

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Willis, Tim (2012) "Making Job's God Our God: Reflections on the Speeches of God in the Book of Job," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss4/8>

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Making Job's God Our God:
Reflections
on the Speeches of God in the Book of Job

By Tim Willis

One of the Convocation speakers at Pepperdine University this past February told the story of a young woman in Houston who had come to mean a lot to his family. This woman had been a prostitute since her early teens and had been involved in the drug scene. She had six children by five different fathers. But a few years ago she began attending church and eventually became a Christian. In the months following her conversion, she became increasingly consumed by three things—by a desire to see that her children were cared for, that they have a better life than she had had; by a desire to bring others to the Lord; and finally, by AIDS (so consumed by it, in fact, that it took her life just a few months ago).

Job as an “Explanation” of Suffering

I tell this story as a contrast to the story of Job, because we most often think of Job as he is described by James. To encourage persecuted Christians, he says, “You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:11). I certainly believe and accept James’s application of Job’s story to his audience; but because of stories like the one of this woman from Houston, I wonder if this exhausts the message of Job.

In Job’s case, I look to the final scene of the book—a scene of contentment and happiness in old age—and I am inclined to say that the message is that “all things really do work together for good to those who love God” (Rom 8:28). All too easily, that becomes one of my “patented answers” to people who question their suffering. It’s either that passage, or it’s the proverb that says, “The Lord disciplines

those he loves” (Prov 3:11; Heb 12:6), or it’s a quotation from James or Peter about suffering as a means of building character, or it’s a biblical example of having to suffer the consequences of sin, even though one is forgiven.

But I come away from all of these options feeling uneasy, because I feel I have arrived too quickly at “the biblical explanation” for people who have deep and nagging questions about God and human suffering. Such answers never seem to satisfy. I certainly believe that those things should be taught, because they are right. Those passages show the importance of having a long-term perspective about suffering, and they remind us that God’s view of life is much bigger than our own. But I am uneasy because they are intellectual responses to something that is more than intellectual. “Patented answers”—even quotations from Scripture—do not deal adequately with the full spectrum of issues raised by situations of grief and suffering.

This is reinforced in me by the fact that Job possesses a “healthy” perspective on suffering when his hard times come. When disasters strike him in rapid-fire succession, Job says, “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). When his wife counsels him to curse God, he says, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (2:10). Job has a “biblical” perspective. Of more importance, in my mind, is the fact that God himself proclaims Job’s righteousness at both the beginning and the end of the book (1:8; 2:3; 42:7).

So, if Job has a long-range perspective and a deep faith in God at the beginning of the book, if he is pronounced “right” by God from beginning to end, what changes occur in him? His final reaction to God is to say, “My ears had

heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you” (42:5). Something has changed for Job. But what? And why does he repent (42:6)? It seems that questions like these should be answered if one is to make use of this book as God intended.

In summary, Job is a book that deals directly with a situation of extreme suffering and grief, and yet it answers so few of the questions raised by such situations. In fact, if we turn to the book for help in times of suffering, we run the risk of doing harm rather than good. Although the reader has been given a “behind-the-scenes look” at Job’s suffering, the “explanation” revealed to the reader is not revealed to Job. We cannot assume that the book intends to say that the explanation for Job’s suffering (the challenge from Satan, testing Job’s faith) is the explanation for our suffering. A survey of the whole Bible teaches us that the explanation for Job’s suffering is simply one of many possible explanations. In the end, we are like Job in that, often, we are never told why we suffer.

And so, my major conclusion to this point is that the book of Job does not set out to “explain” why the righteous suffer. It simply affirms that they do. In fact, looking for such an “explanation” in the book reduces it and its author to the same level as one of Job’s friends, thinking that comfort comes through intellectual answers to questions about suffering in a benevolent God’s world. More important, to generalize from the book might lead to the same conclusion reached by those friends: that anyone who does not receive blessings (like Job does in the end of his story) simply does not possess the faith that yields such blessings. Such a conclusion is undeniably unbiblical; life is too complex for such simplistic reasoning, and the Bible itself does not support it.

So where do we go from here? To redirect our thoughts, I think it would be helpful to recognize that Job embodies the *righteous* sufferer. Suffering is the characteristic of Job that James brings out, because that is what his audience needs. But I would suggest that recognizing the significance of Job the Righteous is just as important for interpreting the book’s message.

Asking a Different Question

Last year, on a Wednesday evening, the class I attended was discussing a book on ministering to the poor. The particular chapter under discussion that evening addressed some of those “ultimate” theological questions raised when

Christians suffer. I thought my wife put it best, “Why would God deliberately do something to hurt somebody who is not his enemy? Even humans don’t do that.” The discussion was very stimulating, as several profound and helpful insights were presented.

In the midst of this, though, something totally unexpected came to me. First, I realized how much “fun” I was having, engaging in all this deep thinking about the human predicament. But then it struck me that one person had not yet been heard from: God. And almost instantaneously, it wasn’t “fun” any more. I realized that God had merely been the *object* of our discussion. What was needed was for him to be a participant.

This is what is going on in the book of Job. Job is a man declared by God himself to be “blameless and upright” and without moral equal on the earth. He is not—like us—someone striving to attain to a righteous life; he *is* righteous. God says so. Yet he is suddenly confronted with a situation of great suffering which raises those “ultimate” questions. His friends come, and they do exactly what we all were doing—they struggle to give an explanation for what has happened. They hold up understanding—knowledge—as the means by which one deals with suffering. They give the “patented answers,” declaring what they “know” to be true about life and God; and Job rejects their answers (correctly) as inappropriate in his case, because he “knows” more about himself than they do.¹ Job concludes by giving his own orthodox understanding of God and his frustration at his own predicament. Then, a young man named Elihu joins the conversation to give some “fresh” ideas; but those, too, fall short of their desired goal. Intellectually, it’s a lot of fun for everyone involved; but spiritually and emotionally, it gives no resolution.

Then, God himself joins the conversation. And from that point on, he does essentially all the talking. He invites a response, but Job can give none. The people with the answers—the friends, Elihu, and now Job himself—fall silent in the presence of God. And it’s not because Job has the wrong answers. It’s because there is no answer. There is only God. God does not explain himself; he describes himself. By reminding Job of what he (Job) is not, he tells Job what he (God) is. When this happens, Job acquiesces, admitting shortcomings and a lack of real understanding.

So what has happened here? What about Job is changed? What is resolved by God’s speeches? We know that something is resolved, that Job is changed, because he

says he has gone from being a “hearer” to being a “seer” (42:5). What does he now “see” that he did not “see” before?

My answer to these questions comes after considering the topic of “righteousness” in the book. It is the question of Job’s righteousness that propels the book forward. Satan’s accusation against Job is essentially that Job is not as righteous as God asserts. This is what is being tested. Job’s

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friends imply that his suffering is due to some unrighteousness on his part. This strikes at the heart of Job’s sense of self; so, in his first response to his friends, he says that it is his “righteousness” that is at stake (6:29).² In the end, Job’s friends fall silent because they cannot dissuade him from his claim of being righteous (32:1). Elihu says that he has entered the discussion because Job justifies himself (literally, “declares his soul righteous”) more than God (32:2; see 35:2). Similarly, the only specific accusation that God levels against Job is that Job has attempted to condemn/accuse God in order to justify himself (40:8; literally, “so that he may be righteous”). So, Job’s righteousness seems to be an important aspect of the progression of thought in the book.

Surprisingly, assumptions about righteousness by the book’s characters seem very orthodox. Both Job (9:2–3) and his friends (4:17; 15:14; 25:4) affirm that “There is no one righteous, not even one” (cp. Pss 14:2–3; 53:2–3; Rom 3:10). Nevertheless, Job also affirms his own righteousness more than once (Job 13:18; 27:6; 29:14), and he charges that God (unfairly) brings suffering on innocent and guilty alike (9:22). Job’s friends deny the latter and assert that Job cannot be righteous in light of his present condition and the consistency of God’s justice (8:3–6; 11:2; see 33:26). Elihu echoes these sentiments, defending God as righteous and accusing Job of impiety for comparing himself and his righteousness to God (32:2; 33:12; 34:17; 35:2; 36:3; 37:23).

It is striking to me, then, that those who really “know” Job’s true moral condition—the narrator and God—declare Job to be “blameless and upright” (1:1, 8; 2:3). The friends

and Elihu say the things that we would say—that God alone is righteous, that Job is presumptuous for continuing to assert his own righteousness. But wouldn’t we say the same things? After all, why shouldn’t Job suffer? Everyone suffers, right? Right. And why does everyone suffer? If you say it is because “all have sinned . . .,” then you are saying what the (incorrect) human characters in the book of Job say. To the contrary, God declares Job to be a righteous man at the beginning of the book, and he never alters that assessment. Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Job repents and declares, “Surely I spoke things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (42:3).

So what is going on here? Through most of the book, Job apparently believes that there is an abstract, universal standard of right and wrong by which everyone, including God, can be judged. God’s speeches gently but firmly rebuke him for that. His speeches declare (implicitly) that he is not subject to measurement by some abstract standard of right and wrong. He is God, the Holy One. Mercifully, he reminds Job of his holy sovereignty very gradually, recounting just a few examples of it from nature. When he is finished, we realize that he has barely scraped the surface of who he is. Job has been given only a partial glimpse of who the Holy One is. The full picture would have overwhelmed him. Yet, with that partial glimpse, he “sees” God as he has never seen him before. Most important, he sees that it is God—a person, and not an abstract system—by which righteousness is determined. Job had been correct in thinking of himself as righteous; but what he had not realized prior to the end of his story is that he is righteous only because God says that he is righteous, not because he conformed to some abstract standard of righteousness on his own. Righteousness is a personal attribute of God which no human can attain, but it is one which God—by grace—accords to humans.

Finally, there is a great irony about the final section of the book that must be recognized. The personal encounter between Job and God—for which Job had been asking—overwhelms Job. He had wanted such an encounter so that he could prove himself to be innocent. Ironically, he recognizes his guilt instead. The irony is that this actually provides that for which Job had been longing—peace. Job “sees” God, and that causes his entire “view” of himself to change. Job is changed, not just his mind; he has come not to more understanding, but to a different type of understanding.

And I think that that is what we should attempt to do with others, no matter how idealistic it might sound. We must get beyond the point of thinking that we need to explain God to suffering people. Certainly, we must talk about the big picture, about how all things work together for good, about how a truly beneficent God is in control of what goes on in this world. But we need to remember that answers come from knowing God personally. There is a spiritual dimension to it that defies intellectual explanation and can only be experienced through personal encounter. It is what the wisdom writers call “the fear of the Lord.” In such a personal encounter we are frightened by God’s presence, and yet calmed; he makes us weak, yet strengthens us as well; we are saddened by our own human state, yet filled with joy at his divine being; we feel ashamed, and yet totally accepted; condemned, yet justified; suffocated, yet full of life; constrained, yet free.³ Such a paradoxical “knowledge” of God cannot be learned; it must be experienced. People must “see” God; simply “hearing” about him will not bring comfort.

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Notes

¹ See Nahum Glatzer’s discussion of “knowledge” in the book of Job in *The Dimensions of Job* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 4–11.

² The story of the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:17–31; cp. Matthew 19:16–30; Luke 18:18–30) provides some interesting parallels to the story of Job, especially in helping us see how people used to assume a connection between wealth and righteousness. When Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” the apostles did not congratulate themselves on being poor. Instead, they marveled and said, “Then who can be saved?” In other words, if the *rich* are not going to be saved, then who can be? Unlike so many today who see wealth as a hindrance to righteousness, they viewed wealth and righteousness as almost inseparable.

³ Several New Testament passages echo these ideas. For example, “I have been crucified . . . , nevertheless I live” (Gal 2:20); or “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). It would seem that the doctrine of an indwelling Holy Spirit would involve this as well.