JOB AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

*Introduction*

The problem of evil exists because monotheistic religions affirm three propositions simultaneously:

God is omnibenevolent (all loving).

God is omnipotent (all powerful).

Evil exists.

If God is omnibenevolent, then he desires a world without evil.

If God is omnipotent, then he could have created a world without evil, or could eliminate evil.

Yet evil exists.

In the Bible, the *locus classicus* for the problem of evil is the Book of Job.

*The Growth of Job over Time*

To understand Job, it is best to begin with the book’s structure. (Since Job appears to be a composite work—by more than one author—its sections can be given approximate dates.)

1-2 prologue (pre-c. 400s BCE)

3-42:9 the poet’s additions (c. 400s BCE)

3 Job’s lament

4-27 Job-friends debates

4-14 1st debate cycle: 4-5 Eliphaz, 6-7 Job 8 Bildad, 9-10 Job 11 Zophar, 12-14 Job

15-21 2nd debate cycle: 15 Eliphaz, 16-17 Job 18 Bildad, 19 Job 20 Zophar, 21 Job

22-31 3rd debate cycle: 22 Eliphaz, 23-24 Job 25 Bildad, 26 Job 27 Job

28 Job’s poem on Wisdom (c. 300s BCE?)

29-31 Job’s final assertions of innocence

32-37 Elihu’s speeches (c. 300s BCE?)

38-42:9 Job-Yahweh debates

38-40:2 Yahweh’s first speech

40:3-5 Job’s first answer

40:6-41:34 Yahweh’s second speech

42:1-6 Job’s second answer

42:7-9 Yahweh’s reprimand of the three friends

42:10-17 epilogue (pre-c. 400s BCE)

The structure looks complex, but it’s relatively simple.

Job apparently began as a simple folktale, comprising the prologue (chs. 1-2) and the epilogue (42:10-17). So it was only two-and-a-half chapters long.

Someone—let’s call him the poet—cracked open the folktale and inserted his own material (chs. 3-42:9). The poet’s additions are two sets of debates (4-27; 38-42:9), plus three smaller sections:

(3, Job’s lament)

4-27 three cycles of debate, between Job and three friends

(29-31, Job’s final assertions of innocence)

38-42:9 two cycles of debate, between Job and Yahweh

(42:7-9, Yahweh’s reprimand of the three friends)

Finally, two additions were inserted after the poet’s work:

28 Job’s poem on Wisdom

32-37 Elihu’s speeches

If you read Job’s prologue and epilogue back to back—the original folktale—you have a brief tale whose plot is simple: God tests Job with sufferings, Job remains faithful, so Job gets twice what he had. The tale’s point seems to be: endure the sufferings that God sends you, and he will reward you. The original folktale may be quite ancient. We still have copies of a Babylonian story (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, i.e., *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*) with the same basic plot as Job; it dates from about 1300 BCE.

Perhaps around the 400s BCE, a Jewish poet split the tale in half and inserted his two sets of dialogues (between Job and three friends, 3-27, and between Job and Yahweh, 38-42:7), as well as three smaller sections (3; 29-31; 42:7-9). The poet seems to have questioned the tale’s simplistic theodicy (explanation of evil). After all, bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people. To endure sufferings is not always rewarded. So the poet has Job and his friends debate Job’s situation. (They mention some alternative theodicies: maybe suffering is a punishment; maybe suffering is a test; etc.)

Perhaps around the 300s BCE, another poet—a mediocre one, so let’s call him the poetaster (which means an inferior poet)—inserted Elihu’s long speech (chs. 32-37). The poetaster was a conservative. He invented a fourth friend (Elihu suddenly appears when the dialogues with the three friends end) to repeat, rather tiresomely, the traditional theodicy (if you’re good, you’re rewarded; if you’re bad, you’re punished).

Also perhaps around the 300s BCE, a poem on Wisdom was inserted, ch. 28. (Insertion of the poem may have disrupted the third cycle of debates. In the cycles, the usual pattern is: Eliphaz speaks, then Job; Bildad speaks, then Job; Zophar speaks, then Job. But in the third cycle, Zophar’s speech is missing; perhaps the poem on Wisdom dislodged it.)

*The Message of Job*

The climax of the book is the two dialogues between Yahweh and Job (38-42:6). Yahweh’s first speech (38-40:2) says, in effect, “I created everything; you know nothing; so sit down and shut up.” Job’s first answer (40:3-5) acknowledges God’s point: “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.” In other words: “You’re right: I overstepped my bounds; I presumed to speak about things of which I am ignorant.” Yahweh’s second speech (40:6-41:34) reiterates his point: “I created everything; you know nothing.” Job’s second answer (42:1-6) again grants God’s point: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3).

But Job’s second answer adds two things that are absent from his original answer. First, he has a mystical experience: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5). It is one thing to hear about God; it is another actually to perceive him. (I take “my eye sees you” to be not literal but a reference to intuition: a direct, non-sensory apprehension of God. See Exod 33:20, where God says, “no one shall see me and live”; 1 Tim 6:16, which says God “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.”) Second, Job repents (42:6, “therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes”). That is an advance over his first answer’s mere admission of ignorance.

I would not describe Job’s final position as a “philosophy of resignation,” as Michael Sugrue does. (“The Bible and Western Culture—Part I—Job and the Problem of Evil.” *Youtube*.*com*.) Job, after his second answer, has not shrugged his shoulders, resigning himself to an insoluble problem. Rather, God has drawn near; and Job has, so to speak, touched the beating heart of the living God.[[1]](#footnote-1) The problem of evil is not just a puzzle but a mystery (an unknowable aspect of reality that frames our existence). Job now trusts: he has reached a response of faith. No explanation that resolves the problem has come to him, but he has reached equipoise in the presence of the mystery. He now rests in a trust that is all but certain, though the reason for it is inexpressible.

Let me conclude by citing two statements of trust similar to Job’s.

First, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was an anchoress (hermit). Gravely ill in 1373 (she afterwards recovered), she had a series of visions (which she called “showings”). Here is her account of the thirteenth showing:

In my folly, before this time I often wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the onset of sin was not prevented: for then, I thought, all should have been well. . . . But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: “It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” (*Showings* 13)

Second, Pippa is a girl, a character in Robert Browning’s 1841 poem, *Pippa Passes*. Meandering through morning sunlight one day, she says to herself:

God’s in his heaven—

All’s right with the world!

1. In W.B. Yeats’s play *The Resurrection* (1927), a character (presumably based on “doubting Thoms,” the disciple to whom Jesus says [in John 20:16], “Reach out your hand and put it in my side”) exclaims of the resurrected Jesus, “The heart of a phantom is beating!” (In Alspach, Russell K., ed. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W*.*B*. *Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1966. 930.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)