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The Meanings of the Book of Job

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The currently dominant readings of the book of Job agree on one essential point: the book refutes the retributory theology assumed to be Jewish orthodoxy, whereby God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. God is amoral. When expectations of divine justice are abandoned, divine injustice ceases to be a problem. Important points in the argument of this essay are that the narrative framework in the prologue and epilogue provides the premises of the book and is to be taken seriously, not dismissed as ironic or naïve. Further, God's speech in the theophany does not terrify Job into submission. This means that the book presupposes God's basic concern for justice. God offers Job verbal debate and in no way threatens him. God's rhetoric is directed not so much at emphasizing Job's ignorance as at making him call to mind how much he does know about God's wisdom, power, and providence. The present essay argues, first, that the book of Job teaches that God does punish and recompense, but incompletely. Justice is immensely important to God, but other principles and concerns may override it. Second, God wants human loyalty, even when justice fails. Third, God needs human help to run the world according to the divine will. God's need for humanity gives humans a place of high honor and perhaps some comfort in the midst of inexplicable suffering.

I. THE TASK

In the 1960s, when I was a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, I had the privilege of studying the book of Job with Professor Matitiah Tsevat. The point of the book of Job, as he explained it, is that justice is *not* at work in the universe, not part of a divine design, not a characteristic of God. God is, in Tsevat's term, *amoral*. God neither rewards good deeds nor punishes bad ones. Without expectations of retributory justice, theodicy—the attempt to justify the unjust actions of a

I am grateful to my wife, Jane, for her thoughtful editing of my manuscript and her perceptive comments.

just God—ceases to be a problem, for God is morally neutral. The expectation of divine reward and punishment causes frustration and unhappiness. “Where justice is possible, injustice is too.” This interpretation became Tsevat’s 1966 article, “The Meaning of the Book of Job,” which set a new path for Job interpretation.¹

As a student, I accepted Tsevat’s reading not only because of its innovation and acuity but also because I found it attractive personally, because it was closer to my developing views. For many years I taught Job by this approach, but I eventually abandoned it. One reason for the change was that Tsevat’s interpretation of the theophany, which is to say, God’s reply in chapters 38–41, came to seem forced, for reasons I will explain. The other reason was that, by Tsevat’s theory, the book started to seem *too* comfortable, too easily harmonized with my own deepening skepticism. I needed to view the book from a distance, with *objectivity*, as scholars used to say. It is not my purpose to critique Tsevat’s article, and I will not address all its contentions. Rather, I will use his idea as my framework for thinking about this issue.

I have written several articles on Job, some of which I draw upon and synthesize in this essay.² Here are the principles taught by the book, in my understanding: First, God does reward and punish and compensate, but incompletely. Justice—the invariable and appropriate reward or punishment for all deeds—is immensely important to God, but it may be overridden by other principles. Second, the book teaches readers to recognize God’s beneficence and to remain loyal to him, even in affliction, even in the awareness that God can be unjust; in other words, it teaches the reader to maintain *faith*, a trust in God not based on knowledge. In this regard I move back toward the traditional interpretation, although it is based on a theology that I personally do not hold. Third, the book inculcates the disturbing yet elevating belief that God, for all his wisdom and power, needs human help if he is to rule the world the way he wants.

II. The Prologue

The prologue, Job chapters 1–2, provides the premises of the book and must be taken seriously, and I will use these chapters in describing the book’s view of divine justice. There is, however, an alternate view, currently prominent. This holds

¹Matitiahu Tsevat, “The Meaning of the Book of Job,” *HUCA* 37 (1966): 75–106, here 97.

²Michael V. Fox, “Job 38 and God’s Rhetoric,” *Semeia* 18 (1981): 53–61; “Job the Pious,” *ZAW* 117 (2005): 351–66; “Reading the Tale of Job (Job 1:1–2:13 + 42:7–17),” in *A Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Ellen J. van Wolde, HBM 38 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010) 162–79; “Behemoth and Leviathan,” *Bib* 93 (2012): 261–67; “God’s Answer and Job’s Response,” *Bib* 94 (2013): 1–23; “The Speaker in Job 28,” in “*When the Morning Stars Sang*”: *Essays in Honor of Choon Leong Seow on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Scott C. Jones and Christine Roy Yoder, BZAW 500 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 21–38.

that the prologue is intended to cushion the blow of the book for the pious readers by showing them an anthropomorphic God who sits in his heavenly court and rewards and punishes justly. Sophisticated readers are supposed to recognize the prologue's naiveté by several features that are unbelievable or folkloric. But, in fact, everything in the prologue is consonant with and needed for what follows. Job's superlative righteousness, said to be unbelievable, is required for the development of the story. Without it the friends are right in insisting that Job has done something deserving of punishment. The scene of God in his court is said to be naïve, but this is only by modern standards. Premodern Jews, however sophisticated, believed in God's heavenly court as a physical reality. In any case, this scene is no more naïve than God's speaking from the whirlwind, which no one thinks disproves the credibility of the theophany. Moreover, the switch from prose to poetry at the end of the prologue is not a signal of a shift to a more credible genre, any more than the move from the prose account of the crossing of the sea to the poetic telling makes Exod 15 more credible than Exod 14.³

The prologue and the epilogue, whether composed by the main author or borrowed and adapted from a folktale, are integral to the book and its fictional reality. The prologue is a thought experiment, a narrative constructed to help us think through the problems and potentials of our own reality.

But if the prologue is not to be discredited, it does affirm reward and punishment as forces in the working of the world. It implies that, in the usual course of events, God does reward the righteous. Job is introduced in verse 1 as "innocent and honest, fearing God and avoiding evil," and verses 2–4 report on his prospering. I find it impossible to read this sequence as other than causal: Job prospered *because* he was righteous. The concurrence cannot be coincidental, as if implying that Job was righteous and just happened to be fortunate (a reading Alan Cooper prefers⁴), since readers who assumed that virtue brings rewards are assuming causal connection, and the book was written for them, not modern skeptics. In addition, the satan, too, assumes that God *wants* people to be just and that he *wants* to reward the righteous, because he must persuade God to make Job an exception.

But retribution is not an invariable, mechanical process. In the prologue, where Job is still holding to his piety, he declares, "The Lord gives; the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21b). As Rick Moore observes, Job does not assume that God's behavior can always be explained by the principle of retribution.⁵ Job recognizes that good and bad fortune come and go according to God's

³There are some additional motifs that are proposed to be hints to the prologue's naiveté or irony. They are discussed in Fox, "Reading the Tale of Job." I argue that in no case do they indicate that the prologue is to be discounted in favor of the dialogue and theophany.

⁴Alan Cooper, "Reading and Misreading the Prologue to Job," *JSOT* 46 (1990): 67–79, here 67.

⁵Rick Moore, "The Integrity of Job," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 17–31, here 19–20. But I disagree with Moore's claim that this is an "admission of capricious rule" (20). God has his reasons.

unpredictable will and not only as clearly motivated reward and punishment. Job expresses no regret or penitence, for he sees no insinuation of guilt in his suffering. Soon, however, he will regard his suffering as an accusation of sin, albeit an unjust one.

By the premises of the prologue, this God is not amoral, not indifferent to the standards of justice. He basically wishes to do justice, but he sometimes finds it necessary, for reasons beyond human comprehension, to violate it. Here is my basic answer to Tsevat: In the book there is divine justice, but it is incomplete. It must be so, if human righteousness is to be pure. As the satan points out (1:9–11), if Job is invariably and fully rewarded for his virtues, his motivation might be the expectation of a payoff rather than unselfish, uncalculating love and fear of God. The purity of human loyalty is more important to God than the consistency of his own justice.

III. THE DIALOGUE

When Job's friends arrive from afar, he sits with them in silence for seven days, then bursts into an angry lament. This is the same man as the patient Job of the prologue but at a different stage of grieving. His friends' silent presence has allowed the dams to break and the bitterness to pour forth.

In chapter 3, Job curses the day of his birth and, with it, the world into which he was born. This chapter is, as Leo Perdue says, an "assault on creation."⁶ In so many words Job says: life is bad, and death is the only good. Subsequently Job will try to demonstrate this by particular examples.

In the dialogue, Job's view of God is fractured. To Job, God is, on the one hand, unremittently hostile and unfair; on the other, the final source of hope and justice. As Job sees it, God is directing a violent attack against him, ludicrously sending archers to surround this broken creature as if he were a great enemy (6:4), a Yam or Tannin (7:12). God torments Job at all hours, even pursuing him into his dreams. He both hides his face from Job (13:24) and breathes down his neck, searching out the slightest flaws (7:17, 10:6, 13:27). Not only does God treat Job as his enemy (7:17–29, 19:11, 27:7, etc.), but his hostility embraces all humanity. God created a dreary world for creatures that would be better off dead. Or so it seems to Job.

If Job were really guilty of wrongdoing, he could find some comfort in knowing that he and God at least shared the same ethical standards, and he could try to live up to them. But, Job says, God afflicts Job—and others—with little attention to guilt or innocence. "If I am wicked, woe to me, and if I am righteous, I cannot raise my head. I am sated with disgrace and drunk with my misery" (10:14–15). Not only

⁶Leo G. Perdue, "Job's Assault on Creation," *HAR* 10 (1986): 295–315, passim. See also Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretation of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms*, ConBOT 37 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), 443.

does God fail to punish the wicked (21:7–33), but he savors the pain of his victims, even the innocent ones: God, as Job asserts in 9:13, “mocks the tribulation of the innocent.”

Still, Job wants his day in court, because his complaint, however bitter, is founded on trust. This the belief, expressed often in the complaint of the individual psalms, that the divine listener “works within the same frame of reference and will concede the basis for our complaint.”⁷ Job’s trust in God is expressed most powerfully when he demands a hearing, expecting—though not consistently—a fair one. God, Job says, “will be a salvation for me, because a fraud cannot come before him. I know I will be justified” (13:18). Job is confident of vindication: “For,” he says, “[God] knows how I act [lit., ‘my way’]. If he assays me, I will come forth like gold” (23:10). Job persists in trusting in God’s fairness, even though he sees no evidence for it. In chapters 29–31, his peroration, Job speaks almost like a typical complaint psalmist, bewailing his afflictions and alienation from God and insisting on his innocence, reinforcing his claims with a formal oath of innocence (31:1–40). Job is a complainant, not a rebel.

Job sometimes thinks of God as basically just and good but more often speaks of him as bad and unjust. Job tries out various metaphors to explain his dilemma. Is he being hounded by God or attacked full on? Is he the accuser or the accused, the judge or the judged? Will Job’s divine assailant give him a fair hearing, which is what Job wants above all else? He knows he is innocent and that he was wronged—but little else.

IV. THE THEOPHANY

Job accused God of injustice, inconsistency, and hostility. He accused God of creating a grim world and treating the humans in it cruelly. The theophany, chapters 38–41, is God’s response to these accusations, in particular to Job’s assertion in chapter 3 that God has perverted creation. But the theophany does not address Job’s accusation of personal abuse, which, as God must realize, cannot be denied. Instead, God tries to introduce Job to an alternate worldview, one that may ease his pain.

When God appears, he does not, contrary to what Job feared (9:17–18), terrify him into submission. He does challenge Job to gird his loins. This is, to be sure, a martial image, an act of preparation for battle, but God uses it as a metaphor for a verbal debate, as he says, “I will ask you and you inform me!” (38:3). He does not accuse Job of wrongdoing or of cursing him. He in no way threatens to harm Job, and in fact Job is already tormented beyond the reach of further harm. God grants Job his longed-for hearing and twice pauses to allow him to have his say. For a king to debate with an outraged subject is an expression of respect.

⁷Lindström, *Suffering and Sin*, 443.

God's speech is not spoken in anger and arrogance. It is not an attempt to terrify and humiliate the human wretch. He speaks in a tone of didactic persuasiveness and paints a picture of a well-tended world.

God begins both of his speeches by asking, "Who is this who obscures the design [עצור] by words without knowledge?" (38:2, 40:1). This scolding assumes that there is a design in the world that Job could have known and that he does know on some level; otherwise, he would not be rebuked for obscuring it. Since Job has obscured the world's design, God will now clarify it, and the following speeches are to be understood as doing just that. God will offer instruction, teaching Job to recognize the design by pointing him to phenomena that exhibit it.

God's instruction makes extensive use of rhetorical questions. Their tone is not ridicule but persuasion, though, as is typical in pedagogy, they are not devoid of rebuke.⁸ Most of the questions have obvious answers and remind Job that he knows much about God's wisdom and power, while also reminding him that much remains unknown. The questions that are beyond Job's grasp, such as "What is the gestation period of the gazelle?" (39:1), have the purpose of reminding him that God has the wisdom necessary for creating and maintaining the world. Job has the very significant wisdom needed to consider the expanses of the universe and recognize God's orderly, benevolent rule, even when many of the particulars remain beyond him. Perhaps his misery prevented him from doing so.

God asks, "Where were you when I founded the earth?" (38:4). If Job were to answer aloud and in full, he could say only, "Nowhere. I had nothing to do with the creation of the world. You did it alone." Job can hardly feel shamed by this fact. God further asks, "Who laid down its measurements—for you know—or who stretched a line upon it?" (38:5). No difficulty here. The parenthetical "for you know" is not facetious; Job knows quite well who the creator is. God's question is meant to evoke awe, not humiliation. And further, "Upon what are its [sc., the world's] sockets sunk?" (38:6a). Job knows the answer and has given it already in 26:7: "upon nothingness." This amazing fact can only evoke awe. The following circumstantial clause, "when the morning stars cried out and all the gods shouted" (38:7), helps paint a glorious and joyful scene, one reminiscent of a temple dedication. Note that this clause assumes Job's knowledge of the angelic rejoicing. God pays Job the compliment of assuming that Job—and, by implication, all humans—can understand much about God's skill as creator, his power as ruler, and the vast breadth of his concerns. In the very process of eliciting a teaching from Job's knowledge, God also reminds him of his inevitable ignorance of vast realms of facts and processes. To be aware of this ignorance is wisdom, too.

After setting the earth's platform in place, God brings the sea under control. In biblical mythology, YHWH fights and defeats Yam.⁹ Earlier Job saw himself as

⁸Rhetorical questions can create a special intimacy of communication, even while maintaining a degree of facetiousness. I discuss this in "Job 38 and God's Rhetoric," 58–60.

⁹YHWH defeats Yam along with other sea monsters in Pss 74:13–14, 89:9–10, and Isa 51:9–10.

being attacked as Yam was attacked (7:21). Here, God has converted Yam from a monster into an unruly child, with God as his solicitous father (38:8–11). God encloses the infant sea in double doors, clothes him in clouds, and swaddles him in fog. Swaddling is a soothing practice that apparently makes a baby feel secure and quiets it down. But the sea is not, and never will be, entirely pacified, so God shuts him behind a boundary, which is the seashore, and says, with parental sternness, “Thus far and no farther! And here I stop the surging of your waves” (38:11).¹⁰ The sea is still unruly, but not an antagonist. It would be a mistake to impose the sea’s qualities as known from elsewhere onto the sea as envisioned in this passage. The author is creating a new vision of the sea, and he will do the like with Leviathan and other creatures.

God cares for his creatures. To the question “Do you hunt food for the lion?” Job’s implied answer is “Of course not, but you do” (38:39–40). The lion, of course, does the actual hunting, but this striking question suggests that God, unseen, guides the hunt. God, not Job, prepares food for hungry raven chicks when they “cry out to God” (38:41). God, unseen, is their provider. Predation kills some animals even as it feeds others. This has been brought as evidence of the cruelty of the world God created.¹¹ But, as Maimonides observes, divine providence protects the species, not the individual.¹²

But does God care for the human species too? He never says he does, but the silence can be tactical. As evidence of divine indifference toward humans, and thus of the lack of justice in the world, Tsevat says that the rain God brings on the desert is “wasted on land uninhabited and uninhabitable” (38:26), an act that is useless and thus lacks moral purpose.¹³ But מדבר is the steppe, which includes grazing land. When it receives rain, it blossoms with herbage, and herders bring their animals there to pasture, exactly the process described in Ps 107:33–38 as a blessing to humans.

Some animals were created in a way that preserves them from human exploitation—the wild ox, for example, which cannot be yoked, and the wild ass, which runs free in the desert. Perhaps God has done this to remind humans of their limitations. But he has also created plenty of animals that serve human needs.

The horse (39:19–25) is a special case. When God asks, “Do you give the horse his might” (39:19c), the unspoken answer must be, “No, but you do.” But there is

¹⁰Read ופה אשביית גאון גליך. Other meaningful emendations, also using MT’s consonants, are possible; see S. R. Driver and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921), 300–301.

¹¹Edward L. Greenstein, “The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job,” in *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay*, ed. Nili Sacher Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, and Michael J. Williams (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 333–62, here 355.

¹²Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Guide III.

¹³Tsevat, “Meaning of the Book of Job,” 100.

more to be said. Far from demeaning human wisdom, God chooses an example that exalts it, for it is human wisdom and skill (and much is required) that shapes an unruly beast into a disciplined and fearsome war machine. The horse testifies to God's skills as craftsman, but human participation finishes the task.

The theophany concludes with two great monsters, Leviathan and Behemoth. For the author, both are meant to be real beasts, because the notion of mythical beast is anachronistic, despite the fact that their description includes features we know to be imaginary and based on myth. Leviathan was traditionally described as a fearsome dragon, the embodiment of evil, as in Job's words in 3:8. There has been a deliberate change in the theophany. Here Leviathan is, I have argued, based mainly on the whale, as known from seafarers' reports (see Ps 107:23–24).¹⁴ He lives in the depths of the sea, shoots a spout, and leaves a wake. He also maintains some features of the serpentine dragon. In Ps 104:26, Behemoth, not known by this name elsewhere, fits the description of a hippopotamus for the most part, perhaps as reported by a traveler.¹⁵ He is massively strong, but his strength seems to be for defense.

Many commentators emphasize the evil and violence of these two creatures and assume that their mere existence transmits these qualities to the world. In Job's theophany, however, neither beast actually does anything evil or aggressive. Both are just magnificent and undefeatable, except, of course by YHWH. Since they are under YHWH's control, they present no cause for fear, except for a human foolish enough to attack them. YHWH's defeat of Leviathan is the primeval and continuing act of justice. These creatures do not radiate evil to the world of the theophany, any more than the creation of great sea monsters in Gen 1:21 prevents God from concluding that all his work is "very good." As Carol Newsom says of these two beasts, "Although God's ability to overcome them is taken for granted, there is little or no reference to enmity or hostility between God and these creatures. Instead God describes them with evident admiration."¹⁶

The theophany reminds Job that God is a skilled creator, a generous and reliable provider for species, and a marvelous artisan and builder. God does not mention humanity, but, in a didactically sound way, he describes his care for animal species and leaves it to Job to draw the analogy with human life. The analogy is an easy one. Like animals, humans eat, reproduce, and feed their young, and God can hardly be absent from the process.

God does not directly respond to Job's questions about his suffering and the world's injustices but speaks about the natural world and its nonhuman creatures. According to David Clines, "the absence of a response is a most telling response, effectively, implicitly. The world that God has created, if its 'Design' (38:2) is

¹⁴ Fox, "Behemoth and Leviathan," 261–64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 261–62.

¹⁶ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 249.

properly understood, does not contain a principle of retribution.”¹⁷ Clines’s conclusion is an unjustified inference from silence. God does not always answer questions, and he may sometimes answer them only obliquely. The psalmist in the complaints of the individual asks questions like “Why have you abandoned me?” and “How long, O Lord?,” but no answer comes. God does not mention retribution here because that is not what the theophany is about. God has set aside the question of justice in the sense of retribution, which is not to say that there is none but rather that this is not what he chooses to describe. Job is not going to have the rightness of his suffering explained, because that would not help other sufferers. Job can learn in this revelation only what others could deduce without a revelation, by wisdom. Job is shown a world that is just but not perfect. Lions can eat gazelles, raiders can kill people, and gods can torment humans for unknown reasons.

Let me repeat the important restriction on the scope of God’s teaching: God cannot tell Job why he is suffering or the book would become irrelevant to sufferers who do not get a personal revelation. (We can learn this as readers, for as such we stand above the world that Job—and God—live in.) For this reason, God changes the subject, from justice to wisdom. This wisdom holds that God has created and governs a world that is good, as in Gen 1. Life, contrary to Job’s opening lament, is better than death, but it is still flawed. It has to be, or human fidelity would be inevitably suspect. The satan—that most acute of theologians—taught us this at the start of the book.

V. JOB’S RESPONSE

In 42:2–6, after YHWH’s second speech, Job offers a confession that interweaves God’s words into his own. God can do everything, Job says, while he, Job himself, is ignorant. His statement in verse 6, *על בן אמוס ונחמתי על עפר ואפר*, has ambiguities in almost every word.¹⁸ Still, I think the traditional translation is sound philologically and fits the context: “Therefore I feel disgust and I repent on dirt and ashes.” The verb *מאס*, like many verbs of feeling and perception, can be both transitive and intransitive (as this verb is also in 9:2, 32:5); and, as often, *נחם* means “regret,” “repent,” “retract.” “On dust and ashes” is Job’s current location and is also an objective correlative of his status and feelings, which Job epitomized earlier as *קלתי*, “I am trivial” (40:4).

But even if one accepts this translation or the like, the problem of tone and intention is still unresolved. One can simply say that Job is speaking ironically, as James Williams asserts, which is to say that Job is not sincere in his confession but

¹⁷David J. A. Clines, *Job 38–42*, WBC 18B (Nashville: Nelson, 2011), 1092.

¹⁸On my parsing of this verse and a survey of its interpretations, see the appendix to “Job the Pious,” 364–65.

is trying to placate God by saying what God wants to hear.¹⁹ (Tsevat, translating **נָסָה** as “retract,” reads 42:6 as Job’s repudiation of his erroneous belief in God’s justice).²⁰ I think that Job *is* repenting—not for sins that may have brought on and justified the calamities but for having obscured God’s design with ignorant words, which is what God accuses him of doing in 38:2 and 40:3. The author means this confession to be sincere. But whether it is sincere or evasive, which is to say merely giving the appearance of regret while concealing resentment from God’s awareness, what is most important to the progression of the drama is that Job *express* regret before his God in the presence of his friends.

Job had offended God’s honor by accusations and insults and must now make amends. Doing so requires a ritual to demonstrate subservience and honor, and the confession in 42:2–6, along with Job’s expression of humility in 40:4, serves that role. This is a status ritual, to use the term of the sociologist Erving Goffman, or, in this case, a subordination ritual.²¹ It is a conventional action whose performance reestablishes and affirms hierarchy, quite apart from the feelings actually held. Like a salute in the military or prostration in a royal court, performance is crucial. In the scene in Job, others are watching: the friends, probably the Satan and other angels, and, most important, the reader. This ritual strengthens Job’s stature before the sovereign and in no way detracts from his dignity, as an evasive confession would do. Perhaps Job is speaking “like a prince” after all, for a prince, too, must know and display his proper place before the king (Prov 25:6–7, Qoh 8:2, Sir 11:1). As for Job’s interior life, that is his business.

VI. THE EPILOGUE

The epilogue, often considered an extraneous happy ending, merely a sop to the pious, is in fact an integral extension of the plot. Immediately after Job’s words of repentance, God says to Eliphaz and his two friends, “You have not spoken what is correct about me.” Yes, there is more to this sentence, but let us first note that it is directed primarily at Eliphaz and the other two friends, with Job brought in only for comparison: “as has my servant Job” (42:7). The friends will face God’s wrath unless they can get Job to intercede for them. Intercession would not be necessary if their mistake lay merely in having maintained a misguided but universally held theological tenet, namely, that God is uniformly just. What angers God is that they have hurt Job. They have been disloyal to their friend.

¹⁹James G. Williams, “‘You Have Not Spoken Truth of Me’: Mystery and Irony in Job,” *ZAW* 83 (1977) 231–55, here 246–47.

²⁰Tsevat, “Meaning of the Book of Job,” 91.

²¹Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), 56–57.

The friends erred in insisting that Job's suffering was punishment for some sin. Now the friends must correct their error not by repenting but by appeasing Job. They will thereby have to recognize that Job has a special closeness to God and is not a sinner.

This verse, 42:7, is commonly understood to validate everything Job has said—paradoxically so—since Job spoke many things that were manifestly wrong and God has said that Job spoke in ignorance (38:2, 40:3). Job was right, however, in insisting on his innocence throughout the dialogue. In context, this is what God is affirming as correct. When the friends recognize and acknowledge Job's innocence by asking for his intercession, Job intercedes and God grants his request.

God restores Job's fortunes, but only after he has interceded on behalf of his friends (42:10). Job must do his part to heal the breach with his friends, who, unlike his relations and fair-weather friends (42:11; see 6:1), have stuck by him all along and have done their clumsy best to help him. The restoration of Job's fortune is not a reward (for Job has done nothing calling for one) or a gift of free grace (for this God is not gracious) but a payment of reparation (hence the verb *שָׁב*, "give back," equivalent to the *hiphil* *השיב*). God's failure to respond directly to Job's lengthy and largely accurate accusations is virtually a plea of *nolo contendere*, and God, knowing himself to be guilty of having harmed Job *הגם*, "without warrant" (2:3), must make reparation. He pays double: one part being recompense, the other a penalty. His honor demands it—as does his justice.

VII. THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

The theophany is God's self-defense, not against all charges of injustice but against Job's opening complaint in chapter 3 that God created a miserable world in which life is worse than death. God cannot rebut Job's charge of having caused him unjustified suffering, because God has; and Job can receive no further explanation of his case, because the experiment requires that Job's ignorance continue even now and forever, so as to make it relevant to other sufferers. So what can Job learn that will help him?

God's first teaching to Job, and the author's message to the readers, is *faith*: to trust in God's goodness, even when knowledge fails and goodness is not visible. I state this as the author's message, not my own. It is explicit in the prologue, when God accepts the satan's rigorous view that one must fear God without expectation of reward. But reward may come, and so may misfortune, and so may some reparation. Or maybe not.

This faith is not a comfortable feeling, a confidence that God will do good for you whatever may be, but rather a rugged fidelity to a just but unpredictable ruler, one whose sovereignty requires unpredictability yet whose goodness allows an

expectation of fairness and of aid—or at least of openness to human claims: God listens. Job's faith is, as William Brown says, "a defiant trust, that God will ultimately hear him out" (see 23:6–7).²² For Job to maintain his faith when justice fails and suffering makes no sense is precisely the challenge the satan presented.

Did Job pass the test? Like so much else in the book, this remains unresolved, with commentators on both sides. We will never know the answer to this question, because God pays no further attention to the satan's destructive and unreasonable challenge. Instead, he moves on to the affirmative teachings of the theophany. God has grown by this experience.

Another teaching is equally important but usually neglected: that sufferers and their suffering are important to God. The relationship requires faith in two directions. There is a divine–human partnership.

Job never learns why he suffered, but he does learn that God considers him important, for he appears to Job in a prophetic vision, takes the trouble to persuade him of something, publicly affirms his virtue in the epilogue, and pays him reparations, necessarily incomplete, for the damage he caused. We the readers have already learned of Job's importance, for we know that God has chosen to rely on Job as his test case to prove the possibility of true human loyalty, and proving this is necessary to God's own honor.

Eliphaz asks, facetiously, "Can a man benefit God, or an intelligent person give him a benefit? Is it a delight if you are righteous, or a profit if you make your ways innocent?" (22:2–3). The answer, as both Eliphaz and Job would be surprised to learn, is yes, and this is why Job was so wrong when he said "I am trivial" (40:4).

Job was needy, and he yearned for divine fellowship. When God appeared in the whirlwind, he brought his fellowship. God too is needy, as Carl Jung recognized. God, Jung says, "needs Job's loyalty, and it means so much to him that he shrinks at nothing in carrying out his test. This attitude bestows an almost divine importance on humans, for what else is there in the whole world that could mean anything to one who has everything?"²³ To answer Jung's rhetorical question: God needs honor, the honor that comes from freely granted human loyalty, without considerations of reward or punishment. To prove that this is possible, God experiments on Job, though doing so causes undeniable and unjustified wrong to him, his family, and, as no one seems to notice, his slaves. God must really need Job. The hosannas of quiring angels could not match the honor that one lone, fragile man holds in his hands to offer.

²² William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 134.

²³ C. G. Jung, "Antwort auf Hiob," in *Menschenbild und Gottesbild*, vol. 4 of *Grundwerk* (Olten: Walter, 1984), 224 (my translation).