Job’s enduring innocence and impeccable piety: reassessing the stubborn tradition that says otherwise (Job 42:7–9)

Rev. Dr. Peter Lockwood

Peter is head of biblical studies at Australian Lutheran College and the editor of LTJ.

The great surprise

In a book full of surprises, God’s final assessment of the words of Job and the words of his comforters may well be the most surprising of all.

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job (referring to the speech from the whirlwind), the Lord spoke to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.’ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer. (42:7–9, NRSV)

Quite out of the blue as the book of Job draws to a close Job’s comforters get the thumbs down from God for what they have said about God, for their theology, whereas Job gets the thumbs up. In fact the comforters are said to have perpetrated an act of folly (Hebrew, נְכֶבֶּקָה, an outrage, an act of sacrilege. Their words represent defiant rebellion against God’s authority and disobedience to his word. Their behaviour has been so horrendous that God’s wrath can only be appeased by over-sized penitential sacrifices\(^1\) and Job’s intercessory prayers. If not, the Lord will return to the friends measure for measure, and inflict on them the outrage that they have inflicted on him. This divine anger is of the kind that was normally reserved for an apostate nation. It is on a par with the folly of Achan who broke Israel’s covenant with God when he coveted and then stole the spoils of war after the fall of Jericho (Josh. 7:15), the folly of Shechem who raped Jacob’s daughter

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\(^1\) The sacrifice that God asks the friends to offer consists of seven bulls and seven rams, otherwise offered for all Israel on each of the seven days of Passover (Ezek. 45:23), and in three other places in the Old Testament at times of high significance in Israel’s history: Numbers 23:1,29, when the Lord turns Balaam’s attempt to curse Israel into a blessing; 1 Chronicles 15:25, when David brings the ark to Jerusalem; and 2 Chronicles 29:21, at the restoration of temple worship under Hezekiah.
Dinah (Gen. 34:7), or the folly of those who rebel against God by refusing to care for the poor and needy (Isa. 32:5,6).

**Job's comforters**

God's reaction seems totally over the top. Surely the comforters' pastoral care for the stricken Job has been exceptional. Rather than shunning their apparently God-forsaken friend, they have spent a whole week with him on the ash heap in grief-stricken solidarity. They have followed up with the best theological wisdom of the day. Cautiously, they have offered the original sin argument. The innate sinfulness of the human condition means that nobody can stand guiltless before God (4:17; 15:14–16; 25:4–6), even someone of such high moral calibre and spiritual fibre as Job. Confidently, they have ventured the divine discipline argument. If Job will receive his suffering as divine discipline it can do nothing but lead to greater wisdom, insight and maturity, and when God has completed his work of transforming and shaping Job through hardship he will be granted a long life of happiness and fulfilment (5:17–27; 36:15). Hopefully, they have invited, urged and cajoled Job to acknowledge the specific sin that has led to the retribution that God has inflicted on him. Job must be keeping something back that needs to be exposed to the bright light of day (20:12,13).

The friends' words are well intentioned. They bear Job no malice. Their chief goal has been Job's rehabilitation. As Eliphaz says: 'Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way good will come to you. Receive instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Lord, you will be restored' (22:21–23). For a large part Job's friends have had nothing but his best interests at heart—that through confession, he would receive absolution and enjoy restitution and reconciliation. Yet God says of them: 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (42:7,8).

The friends would have expected to receive God's total approval of their world-view and their words of pastoral comfort and theological advice, based as they are on the word of God, the wisdom of the elderly, and the traditions of ancient Israel. Job, on the other hand, would receive the sternest rebuke, in fact divine condemnation. Yet their words are suddenly shown to represent a set of beliefs, a piece of hand-me-down wisdom (15:18), that completely fails to accord with God's way of assessing people and their way of relating to God and the community at large. In a nutshell, the friends have said that there is a direct causal connection between sin and suffering, between crime and punishment, and the greater the suffering the worse the sinner (11:13–20). Conversely, a person's prosperity and success, their happy family life and their high regard in the community, are sure signs of divine approval for a life devoted to God and relatively free of blame. Undeserved suffering is to be understood as divine testing designed to strengthen a person's trust in God alone. But suffering for wrongdoing followed by sincere repentance inevitably results in God's favourable disposition, forgiveness and the restoration of one's health and good fortune. To refuse steadfastly to acknowledge and confess wrongdoing, as Job has done, is to call God's absolute justice into question and thereby invite God to unleash the full force of his devastating wrath. With this 'theology' at their disposal,
the friends believe that they alone are able to 'plead the case for God' (13:8), whereas Job no longer can be said to fear God but only speaks deceitfully (15:4:5), a sure sign of the kind of wickedness that cries out before the bar of God's justice for vengeance in the form of the most excruciating suffering (15:20–35).

Readers of Job share with the author information that neither Job nor his friends are aware of. Readers know that Job's suffering is the result of the wager between God and 'the satan', whereby God has allowed 'the satan' to test the claim that Job's integrity and piety are simply a function of his health, his prosperity and his high standing in the community. Under fire Job's faith will falter and fail. Therefore Job has the sympathy of readers from the outset. They will delight all the more in the divine verdict that follows the dialogues, as an increasingly nasty streak is revealed in the friends' counsel. Initially the friends are happy to acknowledge Job's integrity, his wisdom and his high standing in the community (4:4,6). But unable to secure an admission of guilt, their acclaim quickly turns to hard-hitting accusations. They charge Job with impatience (4:5), with anger (5:2; 18:4; 36:13), with ignorance and stupidity (11:7–12), with arrogance (15:7–10; 37:24), with the insolence of imagining that God can be held to account (36:23; 37:19–23), with a stubborn refusal to accept the discipline and correction of suffering (5:17; 36:15), and with downright wickedness in his dealings with others, whether his family (22:6) or the needy of the land such as widows and orphans (22:7–9). Zophar even ventures to suggest that as severe as Job's sufferings are he should know that they are in fact far less than his guilt deserves (11:6).

The friends would have regarded their accusations as the goads that were required to bring Job to his senses. But knowing that Job is not guilty as charged, readers will have given up the last vestiges of sympathy for the friends' unfounded indictments and will be pleased to discover that Job's accusers have now become those most vehemently accused. The reversal in roles could not be more total, or more satisfying.

No explicit reason is given for God's anger towards Job's friends, so readers are left to draw their own conclusions. Is it because of the turn their words have taken, angrily and falsely charging Job with all manner of irreligious and unethical conduct? Or is it their insensitive administration of pastoral care—explaining to a man bowed down under an unimaginable burden of suffering and grief that his affliction has been sent by God in strict accordance with the extent of his wrongdoing? They may provide partial explanations, but the weight falls on the friends' inflexible doctrine of retributive justice.

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2 The use of the Hebrew definite article, 'the satan' (hassatan), indicates that the word is a technical term rather than a proper noun referring to the later Jewish and Christian Satan or the Devil (see Pope, 10,11). Most scholars say that 'the satan' is a member of the heavenly assembly (the divine council). Andersen (81–83) questions whether that is necessarily so, because God's question, 'Where have you come from?' may suggest that he is an unwelcome intruder. At all events, his function appears to be that of a prosecuting attorney, even a devil's advocate, who serves no other purpose in the book than to cast doubts on Job's motives with his question, 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' (1:9), thus providing the catalyst for the action of the prologue that follows.

3 The intensity of God's wrath is to be seen in the light of the book's characteristic hyperbole.
That is what turns God against them, their teaching that God invariably punishes the wicked and rewards the virtuous and that sufferers are *ipso facto* terrible sinners. It is gross heresy, in fact blasphemy worthy of death, and those who teach it are the worst sinners of all.

That is the doctrine of the friends, and now they have been caught out in a gotcha moment. If they had ever thought it possible that God would address them in person it would only be to affirm their impeccable theology, and reject Job's blasphemy. But as if it is not shocking enough for them to learn that their folly has been of such proportions that the sentence of death they deserve can only be waived by huge penitential offerings and through Job's prayers of intercession, they are also compelled to discover in the very next instant, in a throwaway line designed for their ears only, that Job has spoken of God rightly. Hard on the heels of the gotcha moment there follows a double whammy. The friends had regarded it as their sole task and their bounden duty to point out on God's behalf where and how and why Job had spoken wrongly and behaved irreligiously and what he should do to make amends. But now they hear the dreaded words: 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'.

**The scope of Job's 'right speaking'**

If it puzzles the friends that Job should receive divine commendation it has puzzled countless readers of the book of Job down through the ages. At first blush Job may well be submissive and patient in the folktale that bookends the story, but the Job of the intervening dialogues is angry, argumentative and impatient. For that reason there are those who would limit Job's 'right speaking' to his immediate response to the loss of his family and property: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (1:21). They would add Job's response to his wife who tells him to curse God and die following the subsequent loss of his health: 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (2:10). Others who have wondered about what God could be referring to in his praise of Job like to include his compliant responses to God's speech from the whirlwind, the first response an admission of his insignificance before the might and majesty of God (40:3–5), and the second an acknowledgment of human inability ever to penetrate the mysteries of God's governance of the universe and his administration of justice (42:1–6). Here at last, it is said, Job bows down in worshipful submission before God, all-wise and mysterious sovereign, whose ways are beyond human understanding.

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4 Pope (290) explains that the word for 'right' (Hebrew: רָקִיָּה; ṭñō̄n) probably means 'correct' rather than 'sincere'. For that reason, Pope maintains, God's approval of Job's words cannot include his fierce criticisms of God, since God responded by accusing Job of 'darkening counsel with words without knowledge' (38:2). Others (e.g. Smick, 916,19) have countered this claim by saying that Job's words were indeed 'correct' to the extent that he maintained his innocence unfalteringly and correctly refuted the friends' doctrine of retributive justice.

5 See for example Newsom, 634.

6 See for example Whybrey, 172,173.
And as a result Job receives divine approval, a sheer impossibility following his harsh criticisms of God in the preceding disputes. So, do we have two Jobs, one patient and submissive, the other impatient and defiant, the Job of the folklore who is truly worthy of divine commendation and the Job of the poetic dialogues in dire need of rebuke and condemnation? Or can it actually be argued that God's praise extends to the Job of the whole book, beginning, middle and end?

From the very outset the book's narrator tells readers that Job 'was blameless and upright' and 'feared God and turned away from evil' (1:1). In full agreement with the narrator's assessment, God echoes the description in his heavenly tête-à-tête with 'the satan', but goes further and describes Job as 'my servant' —an epithet reserved for the likes of Abraham (Gen. 26:24)—and adds that 'there is no one like him on the earth' (1:8). God soon reaffirms his high regard for Job, this time able to point out that the man's piety has stood the test of intense suffering (2:3). It is also important to note that even in God's confrontation with Job in the speech from the whirlwind (chapters 38–41), God does not once accuse Job of wrongdoing, despite his no-holds-barred assault on God's administration of the world's affairs.

Certainly the interpretative tradition has been reluctant to include Job's blunt words to his comforters and his angry tirades against God in the positive verdict that God delivers regarding Job's words. This tradition builds first and foremost on God's own assessment of Job's words at the start of the first part of the speech from the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' (38:2). And then again as the speech resumes, God asks Job: 'Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?' (40:8). The churchly tradition that excludes Job's incendiary words from God's positive appraisal also appears to be confirmed by the wider biblical witness. St Paul says: 'Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish' (Phil 2:14), clearly alluding to Israel's wilderness generation whose complaints against God were the reason they were not permitted to enter the promised land (Num. 14:26–35). Job is

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7 In his introduction to the book of Job in the Harper Collins Study Bible (NRSV), James Crenshaw speaks of the story's patient hero and the defiant Job of the dialogue; a divinely commended hero in the prose and a rebuked one in the poetry' (892). The portraits of two supposedly different Jobs has re-enforced the traditional view that the book of Job originally consisted of two, and even more than two, independent blocks of material, such as the folklore now divided into the prologue and epilogue (chapters 1 and 2, and 42:7–17), Job's opening lament, in which he curses the day of his birth (chapter 3), the disputes between Job and his friends (chapters 4–27), the reflection on wisdom (chapter 28), Job's defence of his integrity (chapters 29–31), the Elihu speeches (chapters 32–37), and the speech of God from the whirlwind and Job's responses (chapters 38:1 – 42:6). If the book is a pastiche of such independent sources, the task of piecing together the story of the book's progressive literary development is regarded by most scholars today as both impossible and pointless. This essay presupposes that the book as we have it now, whatever its literary pre-history, is the work of a highly skilled author and theologian, steeped in the patriarchal, prophetic and wisdom traditions of ancient Israel, and equally adept at composing profound prose and exquisite poetry. It is also presupposed that such an author has presented a unified theological vision, despite the widely varying viewpoints of the characters that populate the story. For a helpful discussion of Job's authorship and unity, see Smick, 680–85.
certainly one for arguing and complaining. And if James commends Job for his patience (Jas. 5:11), and Ezekiel says that Job’s righteousness puts him in the same league as Noah and Daniel (Ezek. 14:14,20), it is natural to assume that they have in mind the legendary hero of the prologue and epilogue who doesn’t give way to bitter complaining and harsh accusations, not the Job of the poetic dialogues.

**Job’s fury**

The Job of the poetic dialogues does little but give vent to his fury. Deprived of his family, his property, his livestock, his servants, his health and his good name in the community, Job accepts the common wisdom that God has forsaken him, but in his case undeservedly. God has misjudged him completely. So his argument with God is two-fold. As for the divine governance of the universe, Job says that God habitually uses his undoubted wisdom and strength simply to strip religious and secular leaders of their judgment before toppling them from office; and then to take their place he promotes fools and scoundrels (12:13–25). This is because the foundations of the universe are askew; they weren’t properly laid in the first place. There was something intrinsically faulty about the design of the universe, its basic infrastructure. As for the administration of justice, Job says that if his own situation is anything to go by—a righteous man unjustly condemned—God is no better than a spy devoting inordinate amounts of time to pursuing the wrong people, keeping them under constant surveillance in order to catch them out in their wrongdoing, no matter how trivial, as if they were common criminals or enemies of the state (7:17–20). God is like a pack of dogs baring their teeth at their hapless prey before pouncing and tearing it to shreds (16:9,10). He is a lion that pursues its prey without mercy (10:16); a warrior who sends his archers to hunt Job down, hack him to pieces and render him senseless (16:13,14); a slave-master who marks the soles of his slave’s feet so the slave can easily be tracked and captured in the case of escape (13:27). Job goes so far as to tell God openly that until the day he dies he will steadfastly maintain that by depriving him of justice God is in the wrong and he is in the right (27:1–6).

**Faithful lament and fervent petition**

Harsh words and bitter come from Job’s mouth, words that hardly seem to qualify for divine approval. But is it possible to read them in a different light than Israel’s wilderness complaints? Those complaints, after all, were borne of Israel’s rebellion against God and the people’s preference for the gods of Egypt when the going got tough. Job’s complaints, on the other hand, are directed to God and should be interpreted in a different context.

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8 Gerhard von Rad (239) draws attention to some intriguing reflections by Karl Barth on Job’s stinging criticisms of God. ‘Surely all ancient and modern sceptics, pessimists, scoffers and atheists are innocuous and well-meaning folk compared with this man Job. They do not know against whom they direct their disdain and doubt and scorn and rejection. Job does. . . . How strange it is that none of them has ever tried to learn from Job! If they had, they might have begun to realize at least what it is that they are attempting, and thus been able to give more forceful expression to their cause.’ (In Karl Barth, *Church dogmatics IV.3*, English translation 1961, pages 404,405)
altogether. They are the complaints of a man whose gaze is fixed exclusively on God. They are of a piece with the complaint psalms of ancient Israel. Far from being understood as expressions of faithlessness, the psalmists' complaints were expressions of the most heartfelt longing for God. As prayers to God, their principal components were the complaint itself, the confident petition for God's gracious intervention, and the prayers, praises and expressions of gratitude that arose from the assurance of God's grace and favour. Maybe light can be shed on Job's complaints if they are understood from the perspective of precisely this tradition.

Take Job's complaints in and of themselves. The faith of ancient Israel was inherently non-dualistic. God was regarded as the source both of weal and of woe. So if the ancient believer was suffering torment and persecution at the hands of enemies, the ridicule of the community, the loss of family, property or possessions, or the effects of poor health or terminal disease, God was regarded as the ultimate cause of his or her affliction. Job himself says as much in his words to his wife: 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (2:10). It was by no means beyond the bounds of faithful practice for people to charge God with causing their anguish (Gen. 16:2; Ruth 1:21; 1 Sam. 1:6; Pss. 22:1; 88:6–8, 14–18). Job certainly pushes the boundary of such faithful practice, but he does so without crossing the line. At their deepest level Job's complaints about his unjust treatment at God's hands are an appeal to the character of God, not a God who rewards people according to their merit and punishes them according to their sins, but a God who is compassionate and merciful towards his people, especially those who suffer adversity. And could it not be that God welcomes the complaints, so long as they are presented face to face rather than behind his back? The affliction that gives rise to heartfelt exclamations such as 'Why, O Lord?' and 'How long?' indicates a person who longs for God, who knows that God wants his people to engage with him at every level of their being and no matter what their experience, in fact especially when it appears that God has turned his face away from them.

The complaint inevitably gives rise to the petition. This takes the form of Job's repeated challenge to God to appear before him in court so that his grievances could be settled once and for all. Early in the dialogues Job entertained—then quickly dismissed—the radical thought of taking God to court and putting him on trial. As the plaintiff, Job would lay out his charges against God in the form of an affidavit, sign it, and present his testimony before the court, clearly and succinctly—Job's case against God, or Job versus God (13:3). And as is standard in such a process God would be given the opportunity to enumerate the charges he clearly has against Job; that is, he could name the sins for which he has imposed such a harsh penalty (13:23; 23:2-7; 31:35–37), something God has consistently failed to do.

But Job's complaints against God have become so entrenched that they keep threatening Job's resolve to petition for a hearing before a court of law. What would be the use of it? God would not only fail to spell out Job's wrongdoing, but he actually knows that Job is innocent so he has stacked the court against him. By shriveling him up, as Job puts it (16:8), God has gone so far as to tamper with the evidence. How so?
In a society where ill-health is regarded as judgment on sin God has turned the courtroom against Job before the trial can even get under way by inflicting 'loathsome sores' on him from top to toe (2:7). Job's deformed appearance would testify against his innocence more compellingly than any witness for the prosecution ever could. Furthermore, as the putative trial got under way, God wouldn't listen to the charges against him. Instead he would terrify his adversary with his majestic presence, run rings around him in the legal wrangling of the trial process and trip him up in his words so that he would end up condemning himself out of his own mouth (9:2–20).

The petition wrestles with the complaint to achieve the ascendancy in Job's lament. Before long it's as if he is praying 'with sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8:26), wishing that God and he could appear before an impartial mediator (Job 9:33) and that he could be represented by a witness who would vouch for him before the throne of grace (16:19). Even more adamantly Job develops the conviction: 'I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my flesh has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another' (19:25–27). Job probably conceives of his redeemer as a special member of the heavenly assembly, in whom, through whom, by means of whom, he believes he can know without doubting, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, that God is truly 'pro me'. With supreme confidence Job says that he knows that a living redeemer will arise who will champion his cause and win God to his side even after he has died.

It would be comforting to think that here as elsewhere the Old Testament bursts out of its skin, straining ahead to the fulfillment of its promises, hopes and expectations in the ministry of Jesus Christ, that the Old Testament says more than the human writer may have had in mind, and that Job has been given a special revelation of this hope, even if only an ever so momentary glimpse. At all events, a few short chapters later, having signed his imaginary affidavit, his case against God, Job emends one last plaintive plea: 'Here is my signature [on the document]! Let the Almighty answer me! Oh that I had the indictment written by my adversary! Surely I would carry it on my shoulder; I would bind it on me like a crown. I would plead the whole record of my life and present that in court as my defence' (31:35–37). Far from any of this implying sinful rebellion against God, it implies a faith of such tenacity that it will not give up on God no matter what hurdles are placed in the path of gaining a hearing, even perchance a favourable outcome.

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9 For an exhaustive discussion of the role of the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew, go'în) in ancient Israel, and the debate regarding the use of the term at Job 19:25, see Habel, 304–309. The over-riding responsibility of the kinsman-redeemer in Israelite society was to secure the rights of individuals or to ensure the continuity of the family or clan, especially in the face of oppression. The redeemer avenged the blood of murder victims (Num. 35:16–28; Deut. 19:6–12), redeemed those who had fallen into slavery (Lev. 25:48,49), bought back property that a relative had been forced to sell (Lev. 25:25) and even married the widow of the deceased with a view to retaining the dead man's inheritance by providing a male heir (Ruth 4). God is often spoken of as the redeemer of oppressed individuals (Prov. 23:10,11), and at the time of the exodus and the exile he is the redeemer of the oppressed nation (Ex. 6:6; Isa. 41:14; 43:1,14; 44:6).
By name and by nature Israel is a nation that is bound to struggle with God. The nation's forebear Jacob is renamed Israel because he struggled with God and prevailed (Gen. 32:28). At heart God delights in the hard-hitting criticism, the anguished wrestling that cries out to discover the God who the believer has been taught and instinctively understands is loving and gracious and life-giving (Gen. 32:30; Ex. 34:6,7). It has often been noted that several accounts in the Old Testament seem to indicate that God deliberately creates time and opportunity for his servants the prophets to intercede for those who are destined for judgment, and he welcomes and responds favourably to their intercession. He is eager that Abraham, who is responsible for the practice of righteousness and justice in his household (Gen. 18:19), be given the opportunity to plead for Sodom in the hope that it be spared (Gen. 18:16–33). Similarly, the way is opened for Moses to plead for rebellious Israel after the construction of the golden calf (Ex. 32:10), and God attends closely to Amos's intercession and initially changes his mind about the otherwise inevitable destruction of the apostate northern kingdom (Amos 7:1–6). So rather than regarding Job's intense struggles with God as signs of rebellion they should be regarded as clear signs of profound integrity and deep piety, eagerly desired by God and heartily welcomed.

Two other components of Israel's psalms of complaint are prominent in Job's outbursts: the protestations of innocence, and the words of invective against the psalmist's enemies. Commentators wonder how Job's confession that he is a sinner (e.g. Job 6:24; 7:21; 9:2) can be reconciled with his protests that he is innocent (9:20, and especially chapters 29–31)? Whereas Job readily admits that he partakes in the fallen state of humanity he is equally sure that he belongs to the ranks of the righteous (Hebrew, tsaddiqim, Ps. 1:1–3,6), originally those who are acquitted in a court of law, and not to the ranks of the wicked (r'shārīm), criminals and public sinners. Such protestations of innocence are all too readily interpreted in the light of Jesus' criticism of the hypocrite (e.g. Matt. 6:1,2,5,7,16), the Pharisees and scribe (Luke 15:2; 16:14). On the contrary, Job's assertions of innocence belong among Israel's complaint psalms. In that context, as in Job, they are employed as one of several motivational ploys that are designed to persuade God to intervene on the psalmist's behalf. Job's words of invective against his friends can be read in the same vein. His friends have become his enemies, instruments in the hands of God, quite ironically, in tormenting Job and testing his fidelity. The accusations against the afflicted person's enemies and calls for divine vengeance are likewise regular components of Israel's complaint psalms (Pss. 22:6–8,12,13,16–18; 73:6–9,27; 83:2–8,9–13).10

From lament to praise

It is frequently noted that towards the end of most complaint psalms there is a sudden 'change of mood' (Weiser, 79) from complaint and petition to expressions of praise

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10 In a sermon on Job 42:10, titled 'The turning of Job's captivity', the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, finds fault precisely with these two aspects of Job's character, his assertions of innocence and his vitriol towards his comforters. Spurgeon writes: 'Most probably there was, in Job's character, some fault from which his trial was meant to purge him. If he erred at all, probably it was in having a somewhat elevated idea of himself and a stern manner towards others' (337).
and thanksgiving for God's gracious intervention in the life of the suffering individual or community (e.g. Pss: 7:17; 13:5,6; 28:6–9; 31:19–24; 56:12,13). The most likely explanation for the mood change is that within the worshipping community the faithful psalmist has heard and taken to heart the good news of God's favourable disposition towards his beloved people, God's mighty saving deeds towards Israel, which has turned grief to joy quite independently of a favourable turn in the psalmist's fortunes.11

Given that Job has been excluded from the worshipping community of his people, the normal context for hearing the good news of God and the setting for the lament psalms, the narrator provides just such a worshipping community by means of God's totally unexpected theophany, whereby God suddenly appears, in order to address Job 'out of the whirlwind' (38:1). There God privileges Job with a long and gracious word of blessing, honouring him with a response to his heartfelt complaints (38:1 – 41:34). By treating Job as a worthy combatant and an honourable conversation partner, God's vindication of his loyal servant could not be clearer. There follows a remarkable vision of God's wise governance of the realm of creation, with the result that Job's mood changes decisively from lament and petition to praise and thanksgiving (42:1–6), a change wrought without Job receiving so much as a shred of evidence that he is on the verge of experiencing a complete turnaround in his personal circumstances.12

Rather than failing to respond to Job's accusations and delivering a brutal putdown, as so many scholars claim, God addresses them, indirectly and discursively, while raising Job's gaze to a new way of appreciating God's design of the universe and his administration of justice, even though ultimately it surpasses human understanding. God delights in his universe with an unrestrained and almost child-like pleasure. He knows every facet of every life form in intimate detail. God's care for the world is one of daily sustenance, hands on nurture, feeding, preserving, and protecting all creatures, even to the extent of leading eagles and ravens to their prey. There is nothing abstract or academic about God's depiction of the grand design. The author simply draws on a vast array of graphic images, delightful cameos, to portray the scheme both in its finest detail and also in its broadest sweep. The poetry of these chapters is sublime. In all this God is clearly not risk averse.13 He has not created a nanny state, which would devolve into a virtual police state (40:9–14), where nothing can go amiss and nobody can get hurt. The creatures he has made are powerful and ferocious, undomesticated and terrifying.

11 There have been other less plausible explanations. Some have suggested that the sufferer has developed a more positive inner disposition by getting things off his or her chest. Some have suggested that the person's circumstances have changed for the better through the passage of time, and therefore they are better placed to praise and thank God. An older proposal (Begrich, Gunkel) is that the complainant has heard a life-bestowing word, such as the oracle that the childless Hannah heard from the mouth of the priest Eli: 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him' (1 Sam 1:17). And the powerful divine word of command and promise in the form of the priestly oracle has wrought the change in the petitioner's disposition.
12 See in this connection 1 Sam. 1:18, where Hannah's grief turns to joy on the basis of the word of promise, rather than a confirmed pregnancy.
13 See Fretheim (73–85) for an extensive discussion.
God has made the countless scales of Leviathan all neatly set in place with the same tender-loving care that he lavished on Job in the womb. There is a wildness to the created order; it is red in tooth and claw. Ostriches leave their eggs to be scorched by the sun or trampled underfoot by humans. And the reader is left to wonder whether God is as meticulously careful about governing his unruly brood as Job is with his supremely protective parenting (1:7).

But for all the wild profusion of the created realm, God still practises responsible oversight. If the Sea is the home of all things dangerous, threatening and destructive in ancient imagining—certainly, Job thinks of it as running rampant, totally out of control—God downsizes the Sea and construes of it more in terms of a Tasmanian devil, a wild-eyed baby on steroids that bursts from its mother’s womb in an attempt to wreak havoc in nursery and living room alike. But God has wrapped it in swaddling clothes (clouds and thick darkness) and put it in a play-pen, and God says, ‘Thus far you shall come and no farther, here shall your proud waves be stopped’ (38:8–11). God’s delight in the wild, the random and the free is not totally reckless or irresponsible. Evil-doers don’t run the show, as Job has claimed. Whatever wickedness people get up to under the cover of darkness, morning invariably dawns and they are shaken out in the same way that fleas and bed bugs are sent flying when the bed covers are shaken out in the morning (38:8–13). In just such a picturesque way God speaks about the nurturing, providing and protecting ordering of the created realm, human and non-human alike.

Finally in the last chapter of the book, in the first six verses (42:1–6), a conversation takes place between Job and God, the first time in the whole book where fierce disagreement gives way to full agreement between two of the book’s characters, between Job and God. At least it’s a virtual conversation, like a ventriloquist holding a conversation with a puppet. Job speaks both his own lines and God’s, quoting words that God has addressed to him previously. Job speaks first, in a marvelous confession, not a confession of sin, but a confession of wonder and praise. He says, ‘You know’ (not I know, as in English translations), ‘you know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted’. ‘You know, O God’; in other words, ‘Yes, I Job do not presume to know the mysteries of the universe. The place to start and the place to finish is your knowing, Oh God, not my flashes of insight’. Here we have true confession. The words ‘you

14 Job 42:1–6 is structured as two parallel panels. Then Job answered the Lord: ‘You know that you can do all things, and no purpose of yours can be thwarted’ (vss. 1,2).

1. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ (vs. 3a; Job is quoting God, see 38:2).

2. ‘Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know’ (vs. 3b,c; Job responds).

1. ‘Hear and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me’ (vs. 4; Job is quoting God again, who asks Job to hear him out and then respond to what he has to say, see 38:3; 40:7).

2. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I reject and change my mind about dust and ashes (vs. 6; Job’s last words in the book, in response).

15 The original text had ‘you know’, using the second person form of the verb. The scribes responsible for the Masoretic text called what they regarded as a questionable original text ‘that which was written’ (kərîb), and suggested that here readers should understand that ‘the text should be read’ (qâeb) as ‘I know’, using the first person. With Janzen (251,52) this paper prefers the original text, ‘you know’.

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know' acknowledge that the only one who views the world aright, and understands all mysteries, and does all things well, is God. And whatever pieces of wisdom that Job, and humanity in general, may acquire along life's way, expressed with an 'I know', are mere drops in the ocean by comparison.

God also knows that no purpose of his can be thwarted. That sounds at first glance like an expression of God's indomitable, deterministic will. But no, it is far more like the Lord's words to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre when Sarah laughed at the thought of giving birth to a child in her old age, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time, I will return to you in due season, and Sarah shall have a son' (Gen 18:14), or like the Angel Gabriel's words to the puzzled Virgin Mary, 'Nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1:37). That's the tenor of Job's confession of faith too in these his last words. God's purposes will have their way, and those purposes are invariably good.

Next, Job takes the Lord's accusation on his own lips, 'Who is this that darkens counsel with words without knowledge?' (vs. 3) At last, anger and resentment and bitter accusations have given way to a humble acknowledgment from Job that he really has spoken out of turn. His claims to understand the mysteries of the universe were presumptuous; such things are not given to humans to understand. Certainly, Job has been given privileged insights during his magnificent guided tour of the earth, its soaring heights and its amazing depths, to say nothing of the vast expanses of the universe, even travelling back in time to its very foundation. But they're nothing but glimpses, suggestive hints of God's magnificent creation, wild and free, risky and dangerous, that God delights in with childlike pleasure, but not without careful supervision, protection and provision. So Job can now say, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you' (vs. 5). Hearsay and hand-me-down theology have not stood the test of the seeing and hearing made possible when taken on the tour to end all tours by the ultimate tour-guide.

Everything in the book of Job could be said to revolve around verse 6 of chapter 42, the place where interpreters and interpretations cross paths (crux interpretum), the verse that virtually all commentators now say is translated incorrectly in most Bibles where it reads: 'Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes'. Such a translation conjures up a mixture of self-loathing on Job's part, repentance for sin, and the need to spend more time on the ash-heap. None of which is true. It has been helpfully suggested that the verse should be translated, 'I withdraw my suit'16 (or, I yield [melt] before God) and I change my mind concerning dust and ashes'.17 Elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 18:27), 'dust and ashes' is a phrase meaning mortal and finite humanity. Job is speaking metaphorically, not about a return to the literal ash-heap to resume his litany of grief and anger. The first verb in the verse, 'I reject' ('em'as), interacts with the second verb, 'and I am comforted, or mourn, or undergo a change of heart and mind' (w'richamti), to mean 'I reject and change

16 So Habel (578).
17 For the challenges to the common translation of the sentence, see Janzén (254–59) and Prideaux (2011, 26–36) and for an early foray into the question, Patrick (1969, 367–71).
my mind concerning dust and ashes'. As a frail human being, Job has undergone a mental, emotional and spiritual re-orientation of his entire being. The lights have come on; he has reached a radically new understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, of where he stands before God (coram deo) that will stand him in good stead for the years that he may have left to him. Acknowledging his status as a creature of 'dust and ashes', he can also declare boldly and confidently that he has now seen God (42:5). His mind has changed, his argument with God has ended, not once has God charged him with wrongdoing, and neither does Job confess to it, either here or previously, except in the sense that everybody is a sinner. He is happy to resume life as God's creature, humble but not humiliated, and ready to assume once more the mantle of a child of God made in his glorious image.

Here the issue between God and Job is fully resolved, and Job's bitter complaints, harsh accusations, and desperate pleading have finally been stilled. Grief and mourning brought on by extreme suffering have yielded to praise and thanksgiving brought on by the divine encounter. In seeing God Job's deepest longings have been fulfilled, his heartfelt desires have been granted, and he is at peace, despite the fact that there has still been no change to his personal circumstances.

Conclusion

A brief article by Christopher Seitz (1993) provides the starting point for some closing reflections. The use of the phrase 'the patience of Job' at James 5:11 in the King James Version (KJV), Seitz says, has led to the common assumption that James can only be referring to the Job of the prologue and epilogue, not the impatient and angry Job of the poetic dialogues. However, the Greek word that the KJV translates as 'patience' (hypomone) is more accurately translated as 'steadfastness' (RSV) or 'endurance' (NRSV). The word refers to a human condition that continues for an extended period of time; it is not readily applicable to Job's short-lived stoicism immediately after the series of tragedies that strike him and his family.

By using the word 'endurance', Seitz says, James may well have been thinking of the Job of the entire book, the total Job, starting with his initial expressions of piety, extending through the cry from the depths when he curses the day of his birth, taking in the fierce exchanges with his friends and the charges that he lays at God's door, and culminating in his ever more insistent appeals that God front up to an open hearing and answer those very charges. For a whole week Job's grief is too deep for words, and when they finally burst out they stretch almost to breaking point the familiar conventions and themes of Israel's complaint psalms, prayed by the ancient sufferer. But that is the category to which his words belong.

18 Without committing himself to one translation above another, this appears to be Janzen's preferred translation (255).
19 Contrary to those who say that Job deserves an explanation from God for the suffering that he has inflicted, Job's closing words settle the initiating question and the underlying issue, 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' (1:9). On the other hand, God still has unfinished business to settle with the friends.
20 The curse that Job pronounces on the day of his birth (Job 3), itself a bitter exclamation of despair (see also Jer. 20:14–18), steers well clear of his wife's advice to 'curse God and die' (Job 2:9).
It is the contention of this essay that God's assessment of Job's speaking, that he has spoken of him 'what is right', also includes the most extreme statements that issue from Job's mouth. God's favourable verdict regarding Job's speaking is not curtailed by God's full frontal challenges to Job's harsh criticisms of the design and governance of the universe, divine confrontations that introduce both parts of the speech from the whirlwind (38:2;3; 40:6–8). The latter are expressions of divine amazement, even pride in his servant Job, and an acknowledgment of the serious nature of the case that Job has presented. Job's descent to the depths, necessarily accompanied by the harshest words to match his darkest thoughts, is the path that God knows has to be travelled if Job is to rise to a new life, at peace with God and at peace with himself.

In its piety the church has instinctively baulked at Job's vexatious words and often found itself more in sympathy with his friends. Although Job is the character who deserves admiration. Like a dog with a bone he simply won't let go of God. As the dialogues continue the accusations that his friends level at him become increasingly repetitive and tedious, and finally they peter out altogether. Job, on the other hand, moves from strength to strength. After his initial cri-de-coeur, and his early altercations with his friends, his words are directed almost exclusively to God. They are prayers, fervent prayers that want nothing more than to pierce God's frowning countenance and reach their way to his loving heart.

Furthermore, it can be said that as the storm of anger washes over Job and starts to subside his prayers don't focus quite so heavily on his personal distress but increasingly on God's apparently disorderly governance of the world's affairs. Job's innate altruism surfaces, expressing itself in his reawakened concern that people beyond his own family and community don't appear to be guaranteed the justice, peace and security that he would wish for all (see especially chapters 21 and 24). He is only brought back to his personal plight by his friends' repeated insistence that he own up to his wrongdoing and turn to God for forgiveness and a reversal of his fortunes. It wasn't like that from the outset with Job, when one considers his initial cry of anguish directed to no-one in

21 For example, resonating with the home truths and the theological positions of the comforters, those who compiled older one year lectionaries selected texts consisting of the words of the comforters as the Old Testament reading for the day (see Nesper, 410): the words of Eliphaz for the sixth Sunday after Trinity (5:17–26), the words of Bildad for New Year's Day (8:8–22), and even the words of Elihu for the fifth Sunday in Lent (33:13–20) and the second Sunday after Trinity (36:26 – 37:13). The Revised Common Lectionary has taken a different approach. Four texts are from Job, none of which gives the words of the comforters.

22 There are three rounds of speeches by the comforters, following the same sequence: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. In the third round Bildad speaks for only five verses and Zophar doesn't even take his turn to speak. They appear to have run out of steam altogether.

23 In this connection it is also important to note that in his remonstration with Eliphaz, God tells him and his friends that they have not spoken 'to' me correctly, to translate the Hebrew literally, not 'of' me, as in most Bibles (42:7). Secure in their pat answers, their banal theodicies, the friends have done little else than speak about God, drawing on their shallow repertoire of homespun theological reflection to admonish Job and bring him to his senses. On the other hand, when his friends have given him space to do so, Job has engaged in little else than prayer. It is vital that Job's 'right speaking' be seen also in this light.
particular, 'Let the day perish in which I was born' (3:3), and the angry outbursts against his friends that follow. But it isn’t long before the vast majority of his words are prayers addressed to God. That means that we can not only speak of Job’s enduring integrity, but also his growth in integrity.24

A delightful cameo re-enforces the point. When the comforters approach Job at God’s request to ask him to pray for them (42:8,9), none of his suffering has been relieved: loss of children, livestock, servants, health, and standing in the community. As far as the comforters are concerned Job still bears the marks of divine judgment. Yet God’s authoritative command and their fear of God’s wrath would have compelled them to proceed, presumably in abject fear and trembling. With the boot now well and truly on the other foot, with Job fully vindicated and his friends harshly judged, Job nevertheless renounces the heaven-sent opportunity to rejoice in their humiliation, even the temptation to utter a mild, 'I told you so'.

During the course of the dialogues Job has not held back about how unhelpful and hurtful their torrent of words has been (6:14,15; 19:2–6), but he has also spoken of his life-time habit, underscored by a solemn oath, of never taking pleasure in the demise of detractors and enemies (31:29,30). He has long since foresworn the dubious pleasure of Schadenfreude. The surprising turn of events would have stretched this resolution almost to breaking point. But he doesn’t succumb. Twice the Lord vouched for Job’s integrity in the prologue (1:8; 2:3). Now the clearest evidence of his integrity is provided. Despite the fierce exchanges of the past days he doesn’t shun his mendicant friends. And in the same way as he had been in the habit of offering burnt sacrifices and praying regularly for his children in case they had sinned and cursed God in their hearts (1:5), so now he prays for his friends (42:9), and maybe even with words similar to Jesus’ words from the cross: 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Job’s integrity has endured to the very end, even with a greater degree of maturity than was evident in the man before tragedy struck.

References


24 See the essay by Davis (2001) in this regard.


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