

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

No singular Biblical text addresses the problem of evil as poetically and passionately as that of *Job*. *Job* provides a theological framework for approaching the problem of evil: Job holds expectations of a morally perfect deity; a moral dilemma is posed by the experience of evil; Job protests against God when his expectations are inconsistent with God's character. God's response to Job from the whirlwind implies four potential theodicies: 1. Suffering is educational, designed to develop our character. The lesson to be learned is that we are to love God *for naught* escaping completely the cycle of retribution to which our lament and subsequent protest remain captive causing Satan to lose his bet¹. 2. Suffering necessarily follows from the design of the universe. Job is to learn that the human mind is too limited to comprehend any solution to this problem.² 3. Suffering is a test of man's faith; the orthodox interpretation of the *Job* (and Isaac) story.³ 4. Suffering is punishment for either individual or collective sin(s) known or unknown. This stance is taken by deuteronomic theology⁴ which, as we will see, the author of *Job* is criticizing. Also we will see that *Job* offers **no** theodicy.

Even a superficial examination of *Job* should inform us to examine it closely; within the Old Testament, "satan" is **never** used as a proper noun except within *Job*.⁵ "Satan" means "accuser" or sometimes "adversary" in Hebrew or "stumbling block" within Greek. Notice that both "adversary" and "stumbling block" are neutral terms. For example, in the Super Bowl who is the adversary? Answer: Both. Being an adversary is dependent upon a position, being a fan of a particular team in the context of the Super Bowl. Furthermore, placing a value upon the "adversary" is relative to that

¹ Ricoeur, Paul and David Pellauer. "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 53.4, 75th Anniversary Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. (Dec., 1985); pg. 647.

² Chamberlin, Thomas C. "The Problem of Suffering." *The Biblical World*. 8.3 (Sep., 1896); pg. 184.

³ Steinman, Andrew E. "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job." *Vetus Testamentum*. 46, Fasc. 1. (Jan., 1996); pg. 85-86. See the post on *Faith vs. Reason* as to why this interpretation of Isaac is erroneous.

⁴ Ricoeur & Pellauer; op.cite., pg. 638.

⁵ This analysis of "satan" is taken from *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* by Neil Forsyth.

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

position; however, neither is *intrinsically* "evil". The same holds for "stumbling block"; in the Balaam's Ass and Jonah stories, the text says that Yhwh placed a stumbling block in their paths—an angel appeared before Balaam's donkey (the two held a conversation while Balaam threw a temper-tantrum) and the whale (or great fish) for Jonah. Notice here, the stumbling block is positive. In both cases it prevented each from turning away from Yhwh. Ergo, the value of a stumbling block (positive or negative) is instrumentally determined; a stumbling block is *intrinsically* neutral.

The most appropriate interpretation of "Satan" within *Job* is as "adversary". Satan does not *accuse* Job of anything (there is no dispute between Yhwh and Satan over Job 1:1 and 8). *Lucifer* was a watcher angel and contemporary Christianity interprets "satan" as a proper name designating a character who is synonymous with "Lucifer".⁶ However, to accurately discern *Job's* meaning, we must interpret it within the context in which it was written, not the latter context of Christianity some hundreds/thousands of years later! The *Job* story is neither to be taken literally nor superficially but rather allegorically.

Job's protests highlight a conflict between three propositions: (A) Yhwh is omnipotent, omniscient, and is the author of all things.⁷ (B) Yhwh is just and fair. (C) Job is a good person. *Job* 1:1 & 8 (the latter being Yhwh's claim) says Job was "blameless and upright"; thus Yhwh supports (C). Job rejects (B) while Job's friends reject (C). John Curtis argues Yhwh rejects (B) endorsing the second theodicy.⁸ Job's protest is so important that Yhwh answers Job in person. In chapter three, Job ponders the meaning of his existence; was he born to suffer thusly, "Why is life given to a man whose

⁶ Refer to the Jewish texts not canonized by Christianity but canonized by Judaism that are referred to as *The Book of Watchers*.

⁷ Technically, the first two properties—omniscience and omnipotence—are in dispute within Judaism; e.g., why would an omniscient entity need watcher angles—God's DHS and domestic wiretapping by *rough* analogy?

⁸ Curtis, John Biggs. "On Job's Response to Yahweh." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 98.4 (Dec., 1979): pp. 507-510.

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?"⁹ Job's question implies either his life has a divine purpose with which his suffering is a part, or his life is meaningless and he should never have been born.¹⁰ He is demanding an explanation for apparent pointless suffering.

Yhwh's reply is divided into two parts. The first concerns Yhwh's justice and enforcement of the law:

"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."¹¹

The second is Yhwh's preoccupation with the mechanics of his universe:

"Can you pull in the leviathan¹² with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? ...Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering. No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me? Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me."¹³

Notice Yhwh never answers the substance of Job's protest; rather He reemphasizes His sovereignty over humanity; therefore, Job's protest, his "claim" against Yhwh, is baseless.¹⁴ Steinman, following Norman Habel, agrees that the structure of *Job* is built upon a central theme—a lawsuit. Steinman argues that the lawsuit theme does not afford any theodicy. However, Steinman agrees that the legal structure serves to unify many

⁹ Job 3:23. Note "hedged in". This phrase means "sworn to protect". This interpretation is consistent with the later writings of Paul.

¹⁰ Job 3:16-19

¹¹ Job 40:8-12. Note that Yhwh is not *accusing* Job of being proud nor of being wicked as that would contradict Job 1:1 and 8.

¹² Leviathan is a reference to Tiamat from the *Enuma Elis* creation myth. Tiamat, a seven headed dragon, was destroyed by Marduk and her body used to create "the firmament upon the waters". *Enuma Elis* dates to between the 24th and 22nd centuries BCE. The dating of *Job* is in high dispute. The earliest date offered is sometime within the 10th century BCE; however, many believe *Job* was most likely authored during or after the Babylonian exile in the 5th century. Either way, *Enuma Elis* is considerably older and it is clear that Judaism was claiming as their own the identities of deities from other religions; see Neil Forsyth aforementioned for an exhaustive analysis of this practice.

¹³ Job 41:1, 9-11

¹⁴ Curtis. Op. Cit. pp. 507-511.

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

contentious passages but does not explain its entire structure.¹⁵ The lawsuit theme avoids Yhwh's apparent [red herrings](#) and is consistent with Curtis' transliteration. It is clear that Yhwh never answers the substance of Job's complaint, his suit. Rather, within the legal framework, Yhwh denies Job's legal standing to bring suit: "Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me". Job's subsequent "repentance" is not to seek forgiveness nor to maintain faith despite suffering; rather, Job pities humanity and loathes a god who considers his creatures as property.

Job's response to Yhwh is, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Curtis' interpretation contradicts the traditional interpretation—Job is penitent and submits himself to Yhwh. Interpreting *וְנָהַמְתִּי* to mean "to repent" is an ad hoc interpretation requiring a specialized translation not utilized in any of the other 48 Old Testament occurrences. The simplest translation of *וְנָהַמְתִּי* contextually relevant to the *Job* usage is "to be sorry" in the sense "to have pity". The exact phrase *עַפְדֵּי וְאֶפְדֵּי* ("in dust and ashes") occurs only three times in the Old Testament: Genesis 18:27, Job 30:19, and Job 42:6. This exact phrasing means "man in his frailty". Therefore, Job 42:6 reads, "Therefore I despise myself and pity frail man." Job pities a humanity that must tolerate a god who is more concerned with retribution and ontological mechanics than compassion for His creatures.¹⁶

The *Job* story's purpose is to criticize the predominate theology of its day¹⁷ not to put forth any form of theodicy.¹⁸ *Job* criticizes the Judaic belief that Yhwh's justice is unconditional but God's compassion for His creatures is conditional.¹⁹ Christianity maintains that God's love is unconditional (agapé love) derived from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. A god that is more concerned with

¹⁵ Steinman, Andrew E. "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job." *Vetus Testamentum*. 46, Fasc. 1. (Jan., 1996); pg. 89-90.

¹⁶ Curtis. Op. Cit. pp. 499-501. Curtis' Final transliteration of Job 4:26 is "I feel loathing contempt and revulsion [towards you, O God], and I am sorry for [pity] frail man;" see pp. 499-505.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 510-511.

¹⁸ Steinmann. Op. Cit. pp. 85-100. Steinmann argues that the book of Job is about maintaining faith and integrity in the face of suffering. I believe he is in error given Curtis' arguments (see pp. 95-98). Steinmann exclusively relies upon an analysis of Job's internal structure isolated from any other text.

¹⁹ Flemming. Op. Cit. pp. 265.

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

the clockworks of His creation than people's well-being is not a god worthy of worship. *Job's* author forces the attentive believer to wrestle with God. God's primary characteristic is love not retribution—"and the greatest of these is love".²⁰ A loving God who sacrifices His son for humanity's salvation surely is the same God who loves His creatures enough to protect them from grievous harm and suffering that damages the social and divine orders. Is God more concerned with restoring the divine order through punitive, retributive measures or does God love his creatures enough to prevent corruption from entering the divine and social orders through other's sins? Either God cares more for punitive retribution or the problem of evil demands an answer from a loving god. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?" (Job 4:17).

Another popular misconception is that Lucifer, Satan, and the Serpent in Eden are the same person (and to some extent the antichrist in *Revelation*). Again, this interpretation, while the orthodox view of contemporary Christianity, is completely false. The following is taken from Ina Belderis's ["Some Light on Lucifer"](#):

Lucifer means lightbringer, from the Latin *lux* "light" and *ferre* "to bear or bring." The word *Lucifer* is found in only *one* place in the Bible—Isaiah 14:12—but only in the King James and related versions: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O *Lucifer*, son of the morning! . . ." The New Revised Standard Version translates the same passage as "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, Son of Dawn!" In other translations we find: "O shining star of the dawn!" (Moffatt) or "O morning-star, son of the dawn!" (Hebrew Bible). The King James Version is based on the Vulgate, the Latin translation of Jerome. Jerome translated the Hebrew *helel* (bright or brilliant one) as "*lucifer*," which was a reasonable Latin equivalent. And yet it is this *lucifer*, the bright one or lightbearer, that came to be understood by so many as the name for Satan, Lord of Darkness.

In Isaiah 14 the prophet is taunting the king of Babylon: "In the figurative language of the Hebrews,... *a star*, signifies an illustrious king or prince... The

²⁰Stevens, George B. "The Righteousness of God." *The Biblical World*. 24.4 (Apr., 1905): pp. 278.

Job on the POE and Theodicy: Common Misinterpretations

monarch here referred to, having surpassed all other kings in royal splendour, is compared to the harbinger of day, whose brilliancy surpasses that of the surrounding stars" (*A Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, John Kitto ed., 3rd ed., J. B. Lippincott and Co, Philadelphia, 1866, 2:857-8). There are those who claim that the real entity addressed in this passage is Satan, but there is no evidence for this. On the contrary, Isaiah (14:16) says: "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, . . . ?" and (14:18) "All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out . . ." These seem clear references to a man, the king of a nation, not an archangel....

As Lucifer is the morning star, daystar, or Venus, the absurdity of connecting him with the Devil is revealed in the three New Testament passages where morning star or daystar is mentioned:

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. -- 2 Peter 1:19

. . . from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. -- Revelation 2:28

It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. -- Revelation 22:16

All three references to the morning star point to Jesus or things Jesus says or gives. In the Vulgate the word "morning star" in 2 Peter is even translated as *Lucifer* [but not as a proper noun]. In the other two references it is *stella matutina*.