
Job's Lament: How to Understand

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Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal to my accuser for my right.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?
Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn
me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.
I am blameless; I do not know myself;
I loathe my life.
It is all one; therefore I say,
“He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.”

—Job 9:15–22 (NRSV Updated Edition)

Reading Job 9–10, I could not put my mind to rest because of Job's visceral lament. Job does not know why he suffers and argues that he is blameless. Even if he is not sinless or perfect, he does not deserve such excruciating suffering. He concludes that God must be cruel because, “He destroys both the blameless and the wicked” (9:22). So, he feels nothing and laments: “If I am wicked, woe to me! If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace and look upon my affliction. Bold as a lion you hunt me; you repeat your exploits against me” (10:15-16).

Job operates within the traditional theology of reward and punishment and struggles to understand his innocent suffering. In this view, the logic is “you reap what you sow.” But he challenges this traditional wisdom because it does not work for him. In later chapters, he even points out that his friends are not faultless and that the wicked are at ease (12:6; 13:7-12). Job argues that he is blameless and does not deserve this high loss calamity, including his unbearable suffering.

In reality there was nothing he could do to correct the situa-

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tion. On the one hand, in his own eyes he knows that normative wisdom failed. On the other hand, he must live and deal with the traditional worldview. Worse, no one hears him. Even God is silent. His three friends keep preaching: “You have sinned; you deserve punishment; repent; then you will prosper again.” His friends are intoxicated by traditional theology. They are busy protecting the traditional religion. They don't listen to him at all. They speak all the time. So much so that Job is more dejected.

An alternative worldview may help Job understand his misery better. That is, anyone falls victim to anything under heaven. In other words, tragedy happens anywhere to anyone. In that regard, heaven and earth are merciless and impartial. There are human-made sufferings; there are also unknown sufferings. There even are “righteous sufferings” for those who work for God's righteousness. In the case of Job, suffering or misfortune are caused not necessarily by God's action or due to sin. As the sun shines on all, and as the storm hits anyone at any place, things may happen to anyone (cf. Matt 5:45; Dao De Jing 5). That is life's design, perhaps. We must embrace science and sheer reality.

As we approach the end of the Book of Job, God appears finally and speaks to Job. But God still does not answer Job about why

he suffers. Perhaps the only good news is that God is there with him. How do we interpret the final scene of God's appearance and Job's attitude?

Against the traditional interpretation of Job 42:6, where Job is understood as the one who repents, I posit an alternative translation and interpretation. Most English translations have a dominant translation that comes from the NRSV and NIV: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." However, in 42:6a, there is no object of the verb *emas*, which may be better understood as "to protest" (7:16; 34:33; 36:5).¹

Job does not despise himself but protests. In Job 42:6b, the verb *nacham* means "to comfort" (also in other places in the Hebrew Bible) or "to be sorry." Except for the Common English Bible and the Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary, almost all English translations translate *nacham* as "to repent," which seems a bit absurd, given Job's perspective in that the issue is not sin but innocent suffering. Eventually, what Job urgently needs is not a logical answer to why he suffers—about which God did not answer him at all—but God's presence and comfort.² Purdue's point is worth quoting:

Job is not "repenting in" dust and ashes, but rather he expresses his despondency over human fate. He feels sorrow for human beings (i.e., "dust and ashes"), a compassion absent from the nature of God. Job refuses to be intimidated, for he remains defiant. It is Yahweh who has been judged guilty, not the mortal Job, for the voice from the whirlwind has been condemned by his own words.

Sandra Lubarsky points out the importance of God's pastoral care for Job, as she observes:

God comes to Job and Job feels God as personally present, as one who knows and cares for him. It may be that the "answer" to such a fundamental question as suffering finds expression in relational terms because the existential need that arises from suffering is ultimately for relationship and care, not for logic. Perhaps it is the case that though there is much that we do not understand, this much we can understand—that we are connected, each to each, to all of creation and (for Jews) to the Creator and that that connection is permeated with God's presence and care. Here Judaism and Buddhism meet—though the one is theistic and the other not—in the belief that the heart of understanding is relationality.³

1. Leo Purdue, *Wisdom Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 126. Compare *emas* with other uses of this verb in 1 Sam 15:23, 26; Jer 7:29; Hos 4:6; 9:17; Amos 5:21; Job 19:18; and Prov 15:32.

2. See the alternative translations: "Therefore I despise [my life], and I will be consoled on dust and ashes" (*The Complete Jewish Bible*); "Therefore, I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes" (*Common English Bible*); "I protest, but feel sorry for dust and ashes" (Leo Purdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 125).

3. Sandra B. Lubarsky, "Advice to Job from a Buddhist Friend,"

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In conclusion, I love poetic expressions in the middle sections of the Book of Job and Job's authentic, persistent engagement with God without being swayed by his friends. Job's friends failed to minister to him, busily trying to persuade him with words of empty theology. But God acknowledges Job and his case while not answering him about why he suffers. In the end, God seems to admit unwittingly that his experiment with Job was too cruel to provide any lesson. On Job's end, he needs to move away from the traditional theology of reward and punishment and seek God's presence and comfort. Theologizing every human experience may be deleterious to one's life.⁴

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 17.3 (Spring 1999): 67 (58–68).

4. This article is published to honor the memory of the Rev. Dr. Gwen Sayler, Professor of Hebrew Bible.