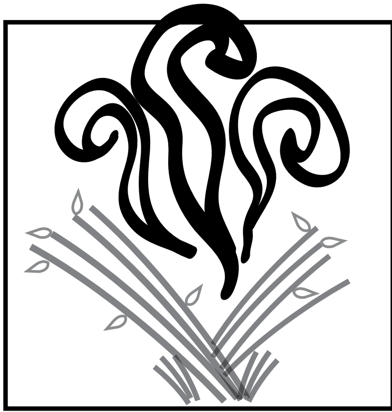

Old Testament

The Path to the Passion through Job

Thomas N. Colley

The book of Job gives God a stage on which to question and struggle with life's number one problem: the existence of evil and suffering. The book does address the human problem with such darkness, but it does not speak to that problem first or exclude divine suffering from its consideration. Especially in the dialog,[1] as we shall see, God suffers as "love [for us] grounded on the pain of love within."[2]

The reader who peruses various commentaries on the book of Job finds that the theme of divine suffering is usually absent. Recent explication of Job has become universal and monolithic, exhibiting an unyielding attitude and a humdrum orthodoxy, removing any difficulties or obscurities from what some have called one of the great classics of world literature. In reading both theological and biblical interpretations of the book, one discovers that the authors too easily digest the book's harsh realism. What with all the energetic forays into the important topic of theodicy, most interpreters of Job have leaned on a tired theology, a default interpretation of the book: Job is the righteous sufferer and God the insidious, aloof, unreliable, remote, inscrutable one Whose silence in most of the book translates into harsh and uncaring withdrawal. Job and the rest of us rant hopelessly against this silent, perhaps absent, almighty one Who seems to be either unwilling or unable to respond or act, apart from pulling rank on mere mortals.

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In this view, the God of the dialog carries little mystery: His role is clear, His non-response ensconced in our minds, and His way in the end is unsatisfying. There is no divine participation in suffering while God remains God. Furthermore, it is argued, God's absence from the dialog simply serves the movement of the book: God maintains His place, is immutable and impassible. With His sovereignty intact, His silence reveals that He does not suffer and that He deals with evil in one of two ways, either in apathy or in safely transcendent ways.

The thesis presented here argues completely to the contrary: the suffering, pain, and deep pathos of God are not left out of the book of Job. Divine wrestling with evil, the insidious existence of pain, suffering, and death, happen within the rich, alive, unsettled interior life of God.[3] As evidenced in the prologue, Yahweh's conversation with the opposition, the *sa-tan*, is internal. It takes place within Himself. The verb-becoming-a-noun *sa-tan*, to oppose, is not yet the full-blown Satan of the New Testament, a being diametrically opposed to God. The *sa-tan,* whose name occurs only three times in the Old Testament, is one of the "sons of God" within the divine council. The conversation in the prologue of Job, then, is within the mind, heart, and purpose of God. After the prologue, God is working within God's own self, and His apparent absence from the dialog is actually a silent suffering presence, a purposeful literary device on the part of the Joban poet to capture the salvific nature of Yahweh, pointing to the hidden protagonist of the book.

Yahweh's silence in the dialog, however, is almost always taken to mean that the God of the whirlwind in chapter 38 is looking back and interpreting that silence so as to imply that God is immutable and impassible. Yahweh is thought to summon "the devil" secretly to an immoral chess match, quickly leaving the scene to let Job fend for himself. In this view, both the prologue and the theophany sandwich the dialog, with the same conclusion: God is unrelenting, Job and we are mere bereft creatures, God is God, here ends the reading. God's people suffer and God can do what God chooses. Any explanation of evil and suffering is superfluous. God need not pay attention to Job and his friends. Let

them work things out on their own. The book addresses only the human before God in the midst of suffering—Who, on the surface of the book, keeps such suffering at arm's length—or so we are told.

Jürgen Moltmann quotes G. A. Studdert Kennedy's poem, "The Hardest Part," in his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*:

> The sorrows of God mun be 'ard
> to bear,
> if 'e really is Love in 'is 'eart,
> And the 'ardest part i' the world to
> play
> Mun surely be God's Part.

Job and we are not answered explicitly in the book because God had to do "God's Part": He was searching, suffering, wrestling inwardly in the face of the problem of evil. Why do we and how can we callously leave God's side out of the question of theodicy? Why bad things happen to good people is first a question for God, "who is engaged in a conversation, one that concerns Yahweh's own life; this conversation within God's self has not been much disclosed or emphasized heretofore in Israel's witness. But we have known, from the earliest mention of Yahweh's glory, holiness, and jealousy, that Yahweh has Yahweh's own life to live. That life may alter the possible answers to Job's question."[4] God is at work within God's self to "get hold" of the mysterious nature of sin, death, evil, and suffering.

Is Job an anticipation of the God-human who stands between the suffering of God and the suffering of the rest of us?

In truth, God is more than present in the speeches of Job, especially those directly spoken by Job to God.[5] Furthermore, even though the name of Yahweh is absent from the dialog,[6] the suffering presence of Yahweh remains in the poetic style of biblical wisdom literature. As one theologian put it, "to write a book to help people cope with inexplicable pain and suffering, one would have to be a poet, since only the poets, poets like the psalmist, know how to touch our souls with words so that we may be comforted."[7] The Joban poet has touched more than our souls by inviting us into the suffering, grieving, troubled heart of God, Who is not helplessly absent from the speeches of Job but rather suffers redemptively, wrestling within Himself. In the desperate cries of Job there emerges the deep pathos of God.

We may also ask: who is Job? Who does the text intend him to be? Who is he in his own person, in *propria persona*? Answer: Job is us *and* Job is God's mouthpiece to bring to speech the heinous reality of evil and suffering.

Does the person of Job as a perfect sufferer look forward to the incarnation?

Job is purposefully presented as an extraordinary person in the text. He stands as God's inner being looking into the abyss, all for us, into redemptive suffering. Where else would God be? Absent in His deity? Aloof in His inscrutability? Unable to address Job's issues or ours in His immutability?

Of course—a point often missed—Job is presented as a perfect human being at the very outset of the book. The meaning of the Hebrew is unmistakable, and it sets up the obvious problem of the book of Job: how can a perfect one suffer? Many English translations are uncomfortable with the word and use "righteous" or "upright." But the book's pathos and dilemma, and ultimately its very genius in fulfilling its purpose, gives us this perfect sufferer. Is Job an anticipation of the God-human who stands between the suffering of God and the suffering of the rest of us? Does the person of Job as a perfect sufferer look forward to the incarnation? Is

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the book of Job a progress report on the incarnation within the perichoresis of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? God's sovereignty here begins to move towards the incarnation, and the Joban poet is a significant biblical witness to that loving, suffering reality in the eternal conversation of the trinitarian God.

In his book *A Leg to Stand On*, the neurologist Oliver Sacks begins his third chapter, "Limbo," with Job 10:22, which is the last verse of Job's second address to God: "O land of darkness, as darkness itself—and of the shadow of death, without any order; and where the light is as darkness." *A Leg to Stand On* relates the author's struggle with pain and suffering within himself. In contrast to so many of his fine works[8] in which he describes the long inner journey of others in their pain and suffering, Sacks involuntarily looks inward in *Leg*. He finds that his injured leg is no longer part of his body. He examines his own identity in the context and crisis of his struggle and the inner nature of illness and health. He says, "Here the roles were reversed and I was the patient myself, bewildered by an experience, a sort of 'alienation' of an injured leg, which I could not comprehend or communicate to my doctors. My only relief was to write about it."[9]

God intends in the book and person of Job not only to turn us toward

the role of human reason in the face of unexplained, Godforsaken suffering, but also to invite us into God's suffering within Himself. Both Sacks and God stand inside their respective narratives with surprising results; neither can stay away from the truth of darkness and stand aloof in the midst of sin–death–evil–suffering. The reader should not leave the salvific, struggling, and suffering Yahweh out of the place ordained by the Holy Spirit in the biblical narrative where "the light is as darkness" (10:22). Since suffering lies at the center of things, God suffers as Job suffers: the silent pathos of God finds voice on the lips of Job.

In wisdom literature, the hiddenness of God, God's words, and God-not-at-the-center is at the center of things.

It has been argued[10] that God does not—indeed, cannot suffer.

> From the dawn of the patristic period Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible—that is—He does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so cannot suffer. Toward the end of the nineteenth century a sea change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God is passible, that He does undergo emotional changes of states, and so can suffer.[11]

Most who are reading these pages are among those who accept to some extent the passibility of God, as we have been taught and influenced by Moltmann, Pannenberg, Wolterstorff, Küng, and von Balthasar, not to mention the wide witness in the Old Testament to the suffering of God,[12] and Luther's careful assertion of the suffering of the Logos in the person of Christ. Most who espouse the salvific purpose and place of God's suffering in the history of salvation, however, have not included the dialog of the book of Job as evidence. But here we begin to see how another reading of the dialog is possible: that God's primary place in the dialog, albeit silent, is never understood in the text as sovereign absence but rather as suffering presence.

The speeches directly addressed to Yahweh by Job[13] refer to their relationship and God's pathos.

> Remember my life is mere wind; I will speak in anguish of spirit and complain in the bitterness of my soul; why do you pay any mind to us, inspect us every moment? Will you never look away from me, you man-watcher? Why am I a burden to you? (7:7*ff.*)[14]

> Do you have eyes of flesh? Are your days as the days of a mortal? Your hands have molded and made me, and then turned to destroy me; remember, it was of mud you made me; life and love you granted me, and your providence guarded my spirit. Yet these things you hid in your mind; I know this is what you did. You are watching me. Few are my days, let me be. Hold off, let me smile awhile before I go, never to return, to a land of darkness and gloom, a land of utter darkness, of gloom without order, which shines like darkness. (10:3–22)

> Remove your pressure from me; why do you hide your face? Make prints on the soles of my feet; on such would you turn your gaze? You would hide me, conceal me until your anger pass, then set me a time and remember me. You would call me and I answer; you care for the work of your hands and count my steps. (13:20–14:22)

> I cry to you, but you do not answer; you stand and look at me. I know that you will return me to death, to the meetinghouse of all the living. (30:20–23)

These texts poetically frame Job's address directly to God by beginning and ending with the same theme: *living*. Further, the Joban poet's masterful last words on God's lips before the dialog, as if to title the entire text, are: "Save his life."[15] Yahweh remembers Job and our life inside His life and does not abandon His creatures. Reading the texts between the lines: God suffers our mortality and knows the anguish of our souls. God watches us at all times, and keeps us as His burden. God's life touches ours, as watching He guards our spirit. Yahweh's deep yearning is to see us smile before we go to the land of darkness. He makes prints on the soles of our feet, remembering us, standing and looking at us until we must return to the meetinghouse of all the living. Job's speech here and elsewhere is not lacking insights into God's own anguish at the plight of humankind. The poetry searches deeply for God's language of suffering in the silence of the words. And these are just a sampling of the riches of the Joban poet as the writer delves into the suffering, redemptive, covenantal heart of God.

The reader is challenged to a more devotional and less exegetical reading of the text of the dialog.

Yet on the surface Yahweh's words are hidden beneath the language of Job. That for which we find words often loses its reality. Language is important, but silence communicates those matters that are too deep for words. Not everything can be clearly stated,

because not everything is understood or known; a good poem hides as well as discloses. Indeed, it hides in order that an insight might not just be given but discovered.[16] Especially in wisdom literature, the hiddenness of God, God's words, and God-not-at-the-center is at the center of things. In much of life, wisdom's testimony is that if Yahweh is to be spoken of meaningfully, He must be a Yahweh Who is not direct and not visible; one Who in fact is hidden in the ongoing daily processes of life. This hiddenness bears witness to a God Who is not bound to the present moment of crisis but acts in faithful sovereignty over the very long haul.[17] The Joban poet chooses intentionally to hide the words of Yahweh, His presence, and His salvific suffering in the dialog, in order to intensify the conflict and crisis inherent in the subject matter.

At times of unspeakable horror in the history of the human race, this problem of communication is especially poignant, as Elie Wiesel bears witness.

> In 1945 I felt we cannot really communicate the experience [of the Holocaust], that all we can do is show the impossibility of communicating the experience—if you take these two facts together—you have a certain need for silence. But the silence is not against language; it is a remedy to language. It tries to purify it, tries to redeem it, to give it back its innocence, its weight.[18]

Even more chilling, and even more appropriate to the present discussion, is Wiesel's speech to the 39th General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Kansas City, Missouri, on November 14, 1970.

> What happened twenty-five years ago cannot and will not—and perhaps should not—be recorded. For what happened goes beyond words, beyond imagination. To make words of it would be blasphemous. Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk said that truth can sometimes be communicated by words, though there is a level of truth so deep it can be conveyed only by silence. And then, lastly, there is somewhere in us a truth so profound and so disturbing that it cannot be transmitted at all.[19]

So the Joban poet attempts to put on the lips of Job words from God, communicated by the silence of God—truths so deep and horrifying that we can only sense them deep within God's silent self.

The reader is challenged, then, to a more devotional and less exegetical reading of the text of the dialog. After all, it *is* poetry and it *is* wisdom. Exegesis verges on the impossible in this book, compounded by the language itself, perhaps appropriately the most difficult Hebrew in the whole of the Old Testament. The text is corrupt in more loci than not and translations are myriad.[20] One can actually read a number of verses in one offering and not recognize the same passage in another. Yet overall, as Job interprets Job, what emerges is the intense humanity and the deep passion of God as both qualities stare into the abyss. What looks back is "divine suffering grounded on the pain of love within." LF

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Notes

1. The dialog is found in 4:1–31:40.
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 25.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 387.
4. Ibid., 388.
5. Job 7:7–21, 10:3–22, 13:20–14:22, and 30:20–23.
6. With the exception of 28:28.
7. Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), ix.
8. Job 9:33, 16:19, 19:25, 31:35, 33:23, and others in context.
9. Oliver Sacks, *A Leg to Stand On* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 84.
10. An excellent read on this whole matter is Jürgen Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), especially section II, "The Passion of God."
11. Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001), 35.
12. One of the best presentations of and arguments for God's intense suffering in the Old Testament is Terence E. Fretheim's *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Weinandy's argument and presentation is well done but is arguably nonbiblical. Elsewhere Moltmann's *Trinity and the Kingdom* presents the history of the argument, but chiefly from the perspective of the passion of Christ.
13. See footnote 5.
14. The translation and biblical references are from Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, 1st ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).
15. It is not surprising that Brueggemann understands the goal and meaning of human existence in wisdom literature as "life." See Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972), 14*ff.*
16. Frederick H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 2.
17. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* 353.
18. I. Abrahamson, "Introductory Essay," in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. I. Abrahamson, 3 vols. (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:56.
19. Elie Wiesel, "From Holocaust to Rebirth," in *Against Silence*, 1:239.
20. Marvin A. Pope's translation of Job for the Anchor Bible Commentary is very good. In addition, the King James Version surpasses the New Revised Standard Version in beauty and textual integrity.