

# Job: Mystery and Faith<sup>1</sup>

D. A. Carson

**D. A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his books are *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981; reprint, Baker, 1994) and *How Long, O Lord?: Perspectives on Suffering and Evil* (Baker, 1990).

Struggle as we may with various facets of the problem of evil and suffering, there are times when particularly virulent evil or horribly inequitable suffering strikes us as staggeringly irrational, unfair. Quite frequently this impression is driven home when we cannot see how to escape the lack of proportion between the massive suffering and the relative inoffensiveness of the afflicted party.

I know a woman who served as a productive missionary for some years in a Latin American country. She returned home to marry a graduate of a Bible college, a man she had known for some years who promised to return to the mission field with her. She had not been married to him for more than a few hours before she suspected she had married a monster. Although couching himself in pious language, he turned out to be psychologically brutal. He was an insecure little runt who publicly maintained a veneer of religious respectability, but who in the intimacy of his own home could live with himself only by savagely demeaning everything his wife did, said, and stood for.

The mission board caught on pretty quickly, and refused to send them out. Years passed, and the abuse worsened. The woman tried talking to friends and counselors; some of them simply sided with her husband and told her to try harder. Eventually she turned to drink; a couple of years later, she was a confirmed alcoholic, herself brutal with her two children. She hated herself, she hated her husband, and she hated God. Why had she gone through so much? She was, after all, simply trying to serve the Lord—fallibly,

no doubt, but sincerely.

Of course, it would have been theologically correct to tell her that, whatever her husband was or did, she was still responsible for her own conduct. But she knew that, and hated herself because she found she could not cope. And in any case, this sort of reproach did not answer her question; it merely compounded her sense of guilt.

The Book of Job has been interpreted in several quite different ways. This short chapter is not the place to go into the variations. But virtually all sides agree that this book's special contribution to the canon, and to the topic of evil and suffering, is its treatment of what most of us would call irrational evil, incoherent suffering. Such evil and suffering do not easily fit into any glib "solutions." We may remember lessons learned elsewhere in the Bible, but when we try to apply them here there are too many loose ends. The physical suffering, as bad as it is, is compounded in Job's mind because it does not make any sense. Consequently, it threatens to destroy his understanding of God and the world, and is therefore not only massively painful in its own right, but disorienting and confusing.

## Job's Sufferings and Initial Reactions (Job 1-3)

The prologue of the book, as the first two chapters are usually called, pictures a man called Job, living in the land of Uz (1:1), possibly ancient Edom. Three times he is called "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (1:8; cf. 1:2; 2:3). He is the father of seven sons and

three daughters, and enormously wealthy to boot. At a time when wealth was measured by livestock, he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys: he was “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (1:3).

Not only so, he was unquestionably godly, even to the point of offering pre-emptive sacrifices on behalf of his children: “Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts,” he reasoned (1:5). This, we are told, was no passing fancy, no faddish piety; this “was Job’s regular custom” (1:5).

Behind the scenes, unknown to Job, Satan enters into a wager with God. God has presented Job as the prime example of a human being who truly loves God and his ways: “he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (1:8). Satan remains unconvinced. He charges that God has so protected Job, so made him prosper, that Job’s “piety” is no more than knowing what side his bread is buttered on. Piety so surrounded by security can’t prove much: “stretch out your hand and strike everything he has,” Satan taunts God, “and he will surely curse you to your face” (1:11).

God takes up the wager, with only one restriction: Job himself is not to be harmed. Satisfied, Satan leaves and so operates behind the scenes that the Sabeans carry off the oxen and donkeys and murder the servants; a raging fire devours the sheep and their shepherds; the Chaldeans form raiding parties and carry off the camels, killing the herders; and a storm destroys the house where his children are having a party, killing all ten of them.

“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I

came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (1:20-22).

Satan is still not convinced. When the Lord points out that Job has still retained his integrity, Satan replies, “Skin for skin! ... A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face” (2:4-5). God takes up this challenge as well, but lays down one restriction: Job’s life must be spared.

Not knowing what has gone on in the courts of heaven, Job finds himself afflicted with painful sores from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. In complete degradation, he sits in the ash pit and scratches his scabs with a piece of broken pottery. To make his misery infinitely worse, his wife, whose suffering must be not much less than Job’s, throws in the towel: “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” (2:9). But Job rebukes her, and reasons, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

The writer concludes: “In all this, Job did not sin in what he said” (2:10).

The prologue concludes by introducing Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who hear of his suffering and agree “to go and sympathize with him and comfort him” (2:11). In the custom of the day, they display their distress by crying loudly, tearing their robes, and sprinkling dust on their heads. And then they do the wisest thing they could have done, certainly much wiser than all the speeches they will shortly deliver: for seven days and seven nights, they keep silence, awed by the depths of Job’s misery.

That is the substance of the prologue.

But the picture of Job in these two chapters, it is sometimes argued, is so much at variance with the picture of Job in the bulk of the book that it must have come from a different author. Perhaps someone added the great speeches to a fairly simple morality story; or perhaps someone added the morality story to the great flights of oratory recorded in the speeches. But such theories solve nothing, for *someone* put together the speeches with the prologue and epilogue, and if that person did not detect an insuperable difficulty, then why should we think that an original writer would find an insuperable difficulty? Such source theories, even if right, do not solve the theological problem: the book as we have it stands or falls as a literary whole, for that is the only form in which it has come down to us.

A more subtle explanation of the prologue has recently been advanced by Athalya Brenner.<sup>2</sup> She argues that both the prologue and the epilogue (42:7-17) are written with self-conscious irony. Although formally they uphold the assumption that good men should be healthy and wealthy, that righteousness “pays” even in this world, and that the final proof is in the closing verses where Job turns out to be better off than he was before he began his ordeal, in fact the writer is so extravagant in his presentation that one has to believe he has his tongue firmly jammed in his cheek. The stylized numbers—seven sons, three daughters, seven thousand sheep, and so forth—plus the repeated emphasis on Job’s goodness (1:1, 8; 2:3), even the preemptive sacrifices, all attest that Job is so extravagantly good as to be unbelievable. It is far easier, Brenner argues, to see the prologue and epilogue as exercises in irony. The author is quietly mocking the

standard approaches to obedience and blessing, disobedience and punishment. It turns out, therefore, that the prologue and epilogue are not in any tension with the bulk of the book: the author raises questions about unjust suffering, and leaves plenty of room for mystery—whether in the speeches of Job and his friends, including God’s response, or in the profoundly ironic prologue and epilogue.

I confess I am thoroughly unconvinced by this creative interpretation. For a start, it guts the Book of Job, robbing it of any punch. Unless Job really is a very good man and singularly blessed in every realm, the problem of unjust suffering is not made to stand out very acutely. Why blessings are poured out on Job in the end, instead of ending the story at 42:6 with Job’s repentance but with no restoration to health and prosperity, I shall discuss at the end of the chapter.

Above all, Brenner finds evidence for irony in various stylized forms of expression. But stylized forms of expression can function in other ways than to signal irony. There is a sense in which the entire book is stylized, whether the prologue and epilogue, which are written in prose, or the speeches, written in poetry. The material is presented as a drama; the stylizations are part of the technique to heighten the tension and to present the case in the strongest possible form.

Indeed, as we shall see, the main themes of the prologue and the epilogue, taken at face value, enhance the significance of the book. But before summarizing some of these themes, it is important to pause at chapter 3.

Chapter 3 is the record of Job’s first “speech” (the term sounds terribly formal and pompous for what is, in fact, a lament; but I shall use “speech” to refer to all the

lengthy interchanges that run to the end of the chap. 41). It is something of a transition. Like the rest of the speeches, it is written in poetry. Nevertheless, Job does not reply to the charges of his friends, nor does he yet challenge God to explain himself. Chapter 3 is Job's lament: like Jeremiah (20:14-18), he wishes he had never been born. "May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!' That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it" (3:3-4).

Job's lament turns to the unanswerable "whys," but still more as lament than as angry indignation: "Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter soul, to those who long for death that does not come...?" (3:20-21). "Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?" (3:23). Then follows a somewhat astonishing admission: "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil" (3:25-26).

The stage is thus set for the interchanges between Job and his three friends. But before surveying them, it will prove useful to summarize some of the points the book has made so far.

(1) The Book of Job frankly insists that suffering falls within the sweep of God's sovereignty. The reader understands, as Job does not, that Job's afflictions owe everything to the exchange between God and Satan. Satan himself recognizes his limitations: he has to secure permission to afflict Job. He charges God with "putting a hedge" around Job to protect him. Only when God grants permission can Satan lash out at Job's family and livelihood. Even then he must secure separate permission to strike Job's body.

Intuitively, Job recognizes that nothing of the sort could have happened to him without God's sanction. He feels trapped, "hedged in"; but he sees that it is *God* who has hedged him in (3:23). All the while he has enjoyed a hedge around him, protecting him; now that it is gone, he feels hedged in. Even so, he does not rush to the conclusion that an enemy has done this outside God's sanction. Job asks, rhetorically, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2:10).

In short, all forms of dualism are radically rejected. Job will not resort to easy comfort about this not really being the will of God: it must be the work of Satan. Of course, it *was* the work of Satan. But in God's universe, even Satan's work cannot step outside the outermost boundaries of God sovereignty. While that is what raises the problem, it is also what promises hope.

(2) The emphasis on Job's goodness is meant to highlight the fact that there is such a thing as innocent suffering. This means more than that not all suffering is directly related to a specific sin; it means that some suffering in this world is not directly related to any sin. Undoubtedly one can posit indirect connections by appealing to other Scriptures about the fall and the universality of sin. But they do not rob the Book of Job of the point being strongly emphasized: the link between suffering and retribution found in, say, Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Romans, is never so mathematically rigid, so symmetrically precise, as to rule out the kind of suffering this book considers.

Intuitively, we know it is so. When a father rapes his six-year-old daughter, in what conceivable sense is the daughter "responsible"? Of course, her suffering is the result of sin—someone else's sin. But that is exactly what makes her the inno-

cent victim. Doubtless she is not innocent on any absolute scale. Six-year-old girls cannot possibly be innocent on any absolute scale: they take after their parents. But what sin has the girl committed that makes her incestuous rape an appropriate “retribution”?

The losses Job faced were, on the natural plane, the result of a mixture of human malice (the Sabeans, the Chaldeans) and of natural disasters (the fire, the wind). But behind them stood Satan; and behind Satan stood God himself. In a theistic universe, it could scarcely be otherwise, if God is the God described in the Bible. Undoubtedly there were public renegades and socially revolting sinners who, we might have thought, deserved the reverses Job suffered. But they happened to Job, whom God himself puts forward as “blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” Although the Bible insists that all sinners will (eventually) suffer, it does not insist that each instance of suffering is retribution of sin. Doubtless if this were not a fallen world, there would be no suffering; but just because it is a fallen world, it does not follow that there is no innocent suffering.

The Book of Job will not let us off the hook: there is such a thing as innocent suffering.

(3) The degree to which we struggle with this question is likely to be related to the extent of our own sufferings. That Job can say, “What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me” (3:25) is not a sign that he did not *really* trust God, and therefore he got what he deserved: that would subvert the purpose of the entire book—in the third chapter, at that! The purpose of these words, rather, is to show that Job had already thought about these matters. He was no amateur

in the things of God. He had thought enough about them to know that, from his own observation, from his own knowledge of God, he could not consider himself exempt from the possibility of disastrous loss. Such loss was what he feared. To that extent, he was prepared for it; probably that prepared mind was also one of the reasons why his initial responses are so entirely noble.

But thinking through the theology of suffering, and resolving in advance how you will respond, however praiseworthy the exercise, cannot completely prepare you for the shock of suffering itself. It is like jumping into a bitterly cold lake: you can brace yourself for the experience all day, but when you actually jump in, the shock to your system will still snatch your breath away.

(4) God does not blame us if in our suffering we frankly vent our despair and confess our loss of hope, our sense of futility, our lamentations about life itself. One cannot read chapter 3 without recalling that God will later excoriate the miserable comforters, but insist that Job himself said right things (42:7).

Of course, it is possible in grief and misery to say the wrong things, to say blasphemous things. Job’s wife is not praised for her counsel: “Curse God and die!” (2:9). But within certain boundaries, yet to be explored, it is far better to be frank about our grief, candid in our despair, honest with our questions, than to suppress them and wear a public front of puffy piety. God knows our thoughts in any case. Whatever “resolution” the Book of Job provides turns on Job’s questions and God’s responses. Without the questions, there would have been no responses.

(5) Already the theme of mystery has

intruded. Neither at the beginning of the affliction nor at the end does God tell Job about Satan's challenge and his own response. Indeed, had he done so, the purpose of the affliction would have been subverted. God's intent, (the readers know) is to show that a human being can love God, fear God, and pursue righteousness without receiving any prompt reward. This pursuit of God is therefore independent of material comfort; it may be in defiance of material comfort. Satan's thesis, that all religious interest is ultimately grounded in self-interest, or worse, in mercenary commitment, is thus shown to be false. But Job himself is not permitted to see this dimension to his suffering. As far as he is concerned, he faces inscrutable mystery.

(6) That is why Job's initial lament, and his later questions, must be placed within the right framework. At no point does Job abandon faith in God; at no point does he follow his wife's advice to curse God. It is precisely because he knows God to be there, and to be loving and just, that he has such a hard time understanding such injustice. Job wrestles with God, he is indignant with God, he challenges God to come before him and provide some answers; but all his struggles are the struggles of a believer. That is why Job can be praised, by God himself, for saying the right things: at least he spoke within the right framework. His miserable friends did not. We shall have occasion to return to this point in the next section, to learn what it tells us today.

### **Job's Plaintive Outrage and His Miserable Comforters (Job 4-31)**

Job's lament is all the encouragement his three friends need to break their silence. The way the drama is set out, each

of them—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—have a go at Job, trying to correct his theology and lead him to repentance. After each speaks, Job himself replies. Then the entire cycle is repeated, and starts to be repeated yet again. The third cycle sputters out with a short contribution from Bildad (25:1-6); Zophar never does contribute to the third round. By this time, Job is really indignant, and makes a lengthy speech (chaps. 26-31) that silences his interlocutors without convincing them.

Job and his friends represent deeply entrenched and opposed positions on the questions surrounding Job's sufferings. To simplify a bit, we may summarize their positions.

(1) *Job's friends offer glib answers and a condemning spirit.* The heart of their theological position is summed up by Eliphaz's question: "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (4:7-8).

(2) *Job responds with self-justification and hard questions.* He is guilty of nothing that can justify such suffering. The readers know this to be true: Job is suffering because God is demonstrating his servant's spiritual integrity to Satan, not because Job is being punished.

But to feel the weight of their arguments, we need to follow the line of some of their speeches. Eliphaz begins with a sly swipe at Job's distress. After all, Job has offered advice and help to many others who have suffered. "But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed" (4:5). The charge is more than mere inconsistency, as the next verse shows: there is an ironic suggestion that Job is guilty of rank hypocrisy. "Should not your piety be your

confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" (4:6). By itself, the question could be taken as a form of encouragement, a gentle compliment. But the next verses, already cited, show it is all a trap: "Who, being innocent, has ever perished?" And so the question itself becomes rather nasty sarcasm.

Reason alone is not enough for Eliphaz. He claims he learned the truths he enunciates in a vision of the night. The form that appeared to him asked, "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?" (4:17). In itself, of course, the question points to something important: we need to exercise humility when we approach God on these difficult questions. But Eliphaz applies it more strongly. Fools and reprobates are destroyed by God: he is so holy that he devours them while they scramble around in futility. "But if it were I," suffering as you are, Job, "I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before him" (5:8). I would recognize him as the One who is also capable of restoring his people. I would shut my mouth, confess my sin, and plead for his deliverance. "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal. From six calamities he will rescue you; in seven no harm will befall you" (5:17-19). In other words, Job, if you confess your sin, and plead God's goodness, you will find yourself restored to your former comforts. "We have examined this, and it is true," Eliphaz rather grandly proclaims. "So hear it and apply it to yourself" (5:27).

But Job will not be put off so easily. For a start, he resents his friends' lack of compassion, their winking condescension. "A despairing man should have the devotion

of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow" (6:14-15). Job can see through his friends' unexpressed fears: if the universe is not as ordered as they would like to think it is, then *they themselves cannot count on security*: "Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid" (6:21).

His plea is emotional, and pitiable: "But now be so kind as to look at me. Would I lie to your face [i.e., by hiding sins]? Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake" (6:28-29).

Job reviews his sufferings again. All he wants is to die before he is tempted to deny the words of the Holy One (6:10). Eventually, he turns to God and begs for pity: "Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again" (7:7). But he is not willing to concede that what he is suffering is only fair: "I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (7:11). He begs God to back off, to let him die; his days have no meaning. Why pick on me? he asks, in effect. Why pick on any man in this way (7:17-19)?

Job does not claim sinless perfection. He simply argues that any conceivable sin he may have committed does not justify being made a target of the Almighty. "If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?" (7:20).

All this is too much for Bildad. He cannot rise to the sly poetry of Eliphaz, nor claim any midnight vision in which to ground the authority of his opinion. He simply reiterates, forcefully, the traditional

answers. “How long will you say such things?” he asks Job. “Your words are a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice?” (8:2-3).

That is the nub of the problem. Job is so sure he has suffered undeservedly that he is only a whisker from charging God with injustice. It must be, rather, that God is just, and his justice prevails. If you suffer, it is because you deserve it; on the other hand, Bildad assures Job, “if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place” (8:6). Any fool can see the implication: that God has not restored Job to his rightful place proves that Job must be impure, unrighteous. The only alternative is that God is unjust; and that is unthinkable.

With Bildad’s fundamental assumption—that God is just—Job has no quarrel. “Indeed, I know that this is true” (9:2), he protests; he has never denied it. “But how can a mortal be righteous before God?” In its context, this question does not ask how a mortal can be pure or holy before God, but how a mortal can be *vindicated* before God. Take it as a given that God is just, Job says. But my problem is that in this case I too am just; I am suffering unfairly. But how can I prove it to God? How can I be vindicated before him? “Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer him one time out of a thousand. His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?” (9:3-4).

Job’s problem is not that God is simply too distant, but that Job could not win—even though he is quite certain he is suffering innocently. (And again, his readers know he is right on the latter score!) Job himself surveys some of the evidence that attests God’s greatness and concludes:

“How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy” (9:14-15). Indeed, all the references to God’s power can be read another way, Job argues. “Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing. He would crush me with a storm and multiply my wounds for no reason. He would not let me regain my breath but would overwhelm me with misery. If it is a matter of strength, he is mighty? And if it is a matter of justice, who will summon him?” (9:16-19). The evidence of Job’s misery suggests that God is sovereign, all right—and cruel. God is so sovereign that even Job’s speech would be constrained in any trial: “Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; if I were blameless, it would pronounce me guilty” (9:20).

Job is not denying that God is sovereign; far from it. “When a land falls into the hands of the wicked,” Job argues, it is God himself who “blindfolds its judges. If it is not he, then who is it?” (9:24). Not for Job some glib theodicy about God simply letting nature take its course, about God not being strong enough or farseeing enough or powerful enough to bring about the good. God is so sovereign that he brings about the bad as well as the good. And that is just the problem: if I also believe that God is just, how can I answer him? “It is all the same; that is why I say, ‘He destroys both the blameless and the wicked’” (9:22).

So Job returns some of the vitriol to his friends. No matter how pure he is, his friends would find him impure: their position demands it. “Even if I washed myself with soap and my hands with washing soda, you would plunge me into

a slime pit so that even my clothes would detest me" (9:30-31).

Again Job turns from his friends to address God, speaking out in the bitterness of his soul (10:1). "Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?" (10:3), he asks. "Are your days like those of a mortal of your years like those of a 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). The truth of the matter, Job insists, is that God gave him life, showed him kindness, and providentially watched over him (10:12), only to set him up for this tragedy. Why bring Job to birth in the first place if God knew he was to end up this way? "Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me" (10:18).

Zophar weighs in. He paints a picture of God in grandiose and transcendent terms. Job's talk, in his view, is appalling. How dare any mortal tell God, "My beliefs are flawless and I am pure in your sight" (11:4)? Job has been begging God to speak, to provide an explanation. "Oh, how I wish that God would speak," Zophar agrees, "that he would open his lips against you" (11:5). God is so holy and transcendent, and Job so flawed and sinful, that Job's suffering is in fact much less than the measure of his guilt. Job's sin is so great God has forgotten some of it. Can't Job concede that this unfathomably great God cannot be duped or tricked? "Surely he recognizes deceitful men; and when he sees evil, does he not take note?" (11:11).

Job replies with scorn: "Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!" (12:2). He sees through them: "Men

at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping" (12:5). "If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom" (13:5). If they are going to rabbit on with such rubbish, they should return to the only wisdom they have displayed so far, the wisdom of the first seven days: they should shut up.

Job reiterates several points. None can escape this God; there is plenty of evidence for suffering that has nothing to do with punishment ("Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble," 14:1); Job himself is innocent, and is certain that in a fair trial he would be vindicated (13:18).

The second cycle of speeches begins, and then the third. There is not space here to survey them, not to detail Job's responses to his "miserable comforters" (16:2). But several things must be said in summary.

(1) Job's friends have a tight theology with no loose ends. Suffering is understood exclusively in terms of punishment or chastening. There is no category for innocent suffering: in their understanding, such a suggestion besmirches the integrity of the Almighty.

(2) Although they are quick to defend God and say many wonderful things about him, their arguments are cast in tones so condescending to Job that one begins to lose patience with them. There is very little hint of compassion, empathy, honest grief. The defense of God can be unbearably hard.

(3) Job's arguments must not be confused with the atheism of Bertrand Russell, the challenge of David Hume, the theological double-talk of Don Cupitt, or the poetic defiance: "I am the master of my fate! I am the captain of my soul!" Job's

speeches are the anguish of a man who knows God, who wants to know him better, who never once doubts the existence of God, who remains convinced, at bottom, of the justice of God—but who cannot make sense of these entrenched beliefs in the light of his own experience.

That is why, in the midst of his confusion and self-justification, Job utters some remarkably assured statements of faith. He is so sure of his case that he wishes he could find someone to arbitrate between himself and God (9:33-35). Of course, this is God's universe, so he can't; but the Christian cannot read these words without thinking of the mediatorial role of Jesus. Nor does Job become apostate: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him!" (13:15-16). He is so sure of ultimate vindication that he can say, "But [God] knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (23:10). However difficult the verses in 19:25-27 be translated,<sup>3</sup> the least they affirm is that Job is absolutely confident in his final vindication—by God himself.

(4) The final lengthy speech of Job (26:1-31:40) reiterates many of the themes already developed, but it reaches a new intensity of bitterness. Now Job is not satisfied with hints: he openly charges God with injustice, and he almost savagely defends his integrity: "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty who has made me taste bitterness of soul, as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will

not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live" (27:2-6). Chapters 29-31 are a moving recital of all the godly things that made up Job's life in the days before he was afflicted. They bear the most careful reading: would to God I could claim half so much. Job has been honest, generous, disciplined; he rescued the poor, helped the blind, comforted those who mourned; he made a covenant with his eyes "not to look lustfully at a girl" (31:1); he was host to countless strangers; he made sure he never rejoiced over the misfortune of another; he never trusted in his own wealth. He frankly feared God (31:23). And he is utterly determined to maintain that his own integrity totally precludes the possibility that his sufferings constitute punishment for sin. As far as he is concerned, confession of sin that he has not committed, just to satisfy his friends and perhaps win some sort of reprieve, would itself be sinful. His integrity is too important to him for that.

(5) Job is therefore not looking for a merely intellectual answer, a merely theological argument. He wants personal vindication by God himself. He wants God to appear and give an account of what He is doing. The drama does not concern an agnostic professor of philosophy; it concerns a man who knows God, who loves and fears God, and whose utter assurance of his own integrity drives him to long for a personal encounter with God that will not merely provide "answers" but will also vindicate the sufferer.

(6) It is important to glance ahead a little. The "three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes" (32:1). They were at an impasse: they could make sense of his suffering only by

insisting on his guilt, and he kept insisting on his innocence. But God, after disclosing himself to Job, says to Eliphaz, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7). Indeed, Job must offer sacrifice and pray for them.

This is remarkable. The three miserable comforters thought they were defending God, and he charges them with saying the wrong things about him. Job defends his own integrity so virulently that he steps over the line now and then and actually charges God with injustice, yet God insists that his servant Job has spoken what is right. Of course, this does not mean that Job’s speeches have been entirely without fault. As we shall see, God charges Job with darkening His counsel “with words without knowledge” (38:2). In the last section of this chapter I shall explore more fully in which ways Job is right and his three friends are wrong. But under any reading of God’s vindication of Job’s discourses, room is made for innocent suffering; a simple theory of retributive justice—punishment proportionate to sin—is inadequate to explain some of the hard cases.

### **Job and Elihu (Job 32-37)**

Chapters 32-37 are among the most interesting, and the most difficult, in the book. They start off by raising our expectations. Elihu, not mentioned until this point, has kept his peace throughout the debate, because the other participants are older than he: custom demanded that age take precedence. But now they fall silent, and Elihu, whose wrath has been stoked by the debate, declares himself angry with both Job and his three friends. He is angry with the three friends, “because they had found no way to refute Job “for

justifying himself rather than God” (32:2). And so his lengthy contribution begins.

The remarkable thing about Elihu’s speech is that at the end of the book it is neither praised nor condemned. Some think it adds little, that it simply reiterates the sentiments of the three miserable comforters (e.g., 34:11), and therefore that he *ought* to be condemned if they are. Some conclude that these chapters must therefore have been added by a later editor.

But a more sympathetic reading of Elihu teases out his contribution, and shows how this young man avoids the opposing pitfalls into which both Job and his comforters have fallen. Perhaps one of the reasons why Elihu does not get a very sympathetic reading in some circles is that he is patently an arrogant and pretentious young man. Probably he is a great wise man in the making, but still far too full of himself and too certain of his opinions. Nevertheless, his main themes prepare the way for the central thrusts of the answer that God himself ultimately gives. If he is not praised, it is because his contribution is eclipsed by what God himself says; if he is not criticized, it is because he says nothing amiss.

We may summarize his argument this way:

(1) Elihu begins with a rather lengthy apology for speaking to his seniors (32:6-22). Among the factors that compel him to speak is his conviction (as he says to Job’s three friends), that “not one of you has proved Job wrong; none of you has answered his arguments” (32:12). This does not mean he thinks Job is entirely right, as we shall see; but Elihu has carefully distanced himself from the theology of the “miserable comforters.”

(2) When Elihu turns to Job, he first rebukes him for impugning God’s justice

(33:8ff.). Job may be innocent (Elihu will come to that in due course), but that does not give him the right to charge God with injustice. There is a sense in which Job himself has been snookered by a simplistic doctrine of mathematically precise retribution. The major difference between Job and his three friends is not their underlying views of retribution, but their views of Job's guilt or innocence. Because Job is convinced he is innocent, he is prepared to skirt the view that God himself is guilty. Elihu will not have it: "But I tell you, in this you are not right" (33:12).

The first reason why Job is not right is that "God is greater than man" (33:12). By this Elihu does not mean to say that greatness provides an excuse for wrongdoing, but that God may well have some purposes and perspectives in mind of which Job knows nothing. However much Job insists he is innocent, he must therefore put a guard on his tongue and refrain from making God guilty.

(3) The second thing Elihu says to Job is that God speaks more often and in more ways than Job acknowledges. "Why do you complain to him that he answers none of man's words?" (33:13). The truth of the matter, Elihu insists, is that "God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it" (33:14). He speaks in revelation: in dreams and visions (33:15-18). *But God may also speak in the language of pain* (33:19ff.). This is an advance on the argument between Job and his friends. Here is a chastening use of suffering that may be independent of some particular sin. Its purpose may be preventative: it can stop a person from slithering down the slope to destruction.

(4) In chapter 34, Elihu is so concerned to defend the justice of God that his rhetoric becomes a little overheated. On the

positive side, Elihu is determined to stop Job from charging God with injustice. The proper response to suffering is to accept it: God cannot possibly do wrong. By speaking the way he has, Job has added rebellion to his sin (34:37); "scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God."

If Elihu is at times dangerously close to siding with the three miserable comforters, it is here. Certainly he has not empathetically entered into Job's suffering, or tried to fathom the anguish that leads Job to defend his integrity in such extravagant terms. But Elihu is right to defend the justice of God, and he has advanced the discussion by suggesting that Job's greatest sin may not be something he said or did *before* the suffering started, but the rebellion he is displaying *in* the suffering. Even so, that does not explain the genesis of the suffering. It may, however, prepare Job to be a little more attentive to listen to God when God finally does speak.

In chapter 35, Elihu expressly disavows that Job is innocent. But unlike Eliphaz (22:5-9), he does not compose a list of sins Job must have committed, but challenges Job's fundamental presumption. To take but one example: Job assumes that when people are oppressed they cry to God for help, and charges that God does not answer. Not so, insists Elihu: one is far more likely to find people crying out "under a load of oppression" and vaguely pleading "for relief from the arm of the powerful" (35:9), *but still not praying*. They want relief, but do not turn to God and pray. They cry for freedom, "[but] no one says, 'Where is God my Maker ... ?'" (35:10). God does not listen to such empty pleas (35:13). What makes Job think, then, that God will answer him when the assumption underlying his

entire approach to God is that God owes him an answer, and may well be guilty of injustice (35:14-16)?

(5) In the last two chapters devoted to Elihu (chaps. 36-37), several themes come together, and Elihu begins to appear in more compassionate guise. The burden of the passage is this: whatever else may be said about the problem of evil and suffering, the justice of God must be the “given”: “I will ascribe justice to my Maker,” Elihu pledges (36:3). But God is not malicious. He does care for his people. Therefore the proper response to suffering we cannot fathom is faith and perseverance; the response to avoid bitterness (for it is the godless who harbor resentment, 36:13). Job is in danger here: “Beware of turning to evil, which you seem to prefer to affliction” (36:21)—that is, Job must not turn to evil as a way of alleviating his suffering. Be patient, Elihu is saying, “those who suffer [God] delivers in [lit. through] their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction. He is wooing you from the jaws of distress to a spacious place free from restriction, to the comfort of your table laden with choice food” (36:15-16). Be patient; it is better to be a chastened saint than a carefree sinner.

### **Job and God (Job 38:1-42:6)**

Finally God himself speaks, answering Job out of the storm (chaps. 38-41). “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (38:2-3). There follows question after question, each designed to remind Job of the kinds of thing he cannot do, and that only God can. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand” (38:4). “Have you ever given orders to the

morning, or shown the dawn its place ... ?” (38:12). “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle?” (38:22-23). “Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs?” (38:31-32). “Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?” (38:39-41). God then goes on to describe some of the more spectacular features of the mountain goat, the wild donkey, the ox, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the eagle. “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” (40:2).

Job had wanted an interview with the Almighty. He had, as it were, sworn an affidavit demanding that the Almighty appear and put his indictment in writing (31:35). But God’s defense wasn’t quite what Job had in mind. At the first pause, Job answers, “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more” (40:4-5).

But God hasn’t finished yet. “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (40:7). Then come the most blistering questions: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash

the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you" (40:8-14).

It is important to recognize that God does not here charge Job with sins that have brought on his suffering. He does not respond to the "whys" of Job's suffering, nor does he challenge Job's defense of his own integrity. The reason he calls Job on the carpet is not because of Job's justification of himself, but because of Job's willingness to condemn God in order to justify himself. In other words, God does not here "answer" Job's questions about the problem of evil and suffering, *but he makes it unambiguously clear what answers are not acceptable in God's universe.*

The rest of chapter 40 and all of chapter 41 find God asking more rhetorical questions. Can Job capture and subdue the behemoth (40:15ff.) and leviathan (41:1ff.)? These two beasts may be the hippopotamus and the crocodile, respectively, but they probably also represent primordial cosmic powers that sometimes break out against God. The argument, then, is that if Job is to charge God with injustice, he must do so from the secure stance of his own superior justice; and if he cannot subdue these beasts, let alone the cosmic forces they represent, he does not enjoy such a stance, and is therefore displaying extraordinary arrogance to call God's justice into question.

Job's response must be quoted in full (42:2-6), along with two or three explanatory asides: "I know that you can do all things," Job tells God, "no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this

that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' [38:2]. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me' [38:3; 40:7]. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you [i.e., Job has come to have a far clearer understanding of God than he had before]. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

What shall we make of this exchange between God and Job? Many doubtful interpretations have been put forward by various writers. Because God refers to so many natural phenomena, one writer argues that a major purpose of God's speech is to tell Job that the beauty of the world must become for him an anodyne to human suffering, a kind of aesthetic aspirin. When one basks in the world's beauty, one's problems become petty, "because they dissolve within the larger plan" of the harmony of the universe.<sup>4</sup> But to someone suffering intensely, the beauty of the world can just as easily become a brutal contrast that actually intensifies the suffering. Worse, it does not dissolve pain; rather, it is in danger of "dissolving" the sufferer in some kind of pantheistic sense of the fitness of things. This is surely a massive misunderstanding of God's response. Not once does God minimize the reality of Job's suffering.

Others, such as George Bernard Shaw, simply mock God's answer. Job wants an answer as to why he is suffering, and the best that God can do is brag about making snowflakes and crocodiles. A contemporary author like Elie Wiesel, writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, holds that Job should have pressed God further. Doubtless Job needed to repent of his attitude, but he still should have pressed

God for an answer: Why do the righteous suffer?

Both of these approaches misunderstand the book rather badly. They have this in common: they assume that everything that takes place in God's universe *ought* to be explained to us. They assume that God owes us an explanation, that there cannot possibly be any good reason for God not to tell us everything we want to know immediately. They assume that God Almighty should be more interested in giving us explanations than in being worshiped and trusted.

The burden of God's response to Job is twofold. The first emphasis we have already noted: Job has "darkened God's counsel" by trying to justify himself at the expense of condemning God; and Job is in no position to do that. "God's speeches show Job that his lowly station point was not the appropriate place from which to judge whether cosmic orders were sufficiently askew to justify the declaration 'let there be darkness.'"<sup>5</sup> The second emphasis is implicit: if there are so many things that Job does not understand, why should he so petulantly and persistently demand that he understand his own suffering? *There are some things you will not understand, for you are not God.*

That is why Job's answer is so appropriate. He does not say, "Ah, at last I understand!" but rather, "I repent." He does not repent of sins that have allegedly brought on the suffering; he repents of his arrogance in impugning God's justice, he repents of his attitude whereby he simply demands an answer, as if such were owed him. He repents of not having known God better: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore ... I repent" (42:5-6).

To those who do not know God, to

those who insist on being God, this outcome will never suffice. Those who do not know God come in time to recognize that it is better to know God and to trust God than to claim the rights of God.

Job teaches us that, at least in this world, there will always remain some mysteries to suffering. He also teaches us to exercise faith—not blind, thoughtless submission to an impersonal status quo, but faith in the God who has graciously revealed himself to us.

### **Job's Happy Ending (Job 42:7-16)**

These verses may be divided into two parts. The first, which we have already glanced at, reports God's wrath with Eliphaz and his two friends for not speaking of God what was right, as Job did (42:7-8). They are required to offer sacrifice to God, and Job, whom they have despised and abused, must pray for them, for God will accept his prayers for them (and, by implication, not their own!).

In the second part (vv. 10-17), after Job prays for his friends, the Lord makes him prosperous again. His siblings and acquaintances gather around him and provide gifts, presumably to help him start up again. He sires another family, seven more sons and three more daughters, and gains herds twice the size of what he had before. No women were more beautiful than his daughters, and Job left them an inheritance along with their brothers—further evidence of Job's compassionate and enlightened treatment of those traditionally squeezed to the periphery of life (cf. chap. 31). He lived to a ripe old age, seeing his children and their children to the fourth generation. Eventually he died, "old and full of years"—an epitaph reserved for the choicest or most favored of God's servants (Abraham [Gen

25:8], Isaac [Gen 35:29], David [1 Chron 29:28], and Jehoiada the priest [2 Chron 24:15]).

If some critics are displeased with God's answer to Job out of the storm, even more are incensed by this "happy ending." The story, they argue should have ended with Job's repentance. Whether he was restored is irrelevant; in any case it is untrue to the experience of many, who suffer at length without reprieve. To end the story this way makes the doctrine of retribution basically right after all. The conclusion is therefore anticlimactic at best, contradictory at worst.

This is, I think, a shallow reading of the text. Perhaps the following reflections will help unpack the purpose of this conclusion a little:

(1) We must beware of our own biases. One of the reasons why many people are dissatisfied with this ending is because in the contemporary literary world ambiguity in moral questions is universally revered, while moral certainty is almost as universally despised. The modern mood enjoys novels and plays where the rights and wrongs get confused, where every decision is a mixture of right and wrong, truth and error, where heroes and antiheroes reverse their roles.

Why this infatuation with ambiguity? It is regarded as more mature. Clear-cut answers are written off as immature. The pluralism of our age delights in moral ambiguity—but only as long as it costs nothing. Devotion to contemporary moral ambiguity is extraordinarily self-centered. It demands freedom from God so that it can do whatever it wants. But when the suffering starts the same self-centered focus on *my* world and *my* interests, rather ironically, wants God to provide answers of sparkling clarity.

(2) Throughout his excruciating suffering, Job has demonstrated that he serves the Lord out of a pure heart. True, he has said some stupid things and has been rebuked; but at no point does he simply curse God and turn his back on Him. Even his demand that God present himself before Job and give an answer is the cry of the believer seeking to find out what on earth God is doing. Even while sitting in the ashpit, Job trusts God enough to express extraordinary confidence in him, and for no ulterior motive.

In that sense, God has won his wager with the devil. Job may utter words that darken God's counsel, but he does not lose his integrity or abandon his God. Is it therefore surprising that there should be full reconciliation between God and Job? And if the wager has been won, is there any reason for Job's afflictions to continue?

(3) No matter how happy the ending, nothing can remove the suffering itself. The losses Job faced would always be with him. A happy ending is better than a miserable one, but it does not transform the suffering he endured into something less than suffering. A survivor of the Holocaust has not suffered less because he ultimately settles into a comfortable life in Los Angeles.

(4) The Book of Job has no interest in praising mystery without restraint. All biblical writers insist that to fear the Lord ultimately leads to abundant life. If this were not so, to fear the Lord would be stupid and masochistic. The book does not disown all forms of retribution; rather, it disowns simplistic, mathematically precise, and instant application of the doctrine of retribution. It categorically rejects any formula that affirms that the righteous always prosper and the wicked are always destroyed. There may be other reasons for

suffering; rewards (of blessing or of destruction) may be long delayed; knowledge of God is its own reward.

Job still does not have all the answers; he still knows nothing about the wager between God and Satan. He must simply trust God that something far greater was at stake than his own personal happiness. But he has stopped hinting that God is unjust; he has come to know God better; and he enjoys the Lord's favor in rich abundance once again.

(5) The blessings that Job experiences at the end are not cast as rewards that he has earned by his faithfulness under suffering. The epilogue simply describes the blessings as the Lord's free gift. The Lord is not nasty or capricious. He may for various reasons withdraw his favor, but his love endures forever.

In that sense, the epilogue is the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth. God is just, and will be seen to be just. This does *not* smuggle mathematical retribution in through the back door. Rather, it is to return, in another form, to the conclusion of chapter 8 of this book.

(6) Although I have repeatedly spoken of God entering into a wager with Satan, or winning his wager with Satan, I have done so to try to capture the scene in the first chapter. But there is a danger in such language: it may sound as if God is capricious. He plays with the lives of his creatures so that he can win a bet.

Clearly that is not true. The challenge to Satan is not a game; nor is the outcome, in God's mind, obscure. Nothing in the book tells us *why* God did this. The solemnity and majesty of God's response to Job not only mask God's purposes in mystery, but presuppose they are serious and deep, not flighty or frivolous.

Nevertheless, the wager with Satan is in certain ways congruent with other biblical themes. God's concern for the salvation of men and women is part of a larger, cosmic struggle between God and Satan, in which the outcome is certain while the struggle is horrible. This is one way of placing the human dimensions of redemption and judgment in a much larger framework than what we usually perceive.

(7) We are perhaps better situated now to understand precisely why God says that his servant Job spoke of him "what was right," while the three miserable comforters did not. True, Job is rebuked for darkening the Lord's counsel: he became guilty of an arrogance that dared to demand that God give an account of his actions. But Job has been genuinely groping for the truth, and has not allowed glib answers to deter him. He denies neither God's sovereignty nor (at least in most of his statements!) God's justice. Above all, so far as the wager between God and Satan is concerned, Job passes with flying colors; he never turns his back on God.

Contrast the three friends. Although they are trying to defend God, their reductionistic theology ends up offering Job a temptation: to confess sins that weren't there, in order to try to retrieve his prosperity. If Job had succumbed, it would have meant that Job cared more for prosperity than for his integrity or for the Lord himself; and the Lord would have lost his wager. Their counsel, if followed, would have actually led Job *away* from the Lord; Job would have been reduced to being yet one more person interested in seeking God for merely personal gain.

This is, at the end of the day, the ultimate test of our knowledge of God. Is it robust enough that, when faced with excruciating adversity, it may prompt us

to lash out with hard questions, but will never permit us to turn away from God?

But perhaps it is better to put the matter the other way round: the God who put Job through this wringer is also the God of whom it is said that, with respect to his own people, “he will not let [them] be tempted beyond what [they] can bear. But when [they] are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that [they] can stand up under it” (1 Cor 10:13). God could not trust me with as much suffering as Job endured; I could not take it. But we must not think that there was any doubt in God’s mind as to whether he would win his wager with Satan over Job!

When we suffer, there will sometimes be mystery. Will there also be faith?

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay is reproduced from chapter nine of *How Long, O Lord?: Perspectives on Suffering and Evil* with the permission of Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI.

<sup>2</sup> “Job the Pious? The Characterization of Job in the Narrative Framework of the Book,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989) 37-52.

<sup>3</sup> For adequate discussion of the difficulties, see John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 292-97.

<sup>4</sup> So Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 133, 304.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Lasine, “Bird’s-eye and Worm’s-eye Views of Justice in the Book of Job,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988) 344.