation* 14.1-2 (2006): 98.

seen God 'with my own eyes'".¹⁶ With this interpretation, then, the whirlwind is more of a farce than a reality. It is all an impressive display of power that has no real strength. It is the same thing as the great Oz in *The Wizard of Oz*: a frailty hiding behind the curtain controlling a false image.¹⁷ Another view of the whirlwind—one that isn't mutually exclusive of the first—is the negation of the “expectation that the universe is ethically coherent.”¹⁸ One last view on this whirlwind sees it as imagery for Job's own problems. In chapter 13, Job angrily says, “Will you harass a windblown leaf? Will you pursue dry chaff?” to give this absurd image of “the creator of the universe chasing after a tiny leaf or a particle of dry chaff in order to crush it with his powerful wind.”¹⁹ *From the whirlwind*, then, may imply God speaking to Job in the midst of his turmoil. Here, we have God finally *answering* Job. Job then sees God in the midst of his difficulties, not in some kind of literal atmospheric disturbance. The storm is symbolic of Job's own descent into chaos and his subsequent return from it. After the whirlwind, Job is a changed man. Combining these views, then, the book of Job begins to appear more as a satire of the philosophical project of theodicy. Creation and morality are not coherent; neither is conceiving of God as a powerful function of the world—something that Job's friends implicitly feel. Reality isn't as simple as how the prologue to the story feels: nice, simple prose that paints a black-and-white view of things. Faithfulness to God isn't simply bending a knee to God but rather a committed partnership with God. The philosophical side of Job should not

16 Linafelt, 98.

17 Linafelt, 105.

18 Wettstein, 347.

19 Alex Luc, “Storm and the Message of Job,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 87 (March 2000): 113.

overpower its mystical and existential dimensions.

A second important note about God's response is the wording used. In both Job 38:1 and 40:1, God *answers* Job. These words are used “only when God speaks to Job” and imply that “God was willing to answer the questions raised by Job.”²⁰ God's response to Job, however, is not what a theologian or philosopher may expect. Instead of telling Job whatever reason God may have had for this catastrophe, God's answer is more on the lines of “I'm the parent, you're the child.” It is a beautification of violence that masks an encounter with the sublime. God's response, then, is not something to be comprehended but rather apprehended.²¹ Job does this well and his immediate response is indicative of it: Job places his hand on his mouth. Apprehending the sublime, Job covers his mouth in order to not condemn himself with his own words.²² While Job's first response is that he will speak no more, confirming this “pleading the fifth,” he does wind up speaking once more. His second response to God can be seen as an apology as he restates one of God's first questions;²³ by turning the question on himself, “Job admits that he has been *hiding* designs deep inside him.”²⁴ Job's mourning is then transformed into praising and he finally gets up from the heap of ashes he has been seated on since chapter 2.

The epilogue, then, returns to the prose of the prologue. The return from Oz is marked with the change back to the black-and-white world of Kansas. Job has

²⁰ Bernard Ehrlich, “The Book of Job as a Book of Morality,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34.1 (January-March 2006): 32.

²¹ Linafelt, 101.

²² Gregory Glazov, “The Significance of the 'Hand on the Mouth' Gesture in Job XL 4,” *Vetus Testamentum* LII.1 (January 2002): 40.

²³ Job 38:2 (“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”) is iterated in Job 42:3 (“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”).

²⁴ Glazov, 37.

been face-to-face with God and his answers found in the apprehension of the sublime, much like Dorothy finding the great Oz and discovering how to return home. The story ends with a final response by God and the restitution of Job. God's *answer* to Job is to be contrasted with God's response to the friends. God deems the three friends incorrect in a declaration. God is not answering them or approving of them. God tells them that they “have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”²⁵ What is this failure that the friends have which Job someone did not? Was it not Job who called God down from the heavens in order to justify the injustices done to Job? Was it not the friends who looked for sins within Job's life in order to support God? As Bernard Ehrlich comments, Job's success was in “searching to understand God, his intellectual honesty” while the friends “have sinned because of their presumptuousness in claiming that they understand how God rules the world, in defiance of the fact that God Himself shows this to be beyond human understanding.”²⁶ The real sin, then, was speaking on behalf of God and not questioning God. The friends have revealed a hypocrisy and a lack of true faith.²⁷

The final part of Job—the restitution of Job—is itself an ethical problem: “the book will have put itself in a strange ethical dilemma in suggesting throughout its course that the principle is invalid and then that, after all, it is valid.”²⁸ That is, with the consistent emphasis that God “promises rewards to the righteous and then, life being what it is, they do not get them, you may have made yourself a

25 Job 42:7.

26 Ehrlich, 37.

27 Ehrlich, 37.

28 David J.A. Clines, “Job's Fifth Friend,” *Biblical Interpretation* 12.3 (2004): 245.

purveyor of falsehood.”²⁹ The book seems to suggest that the friends—the very same who were scorned by God—were right all along: Job is rewarded for his faithfulness through suffering. This ending is the unwinding of the dialog, not a return to Mayberry. By returning to the very principle that God rejected, the book of Job throws the principle of retribution and restitution into question. It is no longer a philosophical book about a man suffering as punishment for wrongdoing but rather an ethical questioning of retribution and the “unjust assault upon an innocent man.”³⁰ The book of Job stands in direct opposition to theodicy.

By rejecting theodicy, Job enters into the Jewish tradition of wisdom literature. It is indeed not concerned about a philosophical or theological treatise but about ethics and morality. Like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Job seeks to present a religious ethics that is not systematic. Its lack of an answer by God *from the whirlwind* places it on par with later Jewish texts such as the Talmud where the goal is dialog and discussion, not definitive answers and systematic theologies. It is the type of book that is meant to be added to, expounded on, and developed in further dialog. By taking it as a theodicy, one fails to recognize the text for what it's worth. By rejecting hypocrisy in those that worship God in name only, the book of Job is a return to Jewish ways, Jewish wisdom, and Jewish practice. Yet this is also a new twist on Jewish custom in that it calls for a Jewish orthodoxy that is ever-changing. The book of Job is one of the texts that set the groundwork for the post-Temple period. After the loss of the Temple in 70 CE, Judaism was forced to re-imagine itself. Job's sense of *seeking to understand God*

²⁹ Clines, 247.

³⁰ Clines, 247.

may have played a role in that. By using Job as an example of religious faith, Judaism was able to reformulate orthodoxy in such a way that made it possible to “keep the dialog going.” By rejecting a definitive answer—from *the whirlwind* no less, Job and Judaism began the never-ending cycle of interpretation and commentary.

So what is the moral of this story? Where does Job leave its readers? Howard Wettstein explains that the Christian theologian Richard Swinburne gets it wrong: “[t]heodicy is the enterprise of showing that appearances are misleading, and that (probably) all the world's evils do promote greater good.’ This is what Job—vs. the Comforters—denies, for which (on my reading) God praises him.”³¹ It is better to read these catastrophes as God suffering with humankind. This existential, mystical ideal cannot be lost amidst the sea of abstract philosophy and theology. By leaving the definitive answers aside, Job finds a peace amidst the whirlwind that finds comfort in acknowledging his inability to understand God. Job is a call for, in the words of Anselm, “faith seeking understanding.”

³¹ Wettstein, 349.