

Article

# Lament of a Wounded Priest: The Spiritual Journey of Job

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**Abstract:** Acknowledging the complex redaction history which produced the Book of Job contained in the Jewish and Christian canonical scriptures, this article offers a spiritual interpretation of the text taking due account of its overall structure and major parts (prologue, main dialogical body and epilogue). With its focus on the formation of personal identity, spiritual theology grants access to a developmental understanding of the biblical narrative and characters. Undergirding this essay is the basic claim that in and with the book and figure of Job are found paradigmatic examples of how to become and remain human and faithful in and despite relentless undeserved suffering. The exploration of Job's life in suffering leads to the discovery that the lament formulated by a faithful heart compellingly summons God to appear and speak, consecrating the human recipient as mediator of divine revelation and sacramental intercessor. Job's wounded body and spirit reflect the spiritual journey he has completed and has been commissioned to invite others to undertake. Undeserved suffering can lead to transformative mystical encounters with God, if and when the human heart dares to believe to the end, giving voice to and challenging God from within relentless unjustifiable pain.

**Keywords:** book of Job (interpretation of); spiritual theology; lament (theology of); suffering (theology of); wisdom (biblical); faith; priestly vocation; mystical encounter

## 1. Introduction

The biblical book of Job defies common sense understandings of faith and human existence. For more than two millennia, this fictional rendering of a non-Israelite's life has felt to its readers all too disruptively and painfully real. Thomas Long aptly describes how, in this most famous of wisdom texts, the human experience and reality of suffering breaks open and apart the classical theology of retribution to set before the faithful the mystery that is the absolute freedom of God.

The author of the canonical Book of Job no doubt knew that the original plot of the story—perfect world/disaster/perfect world restored—was logically impossible. . . . Job's "perfect world" was built upon the assumption that God plays by a set of moral rules that are widely publicized and known to humanity. As long as a person, like Job, obeys the rules, or engages in acts of purification when one of those rules may have inadvertently been broken, then God can be trusted to "play fair" and to preserve and protect. The problem was that the destruction and suffering experienced by Job came as the direct result of divine behavior, which, as far as these moral rules go, was definitely in foul territory. Job suffers not because he has violated some holy ordinance, but because God issued a seemingly capricious challenge to an Adversary, made a wager in the heavenly court, and enigmatically turned Job over to the power of a malicious opponent. (Long 1988, pp. 10–11)

In the Book of Job, divine revelation invites further reflection through the figure of a most honest and not so patient (rebellious) servant. On the basis of his suffering existence, Job demands that God reveal

and account for Godself. Job has had enough of the unreliability of mediations (creation, human reason, conscience, justice and consolation); the wounded nakedness to which his undeserved suffering has reduced him can only be soothed by complete self-disclosure on the part of God.

Job's faithfulness in response to God's readiness to submit him to the test of extreme suffering challenges us to enter into the deeper mystery of being human before the Lord. What is and can be the significance of a blameless existence in absolute poverty and abjection? How and why would God allow for faithful servants to be subjected to unjustified and unjustifiable suffering? Under the guidance of contemporary biblical exegetes and commentators, in what follows I will explore the challenge that undeserved suffering constitutes to a rational understanding and practice of faith. Drawing attention to selected passages of the biblical text, I will follow theological insights leading away from human explanations and, hopefully, closer to the divine mystery itself. Acknowledging the complex redaction process and history which resulted in and with the production of the Book of Job in the form it takes in the Jewish and Christian canonical scriptures, the present article attempts to provide a spiritual interpretation of the text taking due account of its overall structure and major parts (prologue, main dialogical body and epilogue).<sup>1</sup> With its focus on the formation and evolution of personal identity, spiritual theology grants access to an organic developmental understanding of the biblical text and characters. Sandra Schneiders thus speaks of "biblical spirituality," a phrase which, "first and most fundamentally refers to the spiritualities that come to expression in the Bible and witness to patterns of relationship with God that instruct and encourage our own religious experience" (Schneiders 2002, p. 134). The biblical text was not written and transmitted in history only to convey the contents of divine revelation, but also and—arguably—more importantly in order to induce profound lasting personal transformation in its readers. Scripture serves and fulfills a spiritual vocation, for "transformative engagement with the text is the ultimate *raison d'être* of biblical study within the ecclesial community" (Schneiders 2002, p. 142).

In particular, spiritual theology enables and accompanies the definition and production of meaningful life narratives from and within the experience of unexplained and unjustifiable suffering. The challenge and purpose is not to justify or explain away such suffering, but rather to acknowledge its reality and find creative and humanizing ways to live in and through it. Undergirding this essay is the basic claim that in and with the book and figure of Job are found paradigmatic examples of how to become and remain human and faithful in and despite relentless undeserved suffering. The exploration of Job's life in suffering should lead to the discovery that the lament formulated by a faithful heart compellingly summons God to appear and speak, consecrating the human recipient as mediator of divine revelation and sacramental intercessor. Job's wounded body and spirit reflect the spiritual journey he has completed and—I dare to suggest—has been commissioned to invite others (his "friends") undertake. Job's journey in and to faith is one that can be understood only when and as it is lived in the thick and dark of human existence. Let us therefore listen to Job again and anew, in an attempt to further our understanding of how someone who, though entirely blameless "in terms of his moral character and the practice of his faith," ends up "confessing his new and far more profound knowledge of God" (Ortlund 2015, p. 256). What is this knowledge of God which, while emerging in and from faithful compliance with divine law, so transcends human reason and speech that it can only be conveyed by means of lived example and testimony?

## 2. Job, the Wise?

The sacred text opens with a brief description of Job. "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the approach adopted here is similar to that used by exegetical scholars Carol A. Newsom (see Newsom 2003) and Susannah Ticciati (see Ticciati 2005) who both focus on interpreting the final product of this redaction history in its organic complexity.

from evil" (1:1).<sup>2</sup> As the poem or interlude on wisdom (which forms the whole of chapter 28) confirms, this description articulates the substance of authentic wisdom. In a formulation akin to those found in Proverbs,<sup>3</sup> Job 28:28 thus teaches: "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding." Job's wisdom is revealed and acknowledged in and by his behavior. Wisdom cannot be reduced to a body of theoretical knowledge, it rather identifies with and finds expression in a definite way of being and doing. Job knows himself to be the recipient of a multitude of privileges (family, servants, cattle and other possessions) for which he pays constant tribute to the Lord. Job is aware of the gracious character of these privileges, never owed to those who enjoy them. Before he is plagued with his infamous sufferings and tribulations, Job lives and practices a faith essentially preventive in nature and character (see [Ticciati 2005](#), p. 71). Job anticipates what could go wrong, prays and offers additional sacrifices to make sure the people he cares about and for remain in good standing with the Lord. Knowing human beings inherently fallible, Job goes out of his way to prevent himself and his dependents from committing any kind of sin. Referring to Job's defense against his friends' accusations, Fredrick Holmgren observes that Job "does not mean that he is absolutely perfect. That belongs to God alone. He affirms only that he has been true to the covenant with God as human beings can be true" ([Holmgren 1979](#), p. 347).

Faithfulness to the covenant is for Job a full-time occupation and task; humans must remain vigilant and submit their lives to relentless scrupulous moral examination. Never permanently acquired and fully developed, human faithfulness and piety are fragile. Stephen Mitchell analyzes the business that covenantal morality has turned into at this point of Job's life.

Job avoids evil because he realizes the penalties. He is a perfect moral businessman: wealth, he knows, comes as a reward for playing by the rules, and goodness is like money in the bank. But, as he suspects, this world is thoroughly unstable. At any moment the currency can change, and the Lord, by handing Job over to the power of evil, can declare him bankrupt. No wonder his mind is so uneasy. He worries about making the slightest mistake; when he has his children come for their annual purification, it is not even because they may have committed any sins, but may have had blasphemous thoughts. ([Mitchell 1987](#), p. ix)

Mitchell goes so far as to claim that the Job of the prologue is not wise, but merely dutifully good; he does not possess the mature personal identity needed to take a free stance toward God (see [Mitchell 1987](#), pp. ix–x). Servile fear (of retribution) is what moves this Job to be and act faithfully.

Mitchell's reading of Job's spiritual condition strongly correlates with that of another character in the story: The Satan (Accuser, Adversary). At first unaware of him, the Satan's attention is drawn on Job by the Lord's clear affirmation and praise of his way of life. The Lord's words attest the conformity of Job's way of life to the definition of wisdom. "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). Shimon Bakon underscores that these words undeniably reveal "full divine trust in the integrity of man" ([Bakon 1993](#), p. 227). A doubting God would never have brought Job under the scrutiny of the heavenly Accuser, whose vocation precisely is to find fault with the moral/spiritual condition of humans. A God desiring to help Job move from fearful self-oriented faithfulness to loving altruistic service might, however, submit him to such a test. The Lord even describes Job as a faithful servant whose life and actions have no equal on earth. Thus, upheld by God's boastful trust and praise, Job becomes the object of the Satan's challenging doubt. As he objects to the Lord's all-affirmative stance toward Job, the Satan accuses both Job and the Lord of being unfaithful. To put Job's piety to the test of authenticity entails subjecting the Lord's blessing to similar testing. What if Job's motives were not so pure and holy? What if Job served the Lord only by virtue of and for the benefits he receives?

<sup>2</sup> English translations of the biblical text are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Proverbs 1:7; 9:10 and 15:33.

In Robert O'Rourke's clear words, "the Accuser claims that Job's faithfulness should be tested, for, if all his blessings were to be taken away, he would undoubtedly curse God" (O'Rourke 2006, p. 59).

### 3. Consequential Speculations

The very formulation of this challenge reveals that the Satan does not have access to Job's heart. The Satan does not know the true motivations undergirding Job's actions. He speaks as an external observer reduced to making suppositions. As he challenges the Lord's affirmation of Job's exceptional righteousness, the Satan makes himself liable to testing and potential repudiation from both the Lord and Job. Knowing, as Job 32:8 reminds us, that the human spirit is quickened by "the breath of the Almighty,"<sup>4</sup> the Lord cannot but inhabit and know the depths of the human heart. In these conditions, if and when the Lord accepts the Satan's challenge, the Lord does so not to test Job's faith, but rather to lead the Satan to respect human dignity and goodness as they deserve. God boasts of Job's faithfulness because God has sounded his heart. The suffering of the righteous is a test for the hosts of the Lord. In and through the person of tested Job, the Lord is offered by the Satan the opportunity to assert the dignity of the human creature over and beyond that of the divine hosts ("sons of God"). If demonstrated, the faithfulness of Job could be invoked to humble the messengers of God. If Job were to learn to be faithful to God in the context of his undeserved suffering, the Satan might no longer be able to impact Job's existence significantly.

Indeed, the Satan's challenge rests on a definite understanding of faith and piety, deemed genuine only when the person "fear(s) God for nothing" (1:9). True reverence is disinterested, that is, never motivated by self-centered desires. True faith and piety demand that God be loved in and for Godself, independently from all forms of compensation and consolation. The Satan supposes that humans are incapable of such faith and piety and he wishes that the Lord grant him the authority and power required to demonstrate the truth of his claim. The Satan's lack of faith in humans forms the justification for the exercise of dominion over them. When the Lord accepts the challenge, the Satan is granted with the power to move human beings (Sabeans and Chaldeans) and natural elements (fire and wind) so that Job's loved ones (with the exception of his wife) and possessions are killed and taken away from him (1:13–19). Hence, if a human person could meet the Satan's challenge, she would thereby be liberated from his influence and even gain a moral/spiritual authority before God he himself does not enjoy. The many blessings Job enjoys and receives at the beginning and end of the biblical book may then result from and reflect the unique communion and intimacy he shares with the Lord, to which the heavenly hosts themselves do not have access. The book of Job may thus constitute one of the most powerful affirmations of human dignity, and of the dignity of the suffering in particular.

Job's response to this first challenge demonstrates that he cannot be reduced to the "perfect moral businessman" Mitchell wants to perceive in him. "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, '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'" (1:20–21). This prayer is the prayer of someone in mourning. Job grieves for the loved ones he has lost. Job bears the destruction of a family, a home, a community and an economy built over a lifetime of faithful service and careful governance with the continuing assistance and blessing of the Lord. This prayer is the prayer of someone who offers unbearable loss to God, acknowledging his own nothingness and utter dependence on God's plenitude. Job's faith does not rest on blessings and rewards (though needed and welcome), but rather on God's presence and involvement in Job's life (to which the blessings and rewards bear witness, though not in necessary and/or sufficient fashion). Job lives from communion in faith with the Lord both in times of prosperity and poverty.

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<sup>4</sup> In 27:3–4, Job articulates a very similar position: "As long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit."

The Lord himself attests to this communion by invoking it to challenge the Satan. “He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason” (2:3). The Satan’s authority is placed by the Lord under direct threat; the infliction of undeserved suffering upon Job has shown to be unjustified and, therefore, unjustifiable. The Satan is summoned to provide an account for subjecting Job to such a treatment. An abstract ideal of disinterested faith does not and cannot justify the infliction of suffering for “no reason,” especially when such suffering is turned by the undeserving victim into a medium and instrument for the expression of authentic faith. Once again, the Satan is faced with a basic alternative: Either he acknowledges and pays respect to Job’s dignity and faithfulness (and to the trust the Lord has placed in Job) or he invites the Lord to challenge Job to undergo further spiritual transformation (by inciting the Lord to allow him to inflict further undeserved suffering on Job). To justify hitting Job with more unwarranted pain and turmoil, the Satan invokes the human fear of death as the motivation for Job’s persisting piety. In this view, human beings believe in God and respect God’s commandments because they do not want to lose their lives (literally or in the form of qualitative diminishment), especially when they have lost everything else.

The Lord agrees to the Satan’s request, allowing him to alter Job’s health detrimentally without taking his life. Samuel Balentine interestingly suggests that in the Book of Job it is God who is tempted and fails (twice) to trust (see [Balentine 2003](#), p. 357). The prologue raises serious concerns about God’s status and purpose, for as he further observes, “the admission that God can be provoked to do something that might not have occurred without some external pressure invites reflection on the nature of God. Can God be coerced, manipulated, perhaps even tricked?” ([Balentine 2003](#), p. 360). Or, following the hypothesis just hinted at, could God be led to inflict undeserved suffering upon pious human beings to hold his heavenly hosts accountable? In both cases, the main concern resides in and identifies with God’s unaccountability. Does the covenant tying the Lord and the people of Israel to one another allow for God to act arbitrarily and/or in ways that intentionally jeopardize Israel’s perennity and flourishing? While the covenant recognizes the possibility that the human partner may fail to uphold her obligations and includes mechanisms enabling her to make due amends, “there is no prescribed sacrifice that atones for God’s malfeasance, no ritual that requires God’s repentance. . . . Once it is established that God has afflicted Job both willfully and gratuitously, the cult has nothing to offer him” ([Balentine 2003](#), p. 363). As seen previously, in Job 2:3, the Lord admits he allowed the Satan to inflict undeserved suffering upon Job “for no reason.” The epilogue reiterates this thought by having Job’s new extended family comfort him for “all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him” (42:11).

#### 4. Challenged and Challenging Faith

Hence, the Book of Job reveals a theological landscape overshadowed by God’s absolute freedom and arbitrariness. In a fundamental sense, then, God’s fate—alongside the Satan’s—may be shown to lie in the hands and heart of Job. Susannah Ticciati succinctly describes Job’s predicament: “Job must live with this arbitrary God—there is no other option and no other God. Is not this the nub of Job’s pain . . . that there is nowhere to which he can escape from this God?” ([Ticciati 2005](#), p. 172). Afflicted with an incurable skin disease, living in absolute poverty and shame, Job’s condition kindles horror in his wife’s heart who, like the Satan (and most readers), does not understand why Job holds on to his faith (which may reflect both her desire to relieve Job from his suffering and the challenge to which her own faith is subjected). In response to her invitation to let go of his piety, Job retorts: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10). As some of his friends join him and, after a week of respectful silence, seemingly take over from the Satan in subjecting his faith to relentless trial, Job speaks in ways indicating that if he faithfully receives “the bad” from God, he does not do so in and with peaceful patience. Job finds himself at the end of his endurance and wits. “What is my strength that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient?” (6:11) As Karla Suomala underscores, the question for Job is: “Should he continue to be the kind of person

that he has been—upright, honorable, righteous—even though there is apparently no reason to do so?” (Suomala 2011, p. 397).

The task set before Job is tantalizing: To muster the courage and find a way to re-engage positively with God and human existence after undeservingly having lost everything because of God (see Wettstein 2001, p. 345). The achievement of such a feat will demand no less than undergoing a profound spiritual transformation. The first stage of this transformative journey involves giving voice to his broken heart. Job thus begins by cursing the day of his birth, and unleashes his own challenge to God (as the unfolding narrative later reveals) in the form of a lament grounded in and nourished by his profound sense of being unjustly treated. Henrietta Wiley justifiably speaks of Job’s construction and expression of lament as a form of resistance: “His outpouring of grief is a veritable torrent of resistance to divine ‘favor’ and lament over faith, loss and isolation” (Wiley 2009, p. 123). Like Abraham, Job suffers on account of having been elected by the Lord for a special purpose. Blessed by God with a son (Isaac) who embodies the promise and future of Israel, Abraham is asked to sacrifice this same son to God as proof of his faith and righteousness. Blessed with a large family and material riches by God, Job loses everything and everyone he loves (apart from his wife) and is subjected to undeserved suffering to demonstrate his faith and righteousness. God’s personal intimacy defines living conditions and demands excluding the enjoyment of “normal” human existence and relationships.

Loss and solitude are the appanage of the prophetic life and mission. Wiley explains: “God’s demanding attention crowds out the possibility for these men to preserve bonds of affection and support with their families, while God’s limitless power renders any affectionate bond with him inconceivable. This leaves the faithful men who are deemed most blessed by God in a state of deepest isolation and loss” (Wiley 2009, p. 129). Job is left to himself not because he is estranged from God, but rather because God has singled him out. God’s nearness to Job is such that it becomes a challenge for God’s heavenly council who, through the intervention of the Satan, questions the Lord’s bestowal of such a favor upon him. Job suffers because he receives too much attention from God. He wishes for the Lord’s overbearing gaze to move away from him for a time. Job’s words speak for themselves:

What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? (7:17–21)

Job basically summons God to retrieve and recover God’s authentic self, to resume acting in accordance with God’s own infinitely merciful nature and life. Job invites God to find in his own faithful piety an image and likeness of the being and existence God has concealed from him for a time. Job suffers from an overdose of God’s judging presence, revealed in and through the relentlessness and gratuity (arbitrariness) of his suffering. Job knows his condition can be cured only by God’s healing self-disclosure (experienced as forgiveness and communion). Timothy Polk accurately summarizes: “The man is God-intoxicated, we might say, theocentrically obsessed. Indeed, what he seeks most is to see God and to have God recognize and acknowledge him” (Polk 2011, p. 415). His life and condition have literally become unbearable to him (and for others). In Job’s concise formulation: “I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life” (9:21). Resting on the purity of his faith (which does not suppose perfect self-knowledge), Job speaks his experience of undeserved suffering to hold God accountable. Again, in Job’s own words: “My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids, though there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure” (16:16–17). As he speaks and responds to his friends’ counter-arguments, Job really is making his plea to God (cf. 21:4). He wishes to be true to himself before God to offer God the opportunity to repent and make amends by vindicating once and for all his person and actions (cf. 23:7). Following Eliezer Berkovits, Job’s contention with God reflects the quality of the trust he places in God (see Berkovits 1973, p. 113). Job has been left in such nakedness and poverty that only God’s being and life can heal, clothe and support his own.

God's relentless testing has turned Job's body and spirit into throbbing open wounds unable to heal by themselves. By virtue of his personal experience of divinely induced unjustified and unjustifiable suffering, Job has become an unfathomable mystery to himself.

Job's challenging lament is grounded in the urge to speak his truth, the truth of an existence lived in accordance with one's conscience, faithfully listening to and following one's heart, where God dwells and breathes life into the human person. "Until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast to my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days" (27:5–6). Job gained awareness of his integrity from a divine source of knowledge. He loves and trusts the God who speaks to him from within his own heart, and this God compels him to contend with the God his friends describe to him and in whom he used to believe (just like them). Job feels he is ready to pass the ultimate test of human faithfulness: to be measured against God's fully disclosed being and truth. He is willing to give his life to be able to meet with the God he loves so deeply (cf. 13:15–16). "Sure of his innocence," comments Brian Gault, "[Job] wishes to argue his case before God, regardless of the consequences" (Gault 2016, p. 153).

Hence, for Job the main issue is how to be authentically human before and with God, that is, in such a way that God is summoned to be faithful to God's true self. The experience of undeserved suffering shattered the representations of God Job previously entertained and qualifies any new image of God he may produce. Job is confronted with the task of interacting with and relating to God without, beyond mediating representations. Job wants and needs to know God in and as Godself, in the hope that there is to God more (infinitely more) than what he and his friends can conjure. As Long explains,

Because Job suffers so grievously and so irrationally, he is no longer permitted the luxury of an illusion. Every attempt at make-believe falls before the reality of empty places at his family table and the throbbing pain in his body. The only god Job can manufacture from his misery is a monster, and Job must decide whether to flee from this arbitrary and punitive god or to stand up boldly to see if there just might be another—a God not of his own making. (Long 1988, p. 6)

Most of all, Job wants to cease having to do all the thinking and talking; he knows he is going nowhere and cannot find a way to cope with his suffering existence. As Dianne Bergant notes, "Job's greatest suffering is not his loss or physical affliction but his inability to understand why God has allowed this to happen to him" (Bergant 2018, p. 81). To bridge the gap separating him from himself, separating the God he loves from the God who makes him suffer undeservingly, lies beyond his ability. He craves for the truth revealed and conveyed in God's own terms. He will fall silent if and when God reveals Godself and himself (Job) to him. "Teach me, and I will be silent" (6:24).

## 5. Lament as Spiritual Formation

However, as the biblical text shows, Job's moral/spiritual readiness for personal encounter with the Lord is not innate, but rather acquired over time. Job must be prepared to meet with the Lord, and this preparation consists in grasping and assuming the truth that he is being made into an advocate and mediator who stands for humanity before God. Balentine suggests as much when he asks: "Could it be that God is challenging Job to be for himself and for others the *môkîah*, the witness, the *gō'el*, that he has longed for but despaired of finding?" (Balentine 2002, p. 511). Job does indeed call for an arbitrator ("umpire," cf. 9:33), a heavenly advocate ("witness," cf. 16:19), and a redeemer ("vindicator," cf. 19:25) to assist him in bringing his case before, negotiating with and surviving the fateful encounter with God. He needs time to process, adapt to and embrace his own prophetic election and mission. The spiritual formation he undergoes profoundly transforms his understanding of the nature and significance of suffering. What begins as a challenge addressed to God "in order to restore his honor" (O'Rourke 2006, p. 68) morphs into a vicarious sacramental vocation. Lament is the medium, instrument and embodiment of Job's articulation of his personal vocation to serve the Lord in a unique way. Job must learn to speak to the Lord with the authority the Lord wishes him to assume.

When Job is able to do so, the Lord responds to his invitation and the encounter is life changing. Josh Carney thus highlights the significance of lament as channel and incarnation of spiritual development throughout the Book of Job.

Job's conversation with his friends takes up thirty-six chapters. That is the longest conversation in the Bible. Among other things, the length of this discourse signals both that Job's pain was *that* real and that the conversation was *that* important. Lament characterizes the conversation every time Job opens his mouth. For thirty-six long chapters, Job pounds on the ground, or maybe on the door of heaven, or maybe even on God's chest. Finally, in chapter 38, we discover that God has been listening. (Carney 2014, p. 283)

Giving voice and ascribing meaning to unjustifiable suffering is the task of a lifetime, for it entails complete reconstruction of self and God. Such wholesome reconstruction precisely is what faith forged in the crucible of undeserved suffering requires. Lament expands understanding of the human condition and God. T. C. Ham describes the effect of Job's complaint on the readers of the biblical text:

In Job's lament, our horizon of suffering expands. The reader cannot callously witness the pain of others; the poetry draws us in to feel the pain of Job's loss. In Job's lament, our theology of God expands. The reader cannot comfortably accept the God of retribution theology (as Job's friends do); the poetry compels us to question God's justice. In Job's lament, our understanding of God's relationship to humanity expands. The reader cannot merely assent to simplistic views of God's sovereignty; the poetry begs us to imagine a relational God. (Ham 2016, p. 243)

Job's lament defines and sets the criteria for authentic faith received and lived out in the context of unfathomable pain. Correlating the teaching and witness of Job with the experience and reality of the Holocaust, David Blumenthal spells out the tenets of such a faith:

To have faith in a post-holocaust, abuse-sensitive world, we must: (1) Acknowledge the awful truth of God's abusive behavior; (2) adopt a theology of protest and sustained suspicion; (3) develop the religious affections of distrust and unrelenting challenge; (4) engage the process of renewed spiritual healing with all that entails of confrontation, mourning, and empowerment; (5) resist the evil mightily, supporting resistance to abuse wherever it is found; (6) open ourselves to the good side of God, painful though that is; and (7) we must turn to address God, face to face, presence to presence. (Blumenthal 1993, p. 259).

Job's protesting faith emerges out of a profound experience of revelation and communion occurring within suffering itself. The life shattering character of the suffering to which he is subjected would deny Job the possibility of nurturing genuine faith if it were not for the fact that God empowers him to sustain his trust and hope in the true God. Job knows he has been reduced to nothing and lost everything. His body and spirit diffuse searing pain. Whatever strength he has to hold on, defend himself against false accusations and call God to account comes from God, encountered in pain. Edith Barfoot bears witness to the mysterious empowering character of extreme undeserved suffering. In the heart of human powerlessness, divine empowerment can be found. Job survives and fights because at the deepest level of his being, he knows himself welcomed and accompanied by God.

If in the course of human suffering the time comes for plunging into the depths of inexpressible pain, when the whole body is racked from head to foot with agony that nothing can alleviate, then the soul itself, the body's faithful ally, is numb because of the physical state which has overwhelmed it, so that it is incapable of conscious prayer for help, when human aid is of no avail, then, more than ever before, down below conscious understanding, there in the unplumbed depth he waits with open arms to receive the tortured being, while he infuses into the soul and mind of her the absolute trust which feeds the inmost consciousness with the knowledge that all is well; and with divine knowledge comes renewed strength to endure and lie still in the everlasting arms. (Barfoot 1977, pp. 7–8)



## 6. Mystical Encounter

Job is the living testimony of the human heart who knows and believes that it is possible to remain true to oneself and to God in and despite suffering. Job sobs and lives in the dark, but his heart remains lit with the fire of love and truth, his “prayer is pure.” Only absolute vindication from the transcendent God justifies and empowers to go to the end of suffering, that is, to suffer without end. Job lives in and with the hope that when he will have suffered everything in faith, his body and spirit will become fully transparent to God, who will powerfully manifest Godself in and through his humanity. The suffering human nature and person are here pronounced to be privileged mediations for the divine being and power (Job’s undeservingly suffering person reflects the extent of God’s freedom, which transcends the law and the distinction of good from evil). To appear and bear true witness to God, the human person must undergo a radical transformation that will profoundly alter her humanity, opening and enlarging it to receive and channel the infinite light and love of God. Job foresees that the suffering he has borne prepares him for personal encounter with the Lord. Job thus travels in and from faith toward complete intimacy and communion with God. Starting with a theological stance not unlike that repeatedly articulated and defended by his “friends” throughout the dialogical section of the book (grounded in the principle of retribution), in the crucible of relentless and extreme undeserved suffering Job is led to assume and embrace a much more proactive and challenging perspective. While in the world and to himself and his fellow humans, the suffering Job is and feels broken, shattered and powerless, before and with God he is empowered to invite and withstand direct confrontation. Job is no passive bystander; his heart compels him to cry out and denounce his plight before both the human community and God. Unheard by his friends, his lament authoritatively summons God to appear and speak to him. The paradoxical conjunction of human powerlessness and “divine” authority in the person, words and actions of Job embodies the spiritual transformation and journey he has undergone and completed.

At last, the Lord speaks to Job “out of the whirlwind,” but not in a way that meets Job’s “human” expectations. God does not provide the explanation Job feels he deserves to receive by virtue of his unjustifiable suffering. Throughout his exchanges with his so-called “friends,” Job adamantly reasserted that his undeserved suffering placed God under the obligation of justifying Godself. The Lord responds with a dual challenge intended to test, respectively: (1) Job’s knowledge and power over material creation (cf. 38:2–3); (2) the legitimacy of Job’s claim to bear moral judgment on God’s governance of the created order (cf. 40:1–2). The Lord God is never bound or comprehended within the scope of human questions, requests and prayers. The human creature rather is always put into question by the Lord. When the Lord appears and speaks to Job, Job must account for himself, for creatures always stand in need of justification. God, however, has no need for justifications, for everything finds justification in God.

Job’s answer to the divine challenge is profoundly revelatory of the human condition. Job is not impressed with the content of the Lord’s speeches, for in faith, he already knew and believed what the Lord tells him about creation and his involvement with it. Eric Ortlund explains: “What new insight does Job get at the end of the book? Job already knew about Leviathan (3:8), and none of YHWH’s questions in chapters 38–39 are especially difficult—even when they have to do with things Job does not understand, the questions themselves are not difficult to answer. So Job does not appear to have received new information about God” (Ortlund 2015, p. 261). Carol Newsom further argues that “the second divine speech [chapters 40–41] says nothing new. Since Job appears to be hard of hearing, God simply repeats the message, louder and more slowly” (Newsom 2003, p. 248). What does make an impression on him, however, is the Lord’s presence. Job did not so much wish to understand everything, to figure it all out, to make sense of God, evil and suffering once and for all. Job wished for God to be God, to reveal Godself in accordance with the legitimate demands and expectations of his righteous heart. Job needed to know that the Lord of creation identifies with the ground of his own inner life, which he experiences to be at once almighty and merciful. The God who lives and supports Job’s faith from within Job’s heart must be the same as the God who rules over

all that is. Meeting with the Lord face to face—more exactly heart to heart or spirit to spirit—fully convinced him that his faith and integrity were well grounded, taking root in and being directed to the Lord's infinite power and love. Job needed to know and feel, in undeniable fashion, that he was loved and known by God (understanding love as basic life-giving relationship which sustains creaturely existence and human existence in particular). Job is humbled by the infinite honor granted in and by God's personal response. As Polk remarks, "Job is shamed by God's honoring him with his appearance. This appearance, more than anything, is what Job had been demanding; not a judicial verdict, but the honor of a response" (Polk 2011, p. 416).

The humility he displays after God has spoken tells us that this need has been met. First, Job refrains from speaking, adopting a humble, receptive listening attitude. Reverent silence seems to him the most appropriate way to stand in the presence of and engage with God. "I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further" (40:3–5). When the Lord is done with delivering the second part of his speech, Job takes the further step of confessing his ignorance and professes humble reverence to the Lord, for now he sees. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:3, 5). Job came to know God as God is in Godself and himself before God, without having to understand everything like God. For human beings, to know God amounts to knowing that they are being known by God in personal fashion. Mystical union with the divine mystery forms the foundation and fulfillment of human existence. Job's confession does not involve repentance for wrongdoing or incurred guilt on Job's part. Job's encounter with God supposes that Job has not lost his faith and integrity, for his own life is the testimony he brings before and against God (see Newsom 2003, p. 185). Job's concern and worry is not human sinning, but rather divine (in)justice. God, not Job, is here put on trial by none other than Job. Job is moreover not attempting to set himself above or apart from God (he is not falling prey to the sin of pride). Job rather wishes to live always in the presence and under the gaze of the awe-filling (untamable) divine countenance.

## 7. Priestly Vocation

The epilogue to the Book of Job is most significant, for in this last section the Lord vindicates Job's faith and righteousness. The Lord's words to Eliphaz unequivocally assert: "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" (42:7). In contradistinction with his "friends," Job always spoke the truth. The Lord can handle harsh accusatory language and take responsibility for inflicting undeserved suffering when he is addressed in and with integrity. In the second part of the address to Job, under the guise of a display of power, the Lord even appears to acknowledge limitations to his rule, referring explicitly to the need to curb the pride of many creatures (humans, especially). The Lord demands from Job what the divine governance does not accomplish. Job 40:12–14 reads: "Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory."

Job always remained faithful to and reverent toward God; he never tried to explain or justify God, as if God could not do so by Godself. Job never gave up on God, always trusting that God would hear and respond to his lament. Job's prayer always remained open hearted, fully assuming its creaturely finitude and inadequacy. The Lord responds to Job's plea by appointing him as legitimate intercessor for other human beings. Carney articulates the priestly vocation of the suffering righteous (Job being a paradigmatic example) as follows:

When God sends Job's friends to him to pray for them, Job prays on behalf of them. Why? I believe that it is because his suffering has taken Job to a place within the heart of God that most of us don't go. It is not that those secret chambers have "keep out" signs. It is just that most of us would rather not walk down the narrow road to get there. Job becomes one whose job is to communicate something true about God's heart that we do not know.

... This is the priestly work of the mystic and the transformation that suffering brings. (Carney 2014, p. 285)

With respect to his “friends,” then, Job is to act as a priest offering on their behalf prayers and sacrifices that the Lord will receive. Job is consecrated sacramental minister (mediator, intercessor) between the friends and the Lord (see Newsom 2003, p. 157). “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” (42:8).

The Lord is true God, the God of truth, to and with whom the human person can and must always speak the truth, even and especially in most difficult times. Job’s undeserved suffering showed to be the motivation and medium for the expression of a powerful prayer to God. As Balentine observes, the Lord invites Job to act on behalf of his friends so as to enable Godself to express mercy (instead of judgment) toward them. Job’s intercession saves the friends from deserved punishment and allows the Lord to recover and live out God’s true identity.

The epilogue suggests that if Job does not pray the friends will be doomed. And if Job does not pray, the epilogue hints that God might exact a judgment that is incongruent with divine justice and mercy. In short, the friends are wrong, but they are worth praying for. God is angry, but God can be persuaded to check the anger, if someone like Job prays. God, too, it seems is worth praying for. . . . We may think of Job’s restoration, then, as coinciding with, if not effecting, God’s restoration. (Balentine 2002, pp. 503, 515)

Acting as “bidirectional intercessor” (Ticciati 2005, p. 122), Job’s priestly ministry restores both the friends and God. Job’s intercessory role strongly correlates with that of the prophets, who were tasked with the dual duty of conveying the judging power of God to the Israelite people and advocating for the Israelite people before God. So Yochanan Muffs argues:

The prophet is the instrument of divine severity, the attribute of divine justice. But messengership is only part of the whole picture. The prophet has another function: He is also an independent advocate to the heavenly court who attempts to rescind the evil decree by means of the only instruments at his disposal, prayer and intercession. He is first the messenger of the divine court to the defendant, but his mission boomerangs back to the sender. Now, he is no longer the messenger of the court; he becomes the agent of the defendant, attempting to mitigate the severity of the decree. (Muffs 1992, p. 9)

As Susannah Ticciati has shown, throughout the dialogical part of the narrative, “what Job longs for, and what Elihu attempts to actualize, is a hearing in which God will argue with Job on Job’s own terms, becoming his equal, his opponent at law—a hearing in which he will truly engage with Job” (Ticciati 2005, p. 126). Job wishes for “God to remember his justice towards his servant” (Ticciati 2005, p. 128). Job’s experience of undeserved suffering has unveiled the fact that “there is no standard of justice to which God is answerable” (Ticciati 2005, p. 129) other than God. To hold God accountable, Job must bring God (the acting agent) before God (the norm and goal of all being and action). By learning to live faithfully in and with his undeserved suffering, Job allows for his own person to become the medium in and through which this encounter of God with Godself can take place. Job’s witness challenges God to be and act as the worthy Lord of such a creature as the faithful and righteous human person. Job’s integrity imposes itself to God insofar as it fulfills humanity’s being made in the image and likeness of God. Job’s undeserved suffering and corollary spiritual transformation reveal the unfathomable depth of human being and existence, which mysteriously convey and contain God. In Ticciati’s compelling words, “Job has plumbed the depths of his integrity and found God there at the heart of it. God is discovered to be, not just the arbitrary face of the law, but even more fundamentally, the face of Job’s integrity” (Ticciati 2005, p. 155).

Now defined by critical dialogue and personal engagement with God, Job’s vocation undoubtedly sets him for a most challenging existence. As Muffs aptly remarks, the prophetic vocation involves

experiencing “the apperception of a divine force that overwhelms the prophet, takes him up by the forelock, and commands him to speak and to stand up. . . . Because the prophet has an intimate relationship with the Holy One, Blessed He Be, he is able to approach the cloud of the Divine Presence audaciously. . . . There is incredible bravery in prophetic prayer.” (Muffs 1992, pp. 9–11). Muffs then evokes Abraham’s petition on behalf of Sodom as a paradigmatic instance of prophetic intercession. “There is no better example of prayer and petition than that of Abraham in the case of Sodom, which distinguishes itself in its unbridled audacity against heaven: ‘Shall the Judge of the world not do justice?’ (Gen 18:25). There is something elemental here. God’s hands are tied until Abraham, a human being, makes a request, that is, until a prophet intercedes” (Muffs 1992, p. 11). Considering the fact that “the limit to God’s total autonomy [involved and instantiated by prophetic intercession] is self-imposed” (Muffs 1992, p. 11), the prophetic vocation entails constantly putting one’s life at risk. Insofar as they demand tremendous resilience in the face of undeserved suffering and daring boldness in advocating for oneself before God, Job’s life and witness appear to be eminently prophetic. Newsom explains: “Job negotiates the dangerous terrain of alterity by establishing the common ground upon which the divine and the human can meet—the ground of justice. . . . What Job eventually does is to make use of his extensive conceptualization of divine justice to organize an aspect of experience where it did not traditionally function—the right of a person before God” (Newsom 2003, pp. 150, 153). Job acknowledges the inherently “tragic” character of human existence, which takes the form of a never fully appropriated gift received in and from personal encounter and engagement with God’s “wholly irreducible Otherness” (Newsom 2003, pp. 252, 256).

Transformed in the crucible of extreme and relentless undeserved suffering, Job’s being and existence bridge the gap existing between humans and their true selves, the God of justice and the God of mercy, humans and God. Job’s restoration does not and cannot bring him back to his initial condition and status. For those who thread the way of suffering, there is no way back. Suffering becomes part of the very fabric of the person’s identity and life. The trauma of undeserved suffering never goes away; one must learn to bear with and ascribe meaning and purpose to it. Comparing Job’s story to that of the first humans in Eden, Long thus compellingly argues: “Job’s world has fractured and cannot be put back together again. Job has been forced out of his perfect and predictable paradise. The gates of the Jobian version of Eden are blocked, and, wherever Job may go, the one way he cannot go is back” (Long 1988, p. 11).

In this context, the gift of new children, social relations and possessions is not to be interpreted by Job (and the readers) as a return to normal, pre-suffering existence. The new children do not erase or replace the lost ones, but rather preserve their memory and remind Job of the intrinsic vulnerability of the human nature and condition. In Wiley’s sharp words: “The consolation families are meant to replace the irreplaceable. Far from resolving the sense of loss, they serve as a reminder of loss and even the prospect of future losses, not in spite of but because of God’s blessing” (Wiley 2009, p. 117). From Job’s standpoint, then, what is essential to being human is not something one possesses or is, but the fact of being involved in authentic relationships with other human beings and, most importantly, with God. Human existence, even and especially when it assumes the prophetic vocation, never eludes or escapes the threatening presence of God. The gift and blessing of life and flourishing do not overcome and take away loss and grief, suffering and death, which always remain effective modalities for formative encounter with God.

## 8. Conclusions

Here lies Job’s drama: Suffering estranges and isolates the suffering person. Job finds himself forced to bear himself all day, only himself, for he has nothing and no one else, even God is and feels absent. During his pre-suffering life and times, Job did not have to spend much time with himself, since he could care for and rejoice in so many loved ones and things he owned, used and did. The suffering Job has nothing else to care about than his suffering self and *that* is unbearable. Forced to suffer himself, Job is led to understand that he does not understand his life and the God he believes in. Job feels the

need to learn the final truth about himself and God, for without this fundamental knowledge he will never be able to bear his own life.

To learn about himself and God, Job must in turn learn to live with God's silence, that is, the fact that God does not speak directly to the human need for explanation and satisfaction of basic needs, in terms that would suit humans. God answers the human plight in God's own way. Job is thus confronted with a great challenge: that of presenting his plight to and before God in a way that allows God to offer a divine (and therefore definitive) answer. The only way Job has found of doing that is to ask questions to God. Questioning his suffering, questioning God from within his experience of suffering is for Job a primary modality of his faithful relationship with God. Job prays to God by questioning his suffering, by living out his suffering as an honest question and challenge to and for God.

The Lord answers Job's challenging lament by appearing in and speaking out of the "whirlwind." This image is quite telling. God is a storm that brings down everything the human person may believe, think, or build about and by herself. A whirlwind God responds and speaks to the stormy heart of Job. Job has lost his peace and quiet; he is looking for it, he knows he cannot find it in and by himself. Before and in order to find new peace and quiet in suffering, he must go through another storm: God. Peace will not be found outside of the storm, but within it, in its eye. Job must enter infinite turmoil to find peace and quiet in there, and then follow its movement (for storms are dynamic systems). So what God does is not to provide appeasing answers to Job, but to question and challenge him. Job is forced to acknowledge God's absolutely mysterious character, the unfathomability of God's creation and, in the end, his own.

Job comes to see and perceive everything in a new way and the Lord entrusts him with a sacred vocation. He will act as intercessor for his friends, by offering prayers and sacrifices acceptable to God on their behalf and, also, by making the true and living God accessible to them in and through his own person. Job is by the end of the narrative consecrated to the priestly office. Job was led to find in and embrace "innocent suffering [as] a divine calling" (Balentine 2003, p. 357) opting for a vocation of vicarious representation and sacramental intercession. Suffering can give life and lead to encounter with God, if the human heart dares to believe to the end and assume that everything human beings are, have and enjoy is and comes from divine grace. "Fearing God for nothing" (1:9), the righteous (undeserving) sufferer summons God to be faithful to Godself, for in the "bitterness of her soul" (10:1) she has discovered both herself and God.

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