

Living with the Texts: The Book of Job

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1. Job: The Story Begins

The story is told of a man named Job
who lived long, long ago in the land of Uz.

He was a man of perfect integrity,
who feared God and avoided evil.
He had seven sons and three daughters;
seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels,
five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys;
and also many slaves. He was the richest man in the East.¹

One day in the heavenly realms where God presided,
the angels gathered, and the Accusing Angel was there too.
God said to the Accuser, “There is no one on earth
like my servant Job, wouldn’t you agree?
He is blameless and full of integrity.
He fears God and never does evil.”

The Accuser said, “Well, of course he does!
You’ve made him the richest man in the land!
Everything he does, you bless.
If you take everything away from him,
I bet he will curse you to your face.”

God said, “All right: everything he has is in your power.
Just don’t lay a hand on him.”²

¹ Job 1:1–3 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).

² Job 1:12 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).

So the Accuser leaves.

That day, bandits attack and steal all Job's livestock,
every last sheep and camel and ox and donkey.

Far worse, the very same day,
Job's children are all killed in a terrible accident,
all seven sons and three daughters.

Job hears the terrible news.

He falls down in the dust and says:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked shall I return there;
the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
blessed by the name of the Lord.”

And Job refuses to curse the God
who has murdered his children on a bet.

Up in heaven, God is very pleased with how it's going.
He says to the Accusing Angel, “Look, after all this
Job is still innocent.”

The Accuser says, “So what? If you attack his body
I bet he will curse you to your face.”

And God calls the bet.

“All right: he is in your power. Just don't kill him.”³

(Not for nothing did Virginia Woolf once say:

“I read the book of Job last night;
I don't think God comes out well in it.”)

The Accuser covers Job with terrible sores, from his head to his feet.

Job sits down in the dust
and picks up a shard of broken pottery
and scratches his sores in his misery.

³ Job 2:6 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).

Now Job had three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.
They came to comfort him and be with him in his suffering.
For seven days they sat with him.
They kept silent, for they saw how much Job was suffering.

2. Job: The Big Question

Over the last few weeks, I've been working with a small group studying the Book of Job.
They're going to help me out as I tell the next part of the story.

When we last saw Job, he was sitting in the dust,
grieving, in great physical pain.
At least his friends are with him.

Now Job begins to speak. He's hurting so much,
he cries out, "Why am I not dead?
I wish I were dead!"

For...my groanings are poured out like water.
Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes."⁴

Job's friends listen to him. They're upset.
And there's a terrifying question hanging in the air:
Why is Job suffering like this?
They've always been taught to believe God rewards good people
and only the bad people get punished.
So this sneaky little question crawls into their minds.
Did Job do something to *deserve* this suffering?
Is it all really his fault?

⁴ Job 3:11, 13, 23–26 (NRSV).

The friends start to speak. First comes Eliphaz.

[Reader 1:]

“See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.
Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.
But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.
Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope?

“Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble
reap the same. By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed....”⁵

On the surface, he’s saying, come on, buck up, don’t lose hope.
Hold on to your faith that God rewards the innocent
and punishes the guilty.
But Job gets the message just underneath the words.
He realizes his friends are starting to wonder,
is he guilty of something after all?

But Job *knows* he’s innocent.
He cries out again to God: What have I done to deserve this?
“Make me understand how I have gone wrong.”⁶
Tell me: what have I done to deserve this pain?

Song: “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”

Now Bildad speaks, the second of Job’s friends:

⁵ Job 4:4–9 (NRSV).

⁶ Job 6:24 (NRSV).

[Reader 2:]

“How long will you go on ranting,
filling our ears with trash?
Does God make straightness crooked
or turn truth upside down?
Your children must have been evil:
he punished them for their crimes.
But if you are pure and righteous
and pray to God for mercy,
surely he will answer your prayer
and fulfill your greatest desires.”⁷

This is what he says to his friend lying in the dirt,
scratching his oozing sores with a piece of a broken pot,
his friend who has lost his entire fortune overnight,
his friend whose children have just been killed.

Now the third friend gangs up on him too.
Here’s Zophar:

[Reader 3:]

“...[Y]ou say, ‘My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God’s sight.’
But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you....
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.”⁸

You have to wonder, what’s going on here?
Why are Job’s friends being so awful to him?
Is this the kind of comfort we crave from our friends
when we’re in trouble?
In our class at church, we’ve been struggling to understand
why the friends would act this way.
And I think it’s because they are scared.

⁷ Job 8:1–6 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).

⁸ Job 11:4–6 (NRSV).

They're scared of what's happening to Job.

The poet and translator Stephen Mitchell says the friends aren't really "speak[ing] to Job at all, they speak to their own terror at the thought of Job's innocence."⁹ Because they believe God controls what happens to every person. And if Job really is the good person they've always thought he was, and God is doing this to him, what does this say about God? They've been taught to believe God gives people what they deserve. But what if that's not how it works? What if Job really is innocent and God is attacking him anyway? What does this say about God? For the friends, it's too scary even to think about.

And what about for us?
It's easy enough to step back from the text
and say, oh, it doesn't matter; it's just a story;
we don't believe in a God like that.
But we're still left with the big question—
why do people suffer?
Why do *we* suffer?
Why is life so hard sometimes?
The folks in our class have been so aware,
Job isn't the only one with undeserved suffering on his mind,
especially these days as the recession drags on.
So many people have lost money, jobs, a sense of security.
And Job is not the only one to have lost people he loved very much.

So I don't think it's so easy to walk away from Job's story.
Listen to the force in his words:

“Be quiet now—let *me* speak;
whatever happens will happen....

⁹ Stephen Mitchell, Introduction, *The Book of Job* (HarperCollins, 1987), p. xiv.

[God] may kill me, but I won't stop;
I will speak the truth, to his face.
Listen now to my words;
pay attention to what I say.
For I have prepared my defense,
and I know that I am right....

Accuse me—I will respond;
or let me speak, and answer me.
What crime have I committed?
How have I sinned against you?
Why do you hide your face
as if I were your enemy?"¹⁰

This is Job's challenge to God: explain yourself!
Explain yourself!

He doesn't get an answer right away.
For pages and pages, his friends berate him and tell him,
you're wrong to complain.
You're wrong to say you're innocent.
You're wrong to say God is unjust.

Mercifully, this is not where the story ends.
What happens next is beyond extraordinary:
God answers.

3. Job: God Answers

Job and his friends have been arguing back and forth
for hours. It is utterly exhausting.
But at last, at last, at last:
God answers.
We are told:

¹⁰ Job 13:15–18, 22–24 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

[Two readers in unison:]

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

“Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?...

“Has the rain a father,

or who has begotten the drops of dew?

From whose womb did the ice come forth,

and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven?

“Gird up your loins like a man;

I will question you, and you declare to me.

Will you even put me in the wrong?

Will you condemn me that you may be justified?

Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?...

“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?...
Will you play with it as with a bird,
or will you put it on a leash for your girls?...
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?
Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?”¹¹

This is only a small taste of God’s speech
describing the sun and the stars
and the earth and the beautiful wild creatures on it.
Job listens.
And he answers:

I know that You can do everything,
That nothing you propose is impossible for You....
Indeed, I spoke without understanding
Of things beyond me, which I did not know....
I had heard You with my ears,
But now I see You with my eyes;
Therefore, I recant and relent,
Being but dust and ashes.¹²

Friends, this is the absolutely critical moment in the book.
What has happened here?
God has spoken, and what have we learned?
Is God an outrageous tyrant?

¹¹ Job 38:1–11, 28–29; 40:7–9; 41:1–2, 5, 10–11 (NRSV).

¹² Job 42:2, 4–6 (trans. Jewish Publication Society).

An egomaniac? A bully? A dictator?
Just reading the words, maybe...

But, for Job, there is something else going on here.
Job's answer is absolutely critical, and it is very hard to understand.
The original Hebrew words can have more than one meaning.
Most Bible translations have Job saying, "I despise myself,"
but that's probably not the best translation;
it's more like, "I recant," I withdraw what I said about you before.
He says, *I spoke without understanding,
Of things beyond me, which I did not know.
I had heard You with my ears,
But now I see You with my eyes.*

Job has held on to his integrity all throughout his suffering.
He has told the truth as best he knew it.
And it would seem that God honored and respected that in him.
It's true, God shows up sarcastic and challenging at first—
tell me, little man, if you can do everything I can!—
but the real point is that God *shows up!*
And look:
Job has been given an *experience* that changes everything for him.
The creator of the infinite universe, galaxies, planets, cosmos,
has shown up on Job's doorstep and revealed
the essence of everything—
imagine, imagine what it would be like
if you could see absolutely everything in the world,
everything that is and was and ever will be
all at once, no separation, *everything*.
I think something like this happened to Job.

Our class of brave students
has been trying and trying to understand what this means.
Does it answer Job's question?
Does it tell us why there is suffering?

Dear ones, I'm not the one who can answer that.
Here's the thing:
The point of the Book of Job is not to come out at the end
with an intellectual answer.
It doesn't give you a theory about suffering.
What it gives you is a hint of a transcendent *experience*
that took Job and wrung him out
and plunged him into the infinite creativity of that which IS.

The point of Job is not to hand you an answer.
The point is to read it and allow it to shake you
and meditate on it for years if not a lifetime,
and see what *you* learn.
Job says, *I had heard You with my ears,*
But now I see You with my eyes.
There's no substitute.
What Job learned cannot be told or taught,
but only caught, dared, experienced.
I recant and relent, he says,
Being but dust and ashes,
and dust and ashes are we all,
but in Job's words I don't hear bitterness—
rather a marveling, a wonder,
a respect that seems to earn the respect of his God as well.

Because this is how the story ends:

Then the Lord returned all Job's possessions, and gave him twice
as much as he had before.... So the Lord blessed the end of Job's
life more than the beginning. Job now had fourteen thousand
sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a
thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters:
the eldest he named Dove, the second Cinnamon, and the third
Eye-shadow. And in all the world there were no women as

beautiful as Job's daughters. He gave them a share of his possessions along with their brothers.

After this, Job lived for a hundred and forty years.
He lived to see his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren.
And he died at a very great age.¹³

Blessed be the mystery and all who seek it.

Amen.

¹³ Job 42:10, 12–16 (trans. Stephen Mitchell).