A Joban Theology of Consolation*

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Abstract

Contrary to much of the commentary tradition, the book of Job is not primarily a discourse on how to properly speak (or withhold speech) about God in the midst of innocent suffering, nor is it aimed primarily at offering up the character of Job as an exemplar of how to suffer correctly (or incorrectly). Neither is it a treatise about human submission to (or rebellion from) God's mysterious sovereign prerogative in permitting evil. It is instead a theological exploration of the dilemmas and demands of consolation that confront us given the inexplicable enormities of human suffering. Its unifying aim is to confront us with multiple voices that pull us into an open-ended—and decidedly pessimistic—reflection on what innocent suffering reveals to us about our creaturely limits and the fragility of our hope in God, features of the human condition that require our capacities for compassion to exceed our capacities for theological sense-making.

Keywords

Book of Job, problem of evil, theodicy, Carol Newsom, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gustavo Gutíerrez, optimism, pessimism, Susan Neiman, Mara van der Lugt

* I am grateful to the Yale Center for Faith and Culture February 2022 consultation on Scripture and Suffering for feedback on an earlier draft of this paper, including Julia Watts Belser, Lisa Bowens, Drew Collins, Karen Kilby, Calli Micale, Hassan Musa, Jolyon Pruszinski, and Miroslav Volf. Thanks as well to Lisa DeBoer, Rebekah Eklund, Kate Finley, Meghan Page, Michelle Panchuk, Kathryn Pogin, Michael Rea, Kevin Timpe, and two anonymous reviewers.

HTR 117:2 (2024) 181–203

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to advance a reading of the book of Job according to which its central concern is neither theodicy (a purported theological explanation for innocent suffering) nor offering sufferers a means of spiritual reframing that can promise to make their suffering more bearable or productive (a soul-making technique). Instead, the book confronts readers with a profoundly pessimistic perspective on both theodicy and soul-making as tools for reconciling unmerited human suffering to God's just moral governance. The overarching concern of the book is show how this pessimism motivates the demands of consolation—those demands of empathy and compassion that remain precisely when our projects of theological understanding and spiritual technique have run aground on the lived experience of suffering. After detailing in the first section the interpretive difficulties introduced by the literary structure of the canonical form of the book as well as the multi-perspectival analysis best suited to address them, I will in a second section uncover the development of a distinctively Joban theology of consolation. In a final section I will conclude by exploring how this perspective might serve as an important corrective to overly optimistic tendencies in both Christian theological discourses and modern Western philosophical discourses on innocent suffering.

The book of Job is the longest sustained reflection on the tensions between divine justice and innocent human suffering to be found anywhere either in the Jewish Tanakh or Christian Bible. Most of us are familiar with the story: it presents us with an idealized case of unmerited human suffering wherein Job—a paradigmatically righteous person blessed with great wealth, wisdom, and devotion to God—is swiftly and steadily reduced from the best kind of life to the worst, losing his estate and wealth to violence and robbery, losing his servants and all of his beloved children and their families to natural disasters, and finally losing his own physical well-being to a debilitating illness that alienates him not only from his own body but also from his community as a social pariah.[1] Yet he refuses to curse God, instead despising his own life. Three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—attempt to comfort Job as he sits mourning in bewildered lament cursing the day of his birth. This prompts his friends to engage him in a series of dialogues to address the question implicit in his turmoil: why is this happening?

Each of Job's counselors proposes slightly different answers to this question but they are broadly governed by the same basic plausible theological syllogism:[2]

[1] Job's catalogue of calamities seems designed to put on display not only an extreme degree of suffering but also a convergence of suffering from every conceivable *kind* (physical, social, psychological, economic, religious) and from every imaginable *cause* (othering, violence, disease, natural disaster).

[2] Given the covenantal framework outlined especially in Deuteronomy 28, Israelite readers would have been particularly attracted to a path of reasoning that explains human well-being and

either God is unjustly persecuting Job with undeserved suffering, or his misery is somehow merited according to God's just moral governance of the world (whether as retributive punishment for sin, or as corrective discipline). Clearly God cannot be unjust. Therefore, Job's misery must be the result of God's correction or retribution. The proper response, in that case, is to yield to God's intentions for his suffering: confess his wrongdoing or need of divine correction, repent, and throw himself in dependence upon God's mercy to forgive and restore him. Over and over, in several cycles of dialogue, Job vehemently denounces this line of reasoning. While he accepts that no one can make any charge of injustice stick to God,[3] he insists that his suffering is both unmerited and unproductive, that he is neither responsible nor in any way bettered for his life coming to utter ruin. Each of his replies reasserts his agony and protest over an inability to make sense of his situation. The reasons for his suffering remain an open question and an open wound for which he desperately wants closure, whether by an audience with God or by the relief of death. After his friends grow increasingly impatient with Job's rejection of their proposals about God's just uses of suffering, a bystander, Elihu, joins the dialogue to summarize and reassert their (and, he supposes, God's) case.[4] Finally, God interrupts these proceedings, appearing in a whirlwind to vindicate Job to his friends as having "spoken rightly about me" (42:7–8),[5] while also silencing Job's protest over his own suffering. God exposes the finitude of Job's perspective on the divine plan governing the created order and the judgments issuing from it, forcing him to concede his ignorance and drop his demand for an answer.

A puzzling twist to these poetic dialogues is that they are enclosed within a narrative frame that begins by the narrator telling *us* as readers precisely that which Job and his friends are wrangling over for most of the book. We are swept up to a heavenly court to see God's good pleasure in Job's righteousness challenged by an unnamed "adversary" who doubts that Job's devotion to God is pure and disinterested, since he enjoys so much in the way of material comfort.[6]

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calamity as manifestations of divine blessing and curse for human innocence or guilt before God.

[3] See Job 9:2.

[4] A few biblical scholars have argued that the Elihu speeches belong to the original composition, the most plausible among them being Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978, 2011) 546–53. Less well-supported is N. H. Tur-Sinai's view, according to which the Elihu material *predates* the preceding cycles of Job and his friends. See Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967) xxxviii–xxxix. Rather, the consensus view is most likely correct, which is that the Elihu speeches represent a later interpolation from another poet, though I think for reasons less related to lexical issues than stylistic and rhetorical ones. See Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010) 133. Whatever the proper dating, however, functionally the Elihu material seems to play a summative rather than contrastive role—what Samuel Balentine aptly calls a kind of "first commentary" on the preceding dialogue. See Balentine, *Job* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006) 17.

[5] All citations of Hebrew text are taken from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (ed. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[6] Given the use of the definite article הַשָּׂטָן the term clearly names a functionary rather than the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If, the adversary suggests, Job is stripped of all creaturely sources of well-being: property, family, health, he will curse God to his face. God takes the wager over the disinterestedness of Job's faith and permits all the proposed calamities. In the dialogues that follow, readers are left to roll the morsel of this secret knowledge over our tongues through each cycle of exchange between our haplessly ignorant protagonist and his hostile yet equally ignorant antagonists. While dialogues in the Socratic style aim at investing the reader in this sort of exchange in order to initiate a process of critical reflection that enables readers to achieve for themselves the needed insights about an unresolved question or problem, the dialogues seem to undercut motivation to reason along with Job or his friends, since the narrator has already handed us from the outset the very thing they are at such great pains to discover—the meaning and purpose of Job's suffering.[7] So while the final dialogue climaxes with God appearing dramatically from the whirlwind to reprove Job for supposing that he, a mere finite creature, could possibly grasp the meaning of his own innocent suffering within the cosmic scheme of God's plans and judgments, the narrator seems to have already from the very beginning placed in the back pocket of the reader a handy guide to the very plans and judgments that God insists to Job lie beyond all human comprehension.

Moreover, by the time we get to the end of the dialogues we have been thoroughly disabused of what commentators frequently call a "retribution theology," the idea that we can reliably account for our flourishing as a divine reward for our righteousness and our suffering as a divine punishment or correction for our sins. Yet in the short narrative epilogue that closes the book we find God doing two things: first, vindicating Job's righteousness to his friends as having "spoken the truth" about God's dealings with him and, second, God's offering what looks suspiciously like a reward:[8] returning to him double what he once had, renewing his family life with more children, recovering his social capital, and granting him a long and happy life. Job's righteousness seems correlated to earthly blessing after all. The book's closing scene finds Job entering into blessed memory as one whose profound suffering in the end gave way to flourishing, his dishonor turned to a

name of an individual, which has given rise to speculations about whether the divinely appointed antagonist should be understood to be angelic or human.

[7] In "Reading Job as Kierkegaardian Text," *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016) 127–52, Brennan Breed rightly draws attention to the Socratic tradition of dialogue which aims not merely at advancing an argument but rather the "maieutic" (= midwife) function of encouraging "the birth of the critical subject" (129). But unlike that tradition, the Joban dialogue does not primarily aim to "spark autonomous thinking" about innocent suffering (127), nor does it encourage the existential aim Kierkegaard centers, to "appropriate faith" (152). Instead, I argue, it serves to give birth in the reader to dispositions for coping with the tragic burdens born of a faith already appropriated.

[8] Marvin Pope, *The Anchor Bible: Job* (Garden City, NY: 1965) hypothesizes that the author of the poetic dialogues was drawing from an ancient prose folktale that already included all the conventional trappings of a retribution theology, which were then retained in the final composition of the text (xxi–xxix).

place of honor alongside Israel's most celebrated patriarchs.[9] The slender narrative bookends thus stand in deeply ironic tension with the large middle portion, raising a host of interpretive questions about what overall orientation to the problem of innocent suffering the book is seeking to convey to us in its final form.[10] What is the "Joban" perspective on innocent suffering?

To identify *the* Joban perspective is complicated by the fact that the book contains multiple perspectives, as the narrative/dialogue tension illustrates. Recognizing this lends itself to several competing ways of identifying its overarching theme and message. If we privilege the narrator's voice we might read the book as a proposed explanation of innocent suffering by way of the divine test of Job's disinterested devotion, with the focus being on whether or not he passed and why, and as commending to us as readers our own disinterested devotion in the midst of our innocent suffering. If we instead take the book's pronouncement of Job's exemplary character as our guide, we might read it as an encouragement to identify with Job's perspective as those who, like him, are never given any peek behind the veil of our sufferings to reveal God's design for them. Read this way, the book offers us Job as an example of personal authenticity in unmerited and unexplained suffering, commending to us as readers Job's refusal to accept any framing of suffering that makes us responsible for all the evils that befall us and offering us instead permission to protest God's mysterious will in countenancing such evils. If, alternatively, we identify the mistaken perspective of Job's counselors as our key point of departure for the overall message of the book, that message would not so much be to commend any particular explanation of innocent suffering (it's a test!) or any particular way of coping with innocent suffering (protest!) but rather a rejection of retribution theology and a simple commendation of the view that, contra Job's counselors, there *is* such a thing as innocent suffering, that it *exists.* Job's counselors would thus serve as the main foil to the book's assault on the strict reduction of suffering to blessings and curses in God's moral governance of the world. Finally, if we attempt to locate the main message of the book by looking to God's perspective from the whirlwind, we might read the book as a kind of divine silencing of all human perspectives by the assertion of divine sovereignty, with God's response revealing the relative limits of every human perspective in the book: the narrator's opening depiction of the divine test stands exposed as a partial and fragmentary understanding of God's plans and judgments, Job's friends are judged

[9] The formula of a long and prosperous life echoes the language of divine favor commemorating Israelite patriarchs in Genesis.

[10] For this reason, much of the commentary tradition has framed the main interpretive problem about the compositional unity of the text in terms of this narrative versus dialogues contrast. See, Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 3–11, and more recently Warren Zev Harvey, "Questions on the Book of Job," *Religious Studies* 58.2 (June 2022) 1–10. Becoming overly fixated on the contrast in genres, however, can be misleading in seeking to locate the unifying features of the final form of the composition as a whole.

as having spoken incorrectly about God, and Job himself is rebuked by God for having spoken presumptuously out of ignorance.

Clearly, each of these perspectives has something to commend it in the rhetoric of the book. But centering any one of them as the overall "Joban" perspective puts us in the awkward position of skewing our sympathies toward one point of view on unjust suffering in relative opposition to the others.[11] If, for example, we throw in with the narrator's identification of the purpose of unmerited suffering to reveal (Job's/our) disinterested devotion then we will find ourselves failing to identify with the agonizing search after God's intentions exhibited in the dialogue between Job and his friends. If we insist on siding with God, we can find ourselves parting company with Job's authenticity and exemplarity by identifying the line he crossed that merits God's rebuke, thereby standing alongside God as judge over his protest. If we take the main consideration instead to be the theological debate over the very existence of unmerited suffering as posed by Job's interlocutors, then even while we side with Job and God against their retribution theology, we will nevertheless center the concern that his interlocutors most value: the theological question about the status of innocent suffering within God's moral governance over the world. The theological significance of the moral and religious psychology exhibited by sufferers then becomes a decidedly secondary concern. Finally, if we side with Job then we find ourselves defending his disconsolate disposition against both human and divine antagonisms.

Rather than siding with one voice over the others, we should follow Carol Newsom in recognizing that the multi-perspectival character of the book seems to call for what twentieth-century literary critic Mikhail Bakthin calls a "polyphonic" approach to the composition as a whole.[12] Bakhtin suggested that in polyphonic

[11] As Newsom puts it, "In many previous approaches to reading the book, the only voices taken seriously were those of Job and God. The others were mere foils" (*Book of Job*, 261). On the other hand, taking seriously the multiple forms, sources, and perspectives layered into the final composition of the text has led some commentators such as Robin Lane Fox to suppose that "no direct literary approach is possible" and that the resultant final form of the canonical text "no longer makes sense" as a whole. See Jeffrey Boss, *Human Consciousnes of God in the Book of Job* (New York: T&T Clark: 2010) 4. Pope, while affirming the narrative and dialogues to be basically at odds, nevertheless regards the book as aimed at establishing God's sovereign prerogative in human affairs and God's immunity from being "forced to bear witness against himself" (Pope, *Job,* lxvi–lxxv).

[12] See Newsom, *Book of Job*, 21–31. While finding Bakthin's notion of polyphonic analysis helpful in identifying the dialogue between multiple voices in the text, Newsom also holds that Bakhtinian dialogue is an insufficient framework for understanding *Job,* because of its inability to address "the very speech situation upon which the whole story is founded" (30–31), which "emerges from an irresistible curiosity to know something that utterly eludes dialogue" (31), an inability to deal with the violence of "coerced" speech throughout the dialogues, and an inability to make good sense of the "silences" that pervade the book (ibid.). As we shall see, however, I think these alleged inadequacies speak less to the interpretive possibilities afforded by a dialogic analysis of the text and more to the way we characterize the nature of that dialogue and the social logics it represents. It is rather Newsom's focus on the social logics of genre that cannot adequately accommodate the tensions and *aporia* of coercion and silence, whereas these become salient when we shift our focus to the social logics projected by its characters.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

works the "world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it" are conveyed "by means of the social diversity of speech types."[13] Each of the voices in the work, whether that of narrator or some character, stands in for a particular vantage point in society—a distinct social "dialect" that has its own "vocabulary" of norms, authorities, and sociopolitical interests and purposes. By incarnating each of these distinct social dialects via the literary figures of narrator and characters, the author creates a kind of structural model of society, and by placing these figures into dialogue with one another, the work can serve to illuminate the links and interrelationships generated by the ways that these distinct perspectives and interests in society intersect, merge, clash, and otherwise impact one another.

Bakhtin emphasized the openness rather than fixed or finalized character of the dialogue staged in the polyphonic work.[14] The goal of displaying a set of intersecting social logics is to draw the reader into the dynamic interaction between those logics as they unfold throughout the dialogue. Insofar as readers are *witnesses* to this interchange curated through the narration and dialogue in the text, it serves to illuminate their own position and posture in relationship to the social dialects being modeled. But more than merely positioning readers as self-conscious witnesses, polyphonic texts aim to enlist readers as active partners in negotiating, evaluating, and coordinating the perspectives offered by the social dialects represented in the story. Placed among the voices of the text and hearing the echoes of resonance and dissonance among the norms, interests, authorities, and purposes that shape our own lives, we find ourselves reinforcing some dialects rather than others, challenging some by way of others, reframing some by means of others, and our own perspectives and values are transformed.[15] Guiding us into this process is precisely the point of the way polyphonic texts are constructed.

On Newsom's appropriation of Bakhtin, the relevant diversity of speech types consists mostly in the distinct *genres* in the book, such that the formal features belonging to "didactic prose" exhibited by the narrative portions mark a distinct set of values and interests from those expressed by the form of the dialogues.[16] But I will suggest that the thematic content of the book better supports a reading according to which the proper bearers of social logics in the book are more aptly tied to its figures (the narrator, Job, his friends, God) rather than its genres. As we shall see, centering these figures as Bakhtinian voices reveals a different set of contrasts in

[13] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1921) 262–63.

[14] Ibid., 280.

[15] Ibid., 169.

[16] Newsom, *Book of Job*, 168. I think Newsom finds these dynamics of discourse to fall outside a sole focus on dialogue because she conflates Bakhtinian dialogue as a genre of literature with a dialogic genre as a literary device within various genres of literature. For Bakhtin the narrator of didactic prose can be among the dialogical voices in a polyphonic work of literature, and this makes phenomena of silencing and coercion possible features of the narrator's intersection with the characters of the speeches.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perspective and makes salient an important pattern of links and interrelationships between them distinct from those highlighted by Newsom.

What then are the social logics or dialects being presented to us in the tensions between narrator and dialogue partners, as well as the tensions among the divine and human disputants themselves? Into what kind of process of negotiation are readers of these dialects invited as the conversation unfolds? What kind of transformation does the composition aim to bring about in us as readers? When we approach the text with these interpretive questions in mind what emerges is that, contrary to what many commentators have supposed, the book of Job is not so much about how to properly speak (or withhold speech) about God in the midst of innocent suffering,[17] nor is it aimed primarily at offering up the character of Job as an exemplar of how to suffer correctly (or incorrectly). It is instead a theological exploration of the dilemmas and demands of consolation imposed upon us as readers given the inexplicable enormities of innocent human suffering.

We have already observed that the narrative prologue is in some ways a strange stage-setting device for introducing the dialogues between Job and his friends. Taken by themselves, the dialogues primarily unfold as a series of disputes over two main questions: first, is Job innocent (as he himself supposes) or guilty (as his interlocutors suppose) before God? Second, what divinely intended meaning or purpose is being served by Job's suffering? (Job has no idea and confesses his bewilderment, while his friends are certain that God is reproving or punishing him). By bringing us in on the scene from the heavenly court to overhear the plan hatched by God and the accuser, the narrator supplies us with answers to both questions: God clearly regards Job as not only innocent but exemplary. God's purpose for allowing Job's torture by the adversary is likewise explicitly disclosed to us—to see whether he will "hold fast to his integrity" or whether instead, as the Accuser suggests to God, "he will curse you to your face" (Job 1:5). But why settle in advance the very points at issue in the dialogues? Having at the outset resolved these disputes for the reader, what interest does the narrator suppose we ought to take in them?

A possibility that most readily suggests itself is our interest to know whether or not Job *passes* the test: whether he responds to his suffering by holding fast to his integrity, or whether he instead curses God. But the prologue takes that question off the table too, settling it for us quickly after narrating each cycle of Job's affliction. Upon losing his wealth and children we find him lamenting "naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord," and just in case we missed Job's blessing rather than cursing the narrator adds "in all this Job did not sin or impute folly to God" (1:22). Likewise, after he is robbed of physical health and socially ostracized,

[17] A reading most powerfully advanced by Gustavo Gutíerrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell; New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Job is afforded a clear opportunity to fail the proposed test, with the moment of truth presented by his wife: "Still you hold fast to your integrity! Curse God and die!" (2:9).[18] But Job replies "Shall we receive good from God's hand and not evil?" Once again, our narrator assures us, "in all this Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10).

It is in the narrative bridge introducing us to Job's three friends that we are given the first clue nudging us toward the real interest we are meant to take in the dialogues to follow. In Job 2:11, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar do not come to Job as antagonists preparing for an argument, but as companions who met together "to sympathize and console him" (לָנֽוּד־לֹ֖ו וּֽלְנַחֲמֽוֹ), and at first sight of his abject misery, they weep aloud and sit in mourning alongside him for seven days and seven nights, "and no one spoke a word to him, because they saw that his suffering was very great" (2:13). Gustavo Gutíerrez aptly summarizes what remains a strong consensus in recent commentaries on Job when he identifies the central theme as that of "how we are to talk about God" within the specific situation of innocent suffering.[19] But here we see a crucial further qualification in the way the text fixes that theme. It explicitly links our talk about God in the situation of innocent suffering to a consolation and comfort of the innocent sufferer for which all words are inadequate. The patterns of speech and silence that follow are framed by the demands of consolation imposed on one's community by the experience of its innocent sufferers.

These patterns are embodied first in the botched consolation attempted by Job's friends, and second by the decidedly non-consoling intervention of God. In both the human and divine discourses, the characters embody distinct dialects in Bakhtin's sense. As readers we are meant to be pulled into their erupting disputes precisely as interconnections and clashes between Job's social logic of suffering as a traumatic breach of intelligibility on the one hand and the social logics of God's just governance over the world as a proposed source of repairing that breach on the other hand (whether it is the mistaken logic of divine governance offered by Job's friends or its corrective offered by God). By positioning readers as observers of these intersections tasked with actively negotiating their conflicting interests, we gain a new vantage on the possibilities of consolation and the limits of theological speech and sense-making.

Turning first to the cycles of dialogue between Job and his human interlocutors, Job's language is that of the wretched of the earth,[20] those who in the trauma of

[18] Readings of Job's wife have tended to be assimilated to patriarchal norms that vilify women as temptations away from faithfulness to God. Balentine (*Job*, 62–65) highlights how this leads us to neglect ambiguities in our translation of this passage (which can also be read as declaring rather than questioning Job's integrity and as calling him to bless rather than curse God). Still, Job's reaction to her speech as that of a "foolish person" (הַנְּבָלֹ֣ות) complicates these alternative readings. See also C. L. Seow, "Job's Wife," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 141–52.

[19] Gutíerrez, *On Job*, xviii.

[20] The description calls to mind that class of human suffering described by Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Richard Philcox; New York: Grove Press, 1963). While the violence of colonialist oppression is not at the forefront of the rhetoric in the book of Job, neither is it entirely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their unmerited suffering encounter the apparent order of a God-governed world as a chaos, a violent unmaking of sense and order.[21] When Job breaks the silence in lament over his misery, he does so despising his life and wishing for death to come swiftly, but he does so using the theological language of creation and decreation, the dawning of God's light that brings order to the primeval chaos (cf. Gen. 1) and God's continued command over that chaos represented by the untamed Sea (cf. Gen. 7; Exod. 15).[22] He finds the allure of death not simply in the cessation of suffering, but as a great equalizer that brings rest from the various ways that the unspeakable and chaotic world of pain is converted into a kind of false intelligibility and articulacy through unjust exercises of power.[23] In death taskmasters and prisoners, masters and slaves, are alike free from the contrivances that mask the senselessness of human agony they introduce into God's world (3:17– 9). In his lament but also in his own body Job remains disconsolate precisely because this world of chaos is also God's world, a world of profound disorder and senseless pain made manifest in human injustice—and also governed by the God of cosmic and moral order.

It is important to recognize that Job's lament over his experience of God's world as a chaos is not an articulation of the problem of evil in the way we traditionally understand that problem.[24] Clearly established as fixed features of Job's outlook are his acknowledgement that God is the ultimate explanation for all the good and evil we experience, and yet that God's justice is in any case unimpeachable even if inscrutable.[25] The problem for him, rather, is one of disconsolate despair *given*

absent. It is significant that the canonical book of Job functions to expose Israelites under different historical periods of political domination and subjugation, and forces them to consider the innocent suffering of a non-Israelite and to attend to his humanity. Even so, for Job human wretchedness comes in many forms beyond political oppression.

[21] See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 3–23. Scarry offers an enormously insightful analysis of the way that our experiential and linguistic relationship to the world as an ordered cosmos is connected to our embodiment and the ways that social and political mediations of the inexpressibility of bodily pain disrupt that sense of order.

[22] The language of primordial darkness and light, and juxtaposition of the watery womb with the primeval waters of chaos and their associations with Yamm and Leviathan depict Job's desired journey backward from the order of creation through the chaos of decreation to a prior state of nonbeing. See Brian Doak, "Monster Violence in the Book of Job," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 3 (2015) 269–87.

[23] See Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 27–59.

[24] Philosophers of religion routinely distinguish between (a) logical, (b) probabilistic or evidential, and (c) psychological or pastoral problems of evil, on which analysis the book of Job might be considered to speak most clearly to the third sort. But the distinction is dubious. For an excellent critique of the usual divisions and argument for the interconnectedness of the moral, practical, psychological, evidential, and metaphysical dimensions of the problem of suffering, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) 181–202.

[25] For a discussion of Job as a classical source of skeptical theism, see Tamar Rudavsky, "A Brief History of Skeptical Responses to Evil," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (ed. Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder; New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 379–95, 381–86.

his acceptance of God's blameless moral governance over the world, precisely because that blameless moral governance has seen fit to deprive his life and the lives of countless others of their most basic meaning and value.[26] Job confronts his community as a believer in God's concern for the poor and oppressed and in God's just relationship to the world,[27] yet one whose own suffering is so great that he longs for an exit from God's world and wishes he had never been born into it in the first place.[28] From the perspective of one who believes and yet endures such suffering, God's world is not a safe place but a wilderness and God is not an unqualifiedly safe presence but a terrifying and potentially dangerous one. The difference in outlook between Job's friends and his own is just the difference between the way a zebra might appraise life in the Serengeti while grazing lazily in the grass as opposed to from the position of wild-eyed horror as its life ebbs into the securely clenched jaws of a predator. Job represents the dialect of the innocent sufferer of the severest afflictions imaginable, the inner logic of which includes belief in a just God who permits those afflictions, a rationally justified despair of life itself, and an insistent demand for empathy.

It is particularly the last two items in this logic—justified despair and the empathy it ought to motivate—that most confound and eventually anger Job's friends. When Eliphaz breaks his silence to engage Job's lament in his first speech, it is no longer a gesture of solidarity in and with Job's pain. Instead it becomes a theology lesson aimed at imparting consolation through the admonition to find confidence and hope in the very God whose just governance of the world has literally ruined his life as he knows it (4:1–6). While inflected with important regional differences between them, the dialect of suffering taken up by Job's interlocutors (including the late arrival of Elihu) nevertheless exhibits a consistently common underlying structure. It involves the same three elements exhibited by Job's dialect, but the interlocutors assume a different logic of internal relations. Along with Job, they hold that God's moral governance over the blessings and curses of our lives is unimpeachable. But they differ from Job by insisting that such a belief is incompatible with human despair, the embrace of which necessarily constitutes evidence of a failure to believe in or trust divine justice. A fully empathetic disposition of the sort Job desired would mark them as complicit with his despair, and hence implicate them in impeaching God's just reign over our lives. It is precisely because Job fails to acknowledge these alleged implications of his own professed commitments to divine justice that his friends take faithful consolation to require them to hazard a theological correction (ostensibly defending God from the offense of Job's pessimistic despair)

[26] As Mark S. M. Scott puts it in "Befriending Job: Theodicy Amidst the Ashes," *Open Theology* 6.1 (June, 2020) 319–26, at 325: "no theodicy, however compelling, can heal the deepest wounds of life."

[27] See especially Job 21:7–21; 29:11–17.

[28] See Job 3:10–11; 10:18–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and a rebuke rather than an empathetic embrace (ostensibly restoring Job's hope in the promised blessings of dependence on God's will).

I say "ostensibly," because at every turn in his dialogue with each of his interlocutors, Job roundly rejects and even mocks their suggestions that divine providence affords us no justifiable reasons for despair, and hence insufficient motivation for empathizing with the despairing. All they need to do is actually attend closely to the material situations of the sufferers such as himself whom they are lecturing. The uneven and *for all we can tell* indiscriminate distributions of blessing and curse, luxuriant flourishing and abject misery, are empirically available facts we can all observe for ourselves, whether in Job's own life or the countless other instances to which any of us might easily point. To question whether the innocent have ever perished (4:7) is an absurdity bordering on obscenity to which the reply of the wretched can only be: "Please, look at me" (6:28).[29] By this plea Job effectively says "here sits before you someone whose life has been reduced to unrelenting and unbearable pain, forcibly drained of all inner resources and with no reasonable expectation of relief. How can you deny such a person their despair and their wish for the consolation of death?" To Bildad Job emphasizes that such despair is no denial of God's just and righteous prerogative to order the world however God will, but only recognition that the mysteries of that just and righteous will manifestly include God's evident allowance of the calamity of the innocent (9:19–24).[30] God, in other words, needs no defense, but the human casualties of God's just ordering lie all around us, and who will tend to them? It is just this closing off of his interlocutors, not merely to himself, but to the whole host of innocent sufferers per se that motivates Job's repeated accusation throughout the dialogues: that it is not necessarily their theology of divine justice but their *use* of it that makes his interlocutors "worthless healers" who "smear with lies" (13:4).[31]

The dialect of those who must defend at all costs the justice of divine providence against human despair turns those who speak it into enemies of those who suffer horrendous evils.[32] To lack God's wisdom, understanding, and power, and yet to

[29] This construction הוֹאִ֣ילוּ פְנוּ־בִ֑י (lit. "kindly look at me" or "be pleased to face me") appears only here in the Hebrew Bible and seems to convey the request for an honest confrontation and assessment of his condition.

[30] Job's point is subtle in 9:19–24. His acknowledgment that God is unquestionably just is grounded in a recognition of the unknowability and thus the unaccountability of divine justice which makes it a non-consoling reality. Excesses of evil and divine justice alike lie outside the domain of our comprehension. See Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998). Still, it is not right to say as Newsom does that "[f]or Job the excess of evil is God" (*Book of Job*, 129).

[31] The image highlights the posture that Job maintains toward his friends throughout, which is to see them not as philosophical opponents with bad arguments but as incompetent physicians (רֹפְאֵ֖י אֱלִ֣ל [lit. "worthless healers"]) applying a toxic salve to a friend's mortal wound. The issue is accordingly the therapeutic uses of theology that Nemo refers to as "techniques"—approaches to the human condition that presume a prior lawfulness susceptible to our strategic interventions (Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 176).

[32] An essentially victim-blaming dynamic.

"take God's side" is to betray one's own humanity. For just this reason, it would be a mistake to read Job's replies as a tacit acceptance that the most appropriate response to his suffering is a project of theological sense-making undertaken by examining a theology of divine providence. What he wants instead is something categorically different: "Compassion, have compassion on me, you my companions, because God's hand has struck me! Why do you, like God, hunt me, never having had your fill of my flesh?" (19:21–22).[33] But neither does Job think that their own interests in the dispute are what they seem. We find him regularly repudiating their pretensions to good faith theological engagement, questioning their apparently sober and detached interest in protecting God's honor and their purity of heart in seeking the good of their suffering companion.

It is not Job's arguments but Job himself, the concrete reality of his existence, that exposes what is actually motivating his interlocutors. This is most clearly stated in Job's reply to Eliphaz: "you see a horror, and you're terrified" (6:21).[34] The problem with Job's abasement is that if it is truly unmerited, truly inexplicable and indiscriminate from our point of view, and truly an experience of the sort that warrants the kind of despair Job expresses, then it can strike anyone, anywhere. This would force Job's friends to recognize themselves as inhabiting the same uncontrollable and chaotic world that Job inhabits as one that makes them equally vulnerable to his fate, and this terrifies them. Their dialect of divine providence has been constructed precisely in order to impose order on the chaos and render the uncontrollable wilderness into a safely domesticated space with clearly demarcated boundaries to keep the malign providences of God at bay. They have supposed that by claiming representation over God's moral governance to reprove Job's despair, they can themselves become immune to despair. But this is an illusion, a consoling narrative that Rowan Williams has aptly described as mere "religious games."[35] Mocking the purported honesty of their words, Job asks "Why do my honest words provoke? . . . Would you cast lots over the orphan and barter away your friend?" (6:25, 27).[36] Theirs is a dialect of suffering that not merely makes

[33] I disagree with Balentine, who follows Clines in suggesting that Job's plea for "pity" or "compassion" (חָנֻּנִי) is sarcastic: having lamented his abandonment by loved ones in 19:19 ("those I love have turned against me"), he remains grasping for consolation.

[34] Likewise, in 19:28–29 Job points out that even while his friends are pursuing him to find the "root of the trouble" as if it lay in him, they ought to fear *for themselves,* since they are no less susceptible to the violence of divine judgments than he is.

[35] Williams's homily entitled "Dark Night," in *A Ray of Darkness* (Cowley: Cambridge, MA: 1995), describes the "delusional" character of theological meaning-making "designed to comfort and justify us in the style of religious life we have found congenial" (80). Our suffering can illuminate a darkness, revealing that "our path goes round a hole, a bottomless black pit. In the middle of all our religious constructs—if we have the honesty to look at it—is an emptiness. It makes nonsense of all religion, conservative or radical, and all piety," and this, he supposes, is "the darkness of God" about which John of the Cross spoke (81).

[36] As Norman Habel puts it in *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985): "They have abandoned their role as friends and become experts in argument rather than compassionate friends who stand beside Job in spite of God's attacks" (150). What commentators frequently miss,

the wretched of the earth their enemies but sells them out. What is it they hope to gain from gambling over their friend? Over what has he become their bargaining chip? What they hope to acquire, Job insinuates, is a false sense of safety.

We could aptly summarize the target of the dialogues with Job's human interlocutors as a theology of meaning-making in suffering that is underwritten by a kind of toxic positivity about the human relationship to God's providential guidance of the world to its intended ends.[37] This toxic positivity insists on making all suffering productive and castigating all those who despair as blameworthy for failing to appropriate the meaning that might relieve them of their own misery. On the Joban perspective, such a positivity emerges not from faithfulness to God but as a defensive strategy of terror management.[38] It is a distinctively theological form of *spiritual bypassing*, where a doctrine of providence is wielded defensively in order to sidestep one's unresolved terror about one's own susceptibility to horrendous suffering and death.[39] Ironically, it turns out that Job's comforters were never engaged in an honest attempt to comfort Job in his unspeakable degradation in the first place. They were instead seeking to comfort *themselves* with the illusory fantasy that their own life in God's world is not in fact like that of the zebra among predators but more like tourists on safari in the Land Rover being safely transported under the protection of God, their armed guide.

When God intervenes on this dispute, therefore, we find Job in ever increasing desperate need of the empathetic consolations he has been denied, and as readers we are now poised to find out whether he will receive it from God. He won't. Job has not been sanguine about the possibility prior to God's arrival. He had already suspected that "if I summoned him and he answered me, I do not trust that he would listen to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest. . . . Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me" (9:16–17, 20).[40] The result of such an encounter, Job surmises, would likely leave him as disconsolate as when he began in his initial lament over his very existence: "though I am blameless, he would prove me

however, is just what his friends are getting in return for their barter.

[37] For a more general account of "toxic" speech see Lynne Tirrell, "Toxic Speech: Toward an Epistemology of Discursive Harm," *Philosophical Topics* 45.2 (2017) 139–61.

[38] For an overview of terror management theory in social psychology (developed from the cultural anthropology of Ernest Becker) see Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015).

[39] The term "spiritual bypassing" to describe this dynamic was first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984. See his *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), and, more recently, Robert Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

[40] It is not clear whether שְׂעָרָה ("storm" or "tempest) in 9:17 ought to be translated as a foreshadowing of the סְעָרָה out of which God confronts Job in 38:1, because the difference in spelling suggests that the two words are homonyms. For that reason, Greenstein and Alter both render שְׂעָרָה in 9:17 "for a hair he crushes me." See Edward Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) 40 n. 12, and Alter, *Wisdom Books*, 44. It's also possible, I think, that the use of the homonym is a double-entendre aimed at foreshadowing the divine whirlwind. Even so, a similar parallel occurs in Job 30:22: "You lift me up to the wind and cause me to ride [on it]."

perverse . . . I loathe my life" (9:21). Job's recognition that God "is not a mortal" makes him wish he had a "mediator who might lay his hand on us both" (9:33). Even in the comfort he takes in regarding God as witness to his innocence, what Job lacks in God who dwells "on high" (16:19) is precisely the kind of symmetry involved in human fellowship and regard, leaving him wishing with tears that God "would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a companion" (16:21). So now when God appears from the tempest, it turns out precisely as Job had expected: God has vindicated him to his friends ("you have not spoken of me rightly, as my servant Job has" [42:7, 8]) and thus borne witness to his innocence. But likewise, precisely because this witness comes down from on high beyond the veil of human reckoning, God puts questions to him that force Job to condemn himself with his own mouth and confess his limits as a mere mortal, also just as he had anticipated. He can only conclude, "I give up, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6).[41] While vindicated, he remains more deeply disconsolate. It is, after all, precisely his insistence on the innocence of his despair that God has vindicated.

The whirlwind encounter therefore does not function to resolve the questions over Job's consolation that unfold across the dialogues, as so many commentators suppose, but rather to heighten and exacerbate them: if the self-consoling fantasies of his human questioners prevent them from empathetically consoling Job's despair, and God is not a mortal companion or neighbor but rather the incomprehensible ground of Job's misery whose governance of the cosmic and moral order remains unanswerable to his finite perspective, then where is Job to look for comfort in his desperate condition? At first glance, the narrative epilogue might seem to offer something of an ordinary "happily ever after" to the story. But, given the preceding dialogues, the epilogue takes on an especially ironic set of complications designed

[41] I follow Greenstein (*Job*, 185) in translating 'אֶמְאַ֫ס (lit. "I reject") as an intransitive rather than supplying a direct object as many other translations attempt to do (thus "I despise [myself]" in the *NIV*). As Jan Fokklemann explains in *The Book of Job in Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): "what exactly does Job reject as a speaker? The context itself suggests an answer: Job's approach so far, his behaviour in protesting and demanding a lawsuit. Job is throwing the towel in . . . Essentially, verse 6a says nothing else than 40:4b . . . 'I lay my hand on my mouth.' . . . I have rendered v. 6a as "therefore I quit'" (318). The other major lexical problem is with the translation of נִחַ֫מְתִּי as "I repent" or "I am sorry" when it might equally well be translated "I am comforted" with respect to עָפָר וָאֵפֶר ("dust and ashes"), which we find in Gutíerrez (*On Job*, 86–87). While the theme of consolation makes this translation tempting it also fails to make sense given the context of God's rebuke and parallelism with Job's response in 40:4 (which aligns with his prior anticipations of how he would have to respond should God appear—by relenting his claims). Rather than a moral repentance, this seems to elaborate on the sense in which he has "given up": he acknowledges that he has been forced to drop his case against the cruelties of divine providence. Or, it might be, as Greenstein has it, that Job "takes pity on dust and ashes" as an oblique reference to humanity qua creatures of dust in their frailty and finitude (cf. 'עָפָר' in Gen. 2:7) (*Job,* xx, 185). Newsom rightly observes that this marks a kind of "counterpoint" to Job's reaction of "radical acceptance that refuses to admit a tragic rupture" in 3:10 (Newsom, *Book of Job*, 258) as seen from the perspective of the narrator. In the dialogues, Job's refusals of radical acceptance served to heighten his need for consolation, while here it serves to show us that God's appearance has left that need entirely unsatisfied.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to prompt us as readers to reflect on the dilemmas that horrendous suffering imposes on our capacities for empathy and compassion, given our own delusional uses of theology as weapons against an uncontrollable world made no more controllable because it backs up into divine governance.

Job's long withheld consolations arrive at last when God restores his fortunes, his social standing and belonging, and (maybe?) his physical health.[42] But the text does not indicate any sense in which he derives comfort from God having thereby become a safe, predictable, or benign presence to him. Rather his consolations consist in his restoration to communal bonds with his fellow mortals: brothers and sisters who "comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (42:11).[43] Job's dialect had centered on the compatibility of God's just governance with unmerited human suffering and the unreliability of any pre-mortem hope for reprieve given the erratic chaos with which we experience God's world, and hence the justified despair and preference for death on the part of those unlucky enough to experience such suffering. But precisely because God has vindicated this dialect as correct, we are prevented from drawing any general lesson about the relationship between our own disinterested devotion to God, our own experiences of unmerited suffering, or our own hope for divine intervention and comfort in this life. Rather than consoling us, Job's "reward" and comfort becomes unsettling. Given what we have learned from the whirlwind, our story need not end up like Job's, nor do our resources for theological sense-making afford us any reliable guide to ensuring our fate. His experience comes to illustrate how fragile and far removed from any guarantees is our own hope for lives worth living. Having challenged our delusional uses of theology to defend us from the brutality of the world we actually inhabit, this ironic re-deployment of a divine "reward" trope to highlight our vulnerability and finitude also serves to press upon us with greater urgency the imperative to give and receive comfort when and while we can—to become companionable to the human casualties of God's inscrutable judgments out of recognition that our capacities for empathetic consolation must outrun our capacities for judgment or our pretensions to represent or claim divine judgment for ourselves.

A second ironic feature is the suggestion that in paying Job "double" for all he had lost, God has applied to Godself a legal framework of paying compensatory damages to the human casualty of the divine plan.[44] The punchline of the dialogues

[42] In "Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job," *Word and World* 30.1 (2010) 16–22, Jeremy Schipper argues that Job does not necessarily undergo a physical healing in the epilogue's resolution, despite this being often assumed by interpreters who reason that restoration requires the "repair" of disability.

[43] They וַיָּנֻדוּ (empathized, or as Greenstein (*Job*, 187) has it, "shook-their-heads-in-pity" with him), and they וַיְנַחֲמוּ (consoled, comforted) him. Note the contrast with Job's worthless healers, who came to him in 2:11 likewise "to empathize and console him" (using these same verb roots, and thus forming a kind of thematic inclusio for the entire composition).

[44] Balentine remarks that "it is hard to overlook the connection elsewhere in the Old Testament between double compensation and (at least) a tacit admission of guilt" and points us to Francis Anderson's exegesis that connects this passage to that statute in Exod 22:4 requiring that anyone

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had been to repudiate human uses of theology as a mechanism of spiritual bypassing that manages the terror of God's inscrutability by routinizing God's relations to us in a way that domesticates it and makes God much more like a mortal and human sovereign or parent. [45] We are encouraged by both Job's speeches and the divine speech toward a rejection of a certain form of "personalism" about God in favor of a kind of "ultimism" that stresses just how *unlike* us God must be if God is to play the role of a final explainer of the world we inhabit. The failure to recognize this is part of what made Job's counselors such poor comforters—they were essentially trauma-bonded to a God whose distribution of blessings and curses to secure loyalty and obedience resembled an authoritarian human abuser, and their fantasies of rendering the punitive violence of God's curses controllable robbed them of their capacities for empathy.[46] Why then the subtle suggestion here of God's self-subjection to human standards of restitution for having wronged one another? This is an interesting re-assertion of "personalism" that warrants some further reflection. I think it introduces two dimensions that I cannot develop further but which are important to name.

First, it suggests the ineliminable necessity of anthropomorphism in our understanding of God, even while giving us a subtle encouragement to model such an understanding on our compassion and empathy rather than our fantasies of fear and control.[47] Second, it suggests a kind of *reparations* model for God's approach to the inexplicable horrendous evil that we encounter as a result of the mysteries of God's moral governance over the world's chaos. Here we find a rich resource of biblical support for the approach to theodicy that Marilyn McCord Adams elaborates in her *Christ and Horrors*.[48] A key feature of that approach is the

who wrongfully holds the possession of another must pay back double. So Anderson, in *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), writes: "it is a wry touch that the Lord, like any thief who has been found out (Exod 22:4), repays Job double what he took from him" (317).

[45] For a suggestion about how to read this language in scripture in connection with the problem of divine hiddenness, see Sameer Yadav "The Hidden Love of God and the Imaging Defense," in *Love, Human and Divine: Contemporary Essays in Systematic and Philosophical Theology* (ed. James M. Arcadi, Oliver D. Crisp and Jordan Wessling; New York: T&T Clark, 2020) 65–82.

[46] See Joan Reid et al., "Contemporary Review of Empirical and Clinical Studies of Trauma Bonding in Violent or Exploitative Relationships," *International Journal of Psychological Research* 8.1 (2013) 37–73.

[47] One dimension of this anthropomorphism is the depiction of God's inability to bridge the cognitive gap as tragic not only for Job but also *for God*. Given Job's losses, the gesture of double repayment is an impotent gesture that renders God pitiable to us in God's necessarily misunderstood sovereignty. Just how to theorize the form of divine accommodation that grounds our dependence on anthropomorphism is a complicated question. See William P. Alston, "Two Cheers for Mystery!," in *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 99–114. See also Michael Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 42–62, 137–60; Sameer Yadav, *The Problem of Perception and the Experience of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 393–456.

[48] See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 29–52. Curiously while this chapter is titled "Posing the Problems: Beginning with Job," we

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recognition that divine reparation cannot be construed as a form of *compensation* that renders possible a re-narration of the pain endured by the sufferer in which it stands revealed as "worth it."[49] Job is restored but his children are still dead (and some have suggested that he may very well remain physically disabled).[50] He receives a kind of familial comfort that aims to establish a continuity between his suffering past self and his restored self, in which past wounds can be neither overridden or erased but at best woven into something new—a life worth living but not one in which the particularity of the inexplicable losses become valuable.

The unifying purpose of the book is thus neither to defend God nor commend (or condemn) Job, but to draw its readers into an open-ended and transformative reflection on what innocent suffering reveals about our creaturely limits and the fragility of our hope in God, features of the human condition that ought to elicit and motivate empathy and compassion.

The realism and modesty of the wisdom tradition represented in the above reading will not sit well with commentators who trace a grand and triumphant narrative of redemptive history across the rest of the biblical canon. Even when recognizing the "universal" character of this strand in Israel's wisdom tradition (which does not invoke God's special purposes for Israel but speaks generally to humanity and the human condition), many Christian commentators nevertheless have devised ways of subordinating its perspective to the particularity of the historical-redemptive paradigm.[51] The book of Job can be taken simply as a lesson primarily on faith in God or patience in suffering that is easily assimilated to a salvation-historical narrative that aims to supply us with the hope Job lacked.[52] Shouldn't

are not treated to any more than a brief mention of *Job* or its titular character before moving on to discuss the more general problem of unmerited suffering. Nevertheless, my reading fits well with Adams's approach to that problem.

[49] Eleonore Stump's recent attempt to revive the *felix culpa* tradition, in *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), moves in just the direction that I take a Joban theology to reject. Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt take the radical approach of arguing that God literally *erases* past suffering. See their "The Promise of a New Past," *Philosophers' Imprint* 17 (2017) 1–25. Even if metaphysically possible, attempting to appropriate such a view as a source of consolation in our present sufferings arguably brings insuperable problems of its own.

[50] We might examine readings of Job that demand his physical restoration via the framework of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), which critiques uses of narrative to compensate for a lack perceived as a flaw in the natural order. Thanks to Julia Watts Besler for pointing me to this intersection with the disability literature.

[51] For a theological exception to this see the first volume of David Kelsey's work of theological anthropology in his *Eccentric Existence* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster-John Knox, 2009), which identifies the inter-canonical discourses of wisdom in terms of an irreducible dialectical relationship with redemption narrative discourses.

[52] See Susan Garrett, "The Patience of Job and Patience of Jesus," *Interpretation* 53.3 (1999) 254–64.

our incorporation of the Joban perspective into a wider theological vision temper its pessimism regarding innocent suffering with *hope*?

But perhaps what these interpretive gestures aim to find in the wisdom tradition—and what they often insist on inserting when it can't be found— is not so much hope as it is *optimism.* Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* persuasively argues that the whole of modern philosophy's development from the sixteenth century until very recently has been oriented around the problem of evil—understood not so much as a demand for theodicy (the "justification of God" in creating a world so full of apparently gratuitous death and suffering)—but rather in terms of the problem of whether a world like that is nevertheless good for human beings, whether we are rationally entitled to suppose that this is so, and whether we can articulate and understand why it is so.[53] Optimists in the modern philosophical and theological tradition—the likes of Leibniz, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx—have generally answered "yes" to these questions, though various optimists disagree about the rational grounds for our understanding of the world's basic goodness for us as well as the precise limits of rational entitlement we can acquire for our optimism.

Optimists were thus sanguine about our capacity to develop theodicies for the existence of suffering and death, and tended to be committed to there being sufficient *reasons* for these undesirable aspects of our lives, which—while not making them necessarily easier to bear for those who suffered them—were nevertheless capable of being understood in their relationship to the basic goodness of the world.[54] Moreover, out of a firm belief not merely in the goodness of the world for us but also our capacity to understand it and act on it, optimists also tended to stress our abilities to exercise our moral agency to advance human progress in the face of suffering and death.[55] Pessimists, on the other hand, such as Bayle, Voltaire, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, tended to be skeptical, not necessarily about the goodness of the world per se, but about whether we can be rationally entitled to regard the world as good for *us*, and whether our exercises of intellect and agency can bring about the progress that succeeds in making the world as it ought to be.[56] While giving a sophisticated and measured assessment of the internal variations and pitfalls of the optimist tradition, Neiman nevertheless commends it to us over its pessimistic rivals for its capacity to reckon with our ongoing moral and practical struggles with the problem of evil today. Pessimism, Neiman suggests, can easily become a counsel of despair that kills hope and hinders change.[57]

In her *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering,* Mara van der Lugt offers useful correctives to various aspects of Neiman's history but more importantly provides a counterpoint to her optimism, offering us powerful reasons to lend

[53] Neiman, *Evil*, 5, 315 ff.

[54] Ibid., 321.

[55] Ibid., 26.

[56] Ibid., 94.

[57] Ibid., 197, 239.

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greater sympathies to the pessimistic tradition as a moral source and an impetus to hope. Our cultural context has been shaped by the practical outworkings of broadly optimistic commitments, rather than the contrary, and this has resulted in a stress on the role of our wills that makes us responsible for our own happiness, and also thereby tends to make us responsible for our own suffering (whether by a defect in character that prevents us from extracting the good available to us in our suffering or a culpable failure to exercise our agency to actualize the circumstances requisite to our flourishing).[58] This results in what van der Lugt calls an "overburdening of the will" underwritten by a kind of "magical voluntarism."[59] The attitude that has most corresponded to this outlook, moreover, has been a failure of compassion.[60] Since we must each exercise our own agency to secure our own happiness, we can tend to not concern ourselves with the suffering of others, whose suffering might well mark an irresponsible failure of their agency anyway.[61] Optimism about the explicability and remediation of suffering can motivate a dulling of our affect to the experience of suffering.

But, as van der Lugt emphasizes, "it *matters* how we speak of suffering, because speaking *of* suffering is always speaking *to* suffering as well."[62] The book of Job echoes the primary gesture found in the pessimistic tradition, one that insists that whatever *metaphysical* judgment we make about the goodness of the world—even if it is the goodness of the world to come—we must still do justice to the misery of the suffering here in the world we now inhabit (Job's "*Look at me*"). This moral demand has an epistemic corollary, which is to evaluate death and suffering in the light of a more careful attention to the particular miseries as experienced by the miserable, and to lend weight to those experiences "as a critical element, as a test for any philosophy or theory of life" that purports to "explain" the compensatory or justificatory goods served by suffering.[63] Pessimism, van der Lugt urges, offers us an "appreciation of the fullness and fragility of existence . . . a heightened receptivity for the *innocent* as well as the *terrible* or *serious* side of life . . . and a deepened sensitivity to the suffering of others."[64] This can make us "love life more: by opening our hearts to other creatures, by extending our love or at least our kindness to them."[65]

[58] Van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 401.

[59] Ibid., 402.

[60] Ibid., 403.

[61] Though not the intent of philosophical optimism, which often aims at a kind of solidarity, van der Lugt notes that it also tends to be bound to a vision of "self-mastery" that encourages failures of compassion (ibid., 403).

[62] Ibid., 405 (emphasis in original).

[63] Ibid., 406.

[64] Ibid., 409 (emphasis in original).

[65] Ibid.

The value of the pessimism expressed in Job, therefore, is its "profound discomfort with *systems,* whether philosophical or theological in nature."[66] Theological reasoning grounded in experiences of unmerited suffering can maintain an optimistic picture of God's work in the world just to the extent that such reasoning is chastened by the necessity of attending to actual experiences of suffering.[67] Such a chastening often yields the necessity for our compassion and consolation to extend beyond the limits of our judgments about the good. We ought therefore not to override the Joban perspective with our salvation-historical theorizing but rather retain its distinctive contribution as a necessary complement to that theorizing.[68] Considered "as a *complement* to any philosophy (even an optimistic one) that lays claim to describing and evaluating experience . . . [t]he main point of pessimism . . . is to pause theory where it goes too far."[69]

Sometimes the things that don't kill us also do not make us stronger but critically injure us, leaving us permanently maimed. Suffering does not always hold the promise of a good received, and some lives can be and often are reduced to such wretchedness that they truly no longer merit the desire to live them, even if being robbed of that desire is not reason enough to end our lives.[70] For some of God's creatures, at this very moment, the most basic goods of life are irremediably and irreparably closed off to them. This does not mean that hope is non-existent in such circumstances, because there is also a distinctively pessimistic form of hope, which is that "through longing and grief and mourning that we may find some form of consolation."[71] The hope of longing in the face of the uncontrollability of the world is sometimes desperate hope, of the sort that does not permit our judgments to run so far ahead of the experiences of suffering that they are left behind, minimized, forgotten.[72]

There is much more to be said about the intersections between the Joban dialects and the discourses of evil in modernity, but for our purposes we can turn back to the tendency of scriptural hermeneutics that I named earlier, that of mitigating the pessimism of the book with the grand narrative of redemption that we have woven from the narratives of Israel's history, its purported fulfillments in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the birth and destiny of the church in its movement

[66] Ibid., 406 (emphasis in original).

[67] This is, of course, the central insight of liberation theology's insistence on theology done in real rather than imagined proximity to actual human suffering.

[68] We should distinguish this *chastening* of narrative and theological meaning-making from a wholesale rejection of it. For an account of theology precisely as grounded in narrative construction, see Sameer Yadav, "Doctrine as Ontological Commitment to a Narrative," in *The Tasks of Dogmatics* (ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017) 70–86.

[69] Van der Lugt, *Dark* Matters,406 (italics in original).

[70] Ibid., 411.

[71] See ibid., 413, and especially van der Lugt's citation of Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping,* 152–53 to explicate the idea of a "pessimistic hope."

[72] See Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (trans. James Wagner; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

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toward the culmination of all things in the world to come, when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes (Rev 21:4). When confronted with the grand narrative that purports to make theological sense out of the goodness of creation for all of its creatures and God's mission to bring them to their intended end at home with one another and God, we can begin to succumb to a temptation toward all the dangers of optimism cited above. Our capacity to listen to the suffering voices in Scripture can become dulled and our capacities to hear and attend to the sufferings of others can suffer from cultivated failures of compassion. Just as was the case for Job's counselors in their commitment to a theology of divine justice, even a correct notion of God's redemptive work can serve for us as a delusional attempt to avoid the realities of suffering that threaten us and afflict others around us. Christian theologies of flourishing can likewise become elaborate attempts at spiritual bypassing and toxic positivity that hide a thinly veiled form of terror-management—just so many self-protective religious games.

One strategy for such an incorporation is to develop the traditional recognition of Jesus as a Joban figure and to recognize this as an essential feature of what it means for Jesus to have "become for us wisdom from God" (1 Cor 1:30). As Stephen Vicchio remarks, "many Christian interpreters over the centuries have maintained that Job is a 'Christ-figure'" (xiv).[73] How might we find exemplified in a Joban Jesus the perspective spelled out above? I will conclude with five points of connection that merit further consideration.

First, we find Jesus construing the salvation-historical significance of Israel in a way that gives special attention to the needs of consolation embodied by those who suffer most from political and religious narratives of order and progress.[74] Second, a key dimension of Jesus's reading of his own role in bringing about the divinely promised reparation of the world was through the reimagining of social bonds given to and for the wretched of the earth.[75] Along with Jesus's wide-ranging and revisionary conception of who are our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, neighbors, and friends comes a reconstituted infrastructure of consolation.[76] Third, on a traditional incarnational christology, Jesus's own suffering, dereliction, and death, can be understood as divine solidarity and sharing in the fragility and finitude of innocent suffering that marks the human condition.[77] Fourth, in his own scarred resurrection body and its promise for our own, Jesus offers a distinctive kind of hope compatible with a Joban "pessimism," one that retains the wounds of past

[73] Steven Vicciho, *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020) xiv.

[74] For an exposition of these themes in the trial narratives of Jesus in the Gospels, see Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[75] See Stephen Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[76] See John 19:25–27.

[77] See Adams's reflections on the biblical testimony of Christ's dereliction (*Christ and Horrors,* 53–79).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000087 Published online by Cambridge University Press

loss, weaving it into a newness of life capable of future flourishing yet without forgetting, minimizing, or reappraising the evil of past suffering. Finally, in his ascension, Jesus's mediatorial role comes to satisfy precisely that role of divine-human arbiter or "umpire" for which Job longed—someone who "might lay his hand on us both" (9:33; cf. Rom. 8:34).

Each of these dimensions ought to be spelled out in much greater detail and also in more substantive connection with the philosophical trajectories adumbrated above. Doing so would take us well beyond the scope of the present study, though we can hope for that work to be undertaken in the future, if that is any consolation.