

The Book of Job: And You Think You Have Problems
Week 2—February 24, 2016
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
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INTRO

Virginia Woolf, in a letter to a friend, once wrote: “I read the book of Job last night—I don’t think God comes well out of it.”¹ I suspect many in this room feel that way so far. Last week Don Frampton cast a wide net as he introduced us to some of the basic structure of the book of Job, the motivation for piety, the meaning of suffering, the nature of God, and questions commonly explored by congregations and scholars. In that introduction, he gave us a sense of how complex the book can be to interpret.

Tonight I am intentionally skipping the theme of suffering. We know that Rabbi Ed Cohn will explore that concept further next week and will consider Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in his remarks. As Don stated last week, there are so many directions we can take with this story, and time simply won’t allow us to follow all of the threads we have picked up. Tonight I will largely consider chapter 1 and chapters 38-42. I hope to offer some context, raise a few good questions, and give you an opportunity to discuss and share your thoughts.

I hope by now that you have read through all of Job. I have been encouraged by the fantastic questions I’ve heard over the past week. Your observations last Wednesday night and in the following days demonstrate what creative, thoughtful students of scripture you are. I am grateful for these three weeks together.

In the opening words to the preface for his 1985 commentary on Job, Gerald Janzen writes, “It has been said that poems are not so much finished as abandoned in despair. The attempt to write this commentary has brought me to the same place. Any claim to offer here a definitive reading of Job is undermined (for example) by my own experience of the past two weeks: The manuscript was sent off to the editors in mid-semester—a week after it was ‘finished;’ two days after a change in understanding one verb led to a complete revision of the section in which the verb occurred before further classroom work could necessitate more drastic changes. If it is hereby abandoned to the printed page, however, despair is tempered with the hope that it, like other such efforts, will help the reader to make further progress with Job.” He goes on to say,

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume II, 1912–1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 585.

“Generations of seminary students have helped me both to understand Job and to appreciate how provisional that understanding must remain.”

We students of scripture are in good company when we identify the questions and themes we seek to understand yet do not come to lasting conclusions about those questions and themes. Tonight and next week, we hope to “make further progress with Job” while understanding we are on a journey with all of the sacred, ancient texts we study and hold.

JOB, SATAN, and the DIVINE COUNCIL

Friends in the first congregation I served gave me the entire *Interpretation* commentary series when I left Birmingham for Richmond to attend seminary. At a reception following my very last Sunday with them, they laid the commentaries on a long table so church members could leave notes within the covers and pages. As I read through Gerald Janzen’s commentary on Job, I found this note from a dear friend, “Forget the patience...I hope you are always as feisty as Job.”

Last week we questioned the “patience” of Job. Near the end of the New Testament, in James 5.11, we read of the “endurance” of Job. I wonder if my friend Morgan is right in his reading of the “feistyness” of Job—one who challenges his notions of truth, argues with his friends, questions the details of his life, and dares to argue face-to-face with God.

We have in this story a man who, initially, seems very cautious. He is devout in his prayer rituals in ways that seek to protect everything and everyone he loves. He prays and makes offerings for himself and for his whole family, whose personal faith practices aren’t mentioned while their feasting and celebrating practices definitely are. It seems he represents them all and stands between them and God. He rises every morning and prays and sends up burnt offerings, saying, “It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” And we are told, “This is what Job always did.”

And then we come to verse 6. Let’s consider the readings in multiple translations:

Job 1.6

KJV, “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.”

NRSV, “One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.”

ASV, "Now it came to pass on the day when the sons of God came to present themselves before Jehovah, that Satan also came among them."

Immediately, we are introduced to the blameless, righteous Job, his family, and the divine council gathering beyond Job's realm. The divine council is a common Ancient Near Eastern motif, and "In Mesopotamian religion the gods assembled on New Year's Day to determine destinies for the coming year...such a New Year's Day celebrated and renewed the creation of the cosmos with all its life-giving powers."² In the opening chapter, we have an image of a divine council gathered to discuss human beings, and "the satan" is among them. Not "Satan" as in Job or Joshua or Abraham or Don or Ed or Elizabeth, he is referred to as "the satan" or "the accuser" or "the adversary," and he seems to be an expected part of the council that gathers. His presence is not a surprising disruption.

In the 1980s, Frank Peretti wrote a series of fiction books about the spiritual realm that is present both in three-tiered universe (heaven, earth, hell) and invisible around us on the earthly realm. His two most popular novels on these themes sold millions of copies, and he gave language and personality to the presence of evil lurking behind palm trees and in dark corners. When we hear "Satan," we are often thinking of something like Frank Peretti's "Satan" character and not the accuser/adversary in this ancient council scene. That is important to keep before us as Job 1-2 shows us "the most extensive portrayal of a satanic figure in [Hebrew scripture]."³

Referred to with an article and not a proper name, we are to understand his function as primary to his identity. Some scholar's note his role as being like a prosecuting attorney in a courtroom scene or "that of an investigator, tester, or...[one] who seeks to probe the character of human beings."⁴ In the divine council, God takes the lead position and declares Job's character to be blameless and his devotion unblemished. But the accuser "responds with doubt about Job's integrity and his motives for piety. Then he proposes that Job's character be tested." In the story of Job, we never get a sense of value prescribed to the accuser's nature. "[T]he satan is an ambiguous figure who appears on the one hand to challenge God's assessment of Job...and yet on the other hand works within the parameters established by God."⁵ He argues and pushes back yet also accepts the limits as prescribed by God.

² Janzen, *Interpretation: Job*, p. 37

³ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Satan," pp. 759-761

⁴ *TDBI*, "Satan," p. 760

⁵ *TDBI*, "Satan," p. 760

The scene is not one of ultimate good and ultimate evil coming together in a cosmic partnership to torment an innocent human, though I certainly struggle with that being my first, second, and even third readings of this text. And yet, I know that some of our questions of Job are anachronistic. We do this with much of our sacred scriptures when we take the knowledge and customs and experience of our modern-day lives and attempt to layer them on top of ancient stories. It is more helpful for us to understand Job against narratives and theological concepts of the Ancient Near East than against life in the United States in the 21st century. The role the council plays in Job's life is one of the very concepts being challenged by this story.

JANZEN and ANE SCHOLARS

Job as parable is launching some big questions about who God is. We must accept the introductory conceit of a cosmic council deciding the fates of humans if we are to get at the big questions the book of Job is asking us to consider. What role has God played in the world since creation? What role has God played in the Babylonian exile? What role does God play in Job's life? Might we misunderstand God? Might we think we have figured out God but instead have God all wrong?

In his study of Job, Gerald Janzen considers the work of two scholars who have written extensively about ancient Near Eastern religious belief and practice. If Job is saying something about who God is and how God works, then most likely that is to be understood against what other people are saying about who God is and how God works.

Thorkild Jacobsen in his work *The Treasures of Darkness*⁶ explores Mesopotamian religion and notes shifts across millennia. In the 4th millennium, the gods were powers immanent in the phenomena of nature and took the shape or form of the phenomena. In the 3rd millennium, "the gods transcended nature and society, as royal, divine figures who had created nature...and who had created humankind...to serve the gods by working on the earth, the divine estate." In this understanding, the gods were made free because the humans took on the work of the world. By the 2nd millennium, some Mesopotamians came to believe in "'personal' deities standing in direct relation to the individual family or the clan head and understood to be as divine parents of their human children."

⁶ Janzen, pp. 5-7

Frank Moore Cross's work, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*⁷, "connects the religion of Israel's ancestors with the personal religion of second-millennium Mesopotamia. Cross looks at the personal religion found in Genesis through II Kings and notes rather harshly, "'these attempts at the interpretation of history ultimately were inadequate,' insofar as they suppressed the ambiguities of history." Cross observes Job's role "in the main line of the evolution of Israel's religion."

Janzen then adds, "The fact is that Israel's religious history taken as a whole did not, as did that of Mesopotamia, end in a dark age. Rather, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah emerged from the exile with a faith which, however re-formulated and transformed, continued to ground itself firmly in the traditions of those ancestors."⁸ In making sense theologically of displacement and exile, the book of Job offers "critique, deepening, and even transformation...The ancient religion was not wrong," writes Janzen, "rather, it had not yet fully confronted its own implications."

In reading Job, we are encountering a clash of cosmic worldview. Is God personal? Is God far beyond this realm? Is God capricious and arbitrary? Does Job really know the God to whom he prays? Do we? Do we have adequate language and metaphors to even begin to understand the one who speaks from the whirlwind of chapters 38-39:

4

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

5

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?

6

On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

7

when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

8

"Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—

9

when I made the clouds its garment,

⁷ Janzen, pp. 7-9

⁸ Janzen, p. 10

and thick darkness its swaddling band,
10
and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
11
and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?
12
"Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
13
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
14
It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.
15
Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.
16
"Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
17
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
18
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.
19
"Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
20
that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?
21
Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!

ANE...SO WHAT

That's a lot to take in, and maybe very little of what I just summarized will matter to you 5 minutes from now. But what is of utmost interest and importance to me is that we hold in our hands an invitation to grow in our understanding of God. Scripture tells us that an expanding concept of God is a good thing. Just when we think we've pegged God and figured God out, just when we think we have safely drawn the perimeter around ourselves and our families and our communities of faith and offered up our prayers and burnt offerings like Job, we are gifted a challenging word or image that opens our imaginations a bit more. And other times, the shift upends everything we thought we knew. Job gives us room to grow in our understanding of who God is and what we will do with our lives in light of that revelation.

That means there is something of a "yes, but" to Job. The story of Job, passed along by oral tradition and then written and then added to and tweaked, is a response to a particular worldview and a particular concept of God. If we think of scripture as a conversation across time not just between God and humanity but between generations of humankind, then we begin to hear the play between one sacred text and another.

Some might find this notion of an evolution of thought rather unnerving. "Are you saying the Bible doesn't mean what it says?" Not at all. Instead, I think the invitation is exciting and liberating. We are given glimpses across time and in numerous contexts of how God revealed God's self to a people, and we listen in on how that people made sense of what they knew of God. It's a story that grows and continues and moves beyond the pages of our Bibles into the realities of our lives as we participate in this same work of chasing after and making sense of who God is and who we are.

JOB REPLIES and RECANTS

Job suffers, his friends provide inaccurate counsel, God speaks, and then in chapter 42 Job replies:

"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

3

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

4

'Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.'

5

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,

but now my eye sees you;

6

therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

Something in this exchange challenges Job to consider what his life really is and who God really is. In chapter one he draws a clear line around his family and his possessions and he’s grateful for them and prays for them and keeps and preserves what he has with great care. And his life stops at that circle he has drawn around his world. His care stops at that circle. His need for God exists only in supporting and maintaining the world he knows.

God then reveals to Job that it is not Job’s place to draw the circles or protection and interest. It is not Job’s sheer will and control that keeps the earth spinning. Job is not of ultimate concern to God or of ultimate interest. Job has been the center of his own universe and assumed God reigned directly over him and over his family and over his estate. All of that has changed now.

Of Job’s repentance, Karla Suomala writes, “I think it’s possible that Job is rejecting or renouncing his previous ideas about God -- his entire sense that God simply functions as a machine that processes human behavior, rewarding and punishing accordingly. A case can be made for this reading, especially since the word ‘repent’ is problematic. In [Christian scripture], this word is almost always connected to sin and occurs when someone recognizes his or her error and shows remorse. In Hebrew, though, the word can legitimately be understood as changing one’s mind and setting out on a new path. This word is even applied to God in Exodus 32 where God changes God’s mind about doing away with the Israelites after the golden calf incident. Read in this vein, we might say that Job, having seen God, rejected his previous view of God and changed his mind.”⁹

In studying these final 17 verses of Job and its somewhat unsatisfying ending, I found the work of Kathryn Shifferdecker (Associate Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary) and Ellen Davis (Duke Divinity School) to be insightful and helpful.

Of 42.6, “therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes,” Shifferdecker, offers “a better translation (in my opinion) is this, from the Tanakh: ‘Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes’ (42:6).

⁹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2672

Job does not abjectly repent on his ash heap, browbeaten into submission. Instead, he acknowledges that he spoke of things he did not understand. He recants, and he realizes anew his place in the world, a mortal human being. But at the same time, this creature of 'dust and ashes' (like Abraham before him) is privileged to stand in the presence of God himself: 'Now my eye sees you.'"¹⁰

"[Robert] Alter translates Job's statement like this: 'By the ear's rumor I heard of You, and now my eye has seen You.'"¹¹

Job gets it, Job sees this expansive understanding of who God is and what his personal place is in the order of things. God reprimands the friends who DON'T get it and who DON'T see, and Job prays for them just as he once prayed for his own children. And with that, the Lord restored the fortunes of Job giving him twice as much as he had before.

RESTORATION and THE DAUGHTERS

In my recent readings of Job, I took note of the final verses in which Job's family and friends and fortune are restored. Some of us are bothered by this neat and tidy ending in which Job learns a lesson and then gets remarkable rewards. Because we know that life doesn't work that way. So many of you in this room know exactly how it feels to lose everything you have. Even when you rebuild and restore and replace, the grief of loss is still familiar. Even moreso, we know the grief and horror of losing all of one's family cannot simply be replaced by the creation of a new family. If Job's ending seems too tidy, let's push a little bit harder.

Many scholars suggest this ending was added at a later date to give meaning to Job's suffering. At least he gets more money and more stuff, right? At least he gets a new family. The temptation with such historical notes, however accurate, can be to mentally delete the verses. If they are add-ons, then they aren't the "real" story. But they've survived for generations as we have them before us, and we must let Job stand as it is. So what do we do with this ending?

First, the daughters. I have been drawn to verse 15's description of his three daughters, "In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers."

¹⁰ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1455

¹¹ via Karla Suomala

This is different. This is significant. Kathryn Shifferdecker notes, "God restores Job's fortunes, giving him twice as much wealth as before, and ten more children, and it seems to many readers a cheap ending to the book. But note the details of this restoration: Job's three daughters are the most beautiful women in the land, and Job gives them an inheritance along with their brothers, an unheard-of act in the ancient Near East. He also gives them unusually sensual names: Dove (Jemimah), Cinnamon (Keziah) and Rouge-Pot (Keren-happuch).

It seems that Job has learned to govern his world as God does. As Ellen Davis argues in her book *Getting Involved with God*, the cautious patriarch of the prologue who offered "preemptive sacrifices" for his children has become a parent after God's own heart. He gives his children the same freedom that God gives God's creation, and, like God, he delights in their freedom and in their beauty.

Davis writes, 'The great question that God's speech out of the whirlwind poses for Job and every other person of integrity is this: Can you love what you do not control?' It is a question worth pondering. Can you love what you do not control: this wild and beautiful creation, its wild and beautiful Creator, your own children?

As for the question of whether ten new children can replace those lost, Davis argues that it is useless to focus on how much it costs God to restore Job's fortunes. (It obviously costs God nothing.) "The real question is how much it costs Job to become a father again." Like a Holocaust survivor whose greatest act of courage is to bear children after the cataclysm, Job chooses against all odds to live again. Job (and his wife) choose to bear children into a world full of heart-rending beauty *and* heart-breaking pain. Job chooses to love again, even when he knows the cost of such love.

Living again after unspeakable pain is a kind of resurrection. The book of Job does not espouse an explicit belief in resurrection. Nevertheless, the trajectory of the whole book participates in that profound biblical movement from death to life. It is not surprising, therefore, that the translators of the Septuagint [the Koine Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures] add this verse to the book of Job: 'And Job died, old and full of days. *And it is written that he will rise again with those whom the Lord raises up.*'"¹²

¹² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1455

Frederick Buechner offers, "You can think of God as a great cosmic bully here if you want, but you can think of him also as a great cosmic artist, a singer, say, of such power and magnificence and so caught up in the incandescence of his own art that he never notices that he has long since ruptured the eardrums of his listeners and reduced them to quivering pulp. "Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?" he asked (40:9), and then he launched off into a devastating aria about Behemoth, the hippopotamus he had made, and Leviathan, the crocodile he had made, challenging Job or anybody else, if they thought they could, to take them for walks on leashes or pierce their armored hides with cold steel.

You feel that God had only paused to catch his breath when Job saw his chance to break in again at last. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know," he said (42:3). And then he said something else. All his life he had heard about God, about his glory and his holiness, about his terrible wrath and his great mercy, about the way he had created the earth and all its creatures and set the sun, moon, and stars in the sky so there would always be light to see by and beauty to gladden the heart. He had sometimes thrilled and sometimes trembled at the sound of these descriptions, and they had made such an impression on him over the years that not even the terrible things that had happened to him or the terrible question as to *why* they had happened or the miserable answers to that question proposed by his friends could quite make him curse God as had been suggested, although there were a few times when he came uncomfortably close to it. But now it was no longer a matter of hearing descriptions of God, because finally he had heard and seen him for himself.

He had seen the great glory so shot through with sheer, fierce light and life and gladness, had heard the great voice raised in song so full of terror and wildness and beauty, that from that moment on, nothing else mattered. All possible questions melted like mist, and all possible explanations withered like grass, and all the bad times of his life together with all the good times were so caught up into the fathomless life of this God, who had bent down to speak with him, though by comparison he was no more than a fleck of dust on the head of a pin in the lapel of a dancing flea, that all he could say was, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6)."

WILLIAM BLAKE

You have on your tables two images by William Blake from his *Illustrations on the Book of Job*. In just a moment, I want to give you a few minutes to look at these images together, and the correlating scripture that informs the image. You'll have time to reflect and discuss the shift Job experiences from chapter 1 to chapter 42, and then we'll come back together for a final few minutes of discussion.

BLAKE DISCUSSION AT TABLES

After discussion, observations on William Blake's images from Kathryn Shifferdecker:

In the very first illustration of the prologue, Blake shows Job and his family praying beneath a tree. Job and his wife hold books, perhaps Bibles or hymnals. Job's wife clasps her hands in prayer, and the grown children kneel around them. It is a picture of great piety, but it is also static. There are musical instruments hanging in the tree, silent. The sun is setting, and the sheep in the foreground are fast asleep.

In the last illustration, Blake revisits this scene. There is the family again (albeit the new set of children) under the same tree, with the same musical instruments and the same sheep in the foreground. This time, however, there is movement. Job and his wife and the sons are playing the musical instruments, the daughters and the entire family are standing upright in lively poses, the sheep are awake, and the sun is rising. In Blake's illustrations and in the book of Job itself, the pious patriarch of the prologue moves through death to new life. And it is the vision of creation granted him in the whirlwind speeches that enables him to embrace that new life in freedom and in faith.

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For further study:

Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Peterson. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*; Abingdon Press, 1999

J. Gerald Janzen. *Interpretation: Job*; John Knox Press, 1985

Roland E. Murphy. *The Tree of Life: An exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*; Eerdmans, 1990

Ellen F. Davis. "The Sufferer's Wisdom," *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001), 121-143.

Kathryn Shifferdecker, "Of Stars and Sea Monsters: Creation Theology in the Whirlwind Speeches."

https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/31-4_Job/31-4_Schifferdecker.pdf