



Evil and Suffering in Job

The Divine Speeches

Job's dialogue with God (Job 38:1-42:6) stands as one of Scripture's most vivid depictions of the struggle to understand and respond to suffering and evil. In this excerpt from her commentary on Job in the New Interpreters' Bible, Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom reflects on Job's response to God's speeches from the whirlwind.

As Job discovered, events do occur that challenge and sometimes overturn the paradigms that have shaped one's perceptions. Yet people do not readily let go of the frameworks that have shaped their vision of reality. Often, it is when we have already begun to suspect that something is wrong with our paradigms that we become most resistant to allowing them to be challenged. It is not just that we cannot see something, but that we are afraid of looking squarely at what we can glimpse just at the periphery of our vision. Like the characters in the book of Job, many people are reluctant to confront the reality that human beings cannot secure their lives and their families against harm. We do not want to see that bad things happen to good people. Yet horrible things can happen, without apparent rhyme or reason. Premature death, accidents, violence, and illness can happen to anyone at any time. We all know that to be true, and yet we resist it with all our being. Drunk drivers exist, but why must one kill my child? Cancer is a reality, but why must it strike my spouse?

The seeming randomness of such events is terrifying, and so we

cling to interpretive paradigms of experience that will mask the reality, organize it in a way that makes it appear to be something else. Job's friends employed a number of such frameworks, which allowed disaster to be seen as moral discipline, punishment, etc.

Job rejected those frameworks but embraced an alternative, legal paradigm that allowed him to declare the disasters morally wrong and to have someone to blame. All of these paradigms allowed them not to see what they were afraid to see—that the chaotic is an irreducible aspect of creation that must be taken into account in any adequate understanding of experience. To that extent, their moral paradigms served them as a means of denial.

The reality that Job has to confront in the divine speeches is the ineradicable presence of the chaotic in existence. God's speeches do not invite speculation as to why the chaotic is a part of creation. They are not a theodicy in the sense that a theodicy attempts to explain or to justify the presence in God's creation of those things that render human existence fragile and vulnerable. Theodicies, too, are explanatory frameworks that

often serve to mask or obscure something that is difficult to acknowledge. When, in their attempts to justify death, pain, or suffering, theodicies speak of such things as only “appearing” to be evils but “really” being for some greater good, then they are forms of denial. Job’s friends had attempted just such justifications, as they suggested that suffering was divine discipline, but the divine speeches make no such claims. They insist that the presence of the chaotic be acknowledged as part of the design of creation, but they never attempt to justify it. The pain caused by the eruption of the chaotic into human life must be recognized as such.

Sometimes a dramatic confrontation is required to overcome the resistance people often experience in acknowledging the reality of something they have tried hard not to see. Leviathan plays that role in God’s speech to Job. Job had concluded his first speech in chap. 3, which was filled with the imagery of chaos, with the words, “the dread which I dreaded has come upon me” (3:25b, author’s trans.). Like many people, Job intuited but was not yet willing to face what he most feared. Job’s quarrel with God has been a long attempt to keep that dread at bay by trying to engage God in a very different kind of argument. God’s wisdom, however, is to know that Job can neither make his decision about God (1:1; 2:5) nor continue with his life until he has acknowledged the reality of what he fears. Finally,

The power of these speeches to comfort was powerfully articulated by a mother whose teenage son had been killed in an automobile accident. She described how, on the morning of his funeral, she rose early and reached for her Bible, reading to herself the speeches of God from the whirlwind. When asked why she chose those chapters, she said, “I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world.” Her anguish was like that of Job’s in chap. 3, an inward spiral of pain that threatened to swallow all of creation. What she needed was the reassurance of a God whose power of creation and re-creation is stronger than the power of the chaotic.

in the divine speeches Job encounters the very image of his dread in the face of Leviathan. When that happens, it is as though a spell is broken. Job is released from his obsession with justice and can begin the process of living beyond tragedy. Putting one’s life together again is not easy.

For most people, the “happy ending” does not come in the quick and apparently simple resolution that the book of Job describes in 42:7-17. But the book of Job is wise in its recognition that false or distorting frameworks to which people cling in an attempt to defend themselves against what they dread may prevent them from seeing what they need to acknowledge, if they are to get on with their lives.

Confronting the reality of the presence of the chaotic in the design of the world is essential, but if the divine speeches had nothing to say to Job except that pain is part of life, then they would hardly be worth reading. One has to ask how they comfort and strengthen. It is essential to remember that Leviathan is not the only topic in the divine speeches. Before God speaks of that emblem of the chaotic, God has already described a world in which the chaotic, although present, is contained within the secure boundaries of a created order that is also rich with goodness. The power of these speeches to comfort was powerfully articulated by a mother whose teenage son had been killed in an automobile accident. She described how, on the morning of his

funeral, she rose early and reached for her Bible, reading to herself the speeches of God from the whirlwind. When asked why she chose those chapters, she said, “I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world.” Her anguish was like that of Job’s in chap. 3, an inward spiral of pain that threatened to swallow all of creation. What she needed was the reassurance of a God whose power of creation and re-creation is stronger than the power of the chaotic. Job had been ready in his pain to give in to the overwhelming sense of despair, to use a curse to destroy the structures of creation that had led to his unbearable existence (3:3-10). God cannot now take away the defenses that Job has erected in the succeeding chapters without addressing that original cry of despair. The first divine speech in chaps. 38-39 acknowledges Job’s sense of a fall into the abyss. With its orderly pattern of visually powerful images, this divine speech is a verbal re-creation of the world. Hearing the words of the establishment of the earth on secure foundations, the reliable return of the dawn each day, the regulation of life-giving water, and the nurture of the animals is a reassurance that in spite of the reality of pain and loss, God’s creation supports and sustains.

The divine speeches offer comfort in another way, too. A person who has suffered a great loss or who has finally faced up to a painful reality long denied often experiences an overwhelming sense of isolation, alienation, and godforsakenness. There is a need to share the burden, and yet such sharing may be difficult. Cultures often make sharing more difficult than it need be, for instance, by placing too much value on stoic endurance or, as in Job’s culture, by treating suffering as somehow a sign of divine rejection. The result is to increase the burden of isolation. The divine speeches address this issue by means of the creation imagery they employ.

The divine speeches also challenge Job’s understanding of where the presence of God may be found. Like many who suffer, Job experienced himself as godforsaken. In his way of thinking, God’s presence was to be found in the peace and fulfillment of the family circle and the satisfaction of doing good within the community (chap. 29). To a certain extent, Job was not wrong, for God is to be found there. Job found it impossible, however, to experience the presence of God in desolation (chap. 30).

As a symbol of his outcast condition, Job described himself as “a brother of jackals, / a companion of ostriches” (30:29 NRSV), identifying in his misery with the creatures who inhabit desolate places. God’s view of such creatures and their world is quite different from Job’s. The vivid image of God’s “satisfying the desolate wasteland” with rain, symbol of divine blessing, strongly suggests that Job is wrong in thinking that there is any place or any condition beyond the sustaining power of God’s presence.

God’s nurture of and pleasure in the animals of the wasteland is a provocative image. These animals were symbolic of the hostile and alien “other.” In Job’s imagination, they provided an image for describing the rejected and despised human “beasts” cast out of society (30:5-8). It is worth pursuing that connection. In our own society, many groups of people cluster at the margins of society; the mentally ill and the homeless are those we think of first. But one should also think of the biker culture, petty criminals, and others who live on the fringes of the law. The lives of such people often seem to be desolate wastelands, and the emotions they provoke in others are often a mixture of pity and fear. They seem so alien, so far outside the bounds of the ordinary social life that most people take as normative. But that is to view them from Job’s perspective. From God’s perspective, there is no alien outsider; there are only children of God. It can be difficult for “good Christian people” to imagine, but the destitute may know more of the grace of God than do the comfortable, and the petty criminal’s life may be touched by the love of God in ways that the “respectable” person can scarcely imagine. God’s revivifying rain continues to satisfy the desolate places. Indeed, those places are the ones most likely to respond with exuberant flowering, even though that beauty may go unseen by most of the world. □



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GOOD RESOURCES ON EVIL

Recommended by
Justo Gonzalez

The Gospel of Our Suffering
by Soren Kierkegaard (Clark & Co. LTD, 1991)

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning
by Rene Girard (Orbis Books, 2001)

Not the Way Its Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin
by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Eerdmans, 1995)

Recommended by
Marjorie Suchocki

Crawl with God, Dance in the Spirit
by Jong Chun Park (Abingdon, 1998)

*The Fall to Violence:
Original Sin in Relational Theology*
by Marjorie Suchocki (Continuum, 1994)

*The Transforming God:
An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil*
by Tyron L. Inbody (Westminster, 1997)

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Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God
by Marilyn McCord Adams (Cornell Univ. Press, 2000)

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The Choir by Joanna Trollope (Berkley Publishing Group, 1996)

“Ecclesiastical evil is some of the worst of evil.”

Blood of the Lamb by Peter DeVries (Viking Penguin, 1982)

A Severed Head by Iris Murdoch (Viking Penguin, 1976)

“academic evil personified”

Movie: *In the Bedroom*

See also a review of *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, edited by Stephen Davis (Westminster, 2002)
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